

# COUNTRY CASEBOOK

*(Omnibus Eleven)*

*By*

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*The characters and events and some of the places like Buckton in  
these books are  
fictitious.*

*For Cheryl*

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# *Book Sixty-One*

## *Case No. 1: Whose Baby?*

The day, cloudy and warm and still, had not made the small police station in Buckton on Queensland's Darling Downs the most pleasant place to be. The two incumbents, Sergeant Dennis Walsh and Constable Grant Schroeder, had a small fan to bathe them in its slight breeze but they both felt there were nicer places to be. Walsh took a bottle of apple juice out of their small frig and re-filled their mugs.

"Let's hope no one wants us to go out and run round their paddocks." He sat back and savoured the cold juice.

The phone rang. "That'll be someone wanting us to run round their paddocks," Grant said with a grin. There was a time when he would not have dreamed of making any kind of joke to his boss. But over his time in Buckton he had gradually grown in confidence. Local people might call Dennis Walsh 'the Ogre of Buckton' but Grant had come to see that the name didn't fit. He lifted the phone and said "Buckton Police. Can I help you?"

An agitated voice said something and he made a note. "We'll be there as soon as we can." He hung up and turned to his boss. "Someone's shot one of Lyn Harding's horses, she says its rump is filled with buckshot. What should we do?"

"Nip out. Take photos. Try to get a line on the vehicle. I'll ring the vet." Ms Harding might already have done that but better to be sure.

Grant looked a little nervous but got the camera and car keys and went out. He found both Lyn Harding and her partner in the farm and riding school, Freda Donnelly, a bit daunting. But as he drove north-west out of town he thought in faint surprise that his boss had never urged him to take up riding. He did know how to ride although he didn't claim any skill. But then his spare time was pretty well full up. Having thought that he went back to worrying about the call-out and his possible handling of it. Mid-afternoon in late spring seemed an odd time to shoot a horse. Why not come round at night?

Dennis picked up the phone and rang the vet's surgery and got Leila Burkett's assistant. Delia said immediately, "Leila's gone out."

"Good oh, and was it Lady Luck that got shot?"

"Oh! How did you know?"

"I didn't know." But it wasn't worth staying on the phone. Leila might ring in to get Delia to do something, bring something. And although Delia loved the animals and tried hard she wasn't completely reliable. He hung up and said to the empty station, "Lady Luck eh? And why would anyone shoot Lady Luck ... and the hoons aren't out and about yet." Lady Luck was the chestnut mare and top showjumper Lyn Harding had wanted put down after she broke a leg a while ago when she got out of the farm and on to the road. Of course stupid idiots could be out with rifles any time of the day but a small suspicion lingered.

Lyn Harding had caught the mare and brought her up to the yard nearest the house when Grant arrived. It wasn't hard to see that the animal's rump had been well sprayed and that she was still in considerable distress. The vet had arrived and given her a sedative but it obviously hadn't had time to take full effect.

Lyn immediately said, "The bastards! How dare they!"

"Did you hear anything?" Grant still had moments when he couldn't decide how best to come at a problem but he was mindful of his boss talking about a vehicle.

“I heard a shot—though I didn’t realise it *was* a shot straight away—and then there was the sound of a vehicle taking off, something big, you know, some power behind it.”

“And this was—what time?”

“Just before I rang you, of course.”

“You were out in the paddocks or in the house?”

“Here, in the yards.”

“You didn’t see the vehicle?”

“No.”

“Do you have any idea which way it was heading?”

She hesitated over this before saying, “I can’t be sure. I thought it might be heading towards Buckton but in that case Leila would’ve seen it. So it must’ve been heading out,” she waved an arm, “Burleigh or further out ... ” She considered her possibilities before saying, “Some of those idiots from Japana maybe. I’ve heard they drive round in souped-up monstrosities.”

“Some do.” The cattle feed lots south of Buckton gave police a lot of trouble with their young men doing stupid things, and worse than stupid. “But they rarely come out this way.”

Leila Burkett intervened to ask whether Lyn wanted the mare taken back to the surgery “or will I try to dig the pellets out here?”

“Take her,” Lyn said rather brusquely. Leila had come with the horse float on behind her 4-wheel-drive and they carefully led the mare inside the float and secured her. After the two women had spent several minutes in discussion and Grant had stood looking round the farm, the vet drove away and Grant said slightly diffidently, “I’ll go and look along the road. But get on to us if you think of anything else.”

“Will do.” Lyn turned and walked away. Grant had the vague feeling that Lyn had lost interest in the whole affair and yet that didn’t really make sense. Ms Harding must care about her horse; she had probably paid a lot of money to get her through her last accident. Or he assumed she had. He drove back up the lane and parked near the entrance.

There were several other horses in that front paddock and although they had gone back to grazing they still seemed a little on edge. He walked carefully along the verge trying to find where a car might have pulled off the road. He could find no sign of tyre tracks nor of anyone getting out of a vehicle. There were no recent ruts in the gravel verge. Could someone have shot from a moving car? It seemed possible. And had Lady Luck just been in the wrong place, that she had just been very unlucky? But it still seemed odd. An odd time. An odd action. But then life in the police had shown him that people could do odd things at odd times. He got back in the car and drove back to Buckton.

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Sergeant Walsh had had a caller while Grant was out. DSS Greg Sullivan from the small CIB section in nearby Winville. Dennis handed him a glass of the fast-diminishing apple juice and asked him what the problem was.

“Well, two things.” Greg sat down heavily. He was overweight and felt the heat. “Just been over to see an old school mate of mine, staying with his brother near Jondaryan. Not looking good for him. He reckons he’ll be lucky to get another six months. Cancer.” As Greg was only in his late forties and the unknown school mate must be a similar age Dennis said, “That’s bad.”

“Yeah, you don’t expect the kids you went to school with to be dropping off their perches just yet. But I thought I’d drop by and bring you up to speed on other things. Roy’s having his farewell bash the week before Christmas. We haven’t been told if we’re getting someone else—so I’ve got my fingers crossed.”

“They’re booting you up to the top job?” Roy Greenwood had been Greg’s boss.

“Looks like it.” Greg didn’t muster much pleasure in the thought. “Don’t s’pose I can be any worse than Roy. But it’s Doug that’s bothering everyone. They’re still saying a pubic hair and a key—and a few lies—aren’t enough to convict him. They’re still scared that convicting Doug will make us all look bad and not convicting Doug will make us all look like a mob of morons. And then there’s the Hoysted kids trying to get their civil case up before ours.”

“So? Let ’em. If they can show Doug stole from their trust fund then it’ll make him look shonky before the DPP even gets his dates sorted.”

“And if they lose? Then it’ll look like we’re all persecuting a guy in a wheelchair.”

Retired DI Doug Towner had helped send Sam Hoysted to prison for his wife’s murder. To get Doug Towner for Sandra Hoysted’s murder would open a can of worms. Sam in prison wrongfully convicted. Towner a living reminder of police corruption and wrongdoing. A reminder that the bad old days had intruded into the present.

“Don’t let it get you down.” Dennis wasn’t noted for his cheery and optimistic outlook on life but Greg said, “That’s what Narelle says. I guess she’s right. And it’s not exactly down. I trust Payne and the others to put up a good case. But then there’s Ruby Jackson. How on earth do we get someone when the poor old biddy’s been dead for more than ten years? Roy just said ‘Pass it to the cold case fellas’ but I’m blown if I want them back, not after the mess they made last time.”

“There must be better cold case men than that Jennings you had? And anyway you know who killed Ruby Jackson—”

“I do?” Greg had avoided thinking about Ruby Jackson. Her skeleton had been found on a farm over near Prickly Creek. “Well, I s’pose I do but that isn’t much comfort.”

“There were two guys on that farm. Richard and Simon Plowman. One of ’em’s dead so it must be the other.”

“Who could be anywhere.”

“So pass it to the cold case guys. This time they have to accept this was them—and if they go after the remaining one then they’re going to have to look at the Eddie Morton case again.”

“I wouldn’t count on it.”

Privately Dennis thought he wouldn’t count on it either. But a couple of outsiders coming at those two cold cases with a fresh eye and a willingness to put any and every scrap of information on the table ... well, it might do the trick. And those cold case men who had made a mess of the Eddie Morton case might have retired or been transferred or gone on stress leave by now. Greg looked marginally more cheerful as he went out. He would put in a request for help as soon as he was back at his desk. He should run it past Roy but it was unlikely that Roy would care tuppence what he did. Roy was now busy planning his retirement. Or refining the plans he had been making over many months.

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When Sergeant Walsh walked home from the station it was to find his wife Fiona looking and sounding busy. He knew she had offered to help organise the All Saints’ fête this coming Saturday but Fiona could practically organise things in her sleep. This sense of news waiting must be something different. He sat down to take off his shoes and socks while his children came and clustered round to tell him the news of their day; or at least his daughter Elise did. Elise was never backward in coming forwards but Rob usually waited to be asked.

They had filled a couple of boxes with toys, outgrown clothes, books they’d lost interest in, but neither of them mentioned any other news.

“I s’pose she’ll want me to throw some of my favourite things into those boxes?”

Elise found this very funny and Rob immediately joined in. Fiona came and asked them to push the trolley along to the dining-room. Then she said, “You don’t *have* to throw anything away, you know. We’ve got enough put aside to do the household justice.”

“There might be a couple of books hanging round ... I’ll have a look later. And I don’t need all those ties hanging in the cupboard.”

But over dinner Fiona took up a different subject. “My friend Carmen is coming through here next week, on the way to see her mum in Roma and she asked if she could stay a night or two.”

“Don’t think I know any Carmens.”

“We went to school together, though she was a boarder. It’s only been a card at Christmas, that kind of keeping in touch, but it’d be nice to see her again.”

“Sure, why not.” And they went on to talk of other things. But as they sat over coffee while the children went away to play in Elise’s room for a little while before bedtime, he said, “You don’t really sound all that enthusiastic. Wasn’t she one of those that liked Raelene?”

“She did think that you had wrecked the friendship between Rae and me. That’s what Rae told some of our mutual friends.” Fiona and Raelene had been friends since school. But Raelene had given up her shop in Buckton and moved to the Gold Coast.

“And they believed her?”

“Rae is very persuasive when she wants to be.”

“And I’ll bet she never told them she was passing info on to Doug Towner about what I was working on.”

“No, I’m sure she didn’t.” Fiona could still remember the deep hurt she had felt when she’d discovered that Raelene was betraying confidences. “I wonder if she will go along to Doug’s trial to give him a friendly smile?”

“Who cares. And what about this Carmen. She’s not going to give me dirty looks all the time she’s here, is she?”

“I think—and I might be wrong—that she wants some help. I don’t know much about her private life but I know her first husband left her and refused to let her have access to their son. She’s remarried and has two children. They’d be in their teens, I think. But I wonder if it’s something to do with that first marriage. I’m only guessing but her life now sounds quite calm and ordinary.”

“Then she’d be better off finding a good lawyer—if it’s something about custody. And the first kid’d be—what? Eighteen? Nineteen?”

“Oh, at least. She didn’t go on to uni and I think it was because she’d met this guy who bowled her over. Maybe that was the trouble. That she married too quickly or that she was too young.”

“Maybe.”

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He was thinking about bed when he had a ring from the local vet, Mrs Burkett. She said she’d dug all the pellets out of Lady Luck’s rump, given her a tetanus shot, and made her comfortable for the night. “But I’m not all that happy about the whole thing, Dennis. Lyn rang me this evening to say that she’d been on to her insurance company to tell them the mare had been shot and she didn’t know if she would survive. She wanted me to back her up if the insurers rang me. I just said the mare was doing well and that we would know more in the morning. But the thing that’s worrying me, she tried to get me to put the mare down when she broke her leg. I said I thought she could make a full recovery but I think Lyn would prefer to have had the money. She would rather cut her losses and move on.”

He had noticed that about Lyn Harding. She was a good horsewoman yet there was no apparent sentiment in her feelings about her animals. But would she actively *hurt* an animal? He couldn’t decide. At last he said only, “We’ll keep investigating. So if the insurers ring you put them on to me.”

“I may be jumping to conclusions but I am *not* going to put that mare down. I would rather find her a buyer who doesn’t want to jump her—and Lyn can wear the losses.”

Listening to Mrs Burkett’s decisive summing-up Dennis Walsh was half-inclined to think that Lyn Harding had seriously underestimated Leila Burkett—if she really had hoped to get the vet to back her up.

And he thought their next step should be to talk with Freda Donnelly, Lyn’s partner in the farm and riding school. Grant had not been able to find any sign of a car stopping, nor of footprints in the verge but it didn’t preclude a drive-by shooting. It wasn’t normally a busy road.

“Any other problems?”

“I hear Brent Kelly is looking for a younger horse. I said I’d keep an ear out.” Then she said she must go and hung up.

DC Kelly had been in Buckton for a while but was now with Greg Sullivan in Winville. Brent had bought an old stager from Lyn and Freda. Dennis also hung up but he sat a moment wondering if Mrs Burkett was obliquely suggesting that Brent might be a suitable buyer for Ms Harding’s horse.

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Carmen Gannon was a good-looking woman in her early forties. She was shapely with a quiet but attractive style. Regardless of anything Raelene Perry might have said to her she managed to be polite and friendly towards Dennis and had brought small toys for the children. It was not that they needed more toys, they had come back from the fête loaded down with other people's board games, jigsaws, comics and even a set of bongo drums, but he thought it was nice of her to think of them.

He had got nowhere with his investigations into the matter of the shot mare. Grant was right. There was no sign of a vehicle pulling in. And Freda Donnelly had said she was out on the tractor and had not heard or seen anything. He thought mid-November was an odd time to be out plowing, and there was no sign of a crop just harvested, but unless she was in a conspiracy with Lyn Harding to mistreat their animals or defraud an insurance company he couldn't see that it mattered what she did.

The only thing that had left him faintly uneasy was the sense that the two women weren't getting along. Freda had her mother living there but Lyn had no one. It might be that Lyn would like to move on or that Freda and Lyn were not agreeing on key things. He wondered what sort of financial arrangements were in place. Lyn had been living with Freda's husband when he died and she had certainly gained some benefit but she might not have wanted to put money back into the farm if it was all in Freda's name. And was that act of cruelty on the unfortunate horse sufficient reason to try and find out more about whatever financial complexities might be tying the two women together?

Carmen didn't manage to find anything nice to say about Buckton other than that it seemed very peaceful. And then she said they lived on a busy road and it was nice not to have traffic day and night. She said her husband had a garage and she was working three days a week at their local library. Both their children were now at high school. It all sounded very pleasantly suburban and Dennis wondered if Fiona was wrong to think that Mrs Gannon might want some kind of help.

She went in to the kitchen to help Fiona with the washing up while he sat on the sofa and listened to the kids on their newly-bought bongo drums. They played with a lot of energy but not a lot of rhythm. He let his mind wander. Had he been too easy on Freda Donnelly? And why would she say she was plowing if she wasn't?

Did she believe Lyn was trying to pull a fast one and she was determined not to get caught up in it? He let his mind rove to and fro over this without being able to decide whether Mrs Donnelly's 'see no evil, hear no evil' response was significant. He had asked the radio station in Winville to put out a call for anyone who had seen a suitable vehicle on the road north of Buckton between 3 pm and 3.30 to contact Buckton Police. So far they had had no responses. It didn't mean there *was* no powerful vehicle on the road. It might mean Lyn had exaggerated. But if nothing had come in by tomorrow lunch he would go out again and get tougher ...

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An hour later, with the children in bed, and the two women enjoying small glasses of Irish Cream and slices of carrot cake he came and joined them and waited for them to say whether they just wanted to reminisce or whether, as he had intuited, Carmen wanted some kind of help.

But Mrs Gannon seemed to be in no hurry, just indulging in light chat, and he finally said, "I'll leave you to it, then," and went to get up.

"No, don't go," Mrs Gannon said swiftly. "Fiona said you might be able to give me some advice."

He couldn't pretend to any enthusiasm but he said, "Okay, fire away."

"Fiona said she told you about my first husband. He was an American and he just upped one day, took our young son and disappeared. I went to the police but they weren't very helpful, I think they thought it was some sort of custody thing. Each time I asked they said they were keeping an ear out, then they said it had gone to Missing Persons, but that wasn't any better. My dad didn't like Royden, he always said I shouldn't have been in such a rush to marry him. I tried to get him to help me but he wouldn't, they both wouldn't. I managed to save enough to hire a private investigator. He said there was no sign of Roy leaving Australia. I suppose that was a little bit of comfort but it didn't get me anywhere. The man said there was no sign of them in Queensland and did I want him

to search further afield. But I didn't have the money. I passed that on to the police but I don't know if they ever did anything."

"So you have no idea where your son is?"

"Absolutely no idea. I don't even know if he's still alive. I tried to get a TV reporter interested but he said it didn't have enough 'visuals'. I've managed to get a couple of little articles in papers. But if they've gone interstate ..."

"So you divorced this guy?"

"I thought it might make it harder to get John back if I was divorced. But in the end ... well, you have to go on with your own life. I met Pierce and we got married and had a girl and a boy ... but always there is this empty space inside me that sort of ... I guess I just can't let go."

"But if he's spent all these years with his dad he's probably been brainwashed against you. He might not want to be found."

"I know. You hear of that happening. But just to know he was alive and well. It might not be enough but I would accept that, if it's all I can get."

"Well, write the names down and I'll get on to someone I know in the MPU." It was getting late and Ashley Turner was unlikely to be still at work unless there was an emergency. He went out and walked over to the station. He could ring from home but he thought he would rather keep it semi-official. Grant was in the station flat listening to his small TV and he popped his head out his door as Dennis came in to the station and turned on the light.

"Might be a mare's nest," he said grimly. "But I'll leave it with Ash and see if she can help. Go back to your show." Grant accepted this, without wanting to know what might be a mare's nest, and closed his door again.

If Ash couldn't find young John Frederick Millington then he might not be officially findable. If his father had changed his name. And if he wasn't an Aussie citizen that would make it just that little bit harder ... But Sergeant Turner was her usual cheerful self and said she would see what she could do in the morning. With the boy's name and his date of birth ... and he must've been to school somewhere, played sport, been to hospital ... been in trouble ...

As he walked home with the sound of the occasional car on the road through Buckton and someone over the road playing, or trying to play, an electric guitar, he felt the sort of vague unease Ms Harding's horse had engendered. It was true that Mrs Gannon looked less stylish and attractive when she was with Fiona and that she obviously had had a non-existent relationship with her father and a not much more productive one with her mother, and that she had given the vague impression that her current marriage wasn't wonderful—but he couldn't see anything in there to really spark a sense of unease.

'Ash will find her. That'll be the end of the business.' He was tempted to add 'I hope'.

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DC Jenny Forman in Winville's CIB section did not feel she really needed to approach her current boss about the e-mail she had just received. But it was always best to follow procedure. DSS Greenwood just glanced at it and said, "I'd stay away from those weird kids if I was you."

Randall and Neumann Hoysted had invited her to come to hear their civil case against ex-DI Towner next February. Apart from satisfying her curiosity she couldn't really guess why they might want her to come along.

Greg Sullivan got up and came over and she handed him the printed-out e-mail. "Like a Royal Command performance, is it?" he said with a grin.

"Do you think they've got an ulterior motive in asking me to come along?" She had talked to the two young men when she was based on the Gold Coast but she was surprised they even remembered her.

"Of course. Those kids never do anything just to be nice to people." This was Roy's dismissal of them. Greg Sullivan agreed but said, "For sure they want you to sit there and stare at Doug. It'll put him off his stride."

She had heard of off-duty police going along to court to pin a beady eye on someone. It could make someone, already nervous or primed to tell some porkies to the court, become flustered or confused. To have someone like Dennis Walsh grimly watching you was almost guaranteed to make you get a little uneasy. But whether it would work with an old hand like Doug Towner ...



“Do you think that’s it?”

“You wouldn’t know with those weird kids,” Roy said again.

“Still, it might be a good thing to get an idea on how things are going before our case against Doug comes up, see how Doug in a wheelchair comes over.” Greg, now that he was certain Roy would be gone soon, could relax, even give Greenwood some positive responses. Both DC Forman and DC Kelly felt they too could relax a bit. It didn’t mean that Roy was ending his career with a burst of energy and enthusiasm. But at least he didn’t sit around negating everything any more.

“Our case, as you call it,” Roy said drily, “is in the hands of Payne and the others. If they can’t get a conviction nobody can.”

“Maybe.” Greg left it at that. Roy would be gone well before next February. “So any news on a replacement for here?”

“They’re offering us a DS Petra Moore from Goondiwindi. I said we needed a country person, seeing neither of these kids,” he waved vaguely in the direction of his juniors, “knows a sheep from a cow—even if they know a horse from a pig.” He said this rather sourly. He had objected to Brent Kelly wanting Saturdays off to go and ride around the country shows. “And tell Forman I don’t want her fraternising with anyone from Japan.”

Greg was tempted to say, “Tell her yourself”, but he just nodded. He had heard that the new manager at the big feed lots south of Buckton had invited Jenny Forman out to dinner. He didn’t know if it was anything serious or just a casual thing. But as the place was almost certain to give them more trouble he could understand Roy’s unease. On the other hand to get some real insight into the largely South African-owned business might be a plus. He thought Forman had her head screwed on thoroughly though even the most sensible of young women could do silly and compromising things if they really fancied someone. He just said vaguely, “I’ll have a word.”

And Petra Moore? Would she be an asset? He hoped fervently she would fit in and do some good work.

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Walsh and his junior were busy all through the morning with small problems and requests. Fiona had asked Carmen if she’d like to go to the Environment Park at Burleigh or to have lunch at the small vineyard the Cantrells had set up east of Buckton. Carmen had said she preferred wine to mud. There had been a couple of thunderstorms but he doubted whether there was a lot of mud at the park except maybe a thin rind around the lagoon.

Just as he was beginning to think about some lunch Ashley Turner rang him from Brisbane to say, “Found him!”

“Good work, Ash. Where is he?” He showed no surprise.

“She’s not going to like this. He’s doing time in Victoria for stealing cars. It’s his third time in. He’s changed his name too. First time he was John Fred Millington but now he’s calling himself Andy White. Anyway, I’ll give you the details and your anxious mum can decide what she wants to do. But she’d better hurry. He’s due out in two weeks so he may do another disappearing act.”

He jotted it all down and said, “I knew you’d do it. But I wonder whether he’s going to want her turning up out of the blue? Still, up to her. Thanks, Ash.”

“Oh, and before you go, I’m getting married in January. Would you and Fiona like to come?”

“So who’s the lucky man?”

“Tim. Fourth of January. I’ll e-mail you the details.”

Tim Carroll was her boss. The only trouble with the fourth was that he had told Grant he could have a few days in Brisbane in January. Grant wanted to go to the cricket and was planning to take Delia if Leila Burkett could spare her a couple of days. As Leila’s daughter Naomi would be on holidays then it should fit. Grant had gone out to check a small problem at Jack Alexander’s carpet showroom so Dennis jotted a note to check with him later then he rang Fiona on her mobile and said without any lead in, “Ash’s found Carmen’s son.”

“That’s wonderful! I knew you were the right person for her to talk to.”

“She might not agree. He’s in prison in Victoria.”

“I see. So would you like me to warn her before you tell her?”

“Whatever you think.” He trusted Fiona’s tact. “And warn her he’s out in two weeks. So he may disappear again. Good chance he’s living on the streets or something. And he’s changed his name.”

She said, “I see,” again and “See you later then.”

He hoped Carmen Gannon would see any news as good news. And if the youth had been abandoned at some stage of his growing up a mother might well be very welcome.

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Mrs Gannon’s first response as they drove home was “I must go!” and then she said, “How can I get there? I don’t want to go back to Brisbane. I don’t want to tell Pierce anything about it—not till I know it’s for real.”

“Then the best thing might be to drive to Toowoomba and get a flight from there. But surely Pierce would give you all the support you need?”

“Him? Gosh no! He thinks I’m mad to want to find John. He spends his time saying ‘Aren’t my two kids enough for you?’ I can’t make him understand that it isn’t that. He just gets ratty and I’m fed up with him telling all his family I’m a cot case. I wouldn’t mind to walk out sometimes myself.”

And in a few minutes, Carmen had thrown her things back into her bag and gathered up her toiletries. “I’ll just go and check over everything with Dennis then I’ll be on my way.”

“What about your mum? Won’t she be wondering where you are?”

“Never mind her. I’ll ring her from Melbourne.”

Fiona didn’t have a very close relationship with her own mother but she couldn’t imagine treating her with such cavalier unconcern. “Would you like me to ring her and explain what has happened? It would save her worrying.”

“She couldn’t care less—but ring her if you want.”

Mrs Gannon was almost as rushed with Dennis, just going over the details he had got from the MPU, and saying, “Will they let me in—to see him, I mean?”

“I’ll ask them to warn the prison you’ll be there tomorrow or the day after.”

“Then I’ll be on my way.” She moved to the door then hesitated and turned back. “Thanks. Wish me luck.”

She might need more than luck but he was willing to wish her anything if it got her on her way. But afterwards he thought that was a bit harsh. Of course it was natural for the woman to be preoccupied. And yet ... there was something about her which vaguely niggled. He had dealt with lots of anxious people over the years. So it was something else. But he got nowhere with his vague pondering. And the afternoon got busy.

He put it to Fiona in the late evening. “Have you ever seen her with her own kids?”

“No. Just the occasional bit of news. Why?”

“Just something about her bothering me. She brought little presents for our kids but she didn’t seem to be the least bit interested in them.”

“Some women are so wrapped up in their own kids ... but I think she’s become obsessed by the idea life has cheated her. She’s always focused on what she hasn’t got rather than what she has got. I may be wrong but she just dismissed her mother as though she doesn’t matter—and yet it would be a strange mother who didn’t worry about her daughter. I said I’d ring her and tell her what’s happened with Carmen. I’ll ring tomorrow morning.”

“Could be that. Nothing else matters to her ... but I’m still not sure. And I wonder what that first husband is up to?”

“He may have died. That might be why the boy is out there stealing.”

“Well, it’s out of our hands.” She couldn’t miss the hint of relief in his words.

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Fiona did not look forward to ringing Carmen’s mother in Roma. Apart from having to explain that her daughter had rushed off without a word, she had heard from Carmen over the years how unsympathetic and unhelpful, if not downright callous, her mother had always been. So she lifted the phone with some diffidence. But the voice which answered sounded pleasant and friendly. She explained why she was ringing and said that Carmen would ring from Melbourne.

“You mean she might ring from Melbourne.”

“She said she would so I’m sure she will.”

“And you’ve been her friend ever since you were at school together?”

Fiona gave this a moment’s thought before saying, “Well, not a really close friend, just a card at Christmas and an occasional chat on the phone.”

“My dear, I’m glad she has friends like you but you mustn’t believe everything she tells you. I didn’t know she was planning to come to visit me until you rang. She hasn’t been in touch with me for more than ten years. But I just hope she will finally get something resolved in her life.”

The possibility that Carmen had engineered this visit to Buckton as a way to get help in her quest to find her son ... Fiona put the thought aside. “Well, I do too. And for her son’s sake I hope she can help him.”

“But what about his father? Is he still in the picture?”

“We haven’t found him.”

“Good. Then I hope he stays lost for ever.”

“I know he did the wrong thing by taking your grandson but was there something else?”

“Do you know, we begged Carmen not to marry him. We would’ve got down on our knees if we thought it would have any influence. But she was besotted with him. He *was* a good-looking man but we could see the minute we met him he was a crook. I’m still sure he belonged to the Mafia or one of those things.”

“But how did you know? And Millington doesn’t sound very Italian.”

“I don’t think that was his real name. You know she brought him out here to meet us. They’d only known each other a few weeks. She said she wanted to get married in the garden here. But I overheard him talking on the phone to someone. You know he was an American?”

Fiona said she’d heard that from Carmen.

“And he was telling someone about us having the cotton farms and that they could bury a thousand bodies on them and no one’d know. My husband took him up on this, after I told him, and the man swore at Geoff like nobody’s business. That’s when we tried to get Carmen to break it off. And she didn’t believe us, she thought we were making it up, and she went ahead and married him, and we said she was always still welcome to come and visit whenever she wanted but that she wasn’t to bring him, that if she did we would tell the police what he’d said. So she never came home. And then when he took off with John and she couldn’t get the police to take it seriously she asked us for help and we gave her the money to pay someone and the man she found—well, I think he must’ve been completely incompetent, he didn’t do the sorts of things we would think of—like checking on his car registration. All he told her was that Royden was still in Australia and I said to Carmen, why not write to the American Embassy. I don’t think she did. I think she kept hoping he would come back.”

“Why do you think he took your grandson? Was he very close to the little boy?”

“Oh, I don’t think so, my dear. I think it was a kind of blackmail. He knew young Freddy was our only grandchild and I think he had ideas of getting us to pay to get him back. But nothing ever happened so maybe we were wrong about that.”

Fiona knew from things Carmen had said that her parents were well off, that according to Carmen they were ‘rolling’, and that made their lack of support all the more galling. But now she wondered if they really had refused to give her any help. It was an awkward situation. Who did she believe? Mrs Woods sounded kind and reassuring but without seeing her face to face it was hard to tell if these were her real feelings being expressed.

“It isn’t your problem, my dear, so don’t you go worrying. And it was very good of your husband to help Carmen.”

“Yes, that’s just the way he is. But Carmen gave me the impression her marriage is a bit rocky and I was wondering what will happen if she persuades her son to come back to Brisbane.”

“It would have to be a very forgiving man to put up with a woman still hankering after a crook and a lost son. I don’t think she ever gave the marriage a real chance but maybe I’m wrong. I thought Pierce seemed a very decent man and she’s got two lovely children. Not that we’ve ever met them. Not even a photo. But it’s always been Freddy as the only thing that really matters. I’m sorry for him. But sometimes you just have to put the past behind you. And I feel sorry for Pierce if

he has to take young Freddy into his family and pretend to like him. But I mustn't keep you, my dear, and I'll just pray that something good comes out of it all."

Fiona had been scribbling notes down while she listened to Carmen's mother and she thought she would share them with Dennis later. But after sitting in thought for several minutes she jotted down a few points and thought she would send a letter to the US Embassy in Canberra. If John Royden Millington really was a crook and using a false name then they should be notified. And there was another thought in there. Had that private investigator really been incompetent or had Carmen only given him a few selected facts? Had he known that the man he was seeking might be using another name and might've left the country as something quite different? Had the father abandoned the son because having a John Frederick Millington in tow might make it much harder to leave the country as Giuseppe Bellini or somesuch. But then Mrs Woods' ideas about a Mafia connection might be mere supposition ...

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Sergeant Walsh had put off visiting Freda Donnelly again. But his request over the radio for a vehicle to suit Lyn Harding's suggested vehicle had brought nothing in and he was half inclined to believe she had simply latched on to the knowledge that many of the men at the feed lots were trigger-happy.

As he drove up the farm lane he pondered on what line to take. Both Lyn and Freda were strong-minded women. He couldn't see them giving away anything they didn't want to give away. He found Freda lungeing a young horse in one of the yards and went over to the fence and waited. A couple of minutes later she came over leading the horse. "What is it?"

"Put him away first." He didn't want the distraction of a restless young horse. She simply turned and led the horse away. A couple of minutes later she returned and said, "Come over to the house." He noticed she was still living in the small cottage with, presumably, Lyn remaining in the main house. She ushered him in and called out, "Mum! Company." She waved him to a chair and sat down herself. The room was small and rather stuffy and overcrowded. Her mother had possibly brought things she couldn't bear to part with when she sold her house in Kingsthorpe.

"So what were you doing the day Lyn's mare got peppered?"

"I told you."

"No. You weren't plowing that day. So what were you doing?"

"I don't think that's any of your business."

"It is when people lie to me."

"Well, I wasn't out shooting Lyn's horse anyway."

There was a slight diversion when Freda's mother came in with a tray carrying a teapot, two mugs, and some caraway seed cake. She went out again but not before Sergeant Walsh said, "Did you hear anything that day, Mrs Simpson?"

"No, I didn't. And don't you try to say Freda had anything to do with it either. We both loved that horse." She went on out and they heard the kitchen door close.

"Look, Mr Walsh, that is true. She was a lovely mare. She is. We wouldn't hurt her. But we don't know what happened so it's no good asking us."

"What did you think when Lyn told you what had happened?"

"She didn't. She only said, someone's shot the mare and I asked the vet to come and get her. That's all."

"Well, unless a vehicle did stop on the road, some sort of drive-by thing in mid-afternoon, then the whole thing is pretty suss."

"It is Lyn we're talking about here," she responded tartly.

"You're saying she shot her own mare?"

"Probably meant to get her in the hocks and missed or the animal moved. Look, I don't *know*. But we do know Lyn. First she wanted my husband, then she wanted my farm. But every time she hinted that I'd promised her the chance to buy half I would just start talking about something else. I know she's a good rider, better than me because she doesn't have any nerves, or says she doesn't, but we just want her to pack up and go."

He had no intention of getting involved with any of their private feuding but he still resisted the idea of any of them deliberately shooting that lovely mare.

“And how will shooting her mare do that?”

“You’re not suggesting we did it?” Freda sounded affronted.

“Even if Lyn did it—same question.”

“She’s got the mare insured for twenty thousand. She wanted to put her down and get the money last time but the vet put a spoke in that wheel. She’s scared the mare will break down if she really gets her jumping again—and there’s no guarantee that would get her a pay-out. More likely she’d just have to sell her off for dogmeat or patch her up and sell her off to some old duffer who wants a quiet ride. So now she can claim some hooligans have shot the mare and she can have another try for a pay-out.”

It might be. But in a situation with the two women at odds ... and if Freda was going to point the finger at Lyn ... and Lyn might well point the finger at Freda if she thought her hooligans wouldn’t wash. He finished his tea and stood up. “I’ll call in on the vet.” He went to the door.

“You don’t like us, do you?” she said suddenly, “It’s because we wouldn’t give money for Kevin’s other woman, isn’t it?” Kevin Donnelly had secretly taken up with another man’s wife; a man who had not taken kindly to the idea.

“Nothing to do with this case.”

He went out to his car. Freda ate cake in a rather preoccupied silence. Her mother heard the car leave and came back inside and sat down. “I think Lyn’s gone too far this time,” Freda said. “But I still don’t see how we’re going to get rid of her.”

“She probably learnt all about digging her toes in from you,” the old lady said with a slight smile.

“No, but seriously ... ”

Sergeant Walsh called in at the vet’s surgery on his way back to town. Leila left her assistant to finish bandaging a small dog and came over.

“How is she?”

“Doing very well. Another week and she’ll be as good as new.”

“Have you got the name of Lyn’s insurance company?”

She took him over to the office and hunted for the file. “You think it’s an insurance try-on, don’t you—and I’m sure you’re right.”

“Those two women out there—who knows what’s going on. Freda’s trying to get Lyn to leave. I just wonder how far she’s prepared to go.”

Mrs Burkett hadn’t heard this and she looked a little worried. She had heard of spouses feuding over pets but this suggested something more serious.

“But I still think Lyn’s really determined to get the insurance.”

“But is it the horse that’s insured or just her showjumping career that’s insured?”

“I hadn’t thought of that. But the insurers must know.”

“And is there any chance of her jumping again?”

“Of course. Absolutely sound.”

“Lyn’s apparently saying she won’t stand up to strain ... ”

“I’d buy her and jump herself myself if I wasn’t so busy and was ten years younger.”

He didn’t think Mrs Burkett was in the habit of saying things she didn’t mean. But beyond checking with the insurers and keeping an ear out he didn’t think there was much he could do.

He stopped in at the pub. He felt a cold beer would cheer him up. The morning hadn’t done anything to raise his spirits. He mentioned the situation to the long time barman at the Coolibah as the place wasn’t busy and a lot of gossip washed in and out of the pub. George Johnson winked and said, “Bit slow on the uptake today, aren’t you?” George Johnson liked to think he knew most of the important things going on round the district.

“You’re friends of those two dames, are you? Hear their secrets?”

“No. But I know why Freda goes out on the tractor over to the far paddocks, even when she’s not plowing. Little bird told me she’s getting it off with Justin Burdon. Winville fella that’s bought the place behind there and comes out a coupla times a week to do things.”

“And how d’you know that?”

“He drops by now and again and sees no reason to keep his mouth shut.”

As Walsh drove round to the station and parked he wondered if this had precipitated anything ...

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Sergeant Walsh, on his way back from a minor traffic accident over by Iron Pot bridge called into the local garage. Noel Barnard came out and said cheerfully, "Fill her up?" and "Any news?"

"Two young idiots, drove into the sign by the bridge. P platers, reckon they were mucking round in the car and not got their eye on the road."

"Speeding?"

"They say they weren't. For once I think I believe them. Just told 'em to pay the Council the cost of fixing the sign and I'd let it go."

"Do they need a tow?"

"No. They headed on to Winville."

"Well, you might like to know that the father of that dame Cherry poisoned is taking out a civil case against her. I don't reckon he'll get anything out of her."

"But if he goes for Lynnell too? Hasn't she still got that house in Winville?"

Cherry Morton had poisoned the young woman Jayleen Pidcock who had moved into the local pub and touted for customers. Cherry had run her own little sex business out of her home and resented Jayleen jazzing in to town and casually assuming she was all that mattered. Cherry was now doing time in Brisbane. Her mother had left Buckton and moved to Winville.

"She had to sell it. She needed the money. She's living in a little weatherboard out the far end of Ramsay Street."

"So why does the guy think he's going to get money from them?"

"I only heard it on the grapevine but seems he thinks they've still got something stashed away." Jayleen's father, so far as Walsh remembered, had not shown any particular sympathy for his daughter. Walsh wondered what had changed to make the father suddenly claim ... something. That he loved his dear departed daughter and that her loss had ... devastated the family? He might find that hard to prove.

"Possible." He thought it might be interesting to see just what Mr Pidcock presented as evidence. He *had* put forward a Victim Impact Statement at Cherry's trial but it hadn't sounded very convincing. He kept referring to Jayleen as his 'poor little girl' and there weren't many people prepared to see his daughter in that light. Neither parent had expressed sorrow when they heard Jayleen had died. The sorrow, if it was sorrow, had come much later. "And civil cases seem to be flavour of the month," Dennis went on. "The Hoysted boys are suing Doug Towner for stealing from their trust fund."

"Well, I never had much time for him. He come in here one day, said to Mave, 'Fill her up,' like she's some slave or something to be bossed around. And you know Mave—she says, Yes boss, immediately boss, and he gave Mave this really nasty look, and there was this other guy here and he starts to laugh and Towner turns round to him and says something about him minding his own business—and the guy just took it in his stride and said can't a bod have a laugh in this country any more—and Towner just about snarled at him. I never thought he was much of a detective after that."

"No, useless sod, but he did a lot of damage. Who was the other guy? Maybe we can call him in as a witness to Doug's good character?" Dennis said this with a wry grin.

Noel gave that a chuckle. It struck Dennis that Noel would beat Towner hands down when it came to dealing with the public. He was genuinely interested in people, listened to them, took on board their worries in a way that was hard to associate with Towner. And the retired DI had not offset his lack of people skills with a good knowledge of evidence-gathering or an attempt to keep up with new information or scientific breakthroughs.

"And I'll tell you another thing, mate. Towner hated women. You're lucky he only gave Mave a nasty look. I wonder if Sandra Hoysted ever made a joke at Doug's expense? I don't reckon he would've ever forgiven her for making him look a fool."

"We still find it hard to believe—that a senior cop would not only kill someone but send another bloke to jail for something he'd done."

Walsh nodded. “Plenty of bent cops but it’s usually looking the other way, tipping someone off, taking a bribe ... Doug took it to a whole new level. And it’s going to make us all look bad. People are saying we must be a load of morons to never see what was under our noses. Maybe we were.” He had pondered on this in odd moments. Were there things he should’ve seen—beyond his early summing up that Towner was incompetent? He *had* tried to get Towner charged but all that had happened was Towner taking early retirement—to a mansion on the Gold Coast.

After he’d driven away Noel said to Mavis, “And I’ll bet he’ll go on stewing over that for the rest of his life, that there were things he should of picked up on.”

“But it’s not our worry, love, and Den can handle any bad publicity. Look at what he had to put up with when he first came to Buckton.”

“Yep. That was pretty bad. Anyone’d think they preferred old Joe who never lifted a finger to help anyone from one year to the next.”

She gave that a swift grin. “The Goodricks and a few others certainly preferred old Joe. But did you tell Den about our prowler?”

“No. I still reckon it’s Lenny up to his old tricks. I thought when he left again that was the last we’d see of him. But now that Betty’s in hospital ... ”

“But what if it isn’t Lenny?”

## Case No 2: What If ...

The Barnards’ son had left his terrier pup with them while he took his family to the coast for a few weeks’ holiday. He was a happy little pup but he never barked. It was only by chance that Mavis had seen a dark figure in their small paddock beyond the garden and once standing partly hidden behind the silky oak by their garden gate. Each time the man, if it was a man, had simply faded away into the shadows. Even let out into the yard the dog had still not barked. Noel, on hearing his wife’s stories, had said glumly, “Looks like the little fella doesn’t know how to bark.”

Perhaps some dogs simply didn’t bark. But after close observation, Mavis had come to a different conclusion. “I think he’s lonely. He looks for Ricky and the kids and when it clearly isn’t them out there he loses interest. I wonder ... what if we borrowed another dog for company for him?”

“We could get a dog, I s’pose. It’s a while since we had one. What say I ask Mrs Burkett if she’s got one no one wants?”

Mavis agreed with this. “And if she hasn’t I’m sure Myrtle would lend us Solly for a week or two. I’m sure he’s a good barker.”

But Leila Burkett immediately said she did have a dog. He’d been found wandering out along the road to Burleigh and local farmer Mr Greenaway had caught him and brought him in. The dog, a young greyhound, had no collar. “Didn’t want to chase a tin hare,” Mrs Burkett said briskly, “that’s my guess. He’s a bit nervy, might’ve been whacked around a bit.” She thought but didn’t say that the Barnards would be ideal people to take on a young dog in need of a bit of TLC.

That was undoubtedly true—but would a young greyhound and a young fox terrier get on? After some suspicious sniffing, Mavis let them out into the back garden and a few minutes later she could see them tearing round the dusty yard. ‘So far so good ... but will he bark if The Shadow comes back? Noel thinks it’s Lenny but I’m sure it’s not.’ It was hard to define a black shape but she felt certain it was both taller and thinner than Lenny Low. Lenny had stacked on the weight and now had a fair-sized beer gut. There was something lean and swift about this mystery person. ‘Like a greyhound,’ she thought suddenly.

Lenny Low had been caught stealing from them years ago and he had never ceased complaining that Noel was a lousy mate. Mates didn’t call in the police. Noel was prepared, a bit reluctantly, to let bygones be bygones but Mavis was adamant that she never wanted Lenny to set foot on their property again. “What sort of friend steals from you the minute your back is turned?” she had demanded several times.

But now she almost wished this shadowy person *was* Lenny because Lenny was a known quantity. Whereas she couldn't guess this person's motive. Two dogs might be enough to keep this prowler away. Even though the stray greyhound seemed no more ready to bark than the little foxie.

She finally decided to take it to Sergeant Walsh. There was probably nothing he could do. She just wanted to share her unease. But she thought she would wait till Noel was fully occupied before nipping up to the station. 'I'll make a note of when I've seen him and go tomorrow when Dave brings the bus in for its service.'

But she was woken about eleven by a sudden sharp little yip and hurried out of bed and into her slippers. She wasn't sure which dog had woken her but she opened the side door and both animals galloped out and over to the fence. The tall figure with a dark coat of some kind was half way across the small paddock heading, possibly, for the road. She opened the side gate and they rushed out. The figure began to run. She felt sure Lenny couldn't run with those long loping strides. The person reached the fence just before the dogs, then leapt upwards with an athletic leap, hung by both hands, kicked out at the dogs, and then was over the fence. By the time Mavis reached it there was no one in sight. She stood a moment to get her breath back and then slowly retraced her steps. The dogs came with her.

"It *must* be a young person," she said when she'd woken Noel and told him what had happened. "I couldn't vault over that fence. I don't know if it'll do any good but I *am* going to tell Den." Noel, too, couldn't see Lenny Low vaulting any fences but he said, "You don't think it was just someone taking a short-cut?"

"Not if it's the same person who was standing watching the house that night. And if they were cutting through—why run?"

"Well, it's a mystery. But he doesn't seem to be doing any harm. And even if he is 'casing the joint' ... I s'pose there's the TV and sometimes a bit of cash but it isn't going to make anyone rich."

Mrs Barnard had considered this aspect but she had the uneasy feeling their prowler wasn't a potential thief. Yet the idea that he wanted to frighten her seemed even less likely. She was in her fifties so he surely wasn't hoping to glimpse her undressing. And she lived such an ordinary life she couldn't think of anyone she had annoyed. Apart from Lenny maybe.

Sergeant Walsh when she finally went in had a visitor. "Amy!" she said in surprise. "Are you moving back to Buckton?" Amy's family lived just to the west of Buckton and were a nice family with an abiding interest in horses. Amy had joined the police and was now stationed in Dirranbandi. The young woman grinned. "No, no such luck. I just dropped by seeing I'm home for a week."

"And what about your horses?"

"I've got one with me. My sister has the other one." Then she seemed to realise Mavis lived a busy life and would not have come over merely to chat. "You've got a problem so I'll leave you to it."

"That's okay, it's nothing very private, just that we've had some one sneaking round at night. I don't know that there's anything Den can do." She gave him a wry smile.

Mavis might believe this sincerely but Amy had a touching faith in Dennis Walsh ever since he had got back her new Western saddle which Craig Goodrick had stolen.

The phone rang and just before Dennis answered it he said, "Amy, could you go with Mavis and look for footprints this side of the fence." He turned to the phone to say, "Buckton Police." Mavis immediately wondered why she hadn't thought to look to see if their prowler had left any sign of his route but she thought having Amy with her might be just as well. She couldn't very well confront the person if the trail led very clearly ... Amy nodded and the two women went out.

And there was no difficulty in picking up where someone had leapt the fence and turned left. They followed the dusty verge along past the straggle of houses, past the turn-off to Winville, catching sight of a print here and there made by a set of trainers. Mavis couldn't hide her puzzlement. Who along this way would be likely to prowl through their yard?

Amy put a hand on her arm and pointed. The prints seemed to turn in a gate. "The Raes?" Mavis still looked puzzled. Mandy and Tom Rae had moved to Buckton last year. They had brought with them their grown-up son Ben. He was hardly ever seen and local gossip said he was



retarded or 'something'. The parents both worked part time in Winville, Tom in the big hardware store, Mandy in a florist shop there. They seemed to take their son with them but what he actually did in Winville no one seemed to know. But as they lived very quietly and unobtrusively, Mandy going along to the local Church of Christ occasionally and Tom into the Coolibah for an occasional beer, they had not roused much interest and only a bit of vague speculation.

Amy asked her about the house and its people before saying, "I think it might be best if I go in and ask. I don't want them to be upset with you if we've got it wrong."

Mavis was tempted to say that Tom Rae was hardly a customer they could ill afford to lose. But Amy was right. And as she walked back to the service station she thought that their son, in the few times she had seen him, would fit that shadowy figure far better than Lenny ever could.

Amy introduced herself to Mrs Rae and said a person trespassing on the Barnards' property had been reported to police. "Someone," she said mildly, "seems to have climbed over the Barnards' fence and come in your gate." She said it slightly interrogatively. Mrs Rae seemed a pleasant middle-aged woman but she simply stood there and looked blankly at the young constable.

"Have you had trouble yourself with someone coming in to your yard?"

Mrs Rae shook her head and said a bald "No."

"Who else lives here with you?"

"My husband. My son. They would not do anything like that."

"Are they here now?"

"My son is. He is disabled."

"Could I just ask him? He may have seen someone."

Mrs Rae's first impulse was obviously to say no and then she possibly thought of things like 'helping the police', 'being a good neighbour' and not making it look as though they had anything to hide. "I'll just get him. But you won't upset him, will you?"

Amy gave her a sweet smile, all the while wondering what kind of disability the son might have.

When she got back to the station she told Sergeant Walsh she was inclined to think the son was the Barnards' prowler but that he seemed to suffer from Down Syndrome. "I asked him if he ever went there and he just shook his head. He didn't seem very bright, his mouth hung open most of the time, but just as I went to the door I turned back to say goodbye and he looked perfectly normal except for his eyes which sort of turn up a little—and he immediately dropped his mouth open. I couldn't help wondering if he was putting on the 'slow' bit. And I thought mongol people aren't very active, at least, not the couple I've met. But he did look quite lean and fit. I don't want to jump to any conclusions but I thought I'd like to know if he really does go out and wander about people's yards at night."

Dennis nodded. He liked to know something about the people on his patch but the Raes had never been to see him for any reason and he had never had any reason to tackle them on bad driving, noisy parties, drunk and disorderly. They had always remained well below the radar. Maybe that was why the young man was roaming at night. He was tired of the dull life he lived with his homebody parents.

"When you've got time just check if any of 'em have got form. I must go out." He picked up car keys and notebook. "By the way, have you ever come across a Petra Moore? She's going to work with Greg Sullivan."

Amy smiled. "She did come out one time, a guy on the run and heading west from Gundy. I only got to say hullo but after she'd gone several of the men called her some pretty awful things. A ball-breaking bitch was the main one. I felt sorry for her though I don't think she needed any sympathy. She was one tough cookie."

"And Greg's an old softie? Yeah, he might find himself side-lined and her running things. But so long as she does a decent job—" He didn't think Greg would mind all that much.

"Oh, I think she's pretty good. It's maybe just the way she goes about things."

After he'd gone out to the car he found himself wondering if any one would ever describe Amy as 'a ball-breaking bitch'. It didn't seem very likely. She saw her job in the police as a way to help people. Petra Moore might well have seen incompetent men pass her on the ladder and grown

hard and bitter. It would be interesting to see what Greg and his two juniors in Winville CIB made of her.

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Dennis Walsh sat a while with his head in his hands trying to decide what to do next about several things. Fiona had gone to the kitchen. He could hear the kids making a fair bit of noise in the sitting room. Most of his current problems seemed small but he wanted, if humanly possible, to get them sorted. Other people, other coppers, didn't mind to have a filing cabinet full of problems. He had sometimes heard other men say 'How the heck do they think we can find the perp?' or words to that effect. He understood. With the best will in the world, sometimes there was no resolution.

Like Lyn Harding's mare. If it really was a drive-by shooting then unless the perps started boasting in pubs or did the same thing elsewhere ... Leila Burkett had dug the pellets out of the mare's rump, washed them, and handed them to him in a jam jar. The mare was healing up well though still a bit nervy and would be able to go home in a few days. He had tentatively absolved Lyn. She might want the insurance when something went wrong but he didn't think she would shoot her own horse. And he had tentatively absolved Freda Donnelly and her mother. Even if they were at odds with Lyn he couldn't see them hurting Lyn's mare. Which left unknown persons on the road ...

Fiona came in and laid a gentle hand on his shoulder. He looked up. "More problems?" she said quietly.

"Wish I was Einstein. Have you heard from that Carmen dame?"

She didn't think Carmen would like being referred to in this way but said only, "No, not so far. I could ring her but she's probably preoccupied if it really is her son. And I don't know that Einstein was any good on your kind of puzzle."

"It's this bloody business with the horse. I want to get someone but if it was some moron out with an air rifle ... doesn't seem much chance."

She considered this. "Do you think they were specially aiming at that horse or it was just letting off a gun? Were there other horses in the paddock?"

"Two or three. Now, that's a thought. Were they also Lyn's horses—or Freda's? I still don't buy that idea they were louts from Japana—but I haven't got—but what could Lyn really hear? That's a long lane ... " It was something she had noticed many times before. Dennis could plummet into the depths at the apparent drop of a hat—and then he could equally swiftly spring up again, re-energised and with a renewed sense of purpose. He stood up and engulfed her in a large hug. "I don't need Einstein. I've got you." She wasn't sure just what had helped but she was glad something had.

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Noel and Mavis listened to what he told them about the Rae family and said only that they had occasionally seen their son walking round the streets in the late evening but otherwise knew nothing about him. "He looks very fit," Mavis added thoughtfully. "I wouldn't have thought he was disabled in any way ... unless it's in his head."

"Amy thought it might be that Mongol thing, that his eyes were somehow different, but she wasn't totally convinced ... hard to say in one short meeting but he just might be putting something on, hard to see why."

"I know. And why us? We aren't very exciting."

But then very few perverts looked for 'exciting' victims. "Well, just be a bit careful. Lock up properly." The Barnards might lock up at the garage but they probably didn't check every window and door at home.

"And what I'd like to borrow—if you have one—is a vehicle that makes a fair bit of noise."

"I've got Terry Mitchell's old rattletrap here, needs a new muffler—and other things—I don't think he'd mind."

"Then if you and Grant'd come out in it—if you're not flat out now—and I'll go up to the house and see what I can hear."

Noel wasn't slow to see that Walsh was a bit dubious about Lyn Harding's story. "Okay, I'll come over and pick Grant up in ten minutes."

And to Constable Schroeder, Walsh said, “See if you can stop right on the road, not the verge, and I’ll give one ring when I’m up at the yards there. Then give one shot along the verge, without getting out, and then take off with lots of noise. Got that?”

He had borrowed an air rifle from Dave Hickman who had bought it for his boys years ago and it had sat unused in a cupboard since both boys had spread their wings and gone.

Lyn Harding had not been hassling them for results. If anything she seemed resigned to never knowing who or why. But to his question about the other horses in the paddock she had frowned and said, “No, the others were Freda’s. I just wish I’d never let my mare in with them ... but I never thought ... ” And then she seemed to change abruptly. “You mean—they deliberately targeted my mare?”

“Hard to say. But come and stand where you think you were standing that day and we’ll see what happens.”

He stood with Ms Harding over by the fence of the nearest yard to the side of the tractor shed. He pressed the re-dial button then shut off his phone. Two minutes later they heard a faint sound, almost immediately followed by the sound of a vehicle.

He turned back to her. “That was a similar weapon and a vehicle without a muffler.”

She stood there puzzling over the two sounds. “The first ... no, I don’t think I would’ve noticed. And the car ... it doesn’t sound right. There *was* a vehicle. I’m sure of that. But the sound was different. I thought of some big ute, you know, the sort ... I honestly don’t know ... but the sound was different. I can’t explain because ... I heard the horses galloping round the paddock ... I *saw* them galloping ... and I got in the ute and went down.” She stood there frowning. “I wish I could help. She’s never going to jump again but I still want to get the bastards—you do know that, don’t you?”

“If I borrow a big ute—would that help?”

“It might.”

It might be completely irrelevant but he said slowly, “This bloke Freda goes to see—does he ever come here to see her?”

“No, I’ve never set eyes on him.” She considered her answer carefully and went on, “Well, I know what he looks like because I’ve seen him in Winville. His dad’s got a big place just west of the town. But the farm over behind us is much smaller. I just mean he’s never come to our place.”

He noticed she was referring to the farm as ‘our’. Did that mean she still hoped to gain a partnership with Freda? “Are you hoping Freda will sell a half share to you?”

“She said she would at the beginning—but now she always evades talking about it. I guess if she’s serious about that guy she might go and live there but she never says anything to me.”

“Well, get in touch if you think of anything else and I’ll try another vehicle ... and what’re you going to do with the mare?”

“Who knows? It’s all a gigantic mess and I don’t know what the fuck I should be doing.” For the first time he saw her calm efficient façade slip. He had seen her upset, angry, annoyed, but now he saw something vulnerable and uncertain. She looked out over the paddocks to the sight of Grant and Noel returning along the road towards Buckton, then she turned back to him and said abruptly, “What should I do with her?”

He wasn’t sure if she meant the mare or Freda. But he said briskly, “Sell the mare to a good home and think about getting yourself a place of your own.”

“But that’s what she wants! Why should I do what she wants?”

That, he thought, was part of the problem. Two strong-minded women, neither of them willing to be seen to ‘give in’. “Up to you. But surely your happiness and peace of mind is more important than what Freda thinks.”

She didn’t respond to this and he said again he’d be in touch and went over to his car.

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Amy Porter rang him a day later to say, “Dennis, it’s very strange but I can’t find the Raes anywhere, not on electoral rolls, no sign of being in trouble, I can’t find a marriage, I can’t find their son’s birth. Their vehicle is registered to them at the Buckton address but it’s like they just came out of nowhere.”

“They came from over the border maybe?” He’d never heard where they’d lived before coming to Buckton. They had bought the house, he thought, through John Goodrick, so they might’ve given him an address. He could go round and ask but that would almost certainly see it noised round the district. John Goodrick might keep some of his own deals very quiet but he saw no reason to hide other people’s business if he assumed it would bear scrutiny.

“I’ll keep looking. But it does seem a bit strange. They didn’t sound foreign. But they must’ve come from somewhere else. I tried all the Queensland phone books but nothing to fit.”

“Mmmm, well, good luck. And maybe it’s that son of theirs, he’s annoyed people somewhere else and they’ve moved here till they decide what to do about him.” It was only guessing but he had a long-held view that young men with time on their hands, disabled or not, tended to get up to mischief. A visit by Constable Porter might keep him in check, briefly, but sooner or later he would probably go wandering again.

He got Grant on to checking the electoral rolls as a back-up but Amy was right. They weren’t listed under that name. They might be in a Protected Witness program but it didn’t seem likely. He could ask John Goodrick, he could check with the banks though they would probably say it was all confidential, the post office might have seen re-addressed mail ... but unless he could pin the son down to unlawful entry ... he thought a watching brief was probably the best they could do. Instead he sent Grant around to the Butter Factory. One of the men there had a big Nissan ute. Would he let Grant go out with him and try again? It was much closer to the things some of the men at Japana used.

But once again Lynn Harding said the noise didn’t seem right. She said apologetically, “I know I’m being a nuisance and it was noisy but ... not that noise. Maybe it’s my memory ... ”

“Did you hear the vehicle stop?”

“No-o-o, I don’t think I did. Not that there was any reason to ... ”

“If it was a targeted attack they could have turned off the ignition and coasted. But if it was those thugs from Japana ... ” Though he didn’t think they used air rifles. Air rifles were for kids. But he didn’t plan on looking round the district for other utes to borrow.

She considered this too and then said, “I thought about what you said and I wondered if Brent Kelly would like to buy Lady Luck. Sir Ned is getting pretty ancient. And it’s not like him wanting to compete at the top level.”

“If he’s interested he can talk to you.”

He set off down the lane again but as he came by that paddock he stopped and got out. The wire fence was topped with a wooden rail and he parted the strands of wire and climbed through. It was just a hunch but he quartered the paddock carefully. A casual glance would’ve missed it but his careful search yielded up an odd thing a bit smaller than a soccer ball and painted brown with some green blotches for camouflage. In the grassy paddock it seemed a peculiar thing to find. There were no children here to lose it. He picked it up with his handkerchief and it rattled and tinkled.

He went along the fence to the gate and let himself out. In the car he found a large plastic bag and tipped it in. With luck it would yield a few prints but it didn’t mean they would match anything on file. Still, he felt pretty certain now that Lyn’s horse had been the target.

He drove out on to the road and waited for Grant and the rifle to be dropped off by Gerry Thorpe. A few minutes later they parked and Grant came over and got in with his boss. “Looks like it was someone who understood horses.” Dennis told him about finding the ball. “A vehicle stops, maybe someone gets out, of course the horses will turn and face the road to see what’s going on. So if he wants to get the mare in the rump then he has to get them to turn away. Chuck a ball that rattles so it lands behind them, good chance they’ll turn around.”

Grant said he would never have thought of that. “But it must mean they didn’t want to kill the horse, just make trouble for Lyn.”

“Got it in one. So it comes back to Freda. Could she get someone to do it for her?”

It might even be that the shot and the vehicle weren’t connected but that seemed unlikely.

Grant hoped they would find prints which would immediately lead to ... but he couldn’t picture the perp. And the ball when looked at closely did show several clear prints. “It might be a ball blind people use for playing something, I’m not sure what.”

“Okay, I’ll take Rob to ballet and drop it in.” He couldn’t remember if Freda’s prints had been taken when her husband died and she was a suspect but it was very unlikely that her mother would ever have had hers taken. Yet the old lady was probably as keen to see Lyn off as her daughter was. And there was that new man in the equation. Would he do a ‘little job’ for Freda?

But Reid Strohling in the lab in Winville could not link the prints to anyone. “Sorry, you’re going to have to do the donkey work, Dennis,” he said in his non-committal way. It didn’t move the case forward and there was no absolute guarantee that the owner and the thrower of the ball were one and the same.

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“I had a ring from Carmen,” Fiona said one evening as they sat back after dinner.

“Was wondering when she’d get round to telling you something.”

“Well, as it wasn’t very productive, I can understand her being reluctant to ring.”

He wasn’t sure he really wanted to know anything more about Carmen and her lost son. “So she met him?”

“He wasn’t pleased to see her. He just told her straight off to ‘fuck off’ and when she tried to say she’d been looking for him for years he said, no, she hadn’t. She said would he like to come back to Brisbane with her and he just told her to ‘fuck off’ again.”

“And no idea where the dad is?”

“He said his dad wasn’t her business and she said yes he was because he had stolen her son away from her and then he said that was because she was such a terrible mother and then he refused to talk any more and so she finally gave up and went out. I do feel sorry for her but I didn’t know what to tell her, if there is any advice or help we can give.”

He wasn’t sure he would support that ‘we’. So far as he was concerned he didn’t mind if he never saw Carmen again. If she had lied about her parents was she lying about her son now? Carmen probably knew that tender-hearted Fiona would provide help if she was asked, including financial help. But he sat for several minutes thinking it over. Then he said unenthusiastically, “Tell her to find and pay for a private investigator to see where the son lives and who he’s with, whether the dad’s still around. If the dad’s still around she’s got Buckley’s of getting the kid back. If he’s on the streets then he might think again and decide Brisbane is a better deal.”

“She may say she can’t afford it.”

“Just get the boy tailed when he walks out. Two or three days should do it. And don’t you go offering to pay. She has paid work. She can put a bit aside.”

He knew he was right as soon as he said this. Fiona *had* been considering offering to help Carmen. Of course she could do what she liked with her own money but he could see this turning in to a long and expensive saga. “Tell her to tell the authorities there she will provide him with a bus ticket to Brisbane. They’ll probably have him on the next bus out, get a little pest off their patch.”

She had noticed that about police. They liked to move troubles off their patch and on to someone’s else’s patch. And Dennis wasn’t immune to the relief of seeing a troublemaker depart.

“I’ll suggest it to her.”

And if Carmen didn’t like the idea of ‘spying’ on her son he didn’t see it as his worry.

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But whether to keep looking for vehicles which might spark something in Lyn Harding’s mind? It hardly seemed worth the effort.

He and Grant were busy with minor issues all morning. At about half past eleven a big black Toyota ute drew in and parked. Dennis immediately thought ‘Japana? More trouble?’ It was a natural deduction, given all the problems he’d had from Japana employees and managers over the years, but the man who got out and came unhurriedly up the path didn’t look worried.

He came in and Dennis said, “Mr Lopes? Problems?” Rui Lopes had taken over at Japana and Dennis secretly harboured the hope he could improve things.

“Not exactly. I just came for a bit of advice.”

Dennis waved him through to the small interview room and said, “Tea or coffee?”

Grant brought him in a coffee a minute later and Mr Lopes said, “Thanks. The thing is I’ve started putting in a few trees. I got some saplings at the school fête in Dinna and planted them. But I really need some advice on what would be best to plant round the yards.”

“Good oh.” It had always bothered Dennis, seeing the cattle there without shade all through the summer. “Go round to see Tony Thomas at the nursery here.” He gave him directions and added, “Tell Tony I sent you.”

“Okay, thanks, and the other thing is Jenny Forman. I took her out several times but now she’s been told not to see me any more. Her boss told her there was a conflict of interest, or something. I don’t see how—”

Dennis hadn’t heard this and he was surprised DSS Greenwood had stirred himself enough to be concerned about DC Forman’s romantic life. “I s’pose he thinks—if there’s more trouble at Japana and if one of his officers has a relationship with the person in charge—and if something comes to court—”

“That’s a lot of ifs,” Lopes said drily.

“So you haven’t seen Jenny since then?”

“I haven’t. We ring up and chat most days.”

Dennis sat a while pressing his big fingertips together considering his response. It wasn’t that he particularly minded undermining Roy Greenwood’s authority but there might be more to his directive. Winville might’ve got wind of something going on at Japana which they hadn’t got round to sharing with Buckton. At last he said, “Well, you’re both adults but take it quietly. Arrange to come for a swim here in the pool and tee it up with Jenny to meet you here casually, that sort of thing. Roy is retiring in a couple of weeks. He probably wants to feel everything’s ship-shape when he goes out.” He doubted his own words. Roy wasn’t noted for running a tight ship. But it sounded reasonable and Lopes nodded, apparently satisfied.

“And another thing,” Dennis thought he might as well press for more changes at Japana, “The cattle there are too crowded. Put animals under stress and of course they don’t do as well as they should.”

“We boast a three-week-turnaround but that’s rubbish. It’s usually six weeks. Maybe stress plays a part but I don’t know if I can change things ... ”

Walsh agreed. He didn’t think Lopes had much say in the set-up. “But give it a try. The Hoysteds are a bit preoccupied at the moment.” He still didn’t know exactly how much control Neumann and Randall Hoysted had over the feed lots. “And this is between you and me—but did John Duarte get you in there?”

For a moment Lopes’ expressive face seemed to shut down and then he nodded very slightly. Sergeant Walsh also nodded. It confirmed what he had thought all along. “Well, while you’re here maybe you could give me a hand with a small problem. Could you lend us that ute for half an hour?”

“What on earth for?”

“You and Grant can drive out past the Donnelly farm. I’ll tell Grant what to tell you. A horse got shot out there. We’re trying to work out what kind of vehicle was involved.”

“And you think it was someone from Japana?”

“Wouldn’t think so. But the owner of the horse reckons she heard some kind of vehicle take off. So just might help us pin something down.” Lopes still looked dubious but finally said, “Okay, if you say so.”

Dennis gave Grant his instructions and said, “Show Mr Lopes where the turn-off is to the nursery, he wants to buy some trees.” Then he rang Lyn Harding who, fortunately, had just come in to make herself some lunch, and said he’d be there in twenty minutes and for her to come out and listen.

He put the sign on the door after Grant had got into the Toyota and hoped no one would choose to come round in their lunch break for help. But the whole exercise was as fruitless as their previous efforts. Lyn Harding shook her head apologetically. “No, I’m sorry, it still doesn’t sound right. Maybe it’s me ... ”

“And you still think it was heading *towards* Buckton?”

“I must’ve been wrong. Surely Leila would have noticed?”

“How long between you going down to the mare and her arriving?”

“Oh! I guess it would’ve been—I don’t know—twenty minutes, more, I had to catch her and bring her up to the yards so it was ... at least, twenty ... ”

“So anything would be through Buckton anyway before she got on the road?”

She looked dismayed. “I’m sorry, I got that wrong too. I guess we’d best just leave it.”

He had had the same thought. The whole thing was becoming a time waster. But in a contrary way he felt a renewed determination to get someone. It wasn’t so much for Lyn Harding but for the mare herself. He saw enough unthinking cruelty to animals in his work without wanting to see this kind of deliberate cruelty. “Okay, well, just give me a bell if anything else comes back to you.”

Grant and Rui Lopes had turned round and come back and parked by the lane gate. Dennis said, “Thanks, Mr Lopes. And good luck with your trees.” Lopes gave him a slight smile and drove off. Dennis said, “Just a mo, I’d best check the other side of the road. We maybe got it wrong thinking he pulled in by the paddock.”

Probably too much time had gone by to see anything but there wasn’t any particular reason for vehicles to pull off just here. He walked up and down the bitumen looking closely at the gravel verge then beckoned Grant over. “Your eyes are younger than mine. See what you think.”

His junior, not quite sure what he should be looking for, also wandered up and down. “There is a bit of a mark but it could be weeks old ...”

“Sure. But it’s too far over to be a vehicle with two tyres on the bitumen and two on the gravel.” As soon as he said that Grant could see the implication. He said in sudden excitement, “A motorbike?”

Dennis said only, “Could be. Parked back a bit, walked over, came back and took off. I’ll drop you off at the pub and you can ask George, but keep it quiet, what kind of motorbike that Burdon character rides.”

Grant went in to the bakery to get a pie before retuning to the station but he felt he had important news to share with his boss. “George reckons it’s an old Harley—and Harleys make a lot of noise. D’you think that’s it?”

“We’d best go and see this fancy man of Freda’s this evening. Trouble is, we can’t ask for his fingerprints ... or can we?”

“Can we say it’s a process of elimination?”

“And what firearms he has on the property, if they’re properly stored, registered, wish it wasn’t ... well, it’s worth a try.” Grant understood. Lots of kids had air rifles. They could inflict some damage but they didn’t have to be registered.

It got busy again in the afternoon. Grant, all fired up about a visit to the mysterious Mr Burdon, found it hard to concentrate on routine work. Dennis, though, had a phone call from Amy Porter in mid-afternoon. “I can’t find the Raes in New South Wales either. Maybe they came from further away, Victoria or the Northern Territory. D’you think I should keep on looking?”

“Could be they changed their names, officially or unofficially.”

“By deed poll, you mean? Can I get to look at those records?”

“Of course. Unless they’re in a Protected Witness thing. But it’s a lot of work for you. D’you reckon it’s worth it?”

This was a question which Amy had asked herself over and over. What had Benjamin Rae done, if he was the prowler? Some trespass, yes, hanging round the Barnards’ house. But he didn’t seem to have stolen anything, threatened anyone, damaged anything ...

“I wish I knew,” she said slowly. “I haven’t got enough experience to pick up on bad vibes I guess ... but I just can’t get rid of the feeling he was shamming, that he was putting on that idiot bit. I went in there and I felt quite sorry for them, it’s not easy having a grown-up son that they’ll have to care for all their lives ... and then ... I know my intuition doesn’t count for anything but I felt sure he’s a fraud.”

“Well, that’s a place to look.” He didn’t want to tell Amy to trust her instincts. It could get an inexperienced officer into all sorts of trouble even though he thought Amy’s instinct in this case could well be right. “Does he get a disability pension? Is he listed with any kind of support group? Did he go to a special school? Some parents are ashamed of a disabled child, or the relatives are.” He could still remember a woman in Buckton who had been ashamed of her granddaughter who had cerebral palsy. Maybe the Raes had come here to hide from relatives ...

“Thanks, Dennis, I’ll keep digging in my spare time.” It didn’t answer the question of whether there was anything worth digging up. Dennis put the matter aside after making himself a note to just have a casual conversation with one of the local doctors sometime. And maybe he needed to know a bit more about the syndrome himself. Fiona might know or might be willing to do a bit of research for him.

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The summer sun lay in golden light across the paddocks out past Burleigh. The cloudless sky didn’t promise anything. A little breeze tickled the long dry grass along the verge. They passed the Fosdick farm and Dennis told Grant something of the drama which had occurred there years ago. Then they found the gravel lane which ran up past several farms tucked in behind. The lane was called Hickey Lane but Dennis had no idea what long-gone Hickey had given his name to this narrow by-way. They crested a slight slope and could see the bordering trees of Buckton Creek in the far distance. The spreading view seemed a place of perfect peace.

They found a mailbox with a handmade sign saying ‘BURDON’ and turned in over the grid. The place seemed given over to vealers except for a couple of paddocks of recently-baled lucerne. Dennis wondered if the man used it solely for his own animals or sold it on.

An old cattle dog came to the garden gate and barked as they drew up. It was followed by a man in his late forties, a well-set-up man, tall, tanned, with fair hair slightly longer than that of most farmers. He opened the gate and came out, the dog at his side. “Anything wrong?” He sounded merely curious.

“Mr Justin Burdon?”

“Sure. And you’re Walsh, aren’t you? And your offsider.”

“Yep. A couple of things, Mr Burdon.” This showed no sign of worrying Burdon who just said, “Okay. Shoot.”

“You’ve got any guns on the property?”

“An old .22 somewhere.”

“Registered?”

“Sure. You want to check?”

“Nothing else?”

“Not a squeak.”

“No air rifle?”

“Nope.”

“You keep guns on your other property?”

“A couple. You’d have to check that with my dad. Anything else?” Grant was beginning to think they had, he had, jumped to some wrong conclusions. Could anyone really be so calm and unconcerned if he had gone out and shot a champion mare?

“We’d like to take your fingerprints. Process of elimination.”

“What the heck for? I haven’t been involved in anything.”

“As I say, elimination. Someone chucked one of those balls blind people use at the horses in the front paddock over at the Donnelly’s farm.”

“That’s a crime now is it? Probably some kids.”

“Could be. That’s why we want to eliminate all the neighbours.”

“Going overboard, aren’t you? Or you’re short of work in Buckton?”

“Simple business, won’t take more than a couple of minutes.”

“Well, I’m saying no, simple as that. You’ll have to come round here for a better reason.”

“So you’re carrying on with Freda Donnelly but you don’t want to help us find the bastard who was chucking things at her horses? Funny sort of boyfriend.”

“You’ve got that all wrong. One, I didn’t chuck anything at Freda’s horses and two, I’m not going out with Freda Donnelly.”

“She’ll be pleased to hear that. After all that business of parking her tractor by your back fence and sneaking over to your house you’ve not got anything going with her.”

“No, I haven’t and don’t you go round saying I have.”

“She wants to get Lyn Harding off her property. You offered to help her?”

“No, I bloody well didn’t. She wants to get Lyn off, that’s her business.”



“Nice farm. Much better than yours.” Walsh had been looking round at what he could see of the place as he spoke. It could be a nice little farm but things had got run down and the house was a small rather shabby weatherboard with louvres along the front. Justin Burdon obviously didn’t spend time gardening, painting, fixing things. And raising vealers was one of the less strenuous ways to farm. Either Mr Burdon spent a lot of time helping his father or he was looking for an easy life. A ring to Mr Burdon Senior might be illuminating.

“So?”

“Combine the two, make a bloody nice property. And Freda and Lyn, whatever else they are, work bloody hard to keep that place in tip-top condition. You’d be in clover if you hitch up with Freda.”

“Look, I’ve got things to do so either you have more questions or you can get on your way.”

“Think about it. People who refuse to have their prints taken always raise red flags. You might like to re-think.”

Burdon shook his head, turned, and went back inside his yard. The dog followed. Dennis said loudly to Grant, “Hard to see what the bugger does all day, never saw a nice little farm in a bigger mess.” This was an exaggeration. He had seen farms like the Maxwells’ which always annoyed and distressed him.

Constable Schroeder got back in the car but his boss stood there another few minutes looking around. Grant tried to decide whether Burdon was really guilty or not. It was suspicious, him refusing to have his prints taken, and more so as they hadn’t found him ever being in trouble—but was that the clincher?

Dennis got back in the car and said, “Nasty little wanker.” Mr Burdon was at least six feet tall but Grant had noticed that Dennis tended to call people he was suspicious of ‘little’.

“You think he did it?” Grant had quite a lot of faith in his boss’s take on most things.

“The thing is—did he do it off his own bat? Get rid of Lyn and it’d be much easier to move in on Freda. Or was she in on it?”

“But how are you going to prove it?”

“Think I’ll give his dad a ring, see what guns he admits to, for starters.”

“Maybe he’s got rid of the rifle he used.”

“Maybe. With luck his dad might know if he ever bought one.”

“And—do you think he’ll tell you? He might want to protect his son.”

“He might. But the whole thing is a bit odd. His dad’s maybe seventy. So why isn’t he taking over the family farm instead of messing round with this little tinpot place. Maybe father and son fell out. In which case his dad might say something.”

Put like that, Grant could see it was worth trying.

But Mr Alec Burdon said only that he had two rifles, no air rifles, and he had never seen or heard of his son buying one. “And you know about him and Freda Donnelly?”

“Nope. And not my business who he goes to see. That’d be that horsey dame, would it?”

“You know her?”

“Nope. Seen her riding. Thought she was one of those lesbian things, her and that Harding bitch.”

“You know Lyn Harding?”

“Nope. Just seen her riding.”

“So how d’you know she’s a bitch?”

“I hear things.”

“From your son?”

“Just round the traps, nothing special.”

“Your son comes and works on your farm?”

“Course he does. I’m no spring chicken.”

“How often does he come?”

“Every couple of days.”

“You pay him?”

“Course not. He’ll get the whole kit and caboodle when I die.”

And that might take another twenty years, Dennis Walsh thought, and it might make more sense of the son wanting to get somewhere rather than wait endlessly for his inheritance. “So you helped him buy the farm over at Burleigh?”

“None of your business, mate, what I do or don’t do.”

“He saved up and bought it?”

“As I say, none of your business.”

It wouldn’t be hard to check how and when the farm had been bought but it must be quite recently. The Pearces had been there for years, an old couple, but as they did their business in Winville they had had nothing to do with Buckton Police. He left it at that.

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Fiona had set up a web-site to put up information about Dennis’s first wife who had been murdered many years ago. She still checked the site every day but it had gradually moved on from being largely about Norena Walsh to a wider discussion on other possible miscarriages of justice, or people believing that someone had got away with something, or general discussions on issues of governance and transparency. She had wondered about allowing people to talk about issues of possible wrongdoing when she wasn’t in a position to check their claims.

Clearly there was a need for a public forum where people could air grievances but she wasn’t sure if she was the person to provide that forum. In the end she had put up a clear disclaimer to say she did not support or agree with anything posted on the link she had set up but that people with clearly documented problems could post them in the hope of getting some feedback from the public. Some of the complaints were far back and although she felt sorry for those people she didn’t think they were likely to get justice but sometimes people just said, ‘I know nothing will ever be done but thank you for giving me a chance to say what happened’. There might be a deathbed confession but it wasn’t very likely.

When she went to it in the evening after Dennis had grumbled about all the trouble Freda Donnelly and ‘that lot’ had given him she said, “The Hoysted boys have put up a post.”

“About Doug Towner?”

“Yes. But it’s a bit odd. It’s almost like they want to abort Doug’s trial for murder. They’re giving out things they maybe shouldn’t be.”

“I’d best take a look. They probably wouldn’t care if their dad stays in jail. He’s less trouble there.”

And he thought Fiona was right to be worried. The post said clearly that the police had tapped Doug’s phone. “So how did those little beggars find that out?” Then he answered his own question. “They’ve been hacking in.” The tapes, though they showed clearly that Towner had had an ongoing relationship with a Simon Gaunson Massey, had not been put forward as evidence. He could understand that. They would confuse things and Doug’s connection to Massey a.k.a. Plowman wasn’t the reason Doug had killed Sam Hoysted’s wife. “So get the stuff off fast as you can.”

He didn’t know who Towner had got to do his defence but if the lawyer heard about the tapes he could very effectively use them to muddy the waters. And whoever had put the tap on possibly without getting a warrant would also be in trouble. He didn’t think it was DI Payne but he couldn’t be certain. Carl Payne was a meticulous investigator himself. And he had no doubt found the tapes very useful but he may not have checked on who had set up the operation. He was grateful they had but any hint of irregularities would play to Doug’s advantage.

“Pity really. Seeing that Doug never bothered to go by the book himself. I wouldn’t mind to see him hoist by his own what’s-his-name.”

“Petard. Yes. But I don’t want us linked to anything wrong.” It was so easy for police to cut corners—and get away with it. And Doug Towner had so nearly got away with it.

Fiona could remove that post but a day later she found a message saying ‘It’s gone to Peter Stainforth QC. He can probably make whoopee with it.’ It wasn’t e-mailed from either of the Hoysted boys but seemed to be a spam message. Would the Hoysteds do that? Or had someone else seen the post and thought to have some fun with it? She thought of Doug’s lawyer but that didn’t quite make sense. Stainforth must be his barrister but he wasn’t in charge of preparing Doug’s defence. She puzzled over this for a while and then made the difficult decision to take her whole

site down for a time. She put up a message to say that the site was being re-done and she would have it back up as soon as possible. Maybe she was reading too much into it but she couldn't rid herself of her fear that Doug Towner would somehow find a way to get back into their lives and make more disruption and upset.

Dennis only said, "Best thing you could've done."

\*

Sergeant Walsh drove out to see Freda Donnelly the following evening. Elise had begged the chance to come too "to see their horses". He finally agreed though with reservations. It wasn't that Freda was violent or unpleasant but she might not take kindly to any suggestion she had been in cahoots with her new man. As he drew in near the house he said, "Okay, you can go over to that yard and have a look at the horse there—then straight back into the car."

Lyn Harding came out the garden gate and over to him. "Any news?"

"I've come to see Freda. Is she at home?"

The light had come on in the front room of the cottage and the car was parked to one side.

She shrugged and said, "Looks like it."

He headed for the cottage and Lyn walked over to where Elise was leaning on the yard fence to look at the big bay horse inside. "He's just arrived, he's very wild, but he'll soon settle down."

"He needs his mane brushed. I brush Freddie some days." They both looked at the burr-filled mane of the new horse.

"Lucky Freddie. And do you think this one will make a good showjumper?"

Lyn had no idea how best to talk to children unless they were being instructed but she had unwittingly found the way to Elise's heart by asking her for her opinion.

"Oh, I think so. He's got nice strong legs and black feet."

"His feet will look better when I've had a chance to trim them."

"I know how to use a hoof pick but I'm not allowed to do anything else."

"Well, it's a hard job, looking after a horse's feet."

"We've got a racehorse but I don't know who looks after his feet. Maybe it's Mr Hickman."

Lyn unexpectedly smiled. She had bought the horse running wild on a property north of Chinchilla more as an act of bravado than anything else. But now she thought maybe Elise's father might have it right. A little farm like the one Dave Hickman had. Dave probably just got by but he was doing the things he enjoyed doing. Maybe it wasn't worth hanging in here. A little place of her own. A few pupils. A half dozen horses of her own. Making her own decisions. Enjoying doing things just the way she wanted. Not having to discuss things with anyone.

"And who teaches you to ride?"

"Mrs Burkett helps me a lot."

"I could teach you if you like."

Elise didn't know if her dad would want to drive all the way out here so she simply said she would have to ask him. Lyn nodded and asked if she would like to come over to the house for a drink but Elise said she'd been told to stay here. "Okay, well, what say I show you round our harness room."

Freda's mother opened the door to him and invited him in though not with any sense of welcome. There was a smell of cooking and the old lady told him to take a chair and she'd get her daughter. Freda when she came in said immediately, "Any news?"

"Your friend Mr Burdon—does he know much about horses?"

"Not a lot, I don't think. Why?"

"But he knows a good farm when he sees one?"

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"Did you tell him you wanted Lyn out?"

"Probably. It's no secret."

"And he thought he might help you? Move her on, move in himself."

"Are you saying—no, that's rubbish! He wouldn't—I never asked him to do anything." She got up and walked round the room rather than sit and look at him.

“He wouldn’t let us take his fingerprints. Very odd—if he hasn’t done anything. I’m sure you and your mum wouldn’t object.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Very odd behaviour. Very suspicious.”

“And how could his fingerprints be on anything? That’s just stupid.”

“All I want to know is—did you plan the shooting with Justin Burdon?”

“No. Of course not! I love horses!”

“Did you know what he planned to do?”

“No. Absolutely not.”

Freda’s mother came in quietly and sat down on the end of the sofa. She said calmly, “Freda would never hurt a horse.”

“No?” He got up. “Well, if you fancy the bloke you’ll have to train him to be nice to horses.” He went out and over to the car and looked around for Elise. To his surprise she came out of a shed with Lyn, skipping along happily, and said before she reached him, “Lyn is going to give me some riding lessons!”

“Not just now, sweetie, hop in the car.”

Lyn came over to him and said quietly, “You are so lucky to have her ... and I’m going to take your advice and look for my own place.”

“Good oh.” He got into the car and waited for Elise to buckle herself in.

\*

“Any news from Carmen?” Dennis said that evening. It didn’t seem very likely she had taken up his suggestion but it would at least offer her an out from the impasse with her son.

“Well, she did hire someone to follow her son around. I haven’t heard what he’s found out, if anything.”

“Uh-huh. It’s only a long shot but it might be helpful to know something about that dad. If he came in on a false passport I’d like to know why.”

“But it isn’t really your business. And I hoped, with Doug charged, you really would take life a little easier. I don’t want you to think that everyone depends on you to set the world to rights.”

“Is that what you think?”

“Sometimes.”

The phone rang and she hoped it was someone wanting to chat with her, not more work for him. It was Mavis Barnard. “He’s been back, Dennis,” she sounded breathless. “I went out on to the street and ran after him but he outdistanced me by a mile.”

“And you saw him go in the Raes’ gate?”

“No, he went that way but I can’t be sure which gate he went in. Noel says I should leave it but it spoils things, always wondering when I’ll look out and see him watching.”

“And the dogs?”

“No, they both went with Ricky, they’d got so friendly, and I don’t like greyhounds all that much. They’re mainly legs. I’d rather have something a bit cuddly.”

He could understand that.

“Well, I can nip down and check on that young fella—”

“No, don’t do anything just now, you need your time with the family. Tomorrow is soon enough for the little creep.”

He left it for the moment but maybe Amy Porter was right; they did need to know a bit more about the family. He wasn’t wild about asking John Goodrick for assistance, for sure Goodrick would see that as an excuse to get him to turn a blind eye to something. But it was very likely Goodrick had sold the house to the Raes.

John Goodrick next morning agreed that he had, “but it wasn’t a sale. They’ve leased it with the proviso they can buy it if it’s what they want. I think old Don Whelan was glad to get that much. He hasn’t done anything to the house in years. You can ask him more about the deal if you want, he’s up in the Annexe now.”

He could. “But it’s where the Raes were living before they came to Buckton. Did they give you an address?”

“Said they’d stopped a while in Killarney. Don’t think I asked for an address, just a phone number but it was a mobile, not a landline.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

“By the way, my son is going to come here and work for me.”

This didn’t cheer Sergeant Walsh up. John Goodrick’s son had done time for robbing a bank. “Miriam put the hard word on you, did she?” Goodrick now and then went over to stay with the woman who ran the one pub in Garramindi.

“Something like that. And you’re worried about that weird kid of the Raes’, aren’t you, the one that’s always staring in the Barnards’ kitchen window?”

So young Benjamin Rae’s prowlings were all round town? But then there was nothing to stop the Barnards from telling people. Even without cast-iron proof.

“Could be.” Dennis went out and downstairs. He thought, before he went to see the Raes, he would just check with police in Killarney because on the surface of it Killarney was a more pleasant place to live than Buckton. What had brought them here?

He got a Constable Glover who said “Benjamin Rae, eh? Seems to ring a bell. Hold on a tick and I’ll see what we’ve got.” Dennis waited, suddenly hopeful. It would strengthen his hand to know the young man had been in trouble elsewhere. Glover came back in a couple of minutes and said cheerfully, “Well, you’re welcome to the creep. We had complaints about him going into people’s yards and watching them at night. Their neighbour rang me at least three times to complain but when I went around the parents said it couldn’t be their son because he’s in a wheelchair. They said he’d had an accident years ago and was now a paraplegic.”

“Did you believe them?”

“We-e-ell, I did and I didn’t. See, they had it all set up, a sort of ramp to run his chair into their van. It all looked genuine but then, when I was asking the young fella if he’d been out those nights I’m pretty sure I saw his feet move. And then, while I was wondering what to do next—they just up and left. So is he still in a wheelchair?”

“Nope. And no van. Now he’s retarded. Down Syndrome or something.”

“Blimey, you don’t say! So what’s his game?”

“That’s the question, isn’t it? Why go to all that trouble to protect him? We couldn’t find them on the electoral rolls so either they’ve come from somewhere else or they’re using another name.”

“Never thought of looking. I was just glad they were gone.”

Dennis understood this. “So who was the person who complained?”

“Betty Price. She’d be fifty, bit more maybe. Her husband died a couple of years ago. She sometimes has her daughter and grandkids to stay but she was alone each time she saw the young man peering in. She said it was a wonder she didn’t have a heart attack she got that much of a fright and she’s got a weak heart apparently.”

“Maybe that’s it.”

“What is?”

“All his Peeping Tom stuff. Someone did have a heart attack and die and the parents upped and left—wherever—and now they pretend he’s disabled so we don’t suspect him.”

Glover considered this before saying, “Well, that’d be one for the books.”

“You didn’t ever take his prints?”

“No. I’d probably have the civil liberties people jumping up and down and saying I was harassing a disabled man.”

“Pity.”

“But that gives me an idea. The van. Where did they sell it? I should be able to get you the details as it was in the garage here several times.”

Dennis accepted the offer. Where and when the van was sold might not get them anywhere but he increasingly felt that any information might come in useful. Why would any parent go to such lengths to protect a son if there wasn’t something serious needing to be kept hidden?

He went round to the Raes’ house when he’d hung up and made himself some notes but it was obviously one of the family’s days to go to Winville. He prowled around their yard and

wondered which of the items in the shed young Benjamin might have touched but it wasn't worth second guessing anything and he wanted to keep any potential case against Master Rae unsullied.

He would come back in the evening but for now he thought he would just warn Mavis to be extra careful. She had comforted herself with the thought that the young man wouldn't be interested in a woman in her fifties and it was just opportunism. But Betty Price was also in her fifties ...

## *Case No. 3: Horning Around*

Brent Kelly took advantage of a day off to come out to Buckton to see the mare Lyn Harding was prepared to sell cheaply. She was still with the vet as it was potentially dangerous to send her back to the farm with the mysterious shooter still out there. Leila Burkett had put her in the paddock beside the old Larkin house. She was renting the house to Grant Telfer and Lucy Hopgood as they had finally moved out of Lucy's aunt's house and Lucy, unexpectedly, was pregnant. Leila with Lyn and Brent walked down and let themselves in to where Lady Luck was in the company of two small ponies and a nanny goat.

Mrs Burkett had heard various people say that Lyn Harding was hard on her horses but she wasn't sure if she believed this or not. She thought Lyn was very hard on herself, never admitting to any weakness, always pushing herself and by implication her horses. Lyn never tried to befriend her horses, there was nothing sentimental in the way she talked to them or about them, she never patted them, or not that Leila had ever seen. It had probably led to the view that Lyn treated her horses like machines. Leila didn't particularly like Lyn because she was too willing to bring money in to everything. But she had the odd intuition that Lyn was a very good horsewoman because she let her horses be horses. She didn't treat them as pets. But rather she saw them as creatures which were required to do certain things for humans at certain times and then they were allowed to go back to being themselves. She had once heard that Lyn didn't like to stable her horses because they much preferred to be out in the fresh air with space around them.

Lady Luck lifted her head from the grass, studied the group for a moment, then came trotting over to Lyn. Brent stood there looking over the mare with approving eyes. Her coat gleamed a golden red in the sunshine. She had a neat white star and four tiny white socks, just a narrow circle above each neat hoof. She wasn't quite as tall as Sir Ned but she was strongly built.

Lyn slipped a bridle on and led her over to the gate where she'd left the saddle. "All yours," she said to Brent. A couple of minutes later he swung himself up and rode away down the lane to the empty paddock below the house. "He's got good hands," Lyn said critically.

Leila Burkett nodded without offering anything. She had been deeply relieved when her daughter stopped seeing Brent and yet, curiously, she had come to a certain fondness for him. She wasn't sure if she was influenced by Dinny Walsh or whether it was that Brent had worked so hard to learn to ride. She turned back to Lyn and said rather drily, "I still think she'll jump again."

"Maybe." Lyn watched her mare as Brent took her for a trot then a canter then over a couple of small logs. "But I'm fine with Brent having her. I'm going to buy Saul's farm—if I can beat him down enough. I told him he can't ask much for a farm which is still infected with anthrax."

Leila turned to her in surprise. She had thought that the farm had been deemed free of infection. But when she said this to Lyn the other woman said, "I'm sure it is but Saul can't guarantee it."

"I thought he was your cousin or something?"

"My dad was his older half-brother. Amos. He was the biggest bastard you'd ever find. You'd think with all those names out of the Bible, their dad was Micah, they'd be decent people. But my dad told me I was useless from the day I was born. Girls only existed to wait on men, they were too useless to think for themselves. I've spent my life proving him wrong."

Leila thought this unexpected admission said a lot about Lyn. "It must've been hard."

"It was. But I've made my own way ... people say I grabbed Kevin just to get up Freda's nose but it wasn't like that." Leila didn't ask and Lyn didn't offer any more personal thoughts. Instead she said, "You know it was that man of Freda's who shot my mare?"

“Are you sure?” Leila hadn’t heard this.

“It’s what Walsh thinks.”

“And—does Freda know this?”

“She says it’s nothing to do with her.”

Brent came back to them and dismounted. He wanted to say nice things about the mare but he thought it might make Lyn want more for her. They hadn’t agreed on a price, not least because she was still in the vet’s care.

“I’ll leave you to it then,” Leila said briskly. “She’s healed completely so there’s no issue with her health.” She turned and walked back up the lane leaving them to talk. Brent came in a little while later and asked Leila if she could keep Lady Luck a few more days until he could come out with his horsefloat. “So it’s a deal,” Leila said cheerfully. “Well, you’ve got a lovely mare there and I’m sure she’ll do well for you.” She felt that Brent would also like to ask her about Naomi but she hurried on to say she had a busy morning and she would see him when he came to pick up his horse.

He offered Lyn a drink at the pub and she said “why not?” and then he went back to thinking what all this would do to his bank account. The mare was ridiculously cheap for what she had achieved but he still came back to the knowledge that he would now have two horses to care for and only a constable’s pay.

He and Lyn drove round separately to the Coolibah. As Lyn parked she saw a motorbike also parked and said in surprise, “A motorbike! That’s what it was! I should’ve guessed—” Brent got out and came over. “What is it?”

“I’ll bet that belongs to Freda’s guy.”

“And you think he shot Lady Luck?”

“I’m certain of it. Should I ask him point-blank, the bastard?”

Brent suddenly wondered if a drink here was a good idea. Dennis might not be any too happy to find his former constable in the middle of an affray in the pub.

\*

As they went in the pub seemed half-asleep. Pauline Scully unexpectedly was polishing the bar and talking over her shoulder to George Johnson somewhere behind her. Pauline didn’t usually come in till the evening as mornings were rarely busy. They looked around and saw Burdon in a far corner. He was with a young couple.

Brent ordered two drinks and went to take them to a table well away from Burdon but Lyn said without emphasis, “Let’s sit where he can see us.”

Both Pauline and George had heard rumours about Burdon and Freda, Burdon shooting Lyn’s horse, Burdon and Freda in cohorts. Neither of them knew the exact truth of anything. But Pauline said to George as she watched them walk away, “We’d best keep an eye on them. Can you get Bill to join us? You’ll be wanting to leave soon for your appointment.”

“It might even be best to call Dinny. But we can give them the benefit of the doubt for the moment.” George was a mild old man and avoided trouble as much as possible. He much preferred the police to sort out any fights here. But Pauline was made of sterner stuff and she did not doubt her ability to break up most fights. She didn’t really believe Lyn Harding would resort to violence but how Burdon and the two strangers with him would respond to anything she might say ... Burdon was, from what she’d seen, a calm easygoing sort of person. People said he was lazy and she could well believe that. But then quite a lot of their customers were lazy. Quite a few would prefer to sit and drink than work up a sweat. She had no complaints about that. They made for better customers than the farmers who dropped by to ‘lay the dust’ after a couple of hours at the saleyards or people like Dinny Walsh with the occasional beer or older women dropping in for a shandy.

And for the next five minutes all was peace. Brent and Lyn sat over their drinks and talked horse and Burdon and his friends or acquaintances also sat and talked quietly. And then Lyn said in a louder voice to Brent, “That character over there with the light hair is the guy who shot my horse—and there he is swanning round like the Lord High what’s-his-name.”

Burdon ignored her but the young couple turned and stared at Lyn. “Yep, you should be surprised,” she went on with her voice raised. “Came past on his motorbike, stopped, blasted my poor bloody horse—and took off again. But the cops are on to him.”

Brent sincerely wished he had never suggested a drink. And sincerely wished he had insisted on them sitting somewhere else.

The young man sitting with Justin Burdon opened and shut his mouth then blurted out “That can’t be right—”

“Course it isn’t right,” Burdon said calmly. “Don’t take any notice of that old witch. She probably shot the horse herself to get the insurance.”

Lyn stood up with a jerk. Brent said, “No, ignore him.” He put out a hand as though to press her back into her seat.

“You see,” Burdon went on, not raising his voice, “she knows she’s in the wrong.”

“You slimy little toad,” Lyn said loudly. “But Freda’s up with your game now!”

The young couple, supremely embarrassed, began to gather their things up. Pauline Scully slipped out from behind the bar and came hurrying over.

“No trouble now—or you’ll all be out on your ears.”

“It’s nothing to do with us,” Burdon didn’t raise his voice. “It’s that dame there, telling lies.”

“He shot my horse! He should be charged with cruelty to animals!” Lyn seemed to think that Pauline Scully would be better support than Brent.

“Look, can’t we sort this out peacefully?” Brent felt he should assert himself. “If no charges have been laid against Mr Burdon—”

The young couple picked up their bags and stood up; now they eased themselves away from the group and headed for the front door.

“Of course there’s no charges,” Burdon sounded very confident. “That copper down the road came to see me and he accepted I hadn’t done anything wrong.” He obviously didn’t recognise Brent and Brent saw no reason to enlighten him but he was annoyed at the dismissive way Burdon spoke of his former boss.

“Then I think we should just check that with Sergeant Walsh,” Brent said as firmly as he could.

“And now you lot have lost me two good customers,” Burdon went on. “So I’m out of this place and I won’t be coming back.”

Pauline shrugged. “No loss to us.”

George over at the bar and seeing the young couple hurry out had rung the station and got Dennis just back from a fruitless visit to the Rae home. Dennis didn’t sound any too happy about being told Lyn Harding and Justin Burdon were at each other’s throats in the bar. “Then let the bugga go and good riddance,” Dennis said curtly. “And keep his glass for fingerprints. Pick it up with a cloth and put it aside. I’ll send Grant round to get it.”

This wasn’t quite as good as Dennis offering to come himself but George accepted that nothing had actually happened other than some raised voices. He picked up a tray and a cloth and went over and carefully picked up all the empties and said in what he hoped was his usual calm friendly way, “Anyone for another drink?”

They all said no. So that at least suggested no one intended to stay hanging about. But as he got to the bar he had a sudden spasm: which was Burdon’s glass? For a moment he stared down blankly. Then it came back to him. The one sitting on top of the scratch on the tray. He put the tray down with relief. Sending five glasses to be checked for fingerprints wouldn’t make him popular ...

Burdon stood up and said, “You want to watch it, you fucking old bitch. Freda’s got your measure.”

Lyn laughed suddenly. “And she’s got yours.”

“Like hell she has, the old cow, she knows what’s good for her—and once you’ve shifted your bloody carcass—” Then he didn’t seem to see the point in tossing out any more invective and turned to go.

Lyn said loudly, “You all heard him, didn’t you, calling Freda an ‘old cow’?”



Brent and Pauline had but Pauline just wanted Lyn gone and Brent just wanted to be on his way. He got up and went over to the bar and said under his breath, "Should we say anything to Dennis?"

"Not your worry, Dinny's sending Grant round to take that glass to be fingerprinted."

"Well, what say I take it back to Wiville with me?"

But as he said it Grant Schroeder came hurrying up the steps and into the pub. "Oh, hi, Brent, I've come to get a glass."

"Okay, so if you give George a receipt then I'll take it to the lab with me and Reid can let you know. So what d'you want me to tell him?"

"Just to check these prints with the ones he got off a ball."

Brent didn't think they would be able to use this underhand method to get a case into court but he felt he would quite like to see Justin Burdon squirm. It wasn't that he was always in the corner of the women who came through his life but he had been offended by Burdon's manner of talking to Lyn and about Freda.

George left the glass wrapped in a cloth and put it into a paper bag for travel. As he did so, Lyn came over to them and said, "I wonder who those young ones were? I'd say he's probably trying to sell his farm to them now he knows I'm moving out and he thinks he'll be moving in. But I don't think I'll bother telling Freda he just called her names. Let her find out what sort of creep he is for herself."

This sounded unpleasant but Brent doubted whether Freda would believe Lyn anyway.

\*

Grant had barely left the station when Sergeant Walsh had an unexpected visitor. Lynnell Morton. He could not remember Mrs Morton ever coming in to see the police of her own volition. It was usually him demanding and her abusing. He said his usual "Help you?" but it contained no enthusiasm.

"You've got to help me," Mrs Morton said immediately.

"Well, come through." He sat her down in the interview room and took out a form. "So what's the matter?"

"It's not that kind of matter," she waved the form away, "it's that bloody Pidcock, Jayleen's dad, he's suing us, said we killed his darling little girl—"

"Well, you did. Cherry did. So who's to blame him for wanting to put the squeeze on?"

"Cherry only did what she had to do—"

She immediately realised this was a mistake. Making Walsh angry wouldn't help. "Sorry, but you know what she was like."

"Yeah, Cherry should've gone to prison for poisoning her dad all those years ago."

"I don't mean Cherry! I mean that Jayleen slut!"

"Pot calling the kettle black won't help you."

"But you know that dad of hers never did a thing for her, just wanted his sex same as the lot of them, the big lump o' shit."

"Well, tell that to your lawyer. Incest is still a crime. But you'd better have your facts right." Dennis felt certain she was right in her statement but he had no idea where she'd gleaned it from and had no wish to ask. And if she only had it as hearsay her lawyer might refuse to run with it.

"Of course I know what I'm talking about! D'you think no one ever tells me anything!"

"Then off you go. I'm busy."

Probably Lynnell had heard things from some of her relatives. Several of them had been customers of Jayleen Pidcock when she had swanned round the Coolibah Hotel and upset quite a lot of people.

Whether or not that was what Lynnell had hoped to hear she stood up, seemed about to say something though he doubted whether it would be 'thank you', then turned and went out without another word. He considered taking a few minutes to ring Constable Porter in Dirranbandi to tell her her intuition about Benjamin Rae was probably spot on. But he had hardly noted Lynnell Morton's visit when he had another unexpected visitor. Mr Pidcock.

He came in and said immediately, "I need some help."

Once again Dennis sat down in the interview room and took up a pen to fill in a form but Mr Pidcock immediately said, "I don't want none o' that. I just want to find out what those Morton dames've got stashed away. I want to know how much to ask for."

"You can ask your lawyer to make that decision for you. It's none of my business. You're taking out a civil case. Nothing to do with the police."

"Don't come with that, bud. I know you took all the stuff little Jay had in her room. You must know all her customers. You tell me and I'll go round and see 'em all. For sure some of 'em'll want to help me. They're the ones that missed out, same as me."

"You were a customer of your daughter as well?"

For a moment the other man stared at him then he said angrily, "Course I wasn't! What a thing to say!"

"Then what's this about you missing out, same as those other useless morons?"

"I never said that! And don't you say I did! I just want to know where all her papers went."

"Everything she had came back to you. She had no book of customers and amounts paid. So don't go saying she did. Seems like she was making money, all in cash, she didn't want the Tax Office to know about."

He didn't seem to find this a problem. Possibly he too worked on a cash-only basis. "Well, then just name me a couple of his customers and I'll go and see 'em."

Dennis sat in silence considering the ethics of passing on any names. Of course, most of Buckton could name some of Jayleen's customers. She hadn't believed in keeping any of it secret. "Right then, here's a couple and if they don't want to say what a lovely girl Jayleen was—then that's it, you don't hassle them and you don't bribe them to say things." He gave Mr Pidcock the names of Craig Goodrick and Greg Maxwell. Craig was related to Lynnell so he would probably pass anything on, such as an offer of cash, and Greg Maxwell was such an unpleasant customer that he thought Mr Pidcock might think twice about asking him to be a witness—though there was always the possibility that Maxwell might fancy a wad of notes also. And if Mr Pidcock lost his case he might not have any compensation money to spread around his witnesses.

"And if they don't cough up," Pidcock said belligerently, "I'll call Betty, she always knows what's going on around here."

"In that case you'll get Mervyn as well and I don't think the dirty disgusting old sod will impress the court when he says how much he enjoyed sex with his niece. Still, your choice."

He could see immediately that the man wouldn't want Mervyn Cronk anywhere near his case. And he wanted to protect Betty Cronk from any publicity. Betty, unlike many of the people he offered advice to, had taken his words to heart. She'd returned to her church and was often down there cleaning and polishing or sometimes just sitting quietly in a pew reading her Bible. She was now on the roster at the op-shop. She knitted things for the CWA stalls. And in a curious way she seemed to look younger. And happier. He blessed the local women who had welcomed her help and made her feel wanted.

He was heartily glad to see the back of the 'grieving' father as he jotted down the visit and then switched the jug on. He would give Amy a quick ring just to tell her of the Killarney end then get out his sandwiches.

\*

It was late afternoon when Dennis and Grant got an unexpectedly cheerful call from Reid Strohling in the small lab in Winville. Reid wasn't known for his happy demeanour and no one had ever heard him crack a joke. But this time he said, "Don't ask me how you got that glass but you've got a match. Same prints on that funny ball and the glass. Do you want it on the record?"

"I don't see why not. We didn't warn him we were taking his glass before it got washed but the pub had no problem with handing it over. And I can't see it ever coming to court anyway. But I'd just like to have the report on file in case that Burdon bloke gets up to any more of his tricks."

Then he turned to Grant and said, "D'you want to be the one who tells Freda Donnelly?"

Grant hesitated, then said, "Okay. What exactly do I tell her?"

They went over it carefully then Grant said, "I don't have to charge anyone, do I?"

"No. Pity. It's a pretty blatant case of cruelty to an animal but we'll leave it up to those dames to decide if they want to take it any further." He couldn't imagine Freda wanting it made

public and Lyn with her eye on Saul Harding's farm might like her vet bills paid but he couldn't see her wanting to go to court and risk having all the feuding with Freda brought out.

Grant still felt moments when he wondered if he was the best person to tackle people over difficult issues but he had gradually come to understand that even his boss had people he would rather not tackle. It was just one of those things that had to be done.

Freda and her mother invited him in. The sun was going down and the farm lay in prosperous peace as the shadows lengthened.

"News?" Freda seemed on edge as she motioned him to a chair.

"I'm afraid so. It looks as though Mr Justin Burdon definitely shot Ms Harding's horse."

"So why are you telling me rather than Lyn?"

"She will also be told. But we thought you would want to know as he may have done it to help you—"

"Help me?" she said sarcastically. "You must be joking!"

"We thought you would want to know." He felt he wasn't saying it sufficiently firmly.

"Yes, well, now I know. So go and tell Lyn and I'll bet she screams blue murder and wants us to pay all her bills."

Grant wasn't sure if he should try to respond to this but he remembered his boss talking about animal cruelty. "Shooting a horse is a case of animal cruelty ... so I s'pose she might want something." His voice firmed as he said this.

Freda sat back and closed her eyes briefly. She was the one who had said so didactically that they loved Lady Luck and would never hurt her.

"Yes, I guess you're right. Well, leave it with me and I'll organise to pay Mrs Burkett."

Grant did a good job of hiding his relief but after he'd gone out Freda said to her mother, "I seem to be pretty useless when it comes to picking men, don't I?"

Mrs Simpson was a kind old lady and she had had a happy marriage herself. "I can't say I'm sorry to see the end of Justin. I never felt he cared about you just for your own sake. And now, before the show season starts, I want you to take a decent holiday and just put all this behind you. Lyn will take her horses and other stuff and we'll find someone to come in and give me a hand. Just go somewhere you've always wanted to go and let your hair down for a few weeks."

She liked the image her mother conjured up but she wasn't sure if it would be easy to find someone reliable to come in. "I guess we should apologise to Lyn. I don't like her but it was my fault Lady Luck got shot. I just never believed Justin would do a thing like that. I just ... well, it doesn't matter any more. That's the end of all that."

Although she sounded melancholy the feeling slowly grew on her through the evening that she was glad it had ended. Her life with Kevin had ended in a big mess but as she thought back there had been many happy moments in the early days when they both rode around the shows and knew lots of people and had their horses ... and even if it had all gone wrong at least they'd had it. But with Justin there never would have been that shared adventure and she had always been vaguely aware of something missing. Good looks couldn't make up for that lack ...

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When Grant came back to the station his boss said gloomily, "S'pose I'd best head down to the Raes and tackle that young fella but I don't want them to up and scarper before we get to the bottom of the whole thing. I'll see what he has to say about his night time wanderings. They should be home by now."

His impulse was to go in hard but he didn't want to have to chase them around Australia, even if he had the time and energy and resources, and he was sorry they were only leasing the house not buying. It was easier to abandon a lease than a house, even a house in Buckton, which contained your savings.

The car was in the carport and there was a light behind the curtains in the front room. He knocked and waited. Mr Rae opened the door cautiously and said, "Ah, Sergeant. Problems?"

"Your son. He's been prowling again. Go and get him for me."

"I'm not your lackey to be ordered around. And even if my son is disabled he is still an adult in his own right, not a kid to be told what to do."

"Well, if you'd rather I stood in your doorway till bedtime—go for it."

Because the Raes had built up few friendships and not even many contacts Mr Rae wasn't as familiar with Dennis Walsh's 'staying power' as other Bucktonites. But he gave up and went away, calling out, "Ben, the police are here! Where are you?"

Dennis Walsh continued to stand in the doorway wondering why it was so hard to find the young man in a small house. Mrs Rae came out from the kitchen and said testily, "You'd better come in and close the door. You're letting the mozzies in."

He accepted the chair she pointed to and looked around the room. It was surprisingly sparse and lacking in anything personal. Quite comfortable and pleasant. But more in the way a pricey hotel room is comfortable and pleasant.

"He's having a bath," she said rather curtly as though she felt something should be said although she would rather not. "He won't be long."

"What does he do in Winville all day?"

"Nothing much. He likes to go to the park."

"He's not in any sort of special program for people with a disability?"

"No. He doesn't need that."

"He might find it more interesting than sitting on a park bench."

"Well, he wouldn't and I don't think it's any of your business anyway."

"It is, when he's annoying local people. If he was doing some exercise and useful activities through the day he mightn't be wandering round Buckton at night scaring old ladies." Mavis wouldn't like being called old but it sounded better than 'middle-aged' as a victim.

"My son has never scared anyone in his life and you can't prove that he has."

"I wouldn't bet on that, Mrs Rae. So that's why I'd suggest you get your son into some genuine activities through the day."

"And since when were you an expert on how best to look after disabled people? I doubt if you know the first thing about it."

He didn't need to answer this as father and son came into the room and stared at Dennis Walsh. There was no suggestion the young man had just come from a bath but it didn't seem to matter what he'd been up to so long as he was inside the family home.

"You were seen last night, son, and you gave Mrs Barnard a very nasty fright."

The young man stood beside his father with his mouth hanging open and looking the picture of an unfortunate with no idea what was going on around him. And Amy was right about his eyes. They did seem to turn up slightly at the corners. He might've been born that way, a family characteristic, but it wouldn't be very hard to get a doctor to do a very small operation. After all, these days people were always having bits removed or bits added; it probably wouldn't raise any eyebrows.

"My son wasn't out last night. I always check on him." Mr Rae said firmly. "He doesn't know what's what so we keep a close eye on him."

"Not close enough." Dennis kept his eyes on the young man and he and his father were not immune to finding Walsh's pale blue gaze disconcerting. "Now, I'll let it go if you guarantee your son won't wander again. And I also checked the electoral rolls. Your son isn't registered. Did you get an exemption for him?"

Both parents turned and stared at him. He felt they were both flustered and unsure how to respond. He knew perfectly well they were not registered either but by focusing on their son it implied that he wasn't interested in them. Nevertheless they obviously didn't know what he knew or didn't know. An anguished message seemed to pass between husband and wife.

"No. No, we just didn't worry about that. He doesn't understand politics and all that business so why should he register? But if you think we should get him enrolled—should we get a doctor's certificate, d'you think?"

"Yep. You better get him straight round to one of the doctors here and get that sorted."

"We go to a doctor in Winville—"

"Who is that?"

"Oh ... er ... Doctor Barton."

"Okay, same thing, get it sorted." He had never heard of a Dr Barton in Winville but it was possible he was a new arrival. He left it for the time being.

Mrs Rae seemed to think a conciliatory tone would make life easier for the family and she said, "Look, we are both certain Ben hasn't been out doing anything wrong. He would never hurt anybody or steal anything. But we will do as you say about the roll."

Dennis left it at that. Even without his conversation with Constable Glover he thought Amy was right. There was something put on about Benjamin Rae but he thought it would be best to just seem satisfied and go away again. For the time being. But the question buzzed as he returned to the station. Why go to so much trouble—unless there was something more serious hidden away?

\*

The house was surprisingly quiet when Dennis went in. Fiona was in the kitchen making gravy. There was a murmur of voices in the distance.

"Peace, perfect peace," he said drily as he went in. "It's been a day and a half."

She looked a question and he said, "Tell you later. I'll just wash up."

"And you could tell them it'll be dinner in five minutes."

Fiona had put a desk into the room she used as her office so that Elise could do her homework there. Privately he thought Elise could do her homework anywhere. She breezed through it as though Mrs McLaren had given her baby stuff to do. Now she was doing sums and helping Rob do some reading at the same time.

"Nearly finished?" he said in the doorway.

Elise picked up the sheets and said cheerfully, "Easy peasy! Is it dinner time, Dada?"

"Just about."

He thought back to himself labouring over sums on a slate. It certainly saved paper. But the slates always seemed to get cracked and his mother at one stage had resorted to getting him to do sums on the smoothed dirt by the side door. He had always found this kind of learning artificial and awkward whereas the things he learned in a hands-on way seemed simple and practical. But this was a different world and he was glad his kids were relishing it. Yet for a moment he felt briefly nostalgic for that stick and the smoothed dirt while birds sang in the trees and an occasional pelican turned up to explore the small lagoon beyond the sheds.

As they finished dinner Fiona said, "I've had a note from Carmen. A bit of news. Though I'm not sure if it helps much."

"So he's out and about?"

"Yes. The man she hired says he slept a night down on the banks of the Yarra and next day he went to visit two people in a house in Altona. He was there about two hours then went away again and just mooched around for the rest of the day and went to a place for homeless men that night and the next day he went in to an employment agency and came out and sat down by the river and ate hamburgers and fed the birds and went back to the hostel for the night and the next day he wandered round and tried a few cars to see if they were locked and he went back and slept by the river again. That's all Carmen had paid the investigator for. So that's as far as that goes. But the man asked around and found that the old couple were a Mr and Mrs Caulfield—"

"As in the racetrack?"

"It seems so. They were said to be retired and kept themselves to themselves."

"Could one of them be his father, I wonder?"

"Well, not if they really are old."

"So what's Carmen going to do about this? Does she really want her son sleeping rough?"

"It's up to her, I guess, although it might help to get her husband sympathetic. Who knows?"

"Then send that information on to the grandparents. If they've got money to spare and only the one grandchild ... maybe they can pitch in and do their own looking." Though, strictly speaking, they now had three grandchildren. But a lost grandchild probably had a special significance.

Fiona considered this but she wondered if it would seem like going behind Carmen's back. Dennis disagreed. If she hadn't said to Fiona to keep it to herself then presumably she would not object to him making suggestions. "If the kid really is a lost soul then he needs all the help he can get. If he doesn't want his mum back in his life then maybe he would accept his grandparents? It seems worth a try."

Fiona agreed with this, though a little reluctantly. It would look as though she didn't support Carmen. She changed the conversation by saying, "Why did you say it was an awful day?"

"Got proof that Freda's bloke shot Lyn's horse. So that'll be the end of that romance. But it was that blasted young Rae. I wish I could find an excuse to take his fingerprints and then circulate them. Maybe he is just a prime nuisance but I don't see his parents going to such lengths if he just gets up to a bit of mischief ..."

"I think ... being a Peeping Tom can become a sort of addiction. Maybe it doesn't go any further. But with a young man with a very restricted life ... I suppose he has the same urges as other young men ..."

"But would he focus on middle-aged women?"

"Maybe they're easier to find, maybe he has a sort of mother fixation, maybe he hates middle-aged women and blames them for something that went wrong in his life. I'm just guessing but he probably does have a reason. And some men *do* find older women attractive ..."

"Then let's hope we can find that out before the family does a runner again." He didn't see any point in mentioning that he did find some older women attractive as he was hardly fixated on anyone. Fiona was in her forties and he still found her beautiful but he didn't think of her as an 'older woman'.

"It can't be much of a life for them, not making friends, never feeling settled, they must love him very much surely?"

He couldn't answer this.

\*

In the morning he sent Grant round to tackle one of the primary school principal's endless tedious little complaints. Dennis often felt irritated by Nelson L'Estrange and yet he felt he would rather have Nelson and his grumbles than a past high school principal who didn't seem to care what happened at his school so long as it didn't impact on his Chosen Few. The interim high school principal Jon Derry had, to the relief of police, decided to stay in Buckton and really throw himself heart and soul into making Buckton High School the best school possible. Dennis wasn't alone in believing morale was much higher and a general air of enthusiasm had touched even the most lacklustre students.

The phone rang and it was Constable Porter. She said immediately, "You were right, Dennis, they did change their name by deed poll. Horrocks became Rae. But it hasn't really helped us. We can't find any Horrocks anywhere to suit."

"So where did they do the changeover?"

"They gave a Sydney address. But no sign of Horrocks anywhere. D'you think it's possible they've changed twice?"

"I s'pose it's possible but it's more likely to be someone changing back I would think. But so far as I know there's no law against changing your name twice. Think of all the women who get married two or three times. No one objects to them changing their names. I know it's not quite the same but after the Plowmans with their dozens of aliases I don't think anything would surprise me."

"Well, we'll try for another change and I'll let you know."

After she'd hung up it dawned on him that she had said 'us' and 'we'. He didn't mind her sharing it with other officers but just hoped they were all discreet. Then he thought of sharing it with Winville. Someone there just might have suggestions to make and then he weighed that thought up against the general lack of discretion of most Winville incumbents. It was probably better to keep it between Buckton and Dirranbandi. For the time being.

The phone rang again and it was Mrs Dalby at the local pharmacy calling to report a theft. Nothing dangerous, no prescription drugs, fortunately, but someone had been pinching their gift items and with Christmas coming up ... He said he'd be there in five minutes and as there was no sign of Grant he put the sign on the door.

"It's these," Mrs Dalby said briskly, showing him some nice boxed sets with perfume, powder, soap and lotion. "There's four gone. They're always popular with kids buying things for their mum or gran. They're twenty-two dollars each so it mounts up."

"And you've had kids in?"

“They often drop in on their way home from school. We keep some bottles of cold water in summer and some fruit juices. And some kids come in with their parents.” She couldn’t be any more specific. “We’ve been quite busy and I haven’t been able to keep an eye on everyone.”

He carefully picked up the box next to the gap and dusted it lightly. Small fingerprints showed up. It was hard to give them an age but probably somewhere between eight and twelve. And it wasn’t guaranteed that the child or children who had picked up this box had stolen the other four boxes. But there was a good chance.

“It isn’t guaranteed that we can get someone but what say I buy this box and go over it properly at the station and see if it’s anyone we’ve already got on file.” It was a fraught business taking and keeping the prints of children but he had found that the same children tended to get into mischief, steal small items, vandalise things, and it saved a heck of a lot of time and trouble.

Mrs Dalby took his money and thanked him. Then she said quietly, “Are you still looking for the man who has been bothering Mavis?”

This was a surprise though he thought quite a lot of local people probably had seen or heard something. And Mavis saw no need to keep it to herself.

“You saw someone?”

“I did. It was a couple of nights ago. I was dropping his medicine into old Mr Donaldson to save him coming up. I guess it was about half-past-eight and I was walking back up and I saw a man jump the fence there by the garage and he came running down the road and he jumped the gate into the Raes’ yard and he went round the back of the house and disappeared.”

“Well, that’s very useful. We’re certain it’s young Ben Rae but we can’t catch him at it. Would you be willing to do a statement?”

Mrs Dalby was a rather reserved and self-sufficient person but she had a strong sense of Christian duty, too strong in the opinion of some Bucktonites, but now she agreed immediately and said she would come down when her husband came back from doing a delivery.

As he stepped out of the shop he caught sight of Mavis Barnard leading a large mongrel down the street. The creature looked to have some Alsatian in him. He crossed the road in a hurry to catch her before she turned the corner. She might be taking someone else’s dog for a walk but it was far more likely she was thinking of him in terms of a watchdog. He didn’t recognise the dog and wondered if she’d been to the Dogs’ Home in Winville.

Mavis stopped as he came up to her. The dog looked up at him and barked. “He’s a good barker,” Mavis said cheerfully. “I asked Joe Landy for the best barker he had.”

Dennis knew Joe Landy had bought the farm up the road from the Conways but hadn’t had any reason to be in touch with him and didn’t know what family or what pets he might have. He thought Joe was a cousin to Barbara Landy who ran the shop in Norwilla. Or a cousin of Barbara’s dead husband.

“He’s got dogs?”

“Three. I’m just borrowing Thor here for a week or two. With luck he’ll really bark and we’ll let him out into the little paddock of a night.”

“But that paddock isn’t secure. I don’t want him roaming the district.”

“It is now,” Mavis said with a sudden grim note. “Noel bought chicken wire and did the whole paddock except the front fence. We’ve thought of putting a couple of strands of barbed wire above it. But we’ll see what happens with Thor first.”

“Good oh. But the whole thing doesn’t make much sense. You don’t parade round in nothing at night, do you?”

“Of course not! I know, it doesn’t make sense to me either. But there must be a reason unless that young fella really doesn’t know what he’s doing. D’you think that’s it? He really is completely mental?”

“No, I’m sure he knows what he’s doing. I just wish I knew why.”

“Well, don’t go worrying, Den, I’m sure Thor will tear him to pieces if he catches him.”

“Somehow, there’s not a lot of comfort in that, Mave.”

She laughed at that. “I know. But I really don’t mind if Thor gives him a nip. I’ve spent all these weeks worrying.”

That was the thing about prowlers, Peeping Toms, night time intruders. They weren't something where you could simply dust your hands off and say 'that's that'. The fear remained. "If we can't catch him at it, I'll scare them into moving." There was no point in telling Mavis he wanted to keep the family here till he finally got some answers.

But the next problem with the dog was that several neighbours over the next few days complained about him barking. He managed to soothe the complainers by saying the dog was only temporary.

He had better luck with the item from the pharmacy. One of the set of fingerprints came up as a well-recorded mischief-maker. He sent Grant round to the primary school again. "It won't make you popular with Nelson. But I'll guarantee that's young Mick Curtis. Ask him who was with him in the chemist's. I can't see him just fingering this box and leaving the others alone, the little pest." The boy had probably slipped the others into his schoolbag and picked this one up but changed his mind or he thought someone was looking in his direction ...

Grant obediently went off with the box in a carrier bag. And predictably the principal said testily, "What is it now?"

"I need to speak to the Curtis children. It looks like they've been stealing from the Dalbys'."

"Then why can't you do it after school hours."

Grant had one time asked that question of his boss and Dennis had said, "You're sending a message to the whole school about stealing. And trying to interview those little pests round there with their dad and mum screeching at you that their little darlings would never do anything naughty doesn't work."

With that calm assessment with him Grant said firmly. "I would like to see Mick Curtis here. You can be present."

Mr L'Estrange looked as though he would like to take issue but finally said, "Very well, come along."

He went into the Grade Six classroom and said, "Excuse me a minute, Ms Archer, but the police want to interview Mick Curtis."

"Is it about stealing from the pharmacy?"

Both Nelson and Grant looked at her in surprise. "I overheard some boys talking about it as they came in to class. Sort of boasting." It didn't seem the moment to say she had wondered whether it was idle boasting or not.

"Then can you pick those boys out for us."

She called out four boys. In a way Grant was surprised. He had half expected to see some girls in the group. But some boys did give their mothers such gifts. It was just hard to imagine young Mick Curtis giving his mother anything. He was a tough boy with a belligerent stance. Grant secretly doubted whether he had ever given his mother anything except trouble. Maybe he was selling the gift packs on ...

Grant wasn't sure if Nelson wanted him to speak to the whole class but if nothing else Nelson didn't mind how small the crime was, he still wanted a resolution. "Four sets of gift items have disappeared from the Dalbys' shop. We found fingerprints there. So we know one of the boys who were there. So now you others can tell me what you were doing with Mick Curtis."

There was dead silence. Then one boy said, "Mick said his family bought too many and he'd like to sell some. I bought one for five dollars. I didn't know it was stolen." Grant thought it was just as well this boy looked large and strong. Mick would undoubtedly have something to say to them all after school. On the other hand this claimed naivete rang false.

This seemed to open the floodgates. The other two boys said the same thing. "So none of you knew these things were stolen?"

They all said no. But Ms Archer intervened to say, "Then why were you all laughing and saying you'd put one over? I think you all did know that they were stolen."

"Well, boys," Mr L'Estrange said, "you'd best all go down to the station with Constable Schroeder, and Ms Archer and the other pupils can get on with their work. I'm sure Sergeant Walsh will get the true stories out of you all."

At the mention of Sergeant Walsh all the boys seemed to have second thoughts. It was one thing to be tackled by Grant Schroeder who was usually nice and friendly and had even been good



enough to be approached by the Broncos. That had impressed a lot of the boys around town and none of them could understand why he had turned down the offer so as to stay on in Buckton.

It was another thing to bring Sergeant Walsh into the equation.

"It's true," the first boy said suddenly. "We did know Mick had taken them. But we weren't sure if he was just spinning us a line." The other two boys nodded.

"So where are the boxes now?" Mr L'Estrange seemed to think he could tidy this up himself.

"In our bags—"

"Then go and get them."

Ms Archer moved back to the front of the class. Nelson and Grant stepped outside. "Let's hope they haven't damaged them," Nelson said rather despondently.

But all four boxes were still in their cellophane when the boys brought them to Grant. "Right then, I'll return these to the shop. Now you will get a caution and Sergeant Walsh wants you all to go in and apologise to Mrs Dalby for all the worry you've given her."

As he walked along the corridor with Grant, the principal said quietly, "Your boss comes in very handy sometimes for keeping them in line."

Grant wasn't sure but he didn't think that Nelson L'Estrange meant it as a compliment. But he went on to say, "I'll make sure they all come down to the station after school."

"He takes things seriously," Grant said. Though whether the principal wanted this kind of comment or not he wasn't sure. Nelson L'Estrange had been heard to say that *he* was the only person in Buckton who took misdemeanours seriously. Grant thought that his boss would query that. Dennis was rarely willing to let anything go by.

But even if he found Nelson very tedious he was glad to have got it all sorted so quickly. And there was the pleasant job of taking the four boxes back to the Dalbys.

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The Barnards' borrowed dog certainly took his duties seriously. Half their neighbours seemed to be calling the station to say there was some kind of ruckus going on over by the service station. This was just after nine p.m. and Grant hurried into his clothes and took the car to drive down. He would call Dennis if it looked like being more than a dog being a nuisance.

He drew in by the garage and Noel Barnard came out and said in a rush, "The ruddy dog won't let him go!" He took Grant through the back of the garage into their side garden and out in to the small paddock by the house. They had removed all the old cars which had reposed there for many years and planted some fruit trees.

Someone was down on the ground and the big dog was worrying at his trousers. Mavis was ineffectively telling the dog to let go and the person on the ground was screaming that he was dead. Grant had the fleeting intuition that Mavis could pull the dog off if she really wanted to. He went over at a run and grabbed the dog's collar and dragged him away from the prone man. Whoever it was on the ground continued to lie there and groan. Grant said to Noel, "Keep a hold of him while I—" He handed the dog, still growling, to Noel and went towards the man and then turned back to say, "Call the ambulance."

Mavis was tempted to say, "I will but I'll tell 'em not to hurry." Yet she felt vindicated. Now everyone would have to believe her. She wasn't just a middle-aged woman imagining things. She nodded and hurried away. Grant went over and helped the man to his feet. He tipped the hood of his jacket back and stared into the face of the unknown man. The stranger immediately dropped his mouth open and put on an expression of vacant stupidity.

"It won't wash," Grant said quietly. "You deliberately came on to the Barnards' property. Pretending to be too stupid to know this won't get you anywhere."

The young man responded by pulling away from Grant's not very firm hold and trying to run. But Grant was young and fit and strong. He grabbed the trespasser by both arms, dragged them behind the man's back, and said to Noel who was still hovering, "I wish I'd brought my cuffs."

Noel came over and pulled various bits and pieces from his pockets until he came upon a large oily rag. "This might do the trick. You hold him while I tie his wrists. Don't want him getting away now we've caught the little pest." The young man certainly wasn't little but Grant was

amused to find that his boss wasn't the only one to call troublemakers 'little'. Or maybe Noel had caught the habit from Dennis.

"We'll get him over to the front of the garage," Grant said, "and the ambos can pick him up there. I'd best go with him to the hospital. I don't want him getting away."

"Good oh." Noel had thought to offer to call Dennis but as Grant seemed to be coping very calmly and sensibly there seemed no reason to disturb his boss. And he didn't want young Grant to think he didn't have full confidence in him.

The town's only ambulance pulled in some five minutes later and Noel and Grant helped to bundle the man in. "I'd best come too," Grant said. "I don't trust him not to try and do a runner."

As he sat opposite the young man he managed to get a good look at his face and at the mess that was his leg. "Do you want anyone called?" Grant said. If the man really was mentally challenged then he would need someone to come and explain what was going on. "Your parents?"

The young man stared at him then nodded slightly. Then he went back to his pose of vacant non-understanding. "You'd better close your mouth," Grant said suddenly. "You'll catch flies." His granddad had told him that was what the teachers always said when he was a boy at school. Grant hadn't quite understood. After all, his granddad was nothing like this strange young man. But now he got pleasure out of saying it. Noel and Mavis had always been very kind and helpful to him and he felt a sudden surge of triumph that he had helped to solve their problem. But then cold reason butted in and said the problem was still a problem. It would probably need greater brains than his to solve it.

As the stranger was helped out of the vehicle and escorted away, limping and groaning in an exaggerated way, Sister Martin came out and said, "What is going on, Grant, who is he?"

"Well, I think he's Benjamin Rae and he's been attacked by a dog." Then he thought he maybe shouldn't have said that. It could look as though the Barnards had sooled their dog on to him.

"Ah, yes, we have heard rumours of him prowling. Do you think that was what he was doing?"

"It looks like it. I think we should call his parents. And maybe I should call Dennis in case we need to charge him."

"Then you do that and I'll ring his parents."

But she came back a minute later to say, "They don't seem to be in the phonebook. They must only have a mobile."

"Dennis says he'll be round in a few minutes."

"Well, maybe you could ask him to visit the Raes first and tell them their son is in hospital."

Dennis when this request was put to him said with grim pleasure. "Done. And now's our chance to get his prints."

Grant wasn't quite sure how this would work. Trespass was, after all, a civil matter. But if Dennis said it was okay then it probably was. Or maybe he planned to use it in the way they had used that pub glass to warn Justin Burdon. This, too, might act as a warning to the Raes that their son couldn't wander at will through people's private property.

Sergeant Walsh couldn't guess at the response of Mr and Mrs Rae. Would they rush to his bedside or turn their fed-up backs on their son. After all, it seemed he had led them a merry dance over the years. Mr Rae opened the door cautiously and said with a distinct lack of enthusiasm, "Oh, it's you."

"Yep. And you'd best come round to the hospital. Your son is there."

"No, he isn't. He's right here in bed." This, though, wasn't said with a lot of confidence.

"Okay then, go and get him."

Mrs Rae came out to join them and her husband said, "Go and get Ben. The police are saying he's in the hospital. That can't be true."

Dennis simply stood and waited. It would be a strange turn up for the books if the young man really was here in bed and they had caught a lookalike youngster. But he didn't believe it. The parents both went away and he could hear them talking softly but couldn't pick up the words. While they were gone he looked carefully round the room. It still looked pleasant and comfortable but it struck him more strongly now that there was nothing personal about it. No photographs, no

family mementoes, nothing that said ‘this room belongs to the Rae family’ or ‘the Horrocks family’ or any family really.

The parents were away nearly five minutes and he had almost begun to think they’d slipped out the back door and were even now pushing their car silently out of their drive and on to the street, preparatory to driving off.

But Mr Rae finally came back in and said, “Sorry, Ben must’ve gone out for a walk. He does sometimes.”

“I told you to keep him in—”

“He’s not a criminal—”

“Isn’t he?”

Mr Rae shot him an unreadable glance but didn’t respond to this.

“Well, get a move on, he’s in the hospital so if you want to see him you’d best get on down there.”

“What’s happened to him? Did he get hit by a car?”

“Look, the doctors can tell you all that. So the sooner you get there ... ” He turned on his heel and went out. He wanted to get to the hospital and see the young man before the parents got there.

Grant at least was very glad to see the burly figure of his boss come striding along the corridor to be met by Sister Martin and escorted into a room where Dr Sorenson was cleaning and bandaging the man’s leg. “I’ll give him a tetanus shot and he’ll be fine in a few days. Just make sure he takes it easy. I’ve put a couple of stitches in but it looks worse than it really is.”

“Has he given you his name?” Dennis said.

“No. Hasn’t said a word. Is he retarded, do you think?”

“Probably not. Anyway, his parents’ll be here soon and they can fill in the details for you. I just want to take his fingerprints to make sure he’s a first time offender. If he’s done this sneaky business before he might be wanted somewhere else.”

But when he took out his kit and went to pick up the young man’s hand the patient pulled away angrily and tucked both hands tightly under him.

“Very suspicious.” Dennis looked grim.

“Well, I can give him a sedative,” the doctor said thoughtfully. “It’ll help him sleep better. He’s not in serious pain but it may be hard to sleep. He’s obviously had a busy night.”

“Okay, go for it.”

But the patient was equally obstructive when it came to giving him an injection. Dr Sorenson tried to get him to drink something and that was pushed away and the glass smashed on the floor. As a junior nurse swept the pieces into a dust pan the door opened and Mr and Mrs Rae came charging in. Mrs Rae gave a horrible jarring screech and fell upon his neck. Mr Rae said belligerently, “What are you doing to my son! How dare you treat him like this!”

“Sit down, Mr Rae and shut up. Your son will tell you what he’s been up to.”

“Ben, darling, tell me what these awful people have done to you.” Mrs Rae still clung to her son.

But young Ben only put on his mulish face and hung his mouth open.

“He climbed into the Barnards’ yard again,” Dennis said with no let-up to his grimness. “He’d been told not to go near them. Their dog chased him. He’s only got himself to blame. And his parents had been warned not to let him roam.”

“Their dog!” Mrs Rae turned on him with eyes that were both angry and afraid. “How dare they set their dog on our boy! The monsters! They deserve everything they get! Now he’ll get rabies and everything—”

“Don’t be silly—” Dennis saw the night wearing away in stupid to and fro.

“Don’t you talk to my wife like that!”

“We’ll get those people.” Mrs Rae entered the lists again and the people around her understood a little that she was both immensely protective of her son and yet afraid of what he might do. “We’ll take them to court for keeping a dangerous dog, we’ll make them pay up—”

“You do that, Mrs Rae, and tell the court what your son was doing on the Barnards’ property. Now, I want this young man fingerprinted because I’d say this isn’t the first time he’s been out annoying middle-aged women.”

“You can’t do that,” Mr Rae said with an attempt at belligerence. “He hasn’t committed any crime.”

“I wouldn’t bet on that.” Dennis had seen the quick fear in Mrs Rae’s face. He now felt certain that Benjamin Rae had done more than scare a woman in Killarney. “But for the time being we’d best let this young pest get some sleep. And he won’t be up and about for several days. So you’d best call Dr Barton if you don’t want the local doctors to care for him.”

“Who is Dr Barton?” Brett Sorenson said in sudden curiosity.

“Their doctor in Winville. Or so they say.”

“I’ve never heard of a Dr Barton in Winville.” Dr Sorenson had no idea he was undermining the Raes’ story. He was merely curious. “The new doctor at the hospital is Dr Murphy.”

“What does it matter,” Mr Rae sounded angry. “Our son is lying there in pain because of some irresponsible people keeping a dangerous dog—”

“A dog kept inside a secure fence, yep, that’ll be one for the courts. But you won’t risk taking a case to court. So let’s stop gabbing and get home to bed.” As soon as Dennis Walsh said this everyone started to think about finishing up for the night and going home. “You can see your son in the morning and see how he’s doing.” It had the unmistakable sound of a dismissal.

Everyone got up but Mrs Rae bent to kiss her son and whisper something. Then she turned and went out with her husband. Dennis said to the doctor, “He’ll need more than a sedative. Wouldn’t surprise me if they come back and take him. But if he’s dead to the world it’ll make it pretty hard for them.”

“Do you want a guard put on him,” Sr Martin said diffidently.

“Once he’s out to it, just get the night nurse to keep an ear out.”

Dr Sorenson said to Jeannie Martin and those around her, “Sleeping pills?”

Dennis said more cheerfully, “Should do the trick. I’ll leave Grant here for a while.”

Grant had stood silently at the back of the room through all this. Dennis beckoned him out into the corridor and handed over the inkpad and forms. “Soon as he calms down and gets a bit sleepy. Then when you get back to the station log everything in.”

“D’you really think they’ll come back?”

“Good chance.”

“I can stay all night if you want.”

“Once he’s asleep—probably no point. You’ve had a busy day.”

Grant came back into the room and sat down while Dr Sorenson had another go at getting the young man off to sleep. After he and Sr Martin had finally gone out, saying ‘he should sleep till breakfast’, Grant took out the kit and sat waiting. The minutes ticked away. At last the man in bed closed his eyes and appeared to be asleep. But as soon as Grant tried to pick up one hand the other man lashed out and grabbed him. His strong fingers closed round Grant’s wrist. It was like being caught in a vice, Grant later said, but he was no weakling himself and he lifted the other man’s hand away and held it firmly till he felt it grow limp. But the experience had been a revelation. Retarded or not Benjamin Rae was a very strong fit man. He obviously did more than sit on park benches. And more than that Grant had seen the anger and hate burn in the other man’s eyes.

Whatever the truth of the young man’s life would prove to be Grant now found himself believing that Benjamin Rae would have no difficulty in hurting, maybe even killing a woman. He had felt a bit awkward at taking the prints of a man under sedation but now he saw it as playing his part in taking a dangerous man out of circulation. He carefully took both hands up to ink them and press them carefully to the forms, then cleaned both hands and sat back with a sense of satisfaction. Whether Dennis expected it or not he now thought he would almost enjoy staying on as guard.

The hospital grew quiet. The night nurse, Jenny Pym, came in and said, “I’ll turn off the lights now, Grant, and you might like to sit out in the corridor by the door. Can I get you a drink and something to read?”

Grant accepted the drink but thought he was still too keyed up to concentrate on a page. He sat on in the corridor, wondering if there was any point in him staying, but something kept him

there. Dennis might think that lifting a dead-to-the-world young man was more than the Raes could manage. But now he wondered if Mr Rae might be similarly fit and strong. And between the two of them ... and Jenny Pym and Godfrey Waddell might not be a match.

Nurse Pym dimmed the corridor lights but left the door into Benjamin Rae's room open. Mr Waddell came and sat with Grant for a while and heard the story of the night's events. Grant found Godfrey an odd little man, finicky but in a different way to Nelson L'Estrange; more a kind of fastidiousness with bodily processes. It made it strange that his daytime work was as the town's undertaker. Dead bodies were sometimes rather messy. Yet people liked him for the care and gentleness and respect he bestowed on people's dear departed.

As they sat talking quietly Grant asked him how he had become a funeral director. "I saw a need," Godfrey said simply. "It was a nuisance sometimes to have to get someone from Winville. And I had my job here so I wasn't dependant on people dying." He sat and ruminated a moment before saying, "I'll never forget the night your boss brought in that poor woman they'd found out at the rubbish tip. Winville, that lazy Doug Towner, couldn't be bothered to come out and check what was going on or how she died, so Dennis brought her into my rooms. Can you imagine? She had been dead for days, all bloated and horrible, poor soul, and the maggots hatching out. He wouldn't listen to me when I said she couldn't come in to my place. I didn't want anything ... contaminated. It was one of the worst nights of my life."

"And what happened?"

"Oh, they came and took her next day and Dennis found her son-in-law had killed her. Nasty man. No one liked him much when he ran the butter factory. But they sort of respected him. He had a commanding way about him. And they couldn't believe that he would actually kill the old lady." He sat a moment looking back to the time when Dennis Walsh had arrived and many people round town did their best to stymie his investigations. But they had been no match for the steely determination Dennis Walsh brought to his work.

"Her daughter came in to see me before she left Buckton. She said it could not have been nice for me to have her poor mother here but she said she was so grateful that her mother could lie here in peace and calm after her terrible ordeal. She is buried there at the side of the cemetery and I sometimes leave flowers for the old lady."

"That is very kind of you." Grant had found himself moved by the story. And it seemed to explain something about Godfrey Waddell. He was very gentle and kind to the sick, the dying, the dead, but he often found the rambunctious living rather disconcerting. Here, at night, watching over the sick, he seemed at home. It made the obvious liking and respect he felt for Dennis Walsh a little odd.

Godfrey got up and went on his rounds and conferred with Nurse Pym before going on up to the Annexe to check that everything was quiet there. Grant Schroeder considered ending his vigil. He was getting sleepy. But some vague concern kept him in his chair. Perhaps it was his boss's certainty that the Raes would up and leave at a moment's notice. Perhaps it was that look on the young man's face. Perhaps it was just a sense of duty. He didn't try to analyse it.

He got another coffee from Jenny Pym when she came back from visiting the two main wards and asked her where was the nearest toilet. She said, "Godfrey and I are going to have our dinner. Would you like something?" He was tempted. But then he might be in the middle of eating when the Raes crept back in. "Thanks, but I'd better not."

"They won't come back till about three in the morning."

"How do you know that?"

"Well, I don't, of course. But they would want to be sure everyone was asleep and they wouldn't want to run into the start of the morning routine. But come and we'll check on him." She shone her torch carefully round the room. The young man snored in the bed. Grant re-checked both windows and they were still firmly locked. Of course the parents might break the glass but he would surely hear that.

"Looks okay. And you're probably right. But they might be the exception ... "

"They might," she agreed cheerfully and went away again. All grew quiet. It was only the faintest of sounds, a faint squeak on the polished linoleum of the hallway. He stood up and looked around. He thought it came from near the front entrance and he walked softly in that direction. All

was quiet again but he didn't think he'd been misled. Someone had come in quietly. But there was no sign of anyone. Had they slipped in to one of the rooms to hide and wait?

He walked back to his chair and sat down again. Except for the very faint sound of the young man snoring he couldn't hear anything. Perhaps he had mistaken Nurse Pym's steps for something else. He yawned and wished the night was over. He looked at his watch. Not yet one.

He must have dozed then because it was a very faint but different sound which woke him. There was no sign of anyone and for a moment he thought he had imagined it. Nurse Pym must have gone up to the Annexe as there was no sign or sound of her. He got up and looked inside Benjamin Rae's room. It was in semi-darkness, only the faint gleam from the hall.

But there was very obviously someone else in the room. He saw it only as a dark shape. And the window on to the grounds was wide open. He hesitated. Should he tackle the person himself or get help? But the person would be gone long before he could call Dennis and probably even before he could call for Jenny or Godfrey. He launched himself at the shape and hit the person full on. The body fell back against the bedside table with a crash and Grant reached for the light and flicked it on. He saw he was nearly on top of Benjamin's father. Benjamin himself slept on peacefully. Grant yelled at the top of his voice "Help! I need help!"

The man half underneath him tried to throw him off and then grab him in a neck lock. But Grant was more than a match for him. The two of them ended up grappling on the floor, Grant trying to subdue him, Mr Rae still trying to get the upper hand. Grant felt a sharp pain in his eye and knew the other man had tried to ram his thumb into his eye. For a moment there he saw red. He might have really done something serious to the other man but Nurse Pym burst into the room and yelled, "You old bastard!" as she went for Mr Rae. She might be in her forties but she too was fit and had no compunction about throwing her weight on to Rae's right arm and pinning him to the floor.

For a moment all was confusion then Mr Rae stopped struggling and grew still. Grant with Nurse Pym's help flipped him over and pulled both arms up behind his back. Godfrey Waddell appeared at the door and Jenny yelled, "Get Dennis!"

He turned and disappeared.

Jenny turned to Grant, her cap askew, but with a big grin. "You were right and I was wrong. But at least we've got him. I wonder where the missus is?"

"Outside probably, waiting for him to put his son through the window."

"That'd be a job and a half. It's not a very big window." She wanted to laugh. "But are you okay?"

"He got a finger in my eye. It really hurt. But I don't think it's too serious."

"Let's hope not." The thought seemed to sober her.

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It seemed ages before Dennis turned up, carrying his cuffs, and still looking sleepy.

He looked at Grant and Jenny still holding Thomas Rae down. He looked at the young man still blissfully asleep in bed. He looked at the open window.

Then he said, "It'd be a job to get him out—and a fair fall."

But the difficulty now was what to charge the father with. In theory the man was entitled to enter his son's hospital room. It was outside of visiting hours but that was hardly a crime. And Grant it seemed had gone for him rather than the other way around.

"Okay, where's your wife?" Dennis went over and looked out the window. There was no sign of anyone.

"At home. In bed."

"Well, she hasn't committed any crime other than being brainless—so we'll leave her out of it. But you'd best come down to the station and we'll want to hear the truth about what's going on with you and that useless son of yours."

But as he said it Dennis felt sure he would never get anything out of this man. He had put too much of his life into keeping his son away from police. It was very unlikely he would break the habit of so many years.

With Grant's help he buckled him into the car.

"Ms Pym, drop into the station sometime tomorrow. We'll need a statement."

“Can do.” She was looking cheerful again after those anxious moments. It had been a much more interesting night than usual. She was rarely disturbed by more than a patient wanting a bedpan. Medical emergencies were rare in Buckton Hospital. Police emergencies even rarer. “D’you want to be called when he wakes up?”

The young man himself might try to leave as soon as he woke. He might try to go home. “Yep. Let us know. But if he tries to leave let him go. I don’t want any of you taking risks with the bastard.”

Nurse Pym was tempted to ask what else the young man had done. But that could wait.

She stood and watched the car drive away and Godfrey came and joined her. “Why would the parents go to so much trouble to get him out? Do you think they don’t trust us?”

Jenny Pym considered this but she could only say, “Your guess is as good as mine. But I guess we’ll hear all about it someday.”

It seemed, when morning came and the young man woke up, that their fears were groundless. He just lay in bed and said he needed something for the pain. Nurse Pym gave him a couple of tablets, glad that he was behaving reasonably, but a little suspicious of his apparent change of heart. She wondered vaguely if he might be on drugs. Perhaps his parents had brought him to Buckton in the hope that they could get him away from ‘bad company’.

Even so, she went and rang the station and said to a sleepy Grant, “He’s awake, all meek and mild but I’m not sure if I trust him.”

“How does he sound?”

“Pretty normal.”

“He’s not pretending to be stupid?”

“Not at the moment.”

This was a bit odd. Grant wasn’t sure if it had any significance. And what should he tell Nurse Pym?

She took the problem out of his hands by saying, “We’ll keep a close eye on him and let you know if anything changes.”

“Okay. Thanks very much.”

He made himself a cup of strong coffee and had toast and cereal before opening up the station and checking for messages. Dennis wasn’t in a good mood when he came in. “Why the heck did they want to come and live in Buckton,” he said when Grant told him what was happening at the hospital.

“I think it is that thing when all things happen for the best. It’s got a special name.”

“It can have any bloody name it wants. I could still do without the useless idiots.”

“But now we know he only acts stupid. That must be important.”

“Probably is. Well, get on to Greg Sullivan. Tell him we’ve got a set of fingerprints we’d like circulated. And not just Queensland.”

They had tried to get a statement from Mr Rae Senior but without luck. He continued to assert that none of them had done anything wrong. And without a charge Dennis had let him go.

Greg Sullivan didn’t sound any more cheerful than Dennis. “You want me to send prints round Australia? Why would you want me to do that?”

“We think Benjamin Rae might be wanted somewhere else.”

“For what?”

Grant turned to Dennis. “What do we think Ben Rae has done?”

“Rape probably. And maybe worse.”

Grant conveyed this to DSS Sullivan who agreed reluctantly. “Okay, can you fax them?”

Whether the images would be good enough? It was worth a try. Greg rang back ten minutes later to say, “They look okay. But don’t hold your breath.”

Dennis then sent Grant round to the hospital to make sure their suspect really was behaving himself. But he had hardly drawn up when Sister O’Brien came out and said, “Sorry Grant, he’s done a runner. Probably heading home. Sorry about that. We were just going to ring you when we found his bed empty.”

Grant rang his boss who said, “Head down to their house. Park in front of their gate so they can’t get out.”

To himself he said, if only they had a charge, that way they could hang on to one or both or all of the family. And more gloomily, let's hope Grant can get there in time. There's a good chance they got packed and ready last night. And Grant rang in two minutes later to say, "The car's gone. What should I do?"

"Get on the road to Winville, put your siren on and go hell for leather."

## *Case No. 4: On a Long Long Road*

Dennis went round and got his wife's car and drove down to the T-junction and asked around. No one had noticed the Raes' car, a blue Toyota sedan. He tried both ways and came up blank. Either people hadn't noticed or the car hadn't come this way. He went along to the turn-off to Winville but kept straight on. The Raes could go this way though it wasn't a really good road. He came to the next turn-off where one road ran up towards the Porters' farm but decided to keep straight on. Again the road curved and he followed it around. The MacLeods' big farm was off on his right. He headed on up to the crest of the slope where he had a good view southwards. He got his binoculars out of the glovebox but he couldn't see a blue car anywhere.

He turned and drove back down and got on to the road to Winville.

The Raes, probably the father, had tried to turn off when they saw or heard the police car behind them. They had apparently tried to turn at speed off on to the road which looped around towards Burleigh. But the car hadn't taken the turn and had spun out and was now in the grassy roadside ditch. Grant had pulled in and was parked just beyond the Raes. He was helping Mrs Rae out of the car with some difficulty. The young man was still seated in the back. Mr Rae was leaning his head on the steering wheel. Whether it meant he was hurt or whether it was a gesture of despair Dennis couldn't guess.

He took out his phone and called Jake Moss to say, "Accident at the Burleigh turn off. Just past the Ward's place. We need back-up. Three people probably wanted for crimes interstate."

If that didn't bring Winville in a hurry nothing would.

Even so it took young Sam Hassan with Constable Bridges nearly half-an-hour to arrive.

Dennis had got Thomas Rae out. He had a bump on his head, as none of them had been wearing seatbelts, and said his arm was hurting.

"You'll survive," Dennis said.

Mrs Rae sat down on the grass and started to cry. Grant Schroeder said, "Don't cry. I'm sure it can all be sorted out." She didn't seem to find that any more comfort than her husband had found in Sergeant Walsh's words. The young man sat in the back with his mouth hanging open.

The two cops left him to sit there. If his leg was hurting he only had himself to blame. But then when Dennis was complaining for the third time that all of Winville must be half asleep the young man opened the car door, sprang out, and next minute was running down the road and then dived through a barbed wire fence and hared off across a paddock of lucerne. "Let him go." Dennis watched the young man flee. "At least we know he isn't hurt so that'll please the Barnards."

The morning sun shone down on the little tableau. It might have been a peaceful moment while they simply relaxed and waited but Dennis had the intuition that the Raes had in some way given up. It didn't mean they would ever tell anyone the truth. But their long years of protecting and hiding their son were finally coming to an untidy end. They couldn't help a son who didn't stay with them to be protected.

A car from Winville drew up. The two young men got out. "Will we need a tow-truck or can we pull them back up?" Constable Hassan said as they took in the scene.

"Shouldn't be too hard," Dennis agreed. "The four of us and this useless bastard."

"So where are the interstate crooks?" Bridges said, as he took in the rather woebegone couple.

"One of 'em's run away across the paddock there. He can't do much harm, I wouldn't think. He's got a bandaged leg."

"And these two? What have they done?"



“We’ll know just what’s going on when Greg’s circulated those fingerprints. We know they scarpered when police in Killarney wanted to question the young man. We know they changed their name while they were in New South Wales. It’s a good chance the young man’s wanted for rape and these two idiots have been trying to protect him.”

Mr Rae had turned to listen to Dennis and now he was staring at him with his mouth open. “Best shut your mouth,” Dennis said, “You’ll catch flies.” Grant in the background gave that a little snigger.

“Anyway,” Dennis went on, “Let’s see what we can do with this car.”

The four men finally got the car upright and back on the road. “Grant, you’d best get back and let the hospital know what’s happened and hold the fort. Sam, you can go with Mr Rae to Winville if the car’s okay. Mrs Rae will go with you, Trent, and I’ll follow behind you.”

And as he organised everyone he mentally crossed his fingers. Greg Sullivan of course might have put aside the fax and said, I’ll get on to that later, but with luck it was now out in cyberspace and someone somewhere might pluck it in. But when the cars reached Winville, Greg Sullivan just said, “I’ve tried the national data base, nothing, now we can only hope that somewhere will pick it up.”

“I could’ve told you that,” Mr Rae said angrily from behind Dennis. “My son has done nothing wrong. My son is disabled—”

“Disabled, my fat foot!” Dennis could get angry too. “We all saw him leg his way off into the distance. The hospital said he was talking perfectly normal this morning. So don’t give me that bullshit.”

Mrs Rae had taken a seat in the waiting room and been given a cup of tea. She looked old and tired and defeated. She said weakly, “Why don’t you just tell them, Tom ... ”

“Shut your mouth, you stupid woman! If it hadn’t been for you we wouldn’t be in this pickle—”

“Right then, two separate interviews. Keep them both apart. Get Jenny and Brent to do the basics. If they refuse to give their real names it’ll go against them. With luck Greg’ll have something by this evening.” Dennis got up and went out.

“So it’s my baby now, is it?” Greg Sullivan met him in the hallway.

“It is, Greg. I’d say CIB is best-placed to handle it. But ring Amy Porter in Dirranbandi. She might’ve found out something more. They changed their name from Horrocks to Rae and there’s a chance there was another name before that.”

“But where is the one you fingerprinted?” Greg didn’t look best pleased to be landed with a case which could involve several states.

“Running round the paddocks somewhere.”

“So you’re off to get him?”

“Depends.” Dennis went on out. He would have a quick look but he didn’t intend to climb fences and wander through paddocks. But he thought it might now be best for Winville to leave him and Buckton right out of the equation. He didn’t want the Barnards dragged into the mess and blamed for borrowing a ‘dangerous dog’.

There was no sign of the young man anywhere so Dennis Walsh headed on home. But he stopped at the Rae house and looked around. No sign of anyone there and all the doors were locked. Then he called in to the service station and said to Noel, “Send that dog straight home. Don’t want you getting blamed for anything.”

“And is the young man okay?” He and Mavis had had an anxious night. They might get blamed, they might even have to tell Joe Landy that his dog had been taken and put down because it had attacked someone.

“Last I saw of him he was legging it away at top speed somewhere over there behind the Wards’ farm. I’d say he’s pretty spry. His mum and dad’ve been taken in for questioning in Winville. But whether they’ll tell anyone anything—God only knows.” Then he headed back to the station and made himself a cup of tea.

So far as Buckton was concerned, the Raes were a nine-day-wonder. Dennis Walsh was just glad they were out of his hair. He assumed the young man would go to Winville to look for his parents. But several days later John Goodrick called in at the station to say, “There’s still that

young fella in the house down there. I called by to see if they really had gone and let myself in and I found the young fella in a back bedroom. I asked him what was going on but he wouldn't say anything. So if they're not going to be paying anything I want him out of there. And I reckon he should be in hospital anyway. He's running a fever, by the look of it."

It didn't surprise Dennis that John Goodrick would think of money first and health second but he just said he'd check on the young man. He rang Dr Sorenson and said he'd just been told the young man was back in the house and running a fever. "D'you want to come down with me and check on him?"

Dr Sorenson said without enthusiasm that he would be round in five minutes. Then he asked his colleague to squeeze his last couple of patients in if he wasn't back in half-an-hour.

From the street the house looked deserted, its carport empty, the curtains drawn. They knocked and waited several minutes and finally pushed the door open. "Hope he hasn't scarpered again," Dennis said as they went in to the closed-up house. "The idiot's been running round the countryside so he's probably made his leg worse."

They found the young man still in the back bedroom. He was flushed and restless. Dr Sorenson went over and put a hand to his forehead then felt his pulse. "Definitely feverish. And let's look at that leg." But when he tried to lift the sheet back the young man grabbed it and held on tightly. "What now?" Sorenson said, unwilling to manhandle a patient, but sure the young man should be in hospital or at least with someone to care for him.

"His parents are in Winville. Can we send him on there in the ambulance? We'll have to bung him into the vehicle if he won't go. He can't stay here on his own."

Brett Sorenson wasn't wild about what sounded a rather callous response but he was glad Dennis had taken the decision out of his hands. And Winville District Hospital did have more resources and could call on both a psychiatrist and a social worker.

"Very well." He took his phone out and called Jim Phelps who said he'd be round a.s.a.p "That takes the problem away from Buckton," Dr Sorenson said, "but I still don't understand what's going on."

Dennis felt like saying, "Join the club," but he only said, "He's wanted. His parents are trying to keep him out of our reach by pretending he's disabled. He was in a wheelchair the last place he got up to his tricks. Now they're pretending he's got that Down Syndrome thing."

The young doctor considered this and said slowly, "I wouldn't think so." He thought back over his brief experience with the young man and although he could believe in some kind of mental problem it didn't add up to any clear diagnosis. "His eyes look slightly different but I think someone's done a little snip. You think that was deliberate to help him avoid ... well, charges?"

"I think he's taken his prowler business, this Peeping Tom business, into the windows of middle-aged women, too far, somewhere. We're lucky he hadn't gone beyond the prowling here."

"Mrs Barnard?"

"S'far as we know she was the only one here he was bothering. I'd say he was getting familiar with her routines, when she might be home alone."

Sorenson considered this in a rather uncomfortable silence.

The ambulance drew up outside and Jim and his offsider came in to help the other two men lift the angry young man who tried to bite and kick. Dr Sorenson saw the leg with its burst stitches and filthy seepage. To his horror he could see that flies had been at the open wound. "Yes, get him straight to hospital in Winville and get this mess cleaned up and re-stitched. If only he'd stayed put here he'd probably be well on the mend."

He watched the vehicle drive off minutes later and said to Dennis, "Let's hope he doesn't make more trouble along the way."

"I told Jim to put the siren on and go for it. That might stop the fool from trying to jump out."

"Who knows?" Dr Sorenson turned and headed for his car and the short drive back to the surgery. Dennis Walsh went back inside the deserted house and gave it a thorough search.

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John Goodrick was back next day to ask if he could put new tenants in.

“You’d best check with Winville where the parents are. How much longer does their lease run for?”

“End of January. But if they don’t pay regularly I will see them as breaking the lease.”

If it was just John Goodrick missing out, Dennis Walsh didn’t think he would worry overmuch. But the old pensioner who actually owned the house didn’t deserve to be done down. “They’ve taken all their stuff. I’ve removed a couple of things from the kitchen if we need to get extra prints. But I’d say, if they don’t return by next week—go for it.”

Though it wasn’t as if people were lining up to rent an old weatherboard in Buckton ...

Goodrick went away and Dennis went out to check on the stray dog they had in their pen. When he came back Grant said, “Greg just rang to see if we’re coming to Roy’s farewell.”

“Well, I’m not. I can see the old sod round Winville any time I want. But you and Delia go along and enjoy yourselves. And if we haven’t got an owner for this dog by then you can take it to the Dogs’ Home there on your way. Did Greg say anything about the Raes?”

“No. Nothing.” It struck both men as a bit odd. If Winville had let the couple go then surely Buckton should be warned?

But Dennis merely shrugged and said, “Well, now what time do you want off after Christmas?”

\*

Amy Porter rang in the evening to say, “Good news! We’ve found your family did another name change in Victoria—”

“Has Greg Sullivan rung you?”

“No-o-o. Not unless he left a message and it didn’t get passed on.”

It was far more likely Greg hadn’t seen any point in widening the investigation.

“Okay, so what’ve you got?”

“Their name before they became Horrocks was Hildern. They lived in Melbourne. We’re now looking to see if there was a Hildern wanted for anything.”

“Some kind of sexual assault probably. But when you say ‘we’ is someone helping you?”

“Petra. I asked her for some advice and she’s been telling me what to do and following things up herself.”

“That was good of her—or is she hoping to crack this case herself? Not that I mind. I don’t trust Winville to take it seriously.”

“I sort of think ... it might be both.”

Dennis gave her a brief run-down of what had been happening and said he hoped Greg could get one or both of the parents to talk.

“And if there are any kudos down the track I want you to get them. I had the bastards on my patch and never noticed anything was a bit weird.”

“But maybe that’s it, that they thought if they could live quietly somewhere else then everything would be okay but they couldn’t stop him going out perving all the time?”

“Maybe.”

He had hardly finished chatting to Amy when Greg Sullivan rang. “The dame has finally cracked. D’you want to come here and listen in?”

“No. I do not. You can handle it. And I just heard their original name was Hildern.”

“And how do you know that, you old devil?”

“I told you to have a chat with Amy Porter.”

Greg said in a grumbly way he didn’t need Amy to solve their cases; then, “I’ll come and tell you what she says, maybe tomorrow.”

And before Dennis could say, no, I don’t want to know, Greg had rung off.

Fiona came in and said, “I’ll just get them into bed and then you can tell me why you’re looking so grumpy.”

“Am I? S’pose I am.” And later he said, “Guess I was an idiot to think that getting Doug and the Plowmans out of my life would make things a bit easier—but people still go on doing nasty stupid things.”

Was it that? Or was it just age creeping up? Or was it that he had been trying to work in a situation where he couldn’t really go in and give those nasty stupid people a piece of his mind.

Maybe that said something about him which he would much prefer not to know. But he had always preferred to work in a hands-on way. Kid gloves had never been his style.

Fiona also considered what might lie behind his general out-of-sorts behaviour and she wasn't sure if it was work or something else making him tired and grumpy. It might be a summer cold coming on or something he'd picked up round the district but she thought it had been coming on for weeks.

"I think you need to stop worrying about work for a while and start making plans for Christmas."

"Such as?"

"The school break-up, our carols, what you'd like for Christmas—"

"Hansom Days is running at Dalby next Saturday. Do you want to come?"

"And here I am trying to get you to take life a bit easier. Honestly!"

"But this is pleasure, not work. And if he wins that's great—and if he doesn't it's still a day away from work."

She could think of more restful ways to spend a Saturday afternoon. But she said, "What about Grant? Isn't he playing cricket?"

"I happen to be the boss, in case you haven't noticed, sweetheart, and he can take his mobile to his cricket and ask George or Delia or someone to mind it for him."

"Good." She didn't mind him cutting Grant a bit of slack but not if it meant he did more work. "And you will try to come along to school tomorrow, won't you?"

The school sports which included fun things like sack races and egg-and-spoon races, was followed by the prizegiving. Every child received a book at the end of the year, not just a chosen few, and by the end of their school years in Buckton every child in and around town had built up a little library, even those who came from homes where newspapers were seen as handy things to light the fire with or line kitchen shelves. Julie McLaren and a couple of mothers took charge of buying the books in Winville and Mrs McLaren often asked parents if she was unsure what a particular child would like. She had no difficulty picking something for Rob Walsh with his love of animals. But she had asked Fiona for some thoughts when it came to Elise. Undoubtedly Elise would be grateful for whatever she received. She was that kind of child. But Julie McLaren wanted something that wouldn't rub it in the noses of other pupils that Elise was a better reader but equally she wanted something that Elise would enjoy.

Fiona gave this careful thought before saying, "She liked reading the Anne books but I don't think she's tried anything else from L. M. Montgomery. What about *Emily of New Moon* or *Pat of Silver Bush*?" Julie McLaren pleased to have solved the problem so easily said, "Have you any plans for the Christmas holidays?"

"We're thinking of a few days at the beach in January. We haven't decided definitely." She could say 'It depends on Dennis' but it didn't really. Most years she went alone with the children. She always enjoyed it but there was that faint sense that something was missing. She had joined up with her friend Patrice a couple of times. But she hadn't suggested it to Patrice for these coming holidays.

Julie said unexpectedly, "I'm going, Andrew and I are going to Caloundra in mid-January. I don't know if you'd like to join us."

Fiona hadn't considered Caloundra but now she thought it might be more restful than Brisbane or the Gold Coast. And although she barely knew Andrew McLaren she knew people regarded him as a quiet and pleasant man. That they also regarded him as ineffective and rather pathetic wouldn't matter at the beach. It was unlikely that he would be needed for any lifesaving—and for all she knew he might be an excellent swimmer. And Julie was stimulating company.

"That's a nice idea. But let me talk it over with Dennis. He just might have other thoughts."

And now the sports were being played out on a hot and increasingly humid day. Fiona sat in a fold-up chair and regularly anointed her children with sunscreen and cheered them on as they tore down the field and came back to her, panting and hot but happy with their couple of little prizes. Mr L'Estrange had arranged for George Hickman who put his time and energy into bringing out the *Buckton Bugle* once a month to hand out the books. And George gave the children a little pep talk

about the importance of reading, how much pleasure it would give them all through their lives. Perhaps the children took it all in but many of them were starting to get rather tired and fretful.

Fiona, watching them all go up, one by one, to receive their books, each with a label and their names inside the front cover, thought this was much nicer than just choosing out the best academically and the best in sports. True, the school did give two special prizes: one for the best attendance record and the other chosen by the children themselves for the child they believed most deserved a prize. The children put their selections anonymously into a box with their chosen name and why they were voting for that person. Some chose out of friendship, some because it was someone they looked up to, some because they thought that person had overcome handicaps, others just put in some vague thing like 'Jackie is lots of fun'.

Mr Hickman as he took the slip and the book had no idea that Elise had run her own secret campaign to get young Joel Atkins nominated. Because Elise remembered hearing Mr Thomas at the nursery saying to her father, "That kid got into trouble but he's picked himself up and I couldn't do without him now, he works so well." Or words to that effect. Elise thought that if her father and Mr Thomas thought that then it was better than other kids nominating their friends.

"And the children of Buckton State School have chosen," Mr Hickman paused to increase the suspense, "Joel Atkins! Congratulations, Joel. I hear you are on your way to being the next Peter Cundall. It's great to see a young man set out to learn and develop a skill and put that skill to the best use possible." Joel, looking embarrassed and shy, took the prize and scuttled back to the rear of the crowd. Fiona saw several other kids looking at Elise and she wondered if they had voted for her but Elise as they went home a half hour later said happily, "I told everyone, or nearly everyone, to vote for Joel and maybe they did."

"Why did you pick Joel out?"

"Because Dad and Mr Thomas were proud of him."

Dennis had come briefly to see Rob and Elise get their books but then he had disappeared again. Now Fiona gave that a wry smile and said, "Well, that's probably as good a recommendation as any." She wondered what particular carrot Elise had dangled before her fellow students.

\*

Dennis had had a busy morning. Greg Sullivan, driven by Brent Kelly, had turned up about 11 am. Brent had then driven off leaving Greg to sit down heavily and say, "Well, it's up to Melbourne now."

"So where's Brent off to? To see the Pounders?"

"Clever man," Greg said drily. "Their house has sold faster than they expected. They'll want him to take his trains, I s'pose. He was going to come out tonight but I said he might as well come with me. Roy's gone beyond worrying about him skiving off. But he was annoyed to hear you weren't coming—"

"And who does he think is going to mind the place? Him and his talk about Buckton being a pushover?"

"He said it showed a lack of respect."

"Bollocks. He's not my boss."

"That's not the point. Aidan skipped off without so much as a handshake or a cheer. So Roy's making sure he goes out with all the fuss we can come up with. Anyway, about this dame, the mother of that weird young fella. It just came pouring out of her. She says she was sick for a long time, in and out of hospital, and he went to stay with her husband's sister and her husband and that they were very strict, really whacked him sometimes—though I'd say her husband did his own share of belting the kid, not that they're going to admit to anything like that. And when the kid came home he was really angry with his mum, wouldn't do anything she wanted, really seemed to hate her. And that's when he started staying out late. She says she thought he was just out with schoolfriends but I don't reckon he had any, I'd say he'd started sneaking round people's yards back then."

"And you think she really didn't know?"

"Hard to say. The husband's still not talking. Nor is young Ben. But then they started to get complaints, their son was peering into people's windows. She told the police it couldn't be her son, that he was never out late, and they let it go. But then when he was about fifteen he started trying

doors and if they were unlocked he would go inside. She insists he never stole anything, just looked at people.”

“People being women on their own?”

“It looks like it. And all the women he seemed to watch were a bit like his mum, fairly short, short brown hair, nothing unusual.”

As Greg said this Dennis realised the description would also fit Mavis Barnard and he silently berated himself for not picking up on any similarity between Mrs Rae and Mrs Barnard. But then it was a description which would fit any number of women ...

“It seems he caught a woman inside her house and when she screamed he tried to stop her and then he ran off. The police came round to the Raes but they were all sitting there watching TV and so the police went looking for other young men who would fit the description. You’d think the young fella’d draw his head in but he probably got a buzz out of it. Next time he found a woman alone he attacked her. She fell and hit her head and died. They said it was a sexual assault as her clothes were disarranged. But if it was rape they didn’t get any evidence. Again the cops came round. Again the family were all there nice and tight in front of the TV. But this time they got prints so they went straight back round—”

“And the family had scarpered?”

“Got it in one. No one seemed to know where they’d gone—or if they did they didn’t let on. The family changed their name by deed poll. But no one thought of checking. I guess it was thought the family was just keeping a low profile for a while. They didn’t know how low it was.”

“And the young fella went on with his prowling?”

“It looks like it. They went to Sydney. They had several complaints there. So they did the same thing. Changed their name and scarpered. As these were only complaints, nuisance stuff, no one followed up.”

“Then they came up here?”

“I think they must’ve spent a while in country New South Wales before they came to Killarney. He was sixteen when he killed that woman. His mum says he will be twenty-eight next May.”

“So if he hates his parents—why do they move heaven and earth to protect him?”

“She says it was all her fault, that she got sick, that she let him go to his aunt and uncle, that she protected him when she just saw it all as a bit of mischief, that it was all her fault that it went on to something worse—”

“But that doesn’t explain why he’s out there in other people’s yards.”

“Haven’t put a shrink on to that one but my own thought is that he was angry with his mum but if he yelled at her or did anything his father stepped in and punished him. So he was taking it out on women who looked like his mum. But I s’pose you could say he maybe started out looking for someone who would be nice to him—but sneaking round people’s yards and giving them a fright isn’t the way to find a nice substitute mum. Still, it’s not up to us to explain his motives.”

“So what’ve you done?”

“Got on to Homicide in Melbourne, asked them if they’d like him back. And they’d better say yes. You’ll probably need to do a statement.”

“Get on to Constable Glover in Killarney to back you up. The young fella was using a wheelchair there. I wonder what disability was next on his list?”

“Blind? Maybe.”

“Well, if there’s any kudos I want thanks for Amy Porter and Grant here. They’re the ones who did most of the work—”

“So your famous suspicions didn’t work this time?”

“Hardly set eyes on them. And if they’d found a way to stop him prowling—but I guess Mavis Barnard was the wrong person to pick on.” And Mavis unlike some of his previous victims had a husband.

After Greg had been picked up and driven away by DC Kelly Dennis had some lunch and wrote up the conversation and tidied away a couple of small problems. But the conversation had brought back his own sense of failure. Two other women, after they’d heard the Raes had done a runner, had come in to tell him they’d seen the young man in their back yards but as he hadn’t done

anything and had disappeared again they hadn't come forward. They both looked slightly like Mavis though one was much older and one younger. He felt like saying 'That's what I'm here for, problems,' but how seriously would he have taken it, given that nothing had happened? And being thankful that nothing *had* happened wasn't very comforting.

Grant came in and Dennis said, "Read my notes. I'd best get ready to go round to the school."

"And Delia says she doesn't want to come to Roy's party."

"Up to her but tell her that since that useless De Jong character has gone she'll be treated properly. And if she wants to marry a copper I guess she needs to learn how to deal with them."

Grant had never mentioned marriage to Delia and he looked a little embarrassed. "Maybe I could take someone else?"

"You don't need to take anyone if you don't want to. They aren't going to be doing any bloody dancing."

Grant wasn't sure how to take this and only said, "I can take that dog if you want."

"Okay, no one comes in by Sunday morning he can go. And I'm off to Dalby Saturday arve. So take your phone round to the cricket and ask George Hickman to answer it for you."

## *Case No. 5: Come to Me, My Child*

His children might be super excited about going to the races in Dalby but Dennis felt that Fiona didn't share their enthusiasm. Not that he really blamed her. The previous day had promised a storm but nothing had happened. Maybe somewhere, such as Dalby, had got enough to lay the dust but he doubted it.

But the very fact that she entered into the children's happiness and packed lunch and hats and suncream and made sure they had their little bit to put on their horse and had brought her camera seemed to make her presence more poignant. She never came grudgingly to the things she wasn't really enthusiastic about. Whereas he knew he would either find an excuse to get out of things or do nothing but grumble. As they drove north-west he found himself pondering on some kind of treat which would be all about her and what she would like. Nothing in the way of ideas had come to him by the time they reached Dalby. Perhaps on the way home ...

Dave Hickman and one of his boys, home on holidays, was there with Hansom Days and a two-year-old filly, Gretel Gunn. "It's her first start," Dave said cheerfully, "so it's anybody's guess but she's got a good turn of speed."

Dennis wasn't wild about the names Dave gave his horses but he always thought he was a good trainer, calm and patient and encouraging. "Well, I'll risk a fiver on her and what about this fella." Dennis reached out a hand to stroke the nose of their shared horse. Dave Hickman knew it was wishful thinking but he always felt his horses ran just that bit better when Dennis was present. He wasn't sure if there was any way to prove it but somehow Dennis seemed to make them that bit stronger ... faster ...

As Dennis walked away, explaining to Elise and Robert what a handicap was, Hickman thought, 'There is something ... I can't explain it ... just something about Dennis and animals ... they trust him somehow ...' And Dennis was privately debating how much to put on both horses. He wanted his children to enjoy their day out but he didn't want them to think that betting was a way to easy money.

"Okay, so Ellie, your money is for a win and Rob's for a place and if you get anything you share it. Okay?" They both agreed to these terms. "But I think Hans is going to win," Elise said earnestly. "I just feel it in my tummy."

"That's probably because you didn't eat enough breakfast."

He placed their bets and put a twenty on Dave's filly for a place. "And now we'll go and find your mum and go and watch the first race." He wasn't wildly hopeful for either horse. But he knew that they would be doing their best. And Hans, though not very big, was a trier all the way.

Fiona came and joined them saying, "I've put something on a horse in the first race, just to see if I can pick anything."

Dennis privately suspected she had just picked out a nice name and could only hope that her pick would do well. When her horse romped in, Dennis said, "Maybe we'd best ask you for your pick in every race?"

Fiona laughed and said it was beginner's luck as she went down to collect her winnings. When it happened in the second race, Dennis said, "Are you sure this is still beginner's luck?"

And the third time Fiona picked the horse which beat Gretel Gunn into second place. The filly hung out very wide but Dave was right, she had a real turn of speed. Dennis was pleased about that. Dave deserved the small successes which came his way.

"So does your beginner's luck tell you anything about Hans? Are you putting something on him?" Fiona still looked rather dazed. Three wins in a row for someone who knew very little about horses, racing, or form, was hard to believe. "I'm not sure what to think. But I do want him to do well for you ... and Dave."

They went down to watch their horse in the mounting yard and then back up to their seats. And Hansom Days did as he always did, putting every ounce of grit into it, and getting home by a nose. "Phew! That was close," Dennis said. "I don't think I can stand the excitement."

"Course you can, Dada," Elise said happily.

"Okay, down we go to lead him in." He wanted his children to see it as the horse's triumph, not just something which had made them some money to spend at Christmas.

Dave also said, "Phew! That was close but he's game as a bantam cock, this fella."

Elise, who had a bantam cock, couldn't quite see the connection but it was nice to be part of everyone's attention.

The children were tired and went to sleep in the back of the car by the time they got on the road home. "You do look happier now," Fiona said quietly. "You've been pretty down-in-the-dumps lately."

"I should be. This'll pay for your holiday and a bit over."

"And what do you think about Caloundra?"

He had just said when she'd raised the idea, "Whatever you'd like." He liked Andrew McLaren, mainly because unlike his curmudgeonly old father he was never the slightest bit of trouble. He went about his life quietly and politely. Whether he ever departed from his local reputation when he was away at the beach was an unknown but it didn't seem very likely.

"If you and the kids are happy with it—and can put up with Julie and Andrew—go for it. You'll need to book soon. And we'll just go down and back in a day for Ash's wedding." It would make for a long day but he'd already given Grant permission to go down for the cricket so it seemed easiest to try and get Winnie to send someone out for the day. And at least Jake Moss wasn't like previous officers who had done their best never to do anything helpful for Buckton.

"So why have you been down these last weeks? Was it just work?"

"That young fella that was hanging round the Barnards' yard—he's been doing it for years and he assaulted and killed a woman in Melbourne. I had no idea. There I was just thinking the Raes lived a nice quiet life not bothering anyone—and now I've found out he was watching at least three women here. And if he'd killed Mavis I never would've forgiven myself."

There was no simple answer to this. No real comfort. And Dennis was very good at beating up on himself when he felt he should've seen something and hadn't. She stayed silent but put a hand on his arm.

"Well, that's life," he said at last.

\*

There was only a message from Greg Sullivan when he went into the station after dropping the family home. Greg said someone was coming from Melbourne to interview Benjamin Rae (to which Greg had added 'If he can get anything out of him he's better than us') and then Victoria would probably have to apply to extradite him from Queensland. 'So let's hope we've got it right.' Dennis fired back, 'Tell them to send someone who looks like his mum, that might make him talk'. It was a forlorn hope. How many officers would Melbourne have who looked like Mrs Rae?



And maybe young Benjamin had got his idiot look down to a fine art and it would fool anyone Victoria sent? But at least the mother had given them enough checkable details so it mightn't be necessary to get the young man to talk. After all, there must be school photos, family photos, neighbours' recollections, and somewhere someone must have collected not only fingerprints, but hairs, saliva, the cast of a boot, sightings, something to pin him down.

But Dennis understood better now that police often didn't take women reporting prowlers very seriously. It was even sometimes seen as a middle-aged woman's fantasy just to get a bit of attention. It was fortunate that Mavis was married rather than a lone woman, and fortunate that Mavis had the steely determination not to let anyone fob her off. But he always came back to the knowledge he had been remiss. He had fobbed Mavis off on to Amy Porter not because he thought Amy would resolve the situation but because he vaguely believed, with Noel, that it was Lenny Low being a nuisance again and Mavis was misinterpreting a shadowy figure at night.

But at least when the Raes were shipped out the whole thing could be forgotten.

He hesitated then lifted the phone. Mavis would sleep better knowing the Raes would soon be gone. And even if there was a last minute hiccup, Victoria maybe saying this man didn't match their evidence or something, it wasn't likely the Raes would ever show their faces in Buckton again. And Mavis did say with heartfelt gratitude, "Den, I know I should've come to you sooner but Noel was so convinced it was Lenny ... and I wanted to believe it was Lenny but I knew it wasn't. To know he'll be gone soon ... well, I hope they throw the book at him. It does get you down, even when you tell yourself it's just someone being stupid or taking a short-cut or something—you still sort of find yourself waiting and watching and feeling a bit uneasy. It sounds silly but it sort of gets you down."

That was the thing about a lot of apparently petty crime; 'it sort of gets you down'. And people deserved to live their lives without that shadow lurking ...

\*

Grant either hadn't been able to persuade Delia Darke, or hadn't tried, because he set off for Winville on Sunday afternoon with Jenny Pym from the hospital by his side and an unwanted dog in the back seat. Whether Delia knew or cared, no one knew. If she shared anything with her boss at the vet's surgery no one heard about it. It was unlikely she felt jealous of Jenny Pym who was nearly twenty years older than Grant.

But Grant to his surprise found himself enjoying her company and deeply interested in some of her stories about Bucktonites. He asked her why she'd come to Buckton to work at the hospital and stayed on. He was tempted to ask why she had never married but didn't think it was his business. They went round to the Dogs' Home first and unloaded the unwanted mongrel. While he talked to the manager Jenny walked around looking at the dogs currently ownerless. She came back to them and said, "Maybe it's time for me to get a dog. But something small."

Small dogs tended to get adopted out more easily than large dogs. People didn't always have room for a large dog or didn't want the cost of feeding it. The manager, Allen Prentice, looked around and said, "The smallest thing we've got is a little Scottie, got hit by a car and he's still bandaged up. I'm surprised no one's claimed him."

She was surprised too. Scotties weren't usually seen as country dogs so people who had one usually had it because they had a particularly fancy for the breed. "If no one claims him and he heals up okay, give me a ring. I'm sure he'd be happy with me."

Mr Prentice took her name and phone number and said he would. As they drove away, Jenny said, "I was nearly going to say no when you asked me. I didn't want anyone saying you'd brought your mother. But I'm glad I came. I think he'll be just the thing for me—and he can bother those spoilt cats of Kath's every time I go round there for tea."

He secretly hoped she was a dog lover not someone indulging a fleeting fancy. But he was glad he'd brought her. She was lively caustic company as they farewelled Roy Greenwood with speeches saying he was a wonderful guy and the place wouldn't be the same without him. And as they drove home later he said, "Now, I know why Dennis didn't want to come. He didn't have much time for Roy—and having to sing 'For He's a Jolly Good Fellow'—I can imagine what he'd be muttering under his breath."

Jenny laughed at this. "I know. And you can see he's a lazy slob. But so are lots of cops and some of them get to the top of the ladder. You always wonder why." And then she said more soberly, "It's a puzzle why Dennis never tries for promotion. Has he ever said anything to you?"

"He hates cities, I know that. And there's Fiona and the kids—"

"But Fiona would go back to Brisbane at the drop of a hat."

Grant had to admit the truth in this. "But ... don't you think she likes some things about Buckton?"

Ms Pym considered this carefully. It went to the heart of why she too stayed on. She knew she could get work in bigger hospitals, more exciting places, but she stayed and didn't regret staying.

"I'm lucky. I stay because I work with such good people. But I wonder if Fiona sees it like that?"

Grant couldn't answer this. He liked Fiona himself. But she couldn't say that she worked with good people. He had the vague intuition that Jenny was using her skills and finding that satisfying whereas Fiona was doing good things which didn't really use her skills. Dennis had once said something about Fiona writing a financial thriller. But of course she could do that anywhere.

"I guess Fiona stays because Dennis stays ..."

"But that's sort of like going round in a circle, isn't it? She stays because he stays—but why does he stay when there's other country stations where he could get promotion but still not have to live in a city?"

Grant didn't hazard an answer but he was privately glad that Dennis did stay. He didn't think he would really like to be part of the station in Winville. He knew what some coppers were like with young constables and he didn't think even people like Jake Moss would have done much to give him confidence.

He needed this confidence when Delia said she was upset that he had taken Jenny Pym with him. She seemed to think that he must like Jenny better than her ...

For a moment he was tempted to say, "She was lots of fun." But then he couldn't bring himself to make things worse. "But you're still coming to Brisbane with me?"

Delia looked as though she would like to make him squirm. "I'm not sure. Maybe you'd prefer to take Jenny."

"I thought you wanted to come? You said you liked cricket."

"Oh but I don't think I do, not all that much, not if you prefer other women."

He found himself wondering if Jenny Pym liked cricket and banished the thought.

"I thought we were good friends—"

"You never want us to be more than friends. I want ... " But instead of telling him what she wanted tears welled up and slid down her cheeks.

"I'm sorry, Dell, I just thought it was nice to be with you and that you liked me too. But I'm not really ready for anything more." This was constrained more by the knowledge that he could be sent on somewhere new at any time and Delia would probably like to stay on here with Mrs Burkett. "I might get sent to somewhere far away that you wouldn't want to live."

"You could give it up, do something else, maybe go and play pro football or something."

He had never asked himself if Delia had been disappointed that he had turned the offer to join a big Rugby team even just as a Reserve. She might've found some glamour in that, more than him being a lowly constable in a little country town.

"I like what I do. I don't want to give it up."

Delia sniffed and got up. "Then you'd better take that nurse with you. Everyone'll think you've brought your mum."

Grant thought of apologising then the thought faded. He had nothing to apologise for. And he wasn't going to make promises or talk about a future for them. He got up too. "If you're sure you really don't want to come to the cricket?"

"I just went along to watch you. It wouldn't be interesting to watch people I don't know."

"Okay." If she really wasn't interested there didn't seem to be anything more to say.

He said something of this to Dennis next morning and that maybe he shouldn't take the time off when he could watch the cricket in his spare time here.

“Rubbish! If Delia doesn’t want to go there’s nothing to stop you going along and enjoying yourself and take someone else if you want.”

“I didn’t know she only came along because I was playing—and I don’t see why she would be jealous of Jenny—” Dennis wasn’t sure if it was jealousy or merely Delia feeling a bit neglected. But he felt there was something else there. That Grant had been developing and growing in confidence and willing to put time in to things. Delia though she was very fond of looking after the animals for Mrs Burkett wasn’t keeping pace with Grant. The two of them had probably commiserated over their shared experience of unsupportive families but that wasn’t enough to found a long term relationship on. He felt vaguely sorry for Delia Darke but he thought Grant should use this time in his life to meet other women. And it wasn’t as though there were no other men around to take Delia out.

He said something of this to Grant who looked a bit sceptical. At last he said, “You don’t mean I should invite someone else?”

“Why not? I’m sure there’s women round Buckton who would enjoy the cricket for its own sake. You don’t want a martyr by your side.”

Grant wasn’t quite sure if his boss was referring to Delia as a martyr. “I guess not.”

But that didn’t really tell him what to do next. Yet there was something curiously liberating in the thought. He did want someone who would really share his enthusiasm for his sport, not merely put up with it, but maybe you couldn’t have everything. Even the couples round the district who seemed very happy probably had their disagreements.

And somewhere lurking in there was the knowledge that he had really enjoyed Jenny Pym’s company. It wasn’t that he could ever think of her as a girlfriend, just that she was fun to be with, interesting to listen to, and he couldn’t picture her complaining if he went out with other people.

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The Walsh phone rang a bit after 9 pm and Dennis said to Fiona, “It’s for you.”

To her surprise it was Carmen’s mother. Mrs Woods said, “I’m sorry to bother you so late, my dear, but I wondered if we could call by tonight or tomorrow morning? We’re at the motel here. We’re on our way to Melbourne.”

Fiona was surprised—Melbourne!—but said they were welcome to come round now and gave them directions. She had secretly hoped that Carmen and her parents might work something out without involving her. But she was curious to meet them.

Somehow she had imagined Mrs Woods to be plump and motherly whereas she was tall and slender. But her voice was just as warm and kind as she had sounded over the phone.

“I know we’re being a nuisance but we just thought you’d like to know what’s going on.”

Dennis came in and sat down and got introduced. “So your man there is still following your grandson?”

“Well, sort of. But young John stole another car and he’s back inside, I’m afraid. We asked our investigator to try and find out something else about those people he visited as they seem to be the only people he’s had any contact with.”

“And?”

“Nothing so far. They’ve lived there about ten years. But he’s never lived there according to the neighbours. So that can’t be his father even if he is pretending to be old.”

Fiona found it strange that the young man didn’t seem to have contact with any younger people. It didn’t seem to be a case of ‘bad company’, of being in a car-stealing gang.

Mr Woods said to her thoughts, “We don’t really understand any of it, you know. Maybe he’s not supposed to consort with any of his gang members. Maybe he’s still on parole. But we can’t understand why he keeps doing things which get him sent to prison.”

It might be some sort of compulsion but Dennis didn’t think so. “It could be that he feels safer in prison than out of it. Three meals a day, a bed, maybe he’s scared of someone ...”

“We wondered if his father might still be there, telling him to do things. But we’re only guessing. And surely his dad wouldn’t be telling him to steal cars?”

“So what made you think the father was a crook?”

Mrs Woods opened her handbag and took out a couple of photographs and handed them to Dennis. They certainly showed a very handsome man. A man to get a woman’s pulses racing.

There was a self-satisfied look on his face. Perhaps just that he knew women fancied him. Certainly there was no lack of troublemakers who were proud of their own stupid behaviour. But was that enough to immediately brand him a crook?

"I suppose it was a lot of little things," Andrew Woods said slowly. "Things you'd hardly notice. His expression. The way he sort of looked around. The things he asked about. The way he talked to Carmen. Like she was his pet dog and she would sit up and beg whenever he clicked his fingers. And then what we heard him saying. And he asked several times things about money. You don't expect someone you've just met to ask what you're making in a year."

Mrs Woods nodded. "And Carmen seemed to change when she was with him. We sent her to the best school we could find and she sort of acted ashamed of it. It was all very strange. It was almost like," she leant forward, "I know this will sound silly, but it was like she had been hypnotised, that she wasn't thinking for herself any more."

Dennis took this literally. "Is that possible?"

The Woods looked at each other. "It doesn't seem very likely, does it?"

"So in the time after he and the boy disappeared and when she met her second husband—what was she doing?"

"We tried to persuade her to go and do some training but she said no, and she just seemed to drift from one not very good job to another."

Fiona had always assumed that Carmen's parents supported her while she tried one dead-end job after another. Carmen had always told Fiona that she couldn't settle to anything as she always hoped her husband and son, or at least her son, would come home again. Fiona had always been sympathetic. But now she wondered if it had been as simple as that.

"And you think she was marking time till this Millington character came back to her?" Dennis had a deeper question: was it possible that Royden Millington had ever got her to do something illegal for him? But he wasn't sure that they would welcome such a question.

"I think she really did keep hoping that. I think that's why the police didn't take her very seriously when she said her son was missing."

Maybe. Though he couldn't see people like Doug Towner bestirring themselves to find a child taken by its father.

"But did you ever get any kind of hunch about what this useless husband of hers might be up to?"

"When he said that thing about burying bodies—well, we wondered if he was some kind of hitman." He looked over to his wife. "I guess it sounds silly or we'd watched too many American movies or something—but we've always wondered since then. Hitmen do get sent to somewhere where they won't be on police computers, that kind of thing. You know, those French agents that blew up that boat—and you hear of dissidents being tracked to other countries and killed. I know it all sounds very unlikely. But we've always felt there was something there. But there didn't seem to be anything we could do—not when he'd disappeared."

"But while he was with your daughter—did you see much of him?"

"No, nothing. He was in Brisbane, well, we assume he was and Carmen said he was, but when she came a couple of times with little John, I don't think she really wanted to be with us. Though she did ask me one time if we'd look after the little boy for a while. She said they were going to make a quick trip to New Guinea and it wouldn't be good for the little boy's health. She said something about him being an agent for some American product."

"And did she go?"

"No. No, I don't think she took it any further. She didn't get us to take him. And she never said anything more about it."

"But this was well before he disappeared?"

Again the couple communed. "About eight months I think. Do you think it's possible he did go and take John with him?"

"No idea. Your daughter's investigator told her he hadn't found your son-in-law leaving Australia ... but could he have changed his name, d'you think?"

"But how would we find out?"

"If he did it officially but I wonder if he might already have had a second passport ... "

There was no obvious answer to this and Mrs Woods said, “We really mustn’t keep you and we’re hoping to get as far as the Hunter Valley tomorrow.”

Fiona said she would be very interested to hear if they found out anything in Melbourne. Dennis didn’t endorse this. He felt he’d played his part and could now leave it to other people. But just as they were going out into the starry night he said suddenly, “That is odd.”

“What is?” Mr Woods turned back.

“Well, why did the kid change his name to Andy White? Same as your initials. AW. But he wouldn’t remember you. He probably wouldn’t even know your name seeing he was only a toddler when he last saw you.”

“Coincidence?”

No one could hazard a different guess.

\*

DSS Sullivan rang next morning to say, “We’ve got a bod here from Melbourne. A detective called Brendan Malone. He’s charged your Ben Rae with manslaughter. He’ll go before the magistrate this morning. If Kelso’s got any sense he’ll have him on his way to Melbourne before you can say Jack Robinson.”

Dennis knew there wasn’t much love lost between Greg and magistrate Graham Kelso. Greg thought he was too close to the town’s bigwigs and too lenient on them and their kids.

“And the parents?”

“We want them charged as accessories.”

“Fair enough.”

“Anyhow, this bod wants to come out and have a quick chat with you, bit of supporting evidence—”

“So when he’s coming?”

“He’s halfway to you now—unless he’s got lost.”

“Thanks, mate.” Dennis didn’t sound in the least grateful. But if it would help get the Raes well away ... “Grant, haul out all we’ve got on the Raes. Some clever dick on his way here, all the way from Melbourne.”

Grant found this rather exciting. It wasn’t often that a big city detective came here to listen to them. He laid their sparse file out in the interview room and got out an extra mug and some custard creams. Dennis came in and laid down an extra piece of paper containing the contact details of Mavis and the two other women who had come forward, also the hospital staff who had dealt with the young man, Amy Porter in Dirranbandi, and Constable Glover in Killarney. At the bottom he had scrawled ‘Constable Schroeder needs a recommendation for all his work on this case.’

Grant read this when Dennis went out again and felt a secret pleasure. Of course no big shot from down south would be the slightest bit interested in anything he had done, but knowing that Dennis thought he had done a good job ... that was better than any stranger saying anything.

DSS Malone drew up outside the station in a Winville car and like many previous visitors wondered if this small brick box could possibly help him nail a perp. Many Bucktonites would say yes but it didn’t strike Malone as likely to be of much help to him. He hadn’t been wildly impressed by the Winville team and assumed he was now out in Hicksville.

He walked in with his briefcase willing to share his investigation with a couple of country bumpkins but not hoping for much. Still, it would be helpful to see the ‘terrain’ in which the young man had offended again and the people who had got suspicious.

A large man with short grey hair and an air of effortless command directed him through to the cramped little interview room. Malone didn’t have a high opinion of most country cops but now, unexpectedly, he found himself feeling like a new recruit facing a tough commander.

“Right now, that’s copies of everything we’ve got,” Dennis said. “D’you want to get statements from anyone?”

“I haven’t got long. I’m s’posed to be in court at 11.30. So just the person who brought the complaint to you.”

This would probably be enough. Mavis would have no difficulty in speaking up for herself.

He told Malone to call in at the service station. “Anyone else you want to see while you’re here?”

Malone leafed through the copies and then the page of contacts. At the end he said, "So who is Constable Schroeder?"

"My constable. He'll make you a cup of tea, if you want. And Constable Amy Porter in Dirranbandi is the one who started the ball rolling."

"So what'd Dirranbandi have to do with the Raes? Did they go there?"

"Nope. Amy's family live here. She was visiting when Mavis came into the station to make her complaint. Amy followed the young man's footprints along the verge there, it's mainly dust, and went in to see the Raes and she immediately got suspicious that he was shamming, that he wasn't disabled at all."

Malone thought there'd be a storm if he accused a disabled person of not being disabled. Maybe it was just as well that the Raes had headed for country Queensland. He thought Dennis Walsh would take any disability advocate in his stride. But it raised the uneasy question: publicity when Benjamin Rae finally got to court back home might encourage other suspects to play the disability card. They might be able to put the kybosh on any reports of the trial ... or leave that aspect of the case out of it ...

From believing he would undoubtedly know more and succeed more often than a couple of small town cops he had come round to believing they had seen more clearly or had put more time and effort into the case than anyone in Melbourne. It was a sobering thought. He thanked Dennis and took the folder. Grant came out with the biscuit tin as he got ready to leave. "Would you like one?" He had hoped that Malone would sit and talk about things in a big city station full of major crimes and top-notch detectives.

Malone opened the front door and said, "Okay, thanks. And I see your boss thinks well of you."

Grant came out on to the shallow front step. "It's very good of him," he felt slightly embarrassed. "And he's one of the best cops in Queensland. He's got the best clear-up rate of any small station."

Malone wasn't sure that finding a few lost cows and stolen bicycles would require much effort. But then Benjamin Rae had passed through three states and three changes of name. And it had taken Buckton to catch him. And there was something about the man in that interview room ... he didn't think he would want to try any wrongdoing on Dennis Walsh's patch ...

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Sergeant Walsh had taken time out while he ate his lunch to draw up a bit of a list for Christmas, things to buy, things to do, people to ring. Fiona had only managed to rent a caravan in Caloundra which wouldn't be terribly comfortable, not if their caravan parks were anything like some caravan parks in the holiday season, but the children would probably enjoy it and they would be out much of the time. He had sent Grant round to deal with yet another small prang in the supermarket car park. Even though they had reconfigured it they still seemed to get more than their share of trouble. He had suggested that they put up CCTV footage to see just who the main culprits were. Because the people who hit other cars so often calmly drove off and left shoppers to fume as they came out and found scratches and dints and broken tail lights.

The bell tinkled and Brent Kelly came in. "I've just come to get my railway from the Ponders. They're moving next week. And I said I'd help Lyn moving."

"So you've taken her horse?"

"I took her last Friday evening. If she stays sound ... I never thought I'd have a horse like that." Leila Burkett was sure that the mare was absolutely sound. Though jumping on rock hard ground round country shows might not be the best way to keep her sound ...

"So you're helping Lyn because she provided you with a bargain?"

Brent sometimes had rather uneasy relationships with women. His father had thoroughly brainwashed him into believing women were evil temptresses, and he had struggled to put that attitude behind him. But then it was unlikely he was seeing Lyn Harding as a woman but rather as an expert with horses.

"It's funny really but I like Lyn, not just because she gave me a good price. She's sort of like someone who's really good at what she does but doesn't really believe in herself."

A lot of people might say the opposite, that Lyn believed too well in herself and so she didn't have much sympathy for anyone else.

"Maybe. Well, enjoy yourself humping her furniture around."

Brent was about to say that Lyn didn't have much furniture then he thought he needn't take that literally. "I will. And I brought a little parcel for Ellie and Rob." He handed it over. "And when I've got the trains set up in my flat—they might like to come and play."

"And you're helping the Pounders move?"

"I offered but they said they had enough family to come and choose things and do the moving. But they gave me Warren's radio. I thought that was nice of them."

The Pounders had bought Naomi Duggan's unit near the High School. In some ways they were sorry to leave behind their big house and garden but they accepted that they were both in their late seventies and it was getting a bit much for them.

"Sure, and by the way what happened to that Pidcock bloke that was bringing the case against the Mortons? I haven't had another peep out of him."

Brent had only heard rumours. There had been nothing listed at the Court House. "I'm not sure. But it's all around town that he was sleeping with his daughter. I don't think that went down any too good—"

"And I'll bet it was Lynnell Morton who spread it."

"And—do you think he was?"

"I'd say so. Not that I wouldn't mind to see the Mortons squirm ... but incest is still a crime."

As Brent went out again Dennis thought the Pounders had been good for Brent. But perhaps too he had been good for them and their autistic son Warren. He preferred to think on that rather than the very uncomfortable thought: what had gone on in the Pidcock family over the years and how many other fathers saw nothing wrong about having sex with their daughters?

He put the little gift-wrapped parcel aside to put under their tree later and returned to his sandwiches.

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## *Book Sixty-Two*

### *Case No. 1: A Cramped Space*

Post-Christmas in the small Darling Downs town of Buckton was usually a brief breathing space before the New Year parties and silliness took over again. Sergeant Dennis Walsh was planning a brief dash to Brisbane in January but hoped late December would stay quiet as his constable had gone to Brisbane for cricket and other fun. To the surprise of many Bucktonites young Grant Schroeder had taken a nurse from the hospital with him rather than Delia Darke, seen by most people as Grant's girlfriend. Other people might be puzzled. Dennis Walsh was pleased. He wanted Grant to keep on growing and developing and he thought Jenny Pym was an ideal person to encourage Grant to believe in himself.

The early morning phone call was from John Simpson, a long time resident of the small hamlet of Dinawadding, to the south of Buckton. "I'm sorry to bother you, Dennis, but we've found

a body in a wheelie bin.” John Simpson was usually a very calm and sensible man but now he sounded both disbelieving and upset.

“What sort of body?”

“Well, a dead body. It looks like a young man. Should we ring Winville?”

“You’re sure he’s dead?”

“Quite sure.”

“Okay, I’ll get on to them and I’ll be out pronto.”

“We’d be grateful.”

As Walsh got on the road he thought it was an odd thing to say. Of course police were supposed to attend. Gratitude didn’t come into it. But he could understand someone like John Simpson saying it. And as he felt he could trust anything Simpson said he’d got straight on to Winville to say, the team’ll be needed. Then he put his siren on and his foot down.

Young man? Something went wrong over Christmas? A wild party? Arguments between relatives? Too much grog? He hoped it was something simple. And Dinawadding was a small place. Everyone knew everyone else.

He drew into the side street and got out. A knot of about a dozen people was standing round a wheelie bin. Buckton Council did a pick-up here once a fortnight. Most people here had chooks and gardens so they threw out the minimum. The knot opened to let him through. The lid of the bin was open and he peered in. There was certainly a body inside. He could see the top of a head of blonde hair, a body in a cotton shirt and jeans. He lifted a hand. It was cold but moved easily. Did that suggest rigor mortis had not yet set in or had already worn off? He felt he could leave that to Dr Watling to decide.

“Did anyone touch anything?”

John Simpson stepped forward. He and his wife had been standing beside an elderly woman Dennis didn’t know. Dotty Simpson had had a hand on the woman’s arm.

“I did. When Maisie came to our house,” he indicated the old lady, “I lifted his hand to see if there was a pulse.”

“Okay, so you’re Maisie who?”

“Maisie Selby.” She still sounded shaken. “I came out to bring my bin in and it was so heavy I thought ... well, I thought they’d missed my bin ... but I’d only put in one small bag of stuff ... I opened the lid ... I got such a shock ... ” she turned to the Simpsons. “I thought I must be going mad.” She pressed her hands together to stop their shaking.

“Did you see or hear anything?”

“Just—just the truck ... maybe there was a car or two but I didn’t take any notice. Why would I? Oh dear, I just can’t believe it, that poor man, what can have happened?”

Walsh turned back to John Simpson. “So he was just as he was now?”

“There’s one other thing.” Simpson looked a little uncomfortable. “I found this. It was sitting there on top of his hand. I picked it up thinking it might tell us who the man is.”

He held it out. “It seems to be a passport.” Dennis took it gingerly and flipped it open. It was in strange writing and for a minute he just looked at it blankly. Russian? He was only guessing.

“I’m sorry,” Mr Simpson went on. “I know I shouldn’t have touched anything. But I thought ... we thought ... maybe it was a local lad, did something silly ... I know that’s ... well, we thought, you know, he’d been drinking ... ”

“Maybe he had. So put the passport back, just where it was, and I’ll get some photos. Then we’d best wait for Winville.”

Of course Winville might be muddling around trying to decide if this was a joke or a hoax. But they must know by now he wasn’t one for jokes. And he’d heard from Jenny Forman that their new sergeant was pretty sharp. He had run into Jenny and her ‘friend’ Rui Lopes swimming in the pool at Buckton. The previous leader of their team in Winville, Roy Greenwood, had objected to DC Forman fraternising with the manager of the feed lots south of Buckton. He had wondered, vaguely, what their new DS thought of it. If she knew. Whether she felt women in the police should stick together ...

He suggested that everyone except the Simpsons and Mrs Selby might as well leave, “unless you saw or heard anything.” If there had been useful footprints or dropped evidence then it was



pretty well trampled over by now. People gradually drifted away, some sorry to miss whatever Winville might decide to do, others realising time was passing.

He went over it all again with Mrs Selby: what time she'd put out her bin, what she'd seen then, if she'd seen or heard anything in the night, what time she'd gone to bed, what rubbish she'd put in, what time she thought the truck had come by.

"That is interesting," Dennis mused, "they were surely taking a risk to put the body in after the truck but before people came out to bring their bins in." Put like that, everyone could see what a risk the person had taken. "And young fellas messing round at the pub wouldn't be out at the crack of dawn," John Simpson said slowly, "they'd be sleeping it off."

"It sounds like a spur-of-the-moment thing." Dennis could also see the risk. "They'd been planning to dump him somewhere else and then thought—heck, why bother, no one's around. Or was it personal?"

He couldn't answer his question and Maisie Selby, a mild-looking woman in at least her late seventies, didn't look the sort of person to be picking fights with relatives or neighbours.

"So who else lives along here?" He indicated the short street.

"I don't know if it's relevant," Mrs Simpson said suddenly, "but we're nearly all oldies along here, so they might think we wouldn't be rushing out to get our bins first thing. Only the Morgans at the end there, he teaches at the school, but they're away on holiday, and the Brumbys next to us have got a young nephew staying with them but he'd only be—what?—twelve, thirteen? And I'm sure they wouldn't know any Russians."

It wasn't very likely anyone in Dinna knew any Russians. "There's no guarantee that the passport and the man belong together. And I'd say the picture in the passport suggests a much older man. This bloke could've dyed his hair but his arms suggest a youngish man."

As soon as he said that the others could see that it was very likely. Not just a young man but a young fit man with well-muscled arms.

"Maybe he defected," John Simpson said. "Do Russians still defect?"

No one could answer this with any authority.

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It took Winville another half hour to arrive and the Simpsons were just about to suggest that Dennis and Maisie come along to their house for a "snack". The car drew in some twenty metres past the group near the wheelie bin and DS Moore and DC Brent Kelly got out and came over. Petra Moore said, without any pleasantries, "so where is he?"

"In the bin." Dennis watched closely as she walked over and looked in. For a moment she seemed as surprised as everyone else. Then she said briskly, "Who found him?"

Maisie Selby stepped forward and DS Moore said, "Right, if you'll come round to the station we'll get a statement. Does anyone recognise him?"

She showed no emotion as the Simpsons said, "We've got no idea. He must've been brought here."

"Then why didn't the perp take advantage of bins out along country roads? Less likely to be seen."

This thought had been puzzling Dennis too. He had put in a call to the feed lots to see if any of their employees were missing and had come up negative; nor had they discharged anyone lately, and the last employee to move on had done so in November. The young man might be a friend or relative come to stay with someone over Christmas but the Simpsons kept a firm finger on the local pulse and would probably have heard of or seen any such visitor.

"That's a good point," Dennis said slowly, "but you've got a chance of being seen on a long country road ... and drivers are more likely to be curious if they see someone messing with a bin." With no idea of the perp it was hard to try to read his mind. And Dennis was fairly sure they were dealing with a 'he'. It would have been a fair job to get a full-sized adult into that bin and to do it fast. It might be early morning but he couldn't be sure people would stay firmly in bed.

"Could be," she said rather dismissively before setting DC Kelly on to do a house-to-house. "We'll have to see what Watling says." She tapped a finger against her lips. "He couldn't've got in by himself?"

"He could but I'd say he's been dead for some time."

Walsh had heard various comments from Winville about their new sergeant in CIB and he thought they were probably quite close to the mark. She gave every impression of being competent and capable but he also wondered if she would prove to be less capable when it came to getting real community involvement. She had shown no interest in developing any kind of rapport with anyone here. And yet local knowledge might prove crucial to the case. He wasn't good at community relations himself in a personal sense. But he had worked hard at building up a degree of community trust simply by working hard, listening to people, and respecting the fact that country people usually had ideas and gossip worth listening to. Still, she was new here and might be feeling that she had to prove something and that was making her unnecessarily curt.

A car drew up and parked beyond the Winville vehicle. Dr Mason Watling got out and came over carrying a bag. He was even less communicative than DS Moore. He stood for several minutes simply looking into the open bin. Then he reached down to check for a pulse. He straightened up and said, "Has anyone touched anything?"

John Simpson, rather embarrassed, mentioned the passport. Watling lifted it out carefully and slipped it into a bag and handed it to DS Moore. Then he stood a moment more in thought. "I'd say we need to cart the body in the bin and remove him at the morgue. We'll need a truck or ute where we can tie the bin firmly. The whole thing'll need to be gone over and then we'll cut the bin." Maisie Selby looked startled then worried, possibly envisaging nasty letters from the Council. "Don't worry. We'll inform the Council, madam."

It was something Dennis had noticed about Watling. His cool reserved manner had led to people calling him 'a cold fish' and other names. But he was punctilious in not only his work but his relations with the public. Now Mrs Selby seemed to relax.

John Simpson had not seen Dr Watling previously but he thought that between Watling and Moore the problem would probably get solved—and would no longer be a shadow hanging over Dinawadding. "Would a horsebox be suitable? I saw the Gandys washing theirs out only yesterday. They might be willing to let you borrow it."

"Excellent." A clean horsebox should have ample means to secure the bin. The Gandy children occasionally came to Pony Club in Buckton and would probably spread stories about the unusual use their float had just been put to. And the more stories floating around the greater the chance someone just might've seen something relevant.

John Simpson went away to knock on the Gandy door. The family owned several paddocks beyond the pub. In another ten minutes Jim Gandy turned up all agog to find out why the police would want to use his horsefloat. Watling explained succinctly then closed the bin lid and asked Dennis and Jim Gandy to help lift it in and secure it.

Petra Moore turned to Walsh once the bin was secured to say, "You can get back to Buckton now. We'll keep you in touch."

"Right. But two things before I go. Get Constable Hassan out here in the station for the next few days. He knows this place better than anyone in Winville. And I'd say this is a sex crime. So take care."

Petra Moore didn't look particularly pleased to have his advice but nodded and turned back to Dr Watling. Dennis walked away to his car. But all the way back to Buckton he mulled over the case. Was it an opportunistic thing? Someone had a body to get rid of and suddenly thought 'an empty wheelie bin! Just the thing' ... but that suggested the person knew he could not be linked back to Dinawadding. Or was it more carefully planned and then something happened to change ... the chosen place to dump the body wasn't accessible or something ... but it still displayed the confidence that the body could not be linked back ... and a sex crime? There was no sign of the young man being in a fight, no needle marks on his arms. Poison? If it was, Watling would find it. AIDS? Syphilis? He had said 'take care' but the man looked too young to have died from a slow-acting infection. 'Maybe I'm an old fossil but I still think many blonde young man are either surfies or male models ... or having sex with men ...' And it was hard to link any of that with Dinna. There weren't very many young men in Dinna at the best of times. If they couldn't get work at the feed lots then they went away to look for jobs.

He pulled over and rang Nicky Wilcox. He assumed that crime writer Luke O'Neill was still living with her though he might've got tired of Dinna too and gone back to Melbourne. Still, Nicky

knew everyone locally. It might be worth having another pair of eyes and ears. But the landline rang out. Maybe they had all gone to Melbourne. He could try O'Neill's mobile but if he was away it would be a wasted call. Unless the news might bring the writer scurrying back in the hope of a scoop of some kind ...

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There were several people waiting outside the station door and Walsh put the Dinna 'incident' out of his mind to concentrate on everyday problems.

Winville though was full of curiosity as Petra Moore came in to the station to collect Greg Sullivan and Constable Archer, along with Reid Strohling from the lab, to go round to the morgue. Jenny Forman was bursting with curiosity and she wasn't sure if she was being left behind for any reason beyond the normal need to keep the CIB section open for business. DS Moore was instructive to work with, incisive, clear, organised, and yet there was always the faint sense that Moore didn't really want her there. It wasn't exactly that Moore preferred her male colleagues, she was caustic enough about most of them, but the feeling remained.

Getting the bin out of the float and carefully carried inside without adding more prints and possible contamination was a business. And going all over it for prints was a tiresome job. Fortunately it had belonged to one old lady and the pick-up was all done mechanically now. At the end of the business they had what seemed to be four sets of prints from the lid and around the rim of the bin. Maisie Selby and John Simpson had both touched it. Dennis Walsh had reached in but without putting a hand on the bin. It was possible someone else had brought the bin in for Maisie or even dropped something in her bin rather than their own. It might require the whole of Dinna to be fingerprinted but they all hoped one set of prints would be the key to the mystery. After all, if it was a spur-of-the-moment decision then it was quite likely the person doing the dumping had not come prepared with gloves.

"Not a pleasant job," Watling said to no one in particular as he watched them work over the inside rim of the bin. Though as Mrs Selby wasn't in the habit of putting food scraps in her bin it could've been much worse. Watling, reluctantly, had rung through to Dr Davis. He didn't particularly want him down in the morgue, carelessly touching things and wanting to race in to the post mortem. But he accepted that Dr Davis was his cross and had to be borne.

Then there was the difficult job of cutting the strong plastic of the bin just above where the young man sat hunched up, still and silent. Watling went over his head and torso and knees before getting Sullivan and Archer, carefully gloved, to lift the body out on to a trolley.

"Young," Watling said quietly. "Early twenties maybe." He slipped a finger into the open mouth. "Wisdom teeth there." Then he gently pressed the chin up to close the mouth while Strohling took photos.

"Blue eyes, blonde hair, lovely young man," Watling said drily. "Northern European origin."

"Well, we'll get pictures and a description out as soon as possible," Greg said briskly. Watling ran a tape measure along the body's length just as Leslie Davis came bursting in, wanting to know what was happening.

"Calm down," Watling said coldly. "Let the police finish here first."

Davis flushed slightly but said nothing. Afterwards Greg Sullivan said to his new deputy, "No love lost there by the look of it." He wasn't sure that he would want to work under Mason Watling but there weren't many people left around Winville District Hospital ready to champion Dr Davis. DS Moore just shrugged and said she hoped they knew what they were doing. Watling had said he would do the p.m. in the morning but he had carefully undressed the body and handed the clothes to the police. Unfortunately there was nothing in the pockets, no useful labels, the brands were things easily bought at Target, so they would most likely have to depend on the general public for information on his identity unless Missing Persons could jump up with an obvious match.

"No sign of drug-taking," Watling had said, "but some bruising round his neck and arms. Not enough to be fatal though." He nodded to the waiting police and said, "Nine tomorrow."

Leslie Davis had lost interest. Nothing more would be said or done today. He stood a moment looking down at that empty young face and then walked out. Watling watched him and seemed to relax.

Petra Moore turned back and said, “Dennis Walsh thinks it’s a sex crime and that he’s been dead two to three days. It’s hard to imagine sex crimes in Dinna but if he came from somewhere else ...”

“Well, he’s a canny old beggar—Walsh—but we’ll know more tomorrow.”

“We found a Russian passport on him. But the picture in it was of an older man.”

“Lordy, that’s one for the books—but I suppose their oligarchs or whatever they are like to have their toyboys, same as perverts of any other nationality.”

She looked sceptical and he wasn’t really surprised. To talk about Russian oligarchs and Winville in the same breath ... and yet he had a good deal of respect for Sergeant Walsh’s hunches, if this was a hunch and not based on something he’d noticed at the crime scene ...

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Fiona Greehan popped in to the station at lunchtime. She said to her husband, “There’s just been something on the local news about a body being found at Dinna. Did they want your help?”

“Young man found in Maisie Selby’s wheelie bin. He’s gone to the morgue. Guess they’ll tell us what’s going on.”

“A wheelie bin? How awful. A fight, do you think?” She could remember the fall-out from a fight outside the pub in Dinna years ago.

“I told that Petra Moore it was most likely a sex crime. No one there recognised him—”

“So what’s she like?”

“Seems to know her job. Not all that tall, but hefty. Bit ... mannish, very short hair. Don’t think she’s much into muddling round, so with luck she’ll get results.” It seemed an honest summing-up and yet he’d felt a faint niggle while he listened to her, talked to her. It was hard to pin down and they hadn’t spent long together. He didn’t think she’d wanted his suggestions but then she wouldn’t be the first in Winville to want to tell him to butt out. And he didn’t think it was quite that. More the feeling she was a one-man(or woman)-band and that brought back unfortunate memories of Doug Towner. Not that her crisp decision-making suggested Towner, more that she would prefer to work with young officers who could be bossed around and who wouldn’t try to steal her thunder. But she might just have been a bit nervous, her first big case here, a lot of strangers watching and wondering ...

“Well, that’s a good thing, isn’t it?” He agreed with this. “And I’ve brought you some quiche. I’m trying a different recipe so if you like it you’ll get more tonight.”

After she’d left for her stint in the op-shop he went back to pondering on the case and DS Moore until someone rang him to say there was a big argument going on at the Coolibah Hotel and they thought it was that father of that Jayleen who had died there.

Strictly speaking, the young woman had died at Paul Pickering’s farm, but Mr Pidcock after deciding not to try and take out a civil case against Cherry Morton who had certainly poisoned Jayleen, seemed to have turned up to abuse the people who ran the pub where Jayleen had stayed. But when Dennis got round to the pub and parked it was to see Mr Pidcock getting in his car and driving away. “That seems to be that,” he said to himself, “unless he’s wrecked the place.”

Instead the pub seemed quiet and largely empty when he went in. Bill Borrie and George Johnson were over at the bar and Craig Goodrick was standing nearby with a man Dennis didn’t know. “So what happened?”

Bill and George looked at each other then George said, “Sorry to bother you, Dennis, I just thought ... well, that bloke ... seems he thinks we all ganged up on his Little Jay, he keeps calling her that but I can’t see that she was that little—”

“I told him to piss off,” Goodrick said in his surly way. “He come round to my place weeks ago and said he wanted me to say what a great chick that Jayleen was. I said I’d put the dogs on to him if he didn’t remove himself, quick smart.”

“Just like that?” Dennis sounded disbelieving.

“He said I’d be doing a good thing—and I said, don’t kid yourself, mate, that big bag o’ lard, who cares ... and he tried to tell me I’d had lots o’ fun with his Little Jay and so I should do something for him. I said she’d bloody well want to be fun when I had to pay.”

“So what did he offer you to testify?”

“Nothing, not a bloody penny!”

“And would you have testified if he’d offered you some cash?” It was getting away from the argument but Dennis was curious. Goodrick had the reputation of doing things for a decent wad of cash; otherwise, forget it.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

“So he came in here and abused you?”

“No, Dennis,” George Johnson stepped in. “He abused Bill and me—and then he said he knew we were all in it with Craig and I said we weren’t, and I said his daughter had given us a lot of trouble and he said why were we complaining when she would’ve given us all the freebies we wanted—and I told him not to talk like that and that he should have some respect for the dead—and then he turned on Craig and said he’d called his daughter ‘a big bag o’ lard’—and he looked like he was going to punch him and Craig put his fists up and Bill rang you—”

“And where does this bloke come in to it?” He indicated the unknown man.

“I don’t. I just happened in.” The man, tall and fit-looking with the indefinable look of an ex-cop, made it sound as though the whole business was a big yawn.

“Well, if you’ve got anything to do with that useless Pidcock I’d suggest you think again. It would give me great pleasure to charge him with incest.”

Bill and George both looked surprised. They hadn’t linked the unknown man to anyone but now they both thought there was something a little odd about the way the man had come in and hung around as though he was waiting for someone to come. “You mean it was a ... a set-up?” George said in some puzzlement.

The unknown man looked at his watch and said, “I must hit the road.” He turned to go out. Dennis thought of detaining him to ask more questions but then it didn’t seem worth the hassle. If Mr Pidcock had decided to resurrect his civil case then that was up to him. But it was a surprise that he should go to the trouble of hiring a private investigator—if that was the relationship with the unknown man. And then he couldn’t bring himself to believe Pidcock really would pay anyone.

“D’you think he wants to sue us?” Bill Borrie had become increasingly frail and quavery. Dennis couldn’t see him intervening in a pub fight even if it was between two elderly ladies.

“Mmm ... could be he’s given up on Cherry and Lynnell and thinks you’d be a soft touch. But as she died on Paul Pickering’s premises, and he’d have a job getting money out of him, I’d say you can relax. But—if you do get anything from his lawyers, let me know.”

That seemed to please both Bill and George. “Thanks, Dennis. And you know something? Bill and me, we never had kids so we can’t really tell folk how to bring up their kids—but I’d really like to tell that bloke that he should be ashamed of himself for not bringing up his daughter properly.”

Craig Goodrick had been standing listening but now he seemed to think the conversation had taken an awkward turn. Next minute he was heading for the door. Dennis let him go.

“Could be,” Dennis said slowly. “And could be he was interfering with his daughters all along the way. I wonder what they’d say if we could ask them.”

“You’re thinking ... well, that he was responsible for the way she behaved?”

“Don’t know, George, but I’ve read that a lot of girls take to prostitution because they were abused as children.”

George gave that some thought before saying, “But that can’t be Cherry’s excuse. Her dad was a decent man.”

“Maybe she just thought it was easier money than a day’s work in the bakery? Anyway, I’d best keep going. We found a body of a young man over at Dinna this morning. Don’t know who he is but he had a Russian passport on him.”

“Strewth! In Dinna! That’s one for the books. And you want to know if he dropped in here for a drink?”

“Not really. I’d say he’d been dead a day or two before he even got to Dinna. But keep an ear out. Young man. Blonde hair.”

It was very unlikely that the person who had shoved him in the bin had come through Buckton. But it never hurt to let the story circulate. Someone just might’ve been coming through Dinna on their way to Buckton and seen ... something ...

\*

It was just after four when Walsh had a ring from John Simpson. His children had been to an afternoon of games at the library and had come in to see him on their way home. Mr Simpson said apologetically, "I'm sorry to bother you again, Sergeant, but Mrs Lambert has something she'd like to tell you. Would you be able to come out or would you like her to come to you?"

"Can't she tell me on the phone?"

"She can ... but you would understand better if you came here. I don't mean just now, but just when you're next out this way."

He was tempted to ask John Simpson if he really thought it was important. But then he couldn't see Simpson wasting his time on a bit of gossip. He would take the children with him if they'd like to come and be back in time for dinner. "Okay. Half an hour."

And to Robert and Elise, "Would you like a quick run to Dinawadding? Home for tea."

Of course. Silly question. They always wanted to go with him. Even if it was nowhere remarkable. They seemed to see it as a small glimpse into the mysterious world of his work. And it was hardly likely John Simpson was getting him out to look at more bodies, bloodstains, severed fingers ... He put the notice on the door and ushered them in to the car.

John and Dotty Simpson were standing by the front gate of a house on the other side of the road and about three houses along from Mrs Selby's. Edna Lambert, though at least in her sixties, seemed to make a real effort to look younger than her age. Dennis hoped this youthful get-up would extend to her mind and her eyesight.

"You see, sir," she said with a pat to her tinted curls, "I didn't say anything to that young man who came round asking because I thought it was John's car parked there in front of Maisie's but when I mentioned it to John he said, no, he hadn't been out, and it must've been a stranger's car and then I got to thinking ... to thinking ... you know."

"So the car?"

"Well, you see it was a yellow sedan. I don't know if it was the same make ... but it did look like theirs—"

"We've got a yellow Datsun," John Simpson said quickly.

"You're sure it was a sedan, not a ute or a van?"

"Oh, quite sure, yes, it was a sedan."

"And you saw someone get in or get out?"

"No. Not really." She seemed to ponder on how to explain it, then said, "If you'd come inside you'd know."

She took him into a spare bedroom and said, "I came in here. You see, I don't sleep very deeply, and I heard the rubbish truck and I thought I might as well get up and do something. I've been going to re-paper the shelves here and I came in and started to take things out of the drawers. I looked out and saw a car draw up near Maisie's and I thought it was John and Dotty and then I was a bit worried that they'd had an emergency ... and then with all the fuss later, and there they were and so I knew they were all right but I didn't have a chance to ask them if they'd had to go out early ... and it was only after that young man had gone that I could ask them about being out and they said they hadn't. I really wasn't trying to—to confuse anyone."

He could see that she didn't have a perfect view of Mrs Selby's house or any car parked out the front. There were several small trees in her front garden and in her next-door neighbour's garden. "So exactly where was the car? Right in front of Mrs Selby's house? Or further this way?"

"I think it was just past her front gate, perhaps in front of her side fence."

"Could you see her wheelie bin?"

"Not really. Just the top of it maybe." And then she re-thought that. "No, I don't think I did see it. I just assumed it was there."

He accepted that. The bin had not been directly in front of the gate. "And how long d'you think it was between the truck going by and the car parking?"

"It wasn't long, maybe five, ten minutes."

"And you didn't see anyone get in or out?"

"I didn't stay watching, I'm afraid."

"You didn't look again at all?"

"Oh, a quick glance just before I went out of the room but there was nothing there then."

“And how long would that have been?”

“I really don’t know.” She looked down at the piles of linen and winter woolies heaped on the bed as though for inspiration. “I don’t think it would have been much over ten minutes. It didn’t take me long to take everything out.”

“Uh-huh. And was the car parked facing this way—or the other?” He thought that a car facing this way would mean the driver getting out would be more visible to someone watching. The other way the driver’s door would open on to the curb.

She seemed to find this a trick question. At last she said slowly, “I think it *was* parked wrongly, that was maybe why I thought the Simpsons—that they’d had something go wrong. But maybe it was just that there were cars parked on the other side, I’m not sure.”

“And the rubbish truck picks up from both sides of the road? It doesn’t go round and come back?”

“No. It comes up this side, then up past the school, then round by Sunrise Road and back. Maybe that was why the car came round like that? Maybe they’d tried to pass the truck or something.”

“Could be.” It was only a small chance but a yellow sedan would be more noticeable than black or white. He would check with the Council to see who did this run. But it still suggested that the person who had dumped the body either was a risk-taker or didn’t really care if anyone saw. The first seemed the more likely. And it also suggested that whoever had done the dumping was strong. That young man seemed fairly slightly built but it would still be a job to get him out of the car and into the bin, single-handed. And there was a more nebulous thought there. Did the perp know something of Dinawadding and that the Simpsons had a yellow sedan or was that a mere coincidence? He thought a possible link to the district would be worth keeping in mind.

Mrs Lambert looked pleased when he said she’d been very helpful. “I’ve got my grandchildren coming to stay next week. I hope all the talk will have died down by then.”

He thought this was unlikely. Such strange happenings were rare in Dinna. People would probably still be discussing ‘the body in the bin’ ten years from now. And that led on to an even vaguer thought: did the perp intend to make just such an impact on this small community?

He drove around past the Wilcox house but there was no sign of anybody. It probably didn’t matter. Dinna had plenty of other people ready to latch on to a bizarre story and milk it dry.

\*

Greg Sullivan, when Moore and Kelly returned to Winville, listened in some surprise to their story and looked at the passport rather blankly. “We need someone who speaks Russian, I’d say.”

“Elise Walsh speaks Russian,” Kelly said immediately.

“Okay, what’re you waiting for,” Moore jumped in, “Get on to this Elise—”

“No.” Greg sounded firm. “She’s only a little kid. I’m not bringing her into this sordid crime.”

Petra Moore looked at him in some surprise. She couldn’t really believe a small girl out here would be speaking Russian. “Then you’ll need to find someone here, some adult.”

“We could look for Russian names in the phone book,” Brent Kelly said tentatively.

“And sometimes Poles and Czechs can speak Russian,” Jenny Forman added.

“No, I’ll go round and talk to Bill Costigan at the post office.” Greg got up. “See you later. And then we’d best get on to the Russian Embassy.”

He went out and Petra Moore said, “Find the contact details. They must have a passport and visa section.”

Bill Costigan was a friendly acquaintance and took Sullivan’s request seriously. “Well, I know of several but who knows if they all speak Russian? The only one I can guarantee is Ivan Kreisky. He gets called Izzy. We’re on the darts team. He works at the Wheat Board but it might be better to go round and see him when he knocks off.”

Costigan wrote down a phone number and address.

Sullivan went round at 5.30 and knocked and introduced himself. “I’ll need some discretion on this but I’d like you to have a look at this passport.” Reid Strohling had fingerprinted the cover and every page. Mr Kreisky took the proffered document gingerly and opened it.

“Dmitri Simonov, born Minsk, 1955.” He leafed slowly through the pages. “He’s certainly got around, look at all these comings and goings. And this was issued to him five years ago.” Mr Kreisky spoke with a faint accent but seemed completely at home in English.

“Uh huh,” the next part was slightly more difficult, “we need to find out if the Embassy knows anything about him. So would you be willing to talk with them, if necessary?”

They would undoubtedly speak good English but Izzy Kreisky lived a quiet life and he suddenly thought this would make for some excitement in it. “Glad to—if you tell me what you want asked.”

“Okay, come in in your lunch hour ... no, better still, come in at nine, tell John Gellibrand you’ve been called in to give us a hand—or I can square it with him?”

“No worries, mate. I can work through lunch. See you tomorrow. And those visas should tell you where the fella’s been.”

Greg was hoping this too. And if Mr Simonov was alive and well—had his passport been stolen or merely lost? Or was he now reposing, very dead, somewhere else around Dinawadding? Greg went back to the station and spent the next half hour noting every apparent movement of the mysterious Mr Simonov. At the end of it he sat back. According to this Mr Simonov was still in Australia. He had come and gone at least four times in the three years since his first arrival. He had visited several Pacific nations as well as New Zealand, and Argentina and Chile in South America.

‘I wonder why? Holidays or business?’ Greg sat back and rubbed his neck. ‘And is he victim or perp?’ He hoped the post mortem would give them a clear insight into how and when the young man had died. He put the passport back in its bag and put it away in the evidence room.

## *Case No. 2: Victim or Victims?*

Greg Sullivan tried to decide whether 9 a.m. Queensland time was 10 a.m. or 8 a.m. in Canberra as he sat over dinner.

“I think they’re an hour ahead,” his wife Narelle said. “Isn’t that what people complain about?”

“Do they?” Greg didn’t see any point in complaining. And even if Russian diplomats were tardy risers they would surely be in the office by 10 a.m. “Well, I just hope they can tell us something useful about this Simonov character. And if he’s dead—why would anyone else want his passport? Bit dicey turning up at the airport with a dead man’s passport.” And then he remembered the Obidini case where the dead man’s documents had been sold on rather than returned to Italy to his family.

“Isn’t there a black market in things like passports?” Narelle sounded dubious. “Though not here, I don’t imagine.”

“But then there’s no guarantee Mr Simonov has ever been within a hundred miles of Dinna.” There would probably be a black market in Brisbane. But then why leave the passport sitting on a dead man. Why not cash in? He let the questions flow through and then he said, “Maybe Simonov is lying dead with this young man’s passport on him.” He didn’t really believe this.

“D’you think the young man is Russian too?”

“I s’pose there’s Russians with blonde hair and blue eyes ... not sure about that. The ones you see on the TV are usually darker ... but maybe. Dennis thinks he could be some sort of toyboy, maybe some young kid wanting some quick money ... and it all ended in tears. Who knows?”

And with Dr Watling’s careful examination and an ounce of luck they would soon know a lot more about the young man.

Greg Sullivan let DS Moore and DC Kelly go round to observe the post mortem while he waited for Mr Kreisky to come in. He would suggest that he say he was ringing on behalf of Winville Police. If pressed he could say he had been invited to help because of his language skills. But in the end it didn’t matter. The Liaison person took the details and said they would ring Winville back.



Ivan Kreisky gave that a wry smile. “So you’ll be on your own when they ring—if they ring. But maybe that’s best.” He felt a bit nervous trying to sound authoritative on the phone but comforted himself with the knowledge that DSS Sullivan never sounded particularly authoritative. “Though I would like to know what happens—if you can tell me sometime.”

All through the day Greg Sullivan was on tenterhooks, waiting for a ring which might or might not go some way to solving the mystery. But nothing happened.

Nor did Drs Watling and Davis solve anything. Mason Watling went carefully over the body taking samples of skin, hair, nails, saliva, blood, while Davis stood by impatiently. But nothing would hurry or fluster Watling as he labeled each bit of the dead youth. He had already arranged for the hospital to x-ray the young man. The teeth might help in identification but there was no sign of broken bones, nothing to indicate severe trauma at any time.

There were slight grazes on the young man’s hands and the bruising they had noticed as they took him out of the bin. “So he wasn’t bashed, stabbed or shot,” Watling said non-committally. But when they turned him over they found the first sign of trauma. Someone had cut upwards through the muscle ring of his anus. It had begun to heal but still looked red and swollen.

Mason Watling simply stood in silence for a couple of minutes. Leslie Davis finally said, with a hint of impatience, “Sex with a big man?”

“It’s been cut, not torn. Punishment, sadism, spite. Not our business. But we’ll need to take it carefully, see if there’s more damage inside.”

It looked like being a very long day, Petra Moore thought, and finally sent Brent Kelly out. “Check with Sullivan and go back out to Dinna. Someone might have remembered something more. And check in with Hassan.”

Kelly was more than happy to leave the sight of the young man’s stomach being lifted out. ‘I guess I’ll smell like that someday,’ he thought gloomily, ‘but I think I’ll go for cremation instead.’

And the stomach contents did little to advance the case. The youth, it seemed, had eaten meat and potatoes and had coffee. And must have died fairly soon afterwards or the meal would have been more digested. “Well, that tells us when he died,” Davis said cheerfully, now tired of standing and watching and listening to Watling drone on.

“Does it?” Watling looked up.

“Of course it does. Probably poison. He ate and karked it.”

Watling gave him a considered look but didn’t respond to this. He had wondered about poison, that the young man had ingested something, but there was nothing to back up the idea. He knew there could be something which would not leave obvious signs but he was increasingly doubtful.

And the result of tests, when the results came back, ruled out the most likely culprits.

And he got tired of hearing Leslie Davis say, “Must be poison, they just didn’t look hard enough.” Dr Watling understood. It was hard to say that a healthy young man with only some minor trauma to his body had died and they didn’t know how or why he’d died.

“Maybe.”

“And those idiots still don’t know who he is so we can’t ask his family about his health.”

“Shock can kill. A bad fright. Terror. But we can’t prove it.”

Sometimes no cause of death could be found. Sometimes it could not be clearly stated on a death certificate. With older people dying there was usually some debility which could be blamed. But this man was unlikely to be more than twenty-two at the most.

“We’ll have to hope that someone’s listed him missing.” But Watling didn’t say it with great hope. If the young man had been homeless, an itinerant, and taken up with an older man, then no one might know or care that he was missing.

The police were also pinning their hopes on someone coming forward and saying ‘Oh, that’s—’ but so far no one had obliged. The Russian Embassy, however, had got back to say that Mr Simonov had left a Baltic port four years and six months ago in his yacht with two crew members and had not returned. His passport had not been reported lost or stolen. His current whereabouts were unknown but he was probably still in Australia.

“Or Australian waters,” Greg said gloomily. “But that’s a lot of water.”

“But if he’s still on his yacht—he can’t leave without his passport,” Petra Moore said briskly.

“So if this kid was with him ... then how did he get to Dinna?”

“And what happened to those two crew members? Was this lad one of them? But they would have needed passports to leave, surely?”

Greg couldn’t see them answering any of their questions. He sat down to nut out more questions for the Embassy. With luck they would continue to co-operate even though it was certainly possible that one of their citizens was responsible for this young man’s death.

A day later Greg was able to say, “The yacht’s name was ‘A. N. Rostow’ so if he hasn’t changed the name or traded it in or wrecked it—we should be able to find where he was last moored. But I think we’ll need to bring Brisbane in. There’s a good chance he was visiting the Gold Coast or somewhere round Brisbane.”

Petra Moore didn’t look best pleased about this. Her first big case and it was going to be given away. But she nodded. “It doesn’t seem very likely Mr Simonov ever heard of Dinna but he might have hired a car and headed west.”

“Except—” Jenny Forman had mulled over what she thought of as ‘the mind of the perp’ day and night, “there’s no shortage of places to dump a body round Brisbane—or even at sea. It’s almost like someone wanted the body found. And I don’t believe it’s all down to the one person. Could Mr Simonov have paid someone to get rid of the body and then they didn’t do what he’d paid them for.”

“And gave this other guy his passport at the same time,” Petra said rather sarcastically.

“That’s the thing,” Greg said mildly.

“Maybe he took the passport so as to dob the Russian bloke in if questions got asked.”

“Maybe.”

Greg privately thought it would be easier to find a yacht than to find a man.

\*

Dennis was busy getting things tidied up in Buckton after the noisiness of New Year and a dozen drink-driving and other charges. He planned to leave early to get to Brisbane for Ashley Turner’s wedding and then come home in the late evening. But to his surprise Jake Moss in Winville said he’d come out and mind the station “and stay on in Brisbane an extra day if you want.”

This helpfulness seemed so unlike any Winville incumbent that Dennis said to Fiona, “I’ll bet he wants to root through everything in peace.”

“He might, but maybe after all this time someone there realises you deserve a weekend off now and then.” And Grant would be back on Monday. “So how about relaxing and enjoying yourself.”

“I’ll take those pics of the mystery guy and Ash can have a look—”

“Sweetheart, she’s going off on her honeymoon, not wanting to look at photos of dead bodies.”

“Well, yeah, sure, but they might still be scratching round when she gets back.”

It didn’t surprise Fiona that Dennis did put an envelope of photos of the mystery man in the glove box. She just hoped Ashley was strong enough to stand up to Dennis.

Jake Moss turned up the evening before they were due to leave and got shown around the station. Then Dennis said, “All yours, mate,” and went home to dinner and an early night. That Moss seemed cheerful and apparently looking forward to his brief stay in Buckton struck Dennis as odd. He had had to practically resort to blackmail to get people from Winville to fill in over the years. But here was Jake behaving as though it was a treat. “Maybe he’s just glad to be away from Winville for a few days,” Fiona hazarded.

Ash Turner and Tim Carroll had chosen to be married at a reception place with big lawns and pleasant gardens. There were about forty people there to enjoy the celebrant and a lavish afternoon tea. Toast after toast was offered and Dennis hoped they weren’t planning to drive anywhere afterwards.

“I saw you looking at my glass,” Ash said to Dennis as people started to rise from the tables. “But we’re getting a taxi to stay overnight in luxury and fly out tomorrow.”

“To where?”

“Vanuatu.” She smiled and added, “And I know you’ve brought some work for me, I saw the look Fiona gave you, but it’ll have to wait. Or you can give it to Jeff over there.”

“Will do.” He bent forward and kissed her on the cheek.

Fiona on tenterhooks, relaxed, and turned back to where the children were still spooning up strawberries and cream. If Dennis wanted to tackle Ashley’s colleague she didn’t mind but she felt sure Winville would already have been on to Missing Persons. She didn’t share his deep distrust of his Winville colleagues—or not now when people like Towner and De Jong were gone.

It was very late when they got home and the children had gone to sleep. She was sorry Dennis hadn’t taken Jake Moss at his word and stayed overnight in Brisbane. The station was closed, only the sign and the outside light on. Moss’s car was not out the front. “Well, so long as he’s out working, not headed home without telling me ...”

That too had been known. Aidan Hassell had decided that Buckton was too much like hard work when he’d been filling in one time, and headed home to Winville. But the lights came on in the station while Dennis was getting out of his suit and Fiona was getting two sleepyheads into bed. When he said this to Fiona she said, “Good, so you can have a lie-in tomorrow.”

It didn’t really surprise her to see him head out straight after breakfast next morning but he seemed cheerful enough when he came back in twenty minutes.

“So he doesn’t need you?”

“No. He said he can stay another night. And if he’s been poking through everything he didn’t say anything.” But when Dennis went over in the late afternoon to see if everything had stayed quiet, Moss said, “Sit down a minute, mate. I just want to run something past you.”

This, it turned out, was not some nit-picking over files but the suggestion that he be transferred to Winville and a younger man put into Buckton. To this, Dennis only said, “I’d need to discuss this with Fiona.” She might prefer Winville to Buckton although he thought she regarded it as merely a larger Buckton, not a place of culture and learning. There was another question in there but he didn’t ask it: would the others in Winville really want him there? He knew quite a few preferred to keep him at arms’ length. And even Greg Sullivan said, when Moss shared this idea with him, “If you bring Dinny Walsh in here, he’ll be running the place in no time at all.”

“Maybe, but I think he’s too good a man to be left to chase drunks all week.”

“Then arrange for him to come here one or two days a week to work with the young ones.” This would keep Walsh occupied and out of the way of the CIB section.

Moss considered this without agreeing or disagreeing. Then he said non-committally, “We’ll see.”

Fiona considered the idea carefully before saying, “Why does he want you there?”

“He didn’t say. But I’d reckon he thinks he’d rather have me than some unknown.” Jake had been second-in-command to Aidan Hassell. He had supplanted Hassell and Hassell had asked for a transfer. It was eminently possible that Moss didn’t want an ambitious deputy looking for ways to do his own supplanting. Dennis Walsh had never shown any signs of wanting to supplant anyone. His way of working was much more direct. He told people what they should be doing and sometimes they took some notice.

“You mean—he thinks you’ll be content to be his dogsbody?”

“Could be.”

“And—could you work okay with him?”

“Probably. But I’m getting too old to fit in with other people.”

Fiona privately thought Dennis had never been terribly good at fitting in with other people. And she couldn’t get enthusiastic about moving to Winville. The schools might be better. There was a Rep Society, a couple of bands and several trios and a small orchestra. They could probably find a paddock for the children’s ponies.

If it had been Toowoomba she thought she probably would say yes but Winville? It seemed a lot of disruption for not much benefit. “Would it mean promotion?”

“Maybe. But I’m happy as I am.” Happy probably wasn’t the perfect description but she didn’t query it.

“Will he be annoyed if you say no?”

“Doubt it. And I don’t think running the idea past me was what brought him to Buckton.”

“So what was?”

“George told me he was in the pub Saturday night for a while, having a drink with a woman. But I s’pose I’d better not blab it all around the place in case he wants it kept secret.”

She couldn’t guess whether the two things were connected: an offer to Dennis and a secret liaison, and just said, “If you decide you’d like a change, well, I’m sure we can manage.”

“I’ll bet you anything you like they’re all telling Jake to pull his head in, even Greg. And I’d reckon Petra Moore thinks she’s finally got somewhere where she can get some kudos for her work.”

She smiled at that. Dennis never asked for kudos but almost without trying he would probably insert himself into the cases where the new detective sergeant was hoping to make her mark.

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It didn’t surprise the Walsh family when Jake Moss turned up late Friday afternoon with a different offer. Dennis only said, “I guess we can give it a go.”

Moss said, “Good. Monday week, I’ll expect you at nine. Send you out with some of the young ones.”

“And how about the young man in the wheelie bin? Any breakthroughs?”

“The case has been passed to Brisbane. Seems that Russian bloke had his yacht moored at Scarborough, somewhere there outside the marina. He got some provisions, paid for them, and was gone next morning. No one knows where he’s gone. Might just be up the coast as he didn’t apply for a visa to go to any Pacific countries—so maybe losing his passport put a spoke in that wheel. But they still don’t know who the young fella is. Could be another Russian. They’re going to run DNA and other tests on him in Brisbane, see if there’s any sea water in his hair, that kind of thing.”

“Greg was happy to let it go?”

“Sure. Don’t think Petra was so keen. Her first big case with us. And we got a fair bit about that Russian bod, doesn’t sound too savoury, but who the kid is—who knows?”

“Young homeless kids hang round boats. They can go aboard to sleep, drink, drug, when no one’s around. Have they shown those photos round the marina?”

“Up to them, I guess.”

Undoubtedly Brisbane had more resources but Dennis had long since grown jaundiced about fellow coppers doing the obvious. If they had jumped to the conclusion that the young man was Russian and brought here on Simonov’s yacht they might not be looking for a local connection. But he was content to leave it to others. He had enough to do in Buckton and more so if he was going to be in Winville on Mondays.

But he thought there was one more thing to be done, after Moss had gone out, and that was to nip out and do a last check around Dinna. Someone might have remembered ... something ... and it wasn’t likely Brisbane would bother with any follow-up in the small town.

Jake Moss went round to the hospital to pick up his ‘friend’ and take her to dinner in Oakey. And Dennis went out to Dinna first thing in the morning and had another talk with the key people before going round to the pub to see if anyone had mentioned anything.

“This may be nothing, Dennis,” Judy Peck said tentatively, “but Martha Harding was in a couple of days ago and told me she’d seen a car parked along the road past the farm early one morning. She didn’t hear about the man in the bin till a few days later because they don’t go out much so she didn’t know you were looking for a sighting of a car—”

“Did she say what kind of car?”

“I don’t think so, just that she didn’t recognise it. Martha always worries about cars parking up there since that time she ... ” Mrs Peck tailed off, knowing Martha was embarrassed to be reminded of her attempt to kill herself there.

“Thanks. Probably a yellow sedan. Let me know if you hear anything more. The car must’ve gone somewhere.”

It could be on a farm. It could be back on the coast. It could’ve been traded in. He just hoped they’d informed Brisbane to look for a yellow sedan. Though he didn’t think Winville had been as certain about the yellow sedan as he was.

He drove round to the farm where old Abraham Proctor, Martha Harding, and Abraham's wheelchair-bound son lived. As soon as he came in, Martha said, "Oh good, so someone's taken me seriously."

"Who did you tell about the car—apart from Judy Peck?"

"Winville."

"They followed up?"

"Well, you're here." He thought of rebutting this but let it go. Martha didn't have a high opinion of the police at the best of times.

"So just tell me exactly what you saw."

"I get up early, say six, and I saw the rubbish truck come past and empty our bin. I was getting things out and putting them on the breakfast table so I didn't go down straight away to bring it up. But when I went to put my boots on I saw there was a car parked along the road, just along a bit from our gate. I was halfway down the lane when it drove off. I didn't think much about it. And I wasn't in Dinna till about five days later."

"You didn't hear it on the news?"

"If I did, I didn't take any notice."

Police were always so sure people would hear things through the media but, as now, there was no guarantee. "So what can you tell me about the car?"

"Not a lot. A sedan. There was a bit of mist around early but I'm pretty sure it was yellow, or maybe cream." No one else had mentioned a mist so he would need to check around. Martha might have cataracts. "I'm not sure but I think there was a man in it. Maybe I'm guessing but it just stood there a short time and then drove off. I didn't see anyone get out."

"And you've never seen the car before along this road?"

"Hard to say but there's not much traffic along here. Maybe someone else saw it. Who knows?"

He tried the other farms along this side road but only got the vague statement that the Winslows had heard a vehicle but couldn't say more than that. And once the car got out on to the back road it could turn right and possibly head for Winville or left and eventually head back the way it'd probably come.

Young man? Or just a man? He called back in on everyone to ask if they knew any local lads who had moved to the coast, perhaps near Scarborough. It was Abraham's son Jeremy who said, "I went to school with Jimmy Gardiner. He went to the coast after his wife died. I'm pretty sure he had a son."

"When did he go?"

"Couldn't tell you the year—but it must be at least fifteen years. His wife was the daughter of Frank and Miriam Tufnell. Frank was killed when a tree fell on him. Jimmy ran the farm for a while but they sold out after Miriam died." Of course lots of country people moved to the coast. For their health. To retire. To be nearer relatives. For work. Because they liked to be near the sea. But it seemed to be a suggestion worth following up.

He tried the phone book for a J. Gardiner in that area and came up with several, including one who ran a chandlery business. In his small ad in the Yellow Pages he said 'You Want—We Supply'. Of course this J. S. Gardiner might be John or Jordan or somesuch. But it seemed worth a ring. When he got a woman answering, he said, "I'm looking for a Jimmy Gardiner who used to live near Dinawadding. I wondered if I'd got the right J. Gardiner."

"Well, you have, but I'm afraid he's out at the moment. D'you want to leave a message?"

"What time is he likely to be back?"

"Say six. He's doing deliveries all afternoon."

"Thanks for that. I'll be in touch."

So now could he turn up a yellow sedan in the name of Gardiner? He assumed CIB had done some checking but if they'd found anything he hadn't heard. But before he went looking he thought it would help to know the son's name. He would try the electoral roll first. With luck the son was old enough to vote and had bothered to register.

But he and Grant got called out to a rolled car and then he let Grant go off to his cricket and the possible involvement of the Gardiner family in this strange case got put to one side.

He set Grant on to looking first thing on Monday and Grant came up with a James and a Guy Gardiner living at the same address. “Okay, so now see if there’s a car registered to this Guy Gardiner.”

He then went out to talk to the Binnies who had two unknown cows, both very wild, in their paddocks and were wondering what they should do with them. Was it a matter of ‘finders keepers’? It was a strenuous job to yard the animals up, one of them charging the Binnies’ cattle dog who only just evaded a horn. In the yard and up the race the animals did their best to climb out. But everyone finally got in close enough to check for non-existent ear tags and brands.

“Well, that’s one for the whatever,” old John Binnie stood there scratching his head. “Where the heck did they come from?”

“Japana?” Dennis too couldn’t link the two brindle cows to any local farm. Had the animals got out during unloading or did Japana have holes in their fences—and had the cows been heading home when they saw the lush green of an irrigated paddock?

“But what would they be doing with cows like these? What the Yanks call ‘cleanskins’?”

“Good question. And if they or someone else can’t prove they own them—then I guess they’re yours.”

Both cows were big rangy animals but definitely on the lean side and not much use on a dairy farm. “Fatten them up and sell them on. But for the moment you’d best keep them yarded and we’ll see if Japana claims them.”

He rang the office, or one office, Japana now seemed to have half-a-dozen offices, of the big feed lots and said were they missing two cows. This got no immediate response. The feed lots said they would ‘ask around’. Dennis just said, “If I haven’t heard from you by this evening I’ll take it you’re not missing any animals.”

And to the Binnies he said, “D’you want them in the Lost and Found if Japana doesn’t claim them?”

“If anyone asks—you can put them on to us, can’t you?”

“Okay, but take care, and best get them de-horned soon as you can.” The feed lots supposedly now had a policy of not taking horned animals but how closely they adhered to it Dennis didn’t know. He returned to the station to have Grant say cheerfully, “I’ve found a car for Guy Gardiner but he traded it in on a hatchback last week.”

“D’you know who bought it?” The papers might not have been processed for the new owner.

“I do.” He handed over a slip of paper.

“Good lad. Now we’ve got to convince CIB to bring the car in and go over it with everything they’ve got. Let’s see if Winville will handle it.”

But DSS Sullivan said, “The whole ruddy case has gone to Brisbane, mate. You’ll have to tell them.”

“Okay. Give me a contact.”

“I’m busy. I’ll get on to you soon as I can.”

“Typical,” Dennis said as he hung up. But only ten minutes later Petra Moore was on the phone. “Did you tell Greg you’ve found the car?”

“Good chance. So tell me who to contact in Brisbane.”

But she immediately said she’d pass it on for him. Dennis read out all the details he and Grant had gleaned. “Too much of a coincidence if they haven’t got anything to do with the business.”

“True. I’ll let you know what happens.”

This was the kind of response Dennis always hoped for and he sounded a lot more cheerful as he finished the call. He hadn’t asked if he should ring the Gardiners back. And with others on to it ringing might only tip someone off. But were the Gardiners the perps, party to the death, or had they agreed to get rid of a body which had died in an accident or from natural causes?

Instead he rang Martha Harding to ask her to ask Jeremy if Jimmy Gardiner’s son had been Guy and what sort of age would he be now. Jeremy came to the phone but hemmed and hawed. It could be Guy but he wouldn’t like to say for certain. And he thought he was probably about ten

when they left—but again he'd only be guessing. "And were they a big strong family. Muscles. Pick up a bag of chook pellets with one hand. That sort of family?"

Again Jeremy hesitated over the question. Dennis wondered if he simply hadn't known the Gardiners very well or whether he was losing the plot. And for sure someone else round Dinna would remember the Gardiners. "I wouldn't like to say," Jeremy said slowly, "but yeah, I think they were all a fair size, don't know about the kid, what he grew up to be."

It would've taken muscles to get the young man out of the car and in to the bin. If the bin had fallen over he could be slid in and then the bin stood upright. But however he pictured it, muscles still came in to the equation. Winville had sent through the details from Dr Watling's examination and although the young man wasn't particularly tall and was slightly built he had obviously done either some hard work or some body-building.

So Guy Gardiner had put the John Doe either dead or alive into his car and driven out to Dinawadding simply because he knew the district fairly well. But then—why in a wheelie bin? If he'd dropped him off in the long dry grass along that side road it was unlikely he would have been found. If passers-by noticed a smell they would put it down to a dead animal. Someone might decide to burn that dry grass but they wouldn't necessarily look closely.

It seemed to bear out the idea that young Mr Gardiner wanted his passenger found.

Dennis pondered over this while he ate a sandwich. Why? Guilt. Remorse. Coercion. He couldn't answer his why and finally put it aside.

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In the end Dennis rang back in the late afternoon and got the same woman. He apologised for being a nuisance and said, "Actually it's Guy Gardiner I'd like to talk to. Does he work for you?"

She said, "He does. But what d'you want him for?"

"Does he drive a yellow sedan?"

"Well, yes, but why? Has he been in an accident? And I think he sold it. I haven't seen it around."

"I think it'd be a good idea if he got in touch with Buckton Police." He gave her the details and said, "It's possible he has been involved in an incident—or his car has, if he ever lets anyone else drive it. Tell him to get in touch with me and get it off his chest and we'll see if we can work something out."

She didn't seem to know what to do or how to respond to this. "I'm sure he hasn't done anything wrong. He's never been in trouble. And we depend on him in the business."

"But he did deliver groceries and things to a Russian boat a couple of weeks ago."

She was silent for a long moment before saying, "Yes, I remember. But that boat has gone and they didn't make any complaints to us. So I don't see ..."

"Just tell him not to do a runner and to get on to me, soon as he can."

When he'd hung up, Grant said, "I thought CIB was running it."

"Depends what you mean by 'running it'. I suspect this young bloke's got in to something he can't handle so the sooner we get him out of it—"

"But won't CIB—well, they might say it's not our business."

"For sure. But I think, if they can't find this Russian bod, they'll throw the book at this kid. So let's hope he has the sense to get in touch with us."

It was Greg Sullivan who got on to Dennis next day to say, "I hear you've been sticking your nose in our case, or Brisbane's case."

"And who told you that?"

"Petra got on to Brisbane with the stuff you gave her about the car. They went round last night just to check and found the kid had done a runner. They reckon you rang up and told the kid to skedaddle. You won't be very popular in some quarters."

"No. I didn't. I've never spoken to the kid. But you're kidding yourselves if you think he's been sticking a knife up some kid's bum. It's that bloody Russian they should be getting after."

"It's not up to you, who they get after. So you just stay well away."

"They knew all about the Gardiners, did they?"

"I don't know what they knew and what they didn't know—"

“I thought sharing info was the name of the game.”

Greg wasn't going to do anything to suggest that neither Winville nor Brisbane had ever heard of the Gardiners. “Just keep out of it, mate, that's all I'm asking.”

“And if the kid gets on to me—what then?”

“He won't. He's probably in Melbourne by now.”

“Well, they can find him for you. After all, we found the Raes for them.”

Greg said, “Doesn't work like that, mate.” And hung up.

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“So you won't be coming to Caloundra with us?” Fiona said over breakfast.

“Nothing I'd like better.” This wasn't quite true. Dennis Walsh had never seen much point in lying round beaches baking himself brick-red. But there would be other attractions ...

“Not even a weekend? Jake can come and look after the station and see Susan again.”

“So you know?” Dennis hadn't told anyone that Jake Moss was seeing Susan Denby, the matron at Buckton Hospital. Though as it was George Johnson at the Coolibah Hotel who had told him it wasn't likely nobody else knew.

“Most of Buckton knows, I would think.”

“Well, I wish they'd all know something useful for a change.”

“So why the big secret anyway? They're both single, aren't they?”

He knew Ms Denby was and Jake was divorced with two grown-up children. There was no obvious reason to keep it secret. But he wasn't fussed on the whole world knowing his own business and he could understand Jake wanting to take things very quietly. And if they decided it was serious, what then? He couldn't very well take on the station at Buckton and she might not want to work in Winville.

“Same reason we didn't shout it to the treetops maybe.”

“Maybe.” Fiona was a very private person herself and could understand them not wanting their romance a thing of public gossip and speculation. “But it would be nice if you could come for at least a weekend.”

“We'll see. But you'll have your hands full—”

“All the more reason for you to come.”

He had been thinking of Andrew and Julie McLaren and wondering whether they got on when they were thrown together for a week. But he could see that the holiday put all the work on Fiona's shoulders.

“I'll think about it. And what was this about you suggesting they change the name of Hickey Lane?”

“I merely suggested it. As no one seemed to remember the Hickeys I thought a new name might be nice. Or if they did remember the Hickeys they said Old Man Hickey was such a bastard that it might be better to let sleeping dogs lie. But then George Hickman told me his daughter had married a Goodrick and they mightn't be best pleased if I suggested changing it. Though if he was so awful then maybe it shouldn't commemorate him?”

He thought on this and what he had heard about Goodrick marriages and finally said, “Best to leave it. Might be a can o' worms. I have an idea the Hickey daughter married while the first wife was still there. They mightn't want that spot of bigamy made public.”

“Well, I'm glad I mentioned it. I wondered why George looked a bit cagey. So Hickey Lane it stays.”

“Pity. I don't like naming things for old sods who should've done time. But, yeah, best to leave it.”

Maybe Dennis was being over-critical but when she told George Hickman what he'd said, George grinned and said, “If Dennis had been in the station then I'm sure he would've got the old sod on a raft of charges. I heard he used to beat the living daylights out of his kids. And I'll bet Dennis would've got him on traffic, drunkenness, bad language, you name it.”

It was a relief to give up thinking about Hickey Lane and she wondered if that forgotten daughter had found happiness, or at least safety, with a Goodrick.

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While Fiona was sorting and packing things to take with them to the beach Leila Burkett, the local vet, was considering the future of her assistant Delia. She had some sympathy for Delia. She still thought Delia was good with the sick or injured animals. But she had got tired of hearing Delia complain about Grant neglecting her. She clearly hadn't forgiven Grant for taking Jenny Pym to Brisbane for the cricket. Leila had grown very fed up with listening to Delia whinge. It would not matter so much if Delia didn't live with her, if she just came in for the working day. But she was also reluctant to sack Delia.

One evening she said, "I really think it's time you spread your wings. There are good things about Buckton but there's a whole wide world out there, full of opportunities. I'm sure you could find work wherever you went. I've got a friend in Toowoomba who just might be looking for a good assistant."

Delia stared at her for a moment and then said, "Oh but, I'm not good enough."

Leila had tried, fairly successfully, to get Delia to stop prefacing most of her sentences with 'Oh but'. Now she said rather tartly, "I wouldn't suggest it to Mearon if I didn't think you could do the job."

Delia turned the idea over and over. Toowoomba *would* be more exciting. There *would* be more choice of nice men. Grant would be sorry that he hadn't been nicer. And she would rather deal with dogs and cats than ponies and cows. At last she said, "Could you?"

"I'll ring her tonight, see if she'll give you a trial."

Grant might or might not be glad to see Delia go. But Leila suddenly felt it would be a relief to see the young woman move on. Delia would always be good and gentle with the patients but she would never go beyond that. She would not want to know the details of the treatments. She would not enjoy deeper conversations. It wasn't a lack of intelligence, Leila was inclined to think, but rather a kind of mental laziness. Her family had convinced her she was incapable of thinking and she still clung to that belief. There was no point in reading, in studying, in asking questions, because she wasn't any good at thinking. It had become a cop-out, in Mrs Burkett's opinion. Brains, like anything else, needed to be used. Coasting along with nothing more challenging than gently patting a sick kitten wasn't enough.

But having got Delia a trial with a Toowoomba vet there was the next question: where to find a suitable assistant? Grant said rather despondently that he'd heard that Delia was going to Toowoomba to work. "It's because of me, that I took Jenny with me, that's why she's going."

"Maybe. But I think Mrs Burkett thought she needed to broaden her experience. Same with you. At some stage you'll need to move on, get more experience. Maybe they'll send you to Longreach or Cairns."

The obvious corollary to that would be saying to Delia he was going and have her say he shouldn't. Or maybe it wouldn't matter to her any more. And the more he thought about it the more her going seemed to be a relief. Things hadn't been the same lately and it never occurred to Grant that he was changing, maturing, growing in confidence, and the vague sense of wanting more from a relationship than talking about unsympathetic families and patting small animals no longer seemed quite enough.

"I wouldn't mind Cairns ... "

Of course Mrs Burkett could advertise in the *Buckton Bugle* or put a sign in a shop window or look further afield. But she mentioned it to Dennis Walsh next time he came down with a stray animal. "D'you need experience?" he said first off.

"No. But I want someone keen to learn. And having a bit of experience with animals would be a bonus."

There were school leavers round Buckton who might fit the bill but Dennis, after running his mind over various local people, said, "What about the oldest Castley boy?"

Justin Castley had finished school several years ago and got some part time work ploughing and occasionally did deliveries for local businesses. Like all the Castley family he was a very quiet shy young man. But he milked the family's cow, kept chooks and dogs and cats, occasionally came down to help Rob with his pony. He would at least start with sensible basic knowledge.

Leila Burkett stood there in thought before saying, "It might work. I'll drop in and see him." And it would have the advantage that he could live at home. She wasn't sure she wanted to share

with anyone. And there was still, unspoken, at the back of her mind that she would like to meet someone with whom she could share more than her veterinary practice. Having an employee in her house cramped things. She didn't want to do her socialising in the pub. But as she sometimes was tempted to share with her daughter—'All the nicest men are taken; I'm going to have to spread my wings too'.

Having young Justin jump at the chance to come and work for her briefly took her mind off the problem of a dearth of men. Justin found Mrs Burkett a little daunting but to be offered a full time job right in Buckton seemed to be a piece of unexpected good fortune.

Not a complete dearth but she didn't intend to lower what she regarded as her standards. And very few men round the district had the sort of education and professional skills she had in mind. It was almost a relief to be busy training a young person rather than pondering on eligible men.

### *Case No. 3: Trouble in the Ranks*

Sergeant Walsh wasn't a party to the griping going on between Brisbane and Winville over the wheelie bin case. The disappearance of Guy Gardiner saw Brisbane criticise Winville for not keeping their officers under control and Petra Moore annoyed with Greg for passing things on to Dennis Walsh and Greg annoyed with Dennis for not staying right outside the boundary line. "It makes us all look bad when you interfere and tip someone off," Greg said rather peevishly.

"Well, which would you rather? CIB talked with the Gardiners and just accepted their story of provisioning the yacht, end of story. Now they know there's more to it—"

"You don't know what follow-up Brisbane had planned."

"Maybe—but would you have told them about the yellow sedan?"

"We still don't know if it's got anything to do with the case. Plenty of yellow sedans around."

"Bollocks! You go out and count yellow sedans, see how many are around the district."

"Look, Dennis, just butt out. I've got Brisbane and Petra on my back—and we still don't have a clue how the young man died. If it was natural causes then we just want to get that young fella for illegal disposal of a body. Then the business is ended."

"And what about that Russian bloke, that sadist, you want him to go carving up the next kid he takes on board?"

Greg was tempted to say 'Not our business what he does' but the thought of someone taking advantage of a homeless kid, any kid really, didn't sit comfortably. "If we could prove he did more than that—we might be able to pull him back. But we can't." And, strictly speaking, they did not know who had been at the young man with a knife.

They both considered the failure of Dr Watling to find a cause of death. New tests in Brisbane might come up with something. But both men had a lot of trust in Mason Watling. If he couldn't pin down a cause of death then it was unlikely that anyone else would. And without a cause the case would probably fizzle out. Getting a young man for dumping the body was probably the best they could do.

Dennis sat considering whether he would make things better or worse if he rang the Gardiners again. But he finally thought 'might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb' and called the business once more.

The same woman answered. When she realised who it was she said crossly, "Haven't you made enough trouble for us!"

"So where is your son?"

"I don't know!"

"So what did you tell him?"

"Nothing. Just that you wanted to see him."

"What did he say to that?"

"Nothing. Just 'okay'."

Dennis was tempted to say something more but finally decided it might be best to leave it at that. If Guy Gardiner hadn't said where he was going then there was no point in trying to get more out of her. But if he had been heading for Buckton then he'd had ample time to get here. So maybe the others were right to see it as a trip to Melbourne.

Dennis just thanked her and hung up.

Then he rang Dr Watling to tell him what had happened. He was under no obligation to tell him anything about the case but he had considerable faith in the doctor's powers of observation. Watling just said, "I see," and then, "So you think we're looking at two people, one to hurt the young fellow and one to dispose of the body?"

"Looks like it. And the injuries you saw—you're sure none of them could've been fatal?"

"He'd obviously been restrained but that was only bruising and some grazing. He'd possibly tried to get free. And the cut to his anus was deliberate but although it was a bit pus-y and messy it would not have been fatal. I thought of contamination with E-Coli bacteria but nothing showed up. He had possibly been swabbed regularly. There wasn't much food in his stomach or intestines. But he hadn't been starved. Brisbane is doing more tests in the hope of turning up some other substance but I won't hold my breath. I still think it had something to do with fear, that he'd been frightened and threatened for so long he just sort of gave up. If we'd got on to him sooner we just might've been able to prove something ... sorry I can't give you anything you can run with but that's the way it is, occasionally."

'He just sort of gave up'. Dennis pondered on this. What would it take to make a young man, all life ahead of him, just 'give up'. If Watling was right, though it was hard to see how it could be proved, then possibly other things had gone wrong in the young man's life long before he met Mr Simonov. If only they had a name ... And then he thought, 'we've got fingerprints, so was he ever in trouble with the law?' He immediately e-mailed Winville. Normally he would ring but it didn't seem worthwhile having another testy exchange with Greg Sullivan.

Jenny Foreman, out to swim in Buckton's pool in the evening with Rui Lopes, called in to the station on her way. "I read your e-mail and I know they took his prints but that was to see if he had touched the bin or the passport. So far as I know they weren't run through the system."

Brisbane might've done that but he said, "No harm in you checking. If the kid was homeless he just might've been had for shoplifting, dealing, being a nuisance to someone."

"They think he might've been soliciting, or Petra does. Easy money." She considered her statement and added, "Well, if you don't mind doing that."

"That's the thing. We still haven't got a handle on the kid. So even a small charge might give a clue. His name and address. Maybe he had a probation officer for a while."

"Maybe." She didn't sound optimistic. He might. But things in the office were still a bit fraught. Petra still believed Greg had been too quick to hand the case to Brisbane and she attributed this to laziness, not efficiency. And Greg, having finally got to the top of this little castle, wasn't fussed on having his deputy criticising him. It wasn't always spoken but she managed to convey her doubts quite effectively with a raised eyebrow.

"I'll see what I can do."

A probation officer. He had an idea they had been cutting back in that area. But it was worth a mention. And that youth in Melbourne, the son of Fiona's friend Carmen, had supposedly had a probation officer. The grandparents had gone to visit the unknown people young Andy White a.k.a. John Frederick Millington had visited. Their e-mail had said the man who introduced himself as Bill Caulfield was the young man's probation officer. But had retired recently. And then Mrs Woods said an odd thing: 'I didn't believe him. It is hard to say exactly why. But it had the feeling of a spur-of-the-moment explanation. And if probation officers retire at 65 or less then I think he would've been 70+. He said he didn't mind if Andy comes to Queensland but he was certain the young man wouldn't want to come. I asked Carmen to put in a formal request to the prison but she said she didn't want him. We asked Mr Caulfield who was Andy's probation officer now and he said he didn't know but he didn't think he still had one. I found this very strange. Surely they would share information if they really did want to help him.'

He had read this without coming to any real conclusion. He didn't know the Woods well enough to trust their views. There might be substance to their suspicions or they might merely have

gone about their investigations in the wrong way. The man might've felt he was being blamed for the young man being in and out of prison all the time. Every probation officer probably dealt with young offenders who refused to be helped.

He had simply e-mailed back: 'Check to see if that Bill Caulfield was ever a probation officer. And find out if anyone is currently listed. I would be surprised to find young Andy has anyone as they would have provided a report, I would think.' Things might be done differently in Victoria but he doubted it.

Fiona too had considered their e-mail before saying, "I wonder why Carmen doesn't want him back?"

"Because he didn't turn out to be the cute little boy she's had in her mind all these years?"

This was possible. Carmen had her dear little boy, a winsome smile, a couple of teeth missing, still willing to cuddle up and have a bedtime story, settled firmly in her mind. This surly youth, rude, angry, telling her to piss off, didn't fit and she would need time to come to terms with the real son.

"Perhaps. And if this elderly man isn't a probation officer and is too old to be his father—then where does he come into it all?"

"Should we suggest they put their private investigator on to this Mr Caulfield?"

"We can suggest ... " The Woods could probably afford to do this but they might feel it was being 'sneaky' or that there were limits to what they were prepared to do for a grandson who didn't seem to want to have anything to do with them.

"There is another thing. If Mrs Woods is right and this man was lying—then maybe he is a crook too and young Andy either has worked for him—or he is making contact with someone 'inside'."

"But—is he in a juvenile place?" Fiona had the touching belief that all young offenders could be 'saved', rehabilitated, set on the straight and narrow. This was understandable. Dennis worked very hard to pull young miscreants back before they racked up a series of charges.

"No. Adult."

"And—is that possible, do you think? That he's some kind of go-between?"

"We'd only be guessing. And it isn't our business. But if there's any chance he's being manipulated by an older man—"

"A sort of godfather?"

It sounded very American. But there was the Woods' idea that Carmen's first husband had a Mafia connection. He was inclined to dismiss the idea. All they knew about godfathers probably came from American movies.

"Maybe. And why does the lad keep getting caught? Surely he's learnt something by now?"

"But if he really is homeless—then maybe it's food and a bed?"

"We're only guessing. Leave it up to the grandparents."

"So if he could be persuaded to come here, to Carmen, or she could find him a flat ... I guess it might be a bit hard to get him a job, but he could maybe work for the grandparents ... "

"Even being homeless might strike the kid as better than hard work on a farm."

She could understand this. She didn't think she would want to live further west. Not even with a good wage thrown in.

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Greg Sullivan had begun by believing it would be good to have an efficient deputy. And in the first few weeks he had been grateful for her energy, neatness, competence, and willingness to stay on late to get things tidied up. But he had gradually come to see that she was always, though not overtly, angling for the kudos which came with getting things cleared up, with getting convictions. He wasn't possessive about cases and was always willing to give credit where credit was obviously due. But it had a whiff of 'one-woman-band' to it. She was less good at sharing, at delegating, and he had to ask her to keep them all in the loop several times.

And even more slowly he had come to see that zeal and hard work were designed to make him look bad. By contrast he always seemed to be slow, lazy, inefficient, a younger version of their previous boss, Roy Greenwood. She, very obviously, was doing the work while he sat back and made the occasional suggestion.

If she came out and said something it would be easier, he said to his wife Narelle. “But I’m starting to feel like I really am an old has-been.”

“So why shouldn’t she do the work? Isn’t that what your juniors are for?” She wanted to cheer him up. She had seen him getting down about the situation at work.

“It’s not exactly that she gets things done. It is sort of the way she makes me look like some old dog plodding along behind.”

“You know you aren’t. And I think maybe you’re reading too much into it.”

He wondered if he was. But this feeling of not quite being up to the position persisted. “And I can’t talk about it with Brent and Jenny ... and I can’t discuss it with Dennis because Brisbane blamed me for Dennis getting that kid to do a runner.”

She could see that he would miss having Dennis to talk it over with. Though she sometimes thought that Dennis and his involvement in Greg’s cases was a mixed blessing.

“There’s Jake, I guess.”

“I can’t go and gripe about someone who’s doing a good job. That would just sound like sour grapes.”

“But—if she’s really ambitious then she’ll soon be sick of Winville and want to move on to something bigger and better.”

She probably would. And then if he got someone useless it would be no good complaining. He sighed and said, “I’ll just have to hope that the kid turns up somewhere and at least that’ll get Brisbane off my back.”

He made it sound like a forlorn hope.

“Never mind. Stranger things have happened. So don’t go worrying. And if you really can’t stick it ... well, you could put in for a transfer.”

Now that their children were all grown up it would be easier to move. Not ideal. She had many friends here in town. But maybe a new posting would do Greg good. He had lived with problems in the station here for so long he almost expected things not to work out well.

“I could.” He didn’t say it with any enthusiasm. And when he came to mull on it in bed he had the disconcerting thought that maybe he couldn’t manage in another station because he had become dependent on other people, not least Dennis Walsh, and his problems with DS Moore were not to do with her but with the way she showed up his failings. It was not a cheerful reflection.

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It was just after eleven the next morning when a small white hatchback drew up outside Buckton police station and a young man got out. Constable Schroeder was round at the newsagency dealing with a small complaint. Sergeant Walsh had just made himself a mug of tea while he brought his paperwork up to date.

The young man came in and said rather diffidently, “You wanted me to come and see you?”

Dennis didn’t recognise him and said, “About what?”

“About a body. You told my mum you could help me.”

“The body at Dinawadding?”

“Uh huh.”

“Well, you’d best come through.” He needed Grant back to sit in on the interview in case any of the various other players wanted to query anything later. “Would you like a cup of tea?”

The young man obviously didn’t expect to be offered refreshments in a police station. For a moment he seemed to think it was some kind of trick question. Then he said cautiously, “Thank you. Black with one sugar.”

Dennis sat him in the small interview room and made another cup.

He got out an interview form and said, “I’d best tape you as well.”

Just then Grant came hurrying in. “Jot it down,” Dennis said briskly, “and join me in the interview, guy about the body.”

Grant had expected the day to be full of trivial items. Now he looked excited. That was the thing about working here. He often did get to hear things before anyone in Winville did. But maybe this time that might not be for the best. He knew Winville was annoyed with Dennis for doing things he hadn’t run past them.

A couple of minutes later he came in and sat down with his own notebook. Dennis switched on the tape and said, "Okay, name and address," and began filling in the form. Grant was curious to see the young man who would even think of putting a body in a wheelie bin. A solid young man with dark hair, blue eyes, broad shoulders, a slightly nervous clasping of his hands.

Dennis gave the date and time and place and said, "So you are admitting to putting the body of a young man in to a wheelie bin in Dinawadding?"

"Uh huh. I'm sorry. I know it was a stupid thing to do."

"You realise disposing of a dead body is an offence."

"I didn't really think about it like that. Just to put him somewhere so people could find him."

"You gave an old lady a terrible fright."

The young man who had obviously psyched himself up to come here now looked miserable. "I didn't think about that."

"Well, you'd best start at the beginning."

Dennis sat back and waited. At last Guy Gardiner said, "We had an order. I took it in our big dinghy to a yacht that was well outside the marina, about eight hundred metres out. It was for a foreigner. It was a really nice yacht. He obviously had pots of money. I took everything up on to the deck."

"What sort of things?"

"Groceries. Toilet paper. Soap. A couple of kitchen knives. Some newspapers. A pair of sunglasses. One of our calendars. Oil. A tin of paint. I don't remember everything."

"Okay. What happened next?"

"The guy just said to leave everything on the deck. I'd offered to carry it all down for him. It was almost like he sort of wanted to see me go pretty quick. I gave him the invoice for everything and he paid me in cash. Then I turned to go over to the ladder and he grabbed a couple of bags and started to go down. But I was a bit curious to see what the boat was like down below and I moved over to look down." He seemed to find the next bit much harder. Dennis and Grant waited.

"There was a young man down below and he had no clothes on and he was tied up by a chain and a ring around his neck. I couldn't believe what I was seeing and I thought maybe it was a ... you know those things they put in shop windows. And then he looked up at me and he, well, I'm sure he was trying to say 'help' but he wasn't making any sound. I nodded but I didn't know what to do. I took the dinghy back to the shore and I thought of going to the police but then I thought maybe I had misunderstood and it was some game and he hadn't really asked me to help. My mum and dad were away for a couple of days or I would've asked them. So I thought I'd come back at night and if he was a prisoner there I could sort of save him."

Dennis and Grant had listened to this bizarre story in silence. They had few doubts that the young man had been kept there as a prisoner, that he had been tied up, but the story remained hard to believe.

"And?"

"I went back after dark, maybe nearly midnight. The dinghy has an outboard motor. But I turned it off and let it coast in and tied it up. I had a torch with me. The boat was in darkness. I went down and I could see papers on a table and I thought they were probably getting ready to sail away. The cabin next to there had two bunks, one on either side of the room. The old man was snoring in one and the young man was in the other. I went over to him and shook him and said sssh and went to lift him up. I don't know if he'd been given something but he was like a dead weight. I sort of dragged him out of bed and in to the next room. He still didn't seem to wake up properly. I could see what looked like a passport on the table on top of other papers and I thought he would need his passport if he was going to stay behind. I grabbed it and stuck it in my pocket. It was really hard to pull him up the gangway and I was scared all the time the other guy would hear us and come after us. But I got him across the deck and down in to the dinghy. He landed with a bit of a bump. I sort of got him seated and cast off. He still didn't seem to be awake and I wondered if he'd taken sleeping pills or was drunk."

This was all said with some hesitations and lip biting but sounded straightforward enough.

“I was about halfway home when I saw lights come on, and then a dinghy behind me. But I got to the shore and tied up and sort of dragged him up. He was sort of wobbling, his head I mean, and I laid him down. I didn’t really know what to do with him but I didn’t want to let that guy catch him. I got him across to my car and got him in the back seat and drove home. I put the car in the garage and went to get him out—”

This seemed to be the sticking point. He looked at them with anguished eyes. “I tried to get him to wake up but he wouldn’t. I thought maybe I should get him to a hospital. But I felt for a pulse and there wasn’t any. I started to panic then. I thought I must’ve killed him when he sort of fell in to the dinghy. I couldn’t think what to do. I thought—if I went to the police or a hospital—they would say I’d killed him. And I couldn’t see how I could prove I hadn’t.”

“You’re sure he was alive when you got him off the boat?”

The young man sat there clasping and unclasping his hands in nervous spasms. “I thought he was alive, just asleep or drugged. He wasn’t cold or stiff or anything.”

“So you actually bumped his head?”

“No, no, I don’t think I did.”

“So when you say he fell into the dinghy—he didn’t land on his head?”

“No. He-he landed sort of sideways and I sort of pushed him so he was sitting, sort of sitting.”

“Go on.”

“I didn’t do anything. I left him in the car all night. I went and had a drink inside. I was ... I was ... it was all a nightmare. I had some whisky my dad keeps for special occasions.”

“Next morning?”

“He was still there. He was starting to get sort of stiff. I knew I had to take him somewhere, he couldn’t stay in my car, but I couldn’t think where to take him. And when I took that passport out of my pocket I saw it couldn’t be him, it was the old guy, but I didn’t know what I should do with it. I walked to work and borrowed one of our vans and I could see the yacht had gone. The man had said he was going sailing in the Pacific but I didn’t know if he meant to Fiji or somewhere or just sort of up the coast a bit. And I thought maybe he couldn’t go far without his passport.”

“Did you know it was a Russian passport?”

“No. Well, maybe I did, but I wasn’t sure.”

“So you went to work?”

“Uh huh. I was pretty useless worrying all the time about him being in my car. And I still couldn’t think what to do next. Then I thought maybe I should take him somewhere where people would ... where they would just sort of ask questions.”

“Did you have an identity for the young man?”

“No, I didn’t have a clue who he was. That’s why I thought, maybe, if the police had a strange body, they could find out. And that’s when I thought of coming out here. I knew people there in Dinna would be curious and they would gossip a lot. I left home that night about ten o’clock or maybe a bit later and I sort of just drove up the Range and then I thought maybe that wasn’t such a good idea after all ... and then I thought of leaving him on a footpath in Toowoomba and then I thought maybe it would be better to come on out here and leave him. I know you’ll think this is crazy but I got to Dinna and the garbage truck was going round and I saw a wheelie bin on its side and I thought—what if I just sort of put him in there and the passport and then people will go looking. I did that. I didn’t think about who owned the bin. And then I went out of town and I was going to go to my auntie’s and then I thought she might say something to someone because I hadn’t been up to see her in ages and then I turned round and went home and it was about nine o’clock when I got home and my parents got home about midday and I didn’t say anything to them.”

“So why did you sell your car?”

“I sort of got to worrying. I didn’t see any blood but maybe they could find some if they went looking and I sold it to a car yard in Brisbane the next evening and bought this.”

He sat back in silence.

Dennis went back to filling in his form. It was a straightforward confession. That part would offer no problem. The passport, so far as he knew, hadn’t been listed as stolen, so that could be left

out of it all. But did he now pass this young man over to Winville or simply charge him and send him to the watch house to come up in court?

“Do you want a lawyer?”

“No. Maybe he could say I’m a nutcase—but that wouldn’t make any difference, would it?”

“Probably not.”

He considered his next course of action. Greg Sullivan would have to be told. There might even be pleasure in letting them all know the young man hadn’t gone to Melbourne, after all.

“And you’re absolutely sure you don’t know the young man’s name?”

“Quite sure.”

“Well, I’m going to charge you with disposing of a body and I’ll put you in the cell here while I talk to CIB in Winville, see if they want to talk with you.”

The young man just nodded.

Grant put Mr Gardiner’s keys and wallet and mobile phone in a packet and let him in to the small cell. Dennis rang Winville and got Brent Kelly. “Tell Greg we’ve got Guy Gardiner here in Buckton. Ask him what he wants done.”

“Wow! So how did you get him?”

“He came to us.”

Dennis then got called round to the pub and stopped at the bakery on his way back for a pie. Grant sat there wondering if he could ask Mr Gardiner some of his own questions but maybe that would be seen as ‘sticking his nose’ into something. Dennis might take such criticisms on his chin but he didn’t really want any one from Winville to be taking him to task.

He ate his sandwiches, wondering if he should offer one to the young man sitting rather disconsolately on the bunk. He took a couple of phone calls then the station grew quiet again. The young man came over to the cell door and said “Pssht! Can I tell you something?”

Grant came cautiously out into the small waiting area. “What is it?”

“I was thinking about an identity, and I have an idea ... it’s just an idea, but I think I saw that young guy talking with someone a while ago. It was a guy I know, does electrical work on boats.”

“D’you have a name for him?”

“His name’s John Dillon. They have a business called Dillon and Marks. They’re electricians.”

“Okay, thanks. And you said that young guy was naked when you first saw him. But he had clothes on later.”

“I put them on him. The jeans, I mean. He was wearing that t-shirt in bed and jocks.”

Grant made a note.

Now he could wait till Dennis came back to see if they should ring that electrician. But he was all fired up with the satisfaction that they had done more than anyone to solve the case. It would be no harm to track down a number for that electrician and just ask him if he remembered anything about that young blonde man. Would it?

He finally got on to Mr Dillon who was also having some lunch. He said, “Young blonde guy? Yeah, he came up to me, two, three months ago and said did I have any work. I asked if he had any qualifications and he said no, and I asked him if he could drive, and he said he could, and I said did he have a driver’s licence, and he said he did. I think he said his name was Geordie. Don’t know how you spell that. I wasn’t fussed on him, I’d say he was a druggie, but he was quite clean. I said he could call in sometime and we’d talk. My partner had broken his leg and couldn’t drive, so I thought if he really could drive we could maybe give him a bit of casual work driving Don around. But the young guy never turned up and I didn’t see him after that.”

“Do you think he really did have a driver’s licence?”

“Hard to say. So you think you’ve found him, or found his body?”

“Would you recognise him from a photo?”

“Might.” Mr Dillon obviously didn’t want to commit himself to anything.

“And do you think Geordie was his real name or a nickname?” Did people get christened Geordie?

“George. Jordan. No idea really.”



“If we get someone to come by with a photo would that be okay?”

“Sure. But don’t pin your hopes on it.”

Grant hoped that Brisbane really would come by with a photo. But one good thing had come out of it. The young man would not have been asking for a job if he was a Russian visiting on a yacht.

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Dennis said, “Good oh, that should help,” when he got back. “So what to do next? Greg, I s’pose.” But he didn’t rush to ring Winville. They could tell Brisbane to go round to Mr Dillon with a photo. But would Brisbane want to be told what to do by Winville? And it was always possible Brisbane had been doing the hard yards round the marina talking to everyone who might conceivably have seen anything.

At last he said, “This may not work but I think I’ll ring Missing Persons, see if that Jeff’ll take the photos round and show them.” Of course Jeff Warren might merely pass it on but ... “No harm in asking.”

He finally caught up with Warren and reminded him about the packet of photos and said they didn’t know if it was the same person but John Dillon might be able to say yes or no. Warren said, “So you still don’t have an identity for your body in the bin? Well, I guess I can ask.” He didn’t sound enthusiastic but Dennis couldn’t guess whether he had his evenings booked up and was on an important case through the day or he didn’t want to be caught up in a messy case or just didn’t feel like a long drive.

He could post copies of the photos, he could see if the electrical business had a fax, he could check with local police. He sighed and said, “Okay, leave it with me.”

“Thanks, mate. It could help us pin down a very sadistic Russian sailor.”

There didn’t seem to be any point in dwelling on the worry that Mr Simonov was unlikely to be extradited from some Pacific nation unless they could prove he had done more than mistreat a young man.

Jeff Warren said, “Well, here’s hoping.”

Dennis put the phone down and said to Grant, “Wonder if that Russian guy did the same thing anywhere else here? If he’s been in the country for four years, off and on, then maybe he had a go at another kid? Maybe we can link him to something.”

Grant could see that this might be a possibility but he said, “How would you go about finding out?”

“Winville,” Dennis said gloomily. “I’ll see if I can get Greg on to it.”

But when he rang he got Petra Moore. “Two things,” he said briskly. “We’ve got Guy Gardiner here. I’ve charged him with the illegal disposal of a body. D’you want him or will I send him to Brisbane?”

“Of course we want him. I can be straight out.”

“And the other thing is—this guy might’ve hurt another kid along the way. It could be worth checking where he’s moored his yacht while he’s been in the country, maybe another homeless kid got the works.”

“Possible. I’ll see what we’ve got from the Russian Embassy. And this Gardiner kid, you want him in the watch house?”

“He’s in my cell. He’s not going anywhere. But best he comes up in court in Winville. I don’t trust Brisbane to keep it to the one charge.”

She didn’t seem to share this particular doubt, but she obviously had a different gripe with Brisbane. “Well, I always thought it was a mistake to give the case to them so quickly. There was a lot more we could’ve done here.”

“True. But Brisbane’s still going to have to go after that Simonov character.”

She gave this a mild snort and he wondered if she too was dubious about anyone going after Simonov. “And maybe it’d be better if you brought him here. We can get him into court first thing tomorrow.”

“Okay. I’ll send Grant with him.”

Mr Gardiner wasn’t wild about having to go to Winville but Dennis said, “Best get it over. And you’d best ring your parents, tell ’em where you are.”

Gardiner took back his phone and made the call. It seemed to take a lot of reassurance to get his mother to believe he really was safe. “But I’ll come up in court in Winville. Can you ask auntie to ... to keep an eye out if they send me to prison here.”

It was very unlikely they would want to keep him in Winville which only kept people on remand or for short term offences. Guy Gardiner would most likely end up in Brisbane anyway. Unless he got a magistrate who believed he was only trying to help.

The wheelie bin negated this image of selfless help.

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“Grant, you’ll have to take him. Check if he’s changed his mind and would like Legal Aid.”

“And what about his car?”

“I think I might put it in the carport here. You can park your car in front—in case any local hoons fancy a joy ride.”

Gardiner stood there while Dennis and Grant discussed things. He had obviously psyched himself up to come and now he stood there rather apathetically wondering how long he would have to spend in prison and what it would be like.

When Grant had the paperwork and Gardiner had been bundled into the police vehicle, Dennis said, “Best take the tape as well. Get Jenny or Brent to do an extra copy for Brisbane. Save him having to go over it all.”

It was the only real sense of sympathy Dennis Walsh had shown. Grant had wondered if his boss accepted the young man’s story in its entirety or only those parts that chimed with information they already had. Now he said, “Is there anything else you want me to do in Winville?”

“Get Brent or Jenny to try and find a driver’s licence that might match. It’s unlikely he went much out of that area. Brent’s pretty good at checking.” He was dubious about the claim. The young man might’ve said he had one in the hope of getting some part time work. But that would fail as soon as anyone asked to see it. Or did he have access to a stolen one?

After Grant had driven away with the young man Walsh went back inside and debated on whether he should try to check drivers’ licences and then he put the thought aside. Brent and Jenny were both good at that kind of donkey work and that was what juniors were for.

His tea had gone cold and he boiled the jug again and sat down to record the morning’s events. The phone rang and Fiona said cheerfully, “I hope you’re having lunch. The kids are loving it here and they’ve both taken to Andrew in a big way. So I hope you’re not too busy.”

“Got that young fella that put the boy in the wheelie bin. Grant’s just taken him to Winville.”

“Oh, that is good. And any luck with finding that Russian guy?”

“No. He’s somewhere on the high seas—and I suspect that’s where a lot of people would like to leave him.”

In that he was more prescient than he knew.

But there was a different possibility in there. With Guy Gardiner out of his hands, and the young man’s confession on record, he probably had no further part to play in that particular drama. So was a day or two in Caloundra possible? They had small stuff on the go here but nothing that Grant with a bit of help from Winville couldn’t handle. Maybe he could get Jake Moss out to Buckton again?

He hesitated then rang Winville’s boss who said cheerfully, “Seems you did good work there, Dennis. They’re all abuzz with the young guy in there and hoping they can crack the case completely before Brisbane gets off its collective bum.”

Dennis said, “Good oh, but I was ringing to see if you’d like another day in Buckton. I’d like to spend a couple of days in Caloundra with the family if someone can give Grant a bit of back-up.”

Jake immediately said, “Go for it, let me know what day you want to go. I’ll come if I’m not snowed under. But that young Grant of yours is shaping up well. I’m hoping you can do something for the young ones here.”

“Well, I’ll go Friday night and come back Sunday night and be in Winville Monday if things here haven’t gone pear-shaped.”

As he hung up he had the odd and slightly disconcerting thought: it had always been Greg Sullivan who was his main contact in Winville but it was gradually becoming Jake as the person he rang first. He wondered if it was merely a passing thing, that once Jake and Susan had either decided to do something together or had split up, things would change back. And maybe it depended more on Petra Moore than on Jake ...

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A very different dilemma was exercising two people in Buckton. Nelson L'Estrange, the principal of Buckton's primary school, and Iris Hitchener, a sister at Buckton's hospital, had been seeing each other for quite some time. At first people gossiped and speculated. Nelson had lost his wife years ago and people wondered if he hoped to remarry. But he was such a tedious person in many people's estimation that they couldn't really see anyone wanting him. Iris kept her thoughts to herself and not even her friends at the hospital knew what she really felt about Nelson.

But no one in Buckton seeing the public Nelson really understood the private man Iris saw. At first she regarded it as merely a pleasant friendship. Nelson was a good cook, he was knowledgeable and interesting about many things. But she wasn't sure that she wanted more and she was well aware that many people round town would be astonished if she said she was thinking of marrying the primary school head.

Over time this thought faded and she felt they could have a good life together. Whether they both wanted to stay in Buckton ... she sometimes saw his desire to stay as a commitment to the school and sometimes she saw it motivated by the fact his wife Hannah had died here and was buried in the cemetery on the south side of town, and sometimes she understood that it got harder to move and to take on a new school as you got older.

One evening she had asked him if he would like to move from Buckton and he had said, "No, not unless you want to."

"Is it some special thing that keeps you here—or you just like Buckton?"

"I told you about Dinny Walsh stopping me doing ... something stupid ... and for a long time I resented him, life just seemed more of the same, it was a struggle to get up each morning, and then one day I was standing watching the children in the playground and they were mostly having so much fun and some of the girls had a long skipping rope tied to a post and they were debating on who they could get to turn it and I don't know why but I went over and I said, 'I'll turn it for you,' so they could all skip, and they said how much they appreciated it, well, not exactly in those words, and I thought to myself, 'I *am* here for the kids, my life doesn't matter beyond that', and somehow I started feeling better about everything. I was still here because I had something important to do in my life. Perhaps it doesn't seem much. But I felt all these children deserved the best school possible and that was a purpose in itself." He considered this before adding, "And then I met you."

It was that, Iris thought, that mitigated the public image of Nelson as tiresome and nit-picking. People did genuinely believe he wanted the best for the school and all its pupils. Country schools could get the 'left-overs'; they were not seen as important and their pupils not likely to be wanting to go on to university ...

But if they were going to get married should they have a very quiet little ceremony, just a half-dozen friends and family, or should they go away somewhere and come back married, or should they have something bigger and more public. They finally compromised. About twelve to fifteen guests, a service at the Anglican church, a reception in the pub or perhaps a marquee. It was Nelson who suddenly said, "Should we invite the Walshes, Dinny and Fiona?"

Iris considered this. She knew why Nelson was asking. But their guests were close friends and colleagues. Dennis Walsh stood outside this group. She liked Fiona and she thought Dennis was a decent man. But they were neither close friends nor colleagues. At last she said, "No, I think it would be better if we had them over for tea or a drink one evening and let them know what we're planning but I don't think they would feel they should be invited."

Nelson accepted this. "Yes, it's hard to keep things low-key and friendly with Dinny Walsh looming over everyone and probably making them feel guilty if they have too much champagne."

Iris laughed at that before saying, "I know what you mean but it's like seeing him only in his official capacity, not allowing him to have a private life."

“Still, I don’t think he’d want to stand round drinking champagne.” He was tempted to add “or listening to people talk about educational theories”. But perhaps it was unfair to see their sergeant as an uneducated man. He had good knowledge in some areas. Only some.

“Then I’ll see when they’re free and you’ll discuss things with Julian Chandler?”

But Dennis when asked to tea said, “It’ll have to wait. Fiona’s away till the end of next week.” This sounded dismissive and he backpedaled slightly to add, “I’m sure she’d be happy to come.”

“The both of you—and the children if they’d like to come.”

“One Sunday then.”

Fiona said, when she heard this, “I’ll bet this is to tell us they’re getting married. Them gearing up to make the big announcement.” A sort of trial run.

“Could be. I just thought they didn’t have enough to do, or Nelson didn’t, through the holidays.”

## *Case No. 4: Gloves Off*

Jenny Forman came on Thursday afternoon to swim. Several people there wondered why she bothered to come all the way to Buckton for a half-hour swim but others, more observant, saw that it nearly always coincided with a swim by the feed lots manager. The first time he came several of the local women had looked him over. After all, he was a good-looking man and good-looking unattached men were scarce in Buckton. But they had soon noticed that he spent most of his time either swimming with or talking with the young constable from Winville. It might be business. Everyone knew the police kept an eye on things at Japana. But it didn’t take very long to notice that there was nothing businesslike in the apparent relationship.

She called in to see Dennis and Grant before going to the Council pool.

“How’s things?” Dennis waved her to a chair. “Any luck with a driver’s licence?”

“Not so far. And just be glad you’re here. Brisbane is complaining that they weren’t told what was happening with the case and Greg told them Winville didn’t know either because you had butted in and got the perp to come here. Oh boy! It’s a gigantic mess because Brisbane said we should be keeping you under control and Greg said no one had ever kept you under control and that Jennings that was up here and charged Billy the Lad somehow got in to the mix and told them we were a useless lot of morons, or words to that effect, and Greg told us later there was going to be a complaint made against us and someone was going to come and go through our files and we should never have contacted the Russian Embassy off our own bat, that it had, quote, international repercussions, whatever that means. You’d think the Russians’d be glad to be rid of someone like that Simonov, if what Guy Gardiner told us was true.”

“So what’s happened to him?”

“He came up this morning and Mrs Vohland put him on a Good Behaviour Bond for a year. And now Brisbane’s said that’s not good enough and they want him, to give him the third degree, I guess. Petra says they’ll try and charge him with manslaughter because it looks like that mystery guy died while he was in Gardiner’s dinghy.”

“But if Watling couldn’t find a cause of death?”

“I know, but they’ve done a second autopsy, because they think Mason is probably not up with the latest. And if they find something, anything I guess, then they can charge him.”

“But can they prove the young man wasn’t already dead? They’ve only got Gardiner’s version, that he thought he was asleep, but if you pick up a dead body, sometimes it does look like the eyes are still moving ...” He wasn’t sure if he was trying to exonerate the young man.

“They’re saying, if he genuinely thought the young man was held prisoner, he should’ve come to them, or the local police anyway.”

Dennis gave that a bit of a snort. “Sure, and they’d immediately get around there—or they’d wait till morning and the yacht would be gone. Yeah, I know all about fast action.” There was more than sarcasm in there. Jenny Forman had heard bits and pieces about Buckton’s long-running

efforts to get action from Winville. Jake Moss hadn't been backward in telling every new officer about Aidan Hassell's failure to attend a serious road accident and that Winville had subsequently been sued.

Grant enjoyed listening in to station wrangles, when he wasn't in the firing line, and he gave this a bit of a grin. "But what will Brisbane do to you?"

"I don't think it'll come to disciplinary action," she said thoughtfully. "But it's Greg who's going to get chewed out and I think that's a pity. I like Greg. And I don't really want him to be stood aside so Petra can take over."

"You don't think she'd do a better job?"

"Maybe she would. But Petra's all about Petra. She does the good work to make everyone else, but specially Greg, look bad. She told me I didn't understand what a hard job she'd had to get anywhere and it was because of women like her that it was easier for women like me. I didn't say anything. But I wouldn't mind sending her to the Gold Coast for a while."

"That is interesting," Dennis said thoughtfully. "She went out of her way to help Amy Porter in Dirranbandi and Amy hasn't been through what you've been through," 'or I don't think she has' he added in thought. "But Amy asked her for help and advice. That probably made her feel good."

DC Forman considered this but only said, "Maybe."

"So how's Greg getting along with the Ruby Jackson case? I haven't heard a whisper."

"He isn't. He passed that to Brisbane and no one's told him anything since. Though I s'pose it was different people."

"So long as it wasn't that bloody Jennings."

Frank Jennings had been made to look a fool in Winville but did he have the clout, the contacts, the power to see that there was comeback; that Greg Sullivan who had taken him to task over the case of Billy the Lad was now made to look if not a fool then seriously out of order? Dennis didn't doubt that there were men who far from seeing the police in an all-for-one-and-one-for-all way would be happy to see a colleague squirm. He hadn't had anything to do with Jennings personally but he probably thought he had good reasons to get back at DSS Sullivan. And it was Mrs Vohland who had dressed him down in the magistrate's court so he might well want to see her put on notice.

Jenny Forman didn't know to whom Greg had passed on the Ruby Jackson file. But as Frank Jennings had been to Garramindi to talk with Sergeant Applegarth he might well seem, or be seen as the ideal person to take on a related case. It didn't do anything to cheer her up.

"Don't worry, Jenny. If nothing happens we'll get on to Carlton Payne. He can link it into his file on the Plowman family."

"I had hoped we would never have to even think about them again," she said rather wistfully. "But I'd better go or Rui'll be gone before I get there."

This didn't seem very likely. Dennis debated, after she'd gone, whether he should contact Carl Payne himself but finally left it. But he might ask Greg sometime whether a copy of the Ruby Jackson file had gone to Payne.

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It was Jeff Warren who rang Dennis Walsh the next morning. He said he had driven up to see 'that electrician' and had shown him the photos of a dead young man and Dillon had immediately said, "Oh, for sure, I'd say that's him. Blondie, curly top, big mole on his neck. But don't ask me who he is because I don't know."

"How old would you say?"

"Twenty, bit more. I'd say he was a druggie. A bit slow. A bit funny the way he looked at me. But he looked like he'd once been okay and was going downhill. I think that's why I didn't tell him, nothing doing, you don't want to see kids end up on the scrap-heap if you can help it."

Warren considered this. It was only Dillon's impression and might not have been borne out by evidence.

"And you're sure he was an Aussie?"

Dillon considered this. He didn't know that various police had wondered if the youth might've been Russian or someone picked up on the yacht's travels. At last he said, "I'd say so. I got the idea he hadn't been hanging round for long but I might be wrong."

"Why did you think that?"

"Well, for one thing, most of the kids hanging round seem to have tattoos. I didn't see any on him."

For a moment Warren regretted this lack. They had sometimes identified bodies by a tattoo. "Mmmm. Doesn't seem to matter how skint people say they are—they always seem to be able to afford some tats. So anything else about him?"

"If he asked me for work he maybe asked other guys round the place. And I'd say he'd grown up in a family, not exactly posh, but like he'd been taught to be polite. It was sort of an effort for him to push himself forward maybe. I know there's kids'll steal from boats and I never leave tools overnight on a boat even if I'm halfway through a job but I didn't really see him as that sort."

"An innocent abroad?"

Dillon considered this and finally said, "I mightn't go that far but a bit that way."

"Did you ever meet that Russian guy, Dmitri Simonov?"

"No. But it looked a pretty fancy yacht. But it must've had everything electronic. It'd take more than a man and a boy to do everything manually."

"You've no idea when the youth might've gone on board?"

"None. But there'll be records on board surely. And for sure someone saw something."

"And—do you think this young man might've appealed to, well, to a gay man?"

"Oh for sure. Cute kid. Don't know if he was keen. But he might've thought he was being asked to help crew the yacht ... and then he found it was more than that. I'd only be guessing."

When Warren got home he put his notes together. It might be awkward if he had stepped into a case that wasn't about a Missing Person but instead a Murdered Person but at least they had linked the young man from the wheelie bin to a young man on a yacht. Now all they needed was a name and the family, if he had one, could be notified and could eventually bury the unfortunate young man. But Dillon's suggestion 'not exactly posh' stayed with him. Had the young man decided he didn't want to go down the track the family wanted and decided to drop out or had he got on to drugs and been thrown out or ... 'I wonder if it would be worth showing the photos round some Brisbane schools' ...

Dennis Walsh said immediately when Warren contacted him, "Well, that ties up that end. But they haven't been able to find a driver's licence that would fit so he was maybe telling porkies to Mr Dillon."

"He did say an interesting thing, or a couple. No sign of tattoos and he said the kid was polite and spoke nicely. I could show the pics round schools here but I guess I should just pass all this on—to you? Or someone else?"

"Could you keep it with you a bit longer, as a Missing Person case I mean? I'd say you're well placed to get an identity."

Warren considered this carefully. As the young man had never been listed as missing it was stretching things to call this a missing person's case and go on calling it that. "I think that mightn't be the best idea. There's a good chance I'd be stepping on someone's toes."

Dennis didn't try to persuade him. If it'd been Ash Turner he might've asked her to do it but Warren was largely an unknown quantity. Still, he had linked the corpse to a time and place and there was always the chance that Guy Gardiner or John Dillon or someone else would remember some other little snippet.

So it was probably time to catch up with Greg.

Sullivan when he caught up with him immediately said, "I don't want to know. I've just been chewed out by that bloody Jennings, the bastard, thinks he's getting his own back—and what's he doing in this case anyway, I thought he was s'posed to be on cold cases and this is still hot—so don't go telling me anything, tell it to Brisbane."

This was the first Dennis had heard of Jennings being assigned to the wheelie bin case and it was depressing news.

“Just shut up and listen, mate. You know and I know Jennings couldn’t find his way out of a paper bag. So if they’ve put him in charge the case’ll go nowhere, just another crazy kid—and so long as it’s down to natural causes, then that’s as far as it’ll go. Can you see Jennings chasing that Russian round the Pacific?”

“No. And he’s not our business—”

“Your boys go down there, look at the boats, guy comes up and asks if they’d like to see over his yacht—you reckon they’d say no?”

“There’s one difference, mate. I’d know they were missing.”

“Not straight away. And that might be long enough for your Russian to get them out of the country—” And how many twenty-two-year-olds kept in touch with their dad every week?

“Okay! Okay! You want me to run round Brisbane with a photo to show to every headmaster—and trying to keep one step ahead of Frank Jennings, is that it?”

“No. Send Petra. She’ll make mincemeat of Jennings if he tries to say anything.”

“Oh God, what a mess,” Greg said resignedly. “But I wish you’d retire or move to Mt Isa or something.”

It didn’t really surprise Dennis, when Jake Moss turned up in the late afternoon, to find that Petra had leapt at the suggestion despite Greg’s caviling and that she had got to Brisbane by lunchtime and had been round half-a-dozen school principals.

“No luck so far?” As it was still school holidays it had meant hunting out and going to home addresses where the school office was not yet open.

“Not unless school principals have short memories. And there’s nothing to stop a kid who talks nice going to an ordinary high school, they don’t all get to go to some super expensive private school.”

“Mmmm, and what about dental records?” They hadn’t been able to link the young man’s fingerprints to any record of offending.

“Brisbane is doing that.”

“Or you hope they’re doing that?”

“You’re a cynic, Dennis. Anyway, off you go, you’ll want to get there before the kids go to bed.” As Grant was back in his little flat in the station, Dennis had given Jake the key to his own house. He didn’t think Jake was likely to invite more than Susan Denby around.

As he hit the road for the long drive to the coast Dennis told himself he had done all he could to bring that young man out of the shadows. It was up to others to go on and link him to family, friends, school ... and as the young man was attractive enough had there ever been a girl in his life?

Then there was the problem of young John Fred Millington. He wasn’t polite. But he too must’ve gone to school somewhere. Was anyone looking for an enrolment, a graduation, even a record of him being expelled? Fiona might have heard the next installment in the saga. Perhaps he could suggest a new project for the private investigator to get his teeth into?

The caravan, when he finally found it, and parked the utility beside Fiona’s car wasn’t designed for extra people. “We’ll be a bit of a squash,” Fiona said as she put his small bag in the cupboard. “And have you eaten?”

He had stopped along the road for a pie and a cup of tea and a packet of nuts to eat while he drove. The thought of sleep was growing very attractive but Elise and Rob wanted to tell him all they’d been doing before he finally put his head on the pillow. By the time Fiona squeezed in beside him he was fast asleep.

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It was a pleasant weekend and he was reluctant to leave and head back to Buckton. He and the kids had gone out in a rowboat with Andrew McLaren and while Andrew fished and the children dropped hopeful hooks into the water he had let himself drift. He didn’t have to do anything. He didn’t have to think anything. He could just loll about and look forward to fish and chips for lunch. But he could see why both children, but Elise especially, liked Andrew. Without realising it he had found one way to her heart, he had asked Elise where she thought the most likely place to catch fish would be. And the funny thing was—they *had* caught fish there. And Andrew did nothing to spoil Elise’s belief that she had chosen the right place. Other people might talk of

luck or say ‘good morning, the fish are finally biting’ or done something to downplay her excitement.

Andrew by his body language or going by the previous day’s activities might have given Elise a hint but he had the unconscious belief that encouraging children made them brighter and happier. Dennis, along with most of Buckton, had vaguely thought that although McLaren was a good farmer he was ineffective and bossed around by his more decisive wife. But now Dennis saw him differently.

Andrew McLaren was a quiet reserved wise man who understood very well that he had no wish for the limelight and didn’t mind what people said behind his back. He had work he enjoyed and was good at. He had a wife he admired and loved. And he had a kind of quietly tolerant view of his family, his neighbours, perhaps of all humanity. But any kind of interference in other people’s lives was anathema. Dennis wondered what it would take to make him take up the cudgels for anyone. But he also found himself wishing that more people could be like McLaren. So much of his work was taken up with interference. Someone had interfered in something ...

Over lunch Fiona told him, told the whole table, that she had heard from the Woods, that Mr Caulfield had never been listed as a probation officer. So why he had claimed to be one remained a mystery. Fiona turned to Julie and Andrew and told them something of the story before saying, “So what should they do next, do you think?”

Julie understandably said, “Did he go to school? There must be records. Someone must’ve enrolled him.”

“Maybe this Caulfield is a sort of surrogate dad? The real dad sneaked out of the country and left his kid with this family in Melbourne.” Dennis didn’t think that Caulfield sounded much like a surrogate, and if he was then why didn’t the youth spend more time with him? It would be a strange dad who didn’t say ‘you need somewhere to sleep, best stay here till you get settled’.

“The young fellow must have some friends surely,” Andrew said mildly.

“Other inmates maybe.” Dennis didn’t believe every young man had friends. It was the age when young man often got dismissed as ‘loners’ and went and did bad things or committed suicide or went traveling “And maybe that’s why he keeps re-offending and going back. There’s someone inside he regards as a friend.”

Was it friendship or was there some other kind of relationship? Presumably a good private investigator could find out who young John Fred spent most of his time with. This might suggest friendship. But if he was going to pass a message on, then the relationship might be far less obvious. And then he felt he didn’t want to think about the young man any more and instead asked what everyone was thinking of doing in the afternoon.

“We haven’t been to the zoo,” Elise said. There was a little zoo not far away.

“All the animals will be having their siesta,” Fiona said with a smile.

“But they’ll still be there to be looked at,” Elise said firmly.

“Okay, zoo it is.” Dennis felt he would rather sit down under a tree, put his hat over his face, and nod off. But with luck he could do that while the children rushed round looking at whatever the zoo enclosed.

Julie McLaren saw it slightly differently. Elise had tackled school and life with a tremendous passion for knowledge but Julie saw this as slowly easing off. Elise seemed happier outside doing things rather than learning things. They had all jumped to the conclusion that Elise would eventually find satisfaction in some sort of academic sphere but perhaps that was a premature assumption. Elise was happy outside with her pony, her poultry, gardening, swimming, doing practical things. And there was the influence of Dennis. He was happier outside than in. Fiona would sit down happily to read a book or play the piano. Dennis would busy himself with painting the tool shed or taking them for a drive out to the lagoon at Burleigh. In some ways she thought in passing, we are like them—in that Andrew is happy outside and I am happier inside.

But whereas Andrew would never try to draw someone along with him she could see that sometimes it would be hard to say no to Dennis Walsh.

It was not the most restful of weekends but Dennis didn’t regret going. He just didn’t feel much like heading in to Winville come Monday morning. Jake was in the station when he parked



the ute in his driveway and walked back round. As soon as he walked in Jake said, “Got some news for you.”

“You and Susan decided to get hitched?”

Jake grinned. “Hardly. No. Petra’s apparently found the school that boy went to and she’s got a name for him.”

“Well, that’s a feather in Winville’s cap.”

“Don’t you believe it. Greg’s been told he should’ve asked Brisbane’s permission to send Petra.”

“So that Frank Jennings can sit on it? Sure. So what’s the kid’s name?”

“Apparently he left school about three years ago. His name is Anthony Giordano.”

“Sounds Italian. He didn’t look Italian.”

“Petra’s found his family. He was adopted. They told her he was nothing to do with them.”

“Well, he was until he reached seventeen, eighteen. Why did they say that?”

“They told her he’d been having it off with a local girl who was underage. They said that kind of behaviour was unacceptable and for him to get out. They say he just went to his room, put a few things in a backpack and walked out. They never saw him again.”

“So when was this?”

“Three years ago.”

“And the girl he was with?”

“They wouldn’t give us a name.”

“So what next? Will they take the body?”

“Probably not. Petra said they were quite angry with her—sort of bringing him back into the family after they’d got rid of him.”

“Did he ever try to find his real parents?”

“Who knows? But we can get their names I guess—unless the baby was dropped on someone’s doorstep.”

Jake got up. “Anyway I’d best be on my way. So I’ll expect you about ten or earlier.”

“You will.” But Dennis didn’t say anything to make it sound like a treat. Instead he felt an overwhelming pity for that young man. Had anyone ever wanted him? Apart, perhaps, from that underage girl? And that story might merely be an excuse.

Geordie?

Why had he used that name rather than Tony? Had he come to hate the name those adoptive parents had given him?

And those parents probably needed to be grilled again. It was always possible the underage girl had run away with young Tony or at least knew why and where he was going. As Jake went to leave Dennis said, “Tell Petra to get the name of that underage girl. If she went with him she could be at risk too.”

Jake considered this, said “Could be”, and went out.

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Whether Jake Moss passed anything on or Petra Moore had the idea herself Dennis Walsh never heard. But she had the thought that the young man might well have shared things with a girlfriend that he had never shared with his obviously unsympathetic parents.

Mr and Mrs Giordano were not pleased to have another visit from DS Moore. She said briskly, “Sorry to bother you but a few more questions. We need the name of the girl your adopted son was seeing. He might well have shared things with her. And we need the name of his biological parents. If they have tried to find him they deserve to know he is dead.”

Amelia Giordano immediately fired up. “Why should we tell you anything? We washed our hands of him when we found out what he’d been doing. He is nothing to us!”

“He may be nothing to you. He is a case to us and we need to know as much about him as possible.”

She sat with her notebook and waited and there was something about her manner which seemed to make the parents decide to answer her questions. Or they wanted her gone and not coming back and back ...

“The girl was Stacey Lynch. She lived at number forty-five. She’s gone now. His useless mum kept coming here and asking us to give him back. She said she was pushed in to giving him up for adoption. She wanted us to hand him back. We said no. We didn’t know how he was going to turn out. If we had we would’ve handed him over straight away.”

“How long did this go on for?”

Mrs Giordano turned to her husband before saying, “Five years, on and off.”

“Did you make a complaint to anyone?”

“No. Maybe we should’ve.”

“And the name of the woman who was harassing you?”

“Sandra ... I think. Sandra Somebody.”

Petra Moore sat waiting. Finally Derek Giordano said, “Halley, I think. We haven’t seen her in ... fifteen years, more, so don’t ask us for an address.”

Petra Moore went back to Stacey Lynch. She at least should be findable. “When you say underage—what age would she have been?”

“How would we know? Fourteen? Fifteen? She was still at school.”

“Do you know which school?”

“Just down the road. She went away later, I haven’t seen her around.”

Despite the information being given grudgingly DS Moore felt she was moving ahead. A name, an address, a school. Though the Lynch family didn’t seem to be any more pleased to have a detective on their doorstep they said that Stacey was staying with them at the moment. Mrs Lynch showed Moore into a pleasant sitting room and said she would get Stacey. There was the sound of a TV from another room and she presently heard voices, then footsteps. An attractive tall blonde girl came in to the room. She stood there looking at DS Moore and her look was apprehensive.

“Come and sit down,” Moore said briskly. “I’m Petra Moore from Winville CIB. I’m looking in to the death of Tony Giordano.”

The young woman gasped and put her hands to her face. “Tony?”

“I’m sorry to bring bad news.” She didn’t sound sorry but her no-nonsense manner seemed to reassure the girl in some way. “He was found dead two weeks ago. Now we’ve been told that he was your boyfriend for a while.”

The girl sat down awkwardly and again put her hands up to her face. But at last she said, “He was a friend. We never did—anything. Just talked about things. He was nice. We just liked talking.”

Then she stood up again and said, “Can we go somewhere else?”

Petra Moore wondered if there was someone in the house young Stacey didn’t want to risk overhearing anything. Or she just felt embarrassed by the police being here. “Of course.” Petra stood up and led the way out to her car. When the young woman had buckled herself in they drove away. About a mile from home Petra pulled in by a small park and said, “Would you feel comfortable talking here?”

“It’s okay.”

“So tell me more about you and Tony.”

“It’s like I said. We just talked. We never went anywhere together. We just talked.”

“Was there any reason why you only talked—if you were such good friends?”

“I really liked Tony.” She looked at Petra Moore as though trying to decide if she might understand a teenage girl’s thoughts. “He was shorter than me.”

Petra Moore had never been in that situation but she could see that a very self-conscious teenager might find it an issue. “Fair enough. So you never had sex, never had dates?”

“No, nothing like that.” She seemed to be trying to sum up DS Moore to see if she would be sympathetic to a further revelation.

“Did you finish high school here?” Moore wondered if the Giordanos’ statement that they hadn’t seen Stacey around simply meant they had no further interest in her once their son left home or whether Stacey had been away somewhere, maybe even up to Scarborough.

“No, I didn’t. You see,” she turned to Moore as though she needed to talk about something important but found the talking difficult, “I had a baby. I got sent away to have the baby and I had the baby adopted. I wanted to finish school but I didn’t want to live at home.”

This begged many questions but Moore only said, “So not Tony’s baby?”

“Oh no, no, it wasn’t.”

“So you had a boyfriend as well?”

“No. No. It was my brother’s baby. But my parents told me I had to put down Tony’s name. I didn’t know where he’d gone so I could ask him.”

“So what did you do?”

“Nothing. I left it blank. I know I should’ve said something but I couldn’t.”

“Incest is a crime. And you were underage.”

“But I still couldn’t say anything.”

Again she put her hands up to her face and was silent for several minutes. Petra Moore finally broke it by saying, “Your brother’s name?”

“Oh no, that would only make more trouble.”

“We can have DNA tests done, you know.”

The young woman turned and stared out the window. At last she said, “I didn’t think of that.”

“So your brother’s name?”

“Simon.”

“And how old is Simon?”

“He’s twenty-four now.”

“And did Tony know you were pregnant?”

Again there was a long silence before Stacey said, “It’s worse than you think.”

“What is?”

“He ... well, he tried to get Tony into trouble all the time. He did ... things and then made sure Tony got the blame. Sometimes the police went round to Tony’s house and Tony’s parents would say to the police he hadn’t done anything but they would then tell Tony he was nothing but trouble. And all the time it was Simon. He hated Tony because he knew I liked him.”

“What sort of things?”

“Oh! You know—trouble. Breaking things, doing graffiti, putting nasty things in people’s letterboxes, taking things, throwing things away.”

“So why did the police think it was Tony?”

Stacey put her hands up to her face again. “He’s taller, you know, but like ... he looks a bit like Tony ... like from a distance.”

“You mean, blonde with blue eyes?”

“That’s right.”

“So who told the police it was Tony?”

This was obviously a sticking point. At last she said, “I think it was my parents. Simon told them Tony was adopted and his mum was like a prossie and awful and he didn’t want Tony hanging round me and I think ... maybe they believed him.”

Simon keeping his misbehaviour close to the family or Simon afraid his sister would say something to Tony?

“Did you tell Tony any of this?”

“I sort of did. I felt very embarrassed. He said he understood. And then his parents believed it was him doing bad things, they never tried to find out the truth about anything, they just said they had always known he had bad blood, but I don’t know what they really thought. And then they told Tony to get out and they threw his clothes and everything out in the yard and he went away and then he rang me up one evening and said he was in Scarborough and he wanted me to come up when I could but I couldn’t because my parents said I had to go to my auntie’s place to have the baby. She lives in Townsville. My mum told her I was nothing but trouble and running round with a boy that was just scum ... but I think she felt sorry for me, she said I could stay on there after the baby was taken away, and I did stay for a while. But then mum said I had to come home so she could keep a good eye on me. It’s all a big mess.”

Stacey went back to staring out the car window.

DS Moore thought they needed to get a timeline for all these events. But she thought she would really like to pin down that question of incest. If Simon Lynch had fathered a child on his

sister she would really like him to be held to account. And if he hadn't—then how much of Stacey's story could be trusted?

"Do you know the name of the people who adopted your baby? And was it a boy or a girl?"

"A boy. Yes, I know who they are and where they live. They said I could come round and see him if I wanted but I didn't want to. I was afraid he might look like Simon. I think they thought I was a bit strange—like it isn't natural not to want to see your own baby. But it doesn't matter, does it?"

"Can you give me their name and address?"

Stacey supplied it and Moore wrote it down. She hoped it would not be necessary to intrude with requests for a DNA test, although the child would someday probably want to know his true paternity. "And your brother—is he living at home?"

"No. He just came home because it was mum's birthday yesterday." She provided another address which DS Moore was relieved to see wasn't far away.

"Thanks for that. I'll try to leave you out of everything."

Stacey obviously hadn't thought this far ahead but now she said, "I don't want him to blame me for more things." Petra Moore thought of asking what 'more things' would refer to. But Stacey said suddenly, "Can you tell me—how did Tony die?"

"I'm afraid it wasn't nice. He seems to have gone on a yacht with a wealthy Russian and something happened. We haven't been able to find a cause of death though there was some bruising. The pathologist was worried that he had been terrorised, that maybe he had lost the will to fight back. We're still investigating."

Stacey considered this carefully before saying, "Maybe he like gave up, like he couldn't stop people blaming him for everything and no one believed him, only me, when he said he hadn't done anything, maybe he thought no one would ever believe the truth, I wish they could've caught Simon, you know, doing things and Tony would be—" She tried to decide how to describe this. Petra Moore said, "Vindicated?"

"Uh huh, that's what I mean. But nobody, not his family, not people round here, no one believed him. Sometimes I thought maybe he *was* doing things, just to get back at his family for criticising him all the time ... but then Simon said something and I knew it was him and not Tony."

She hesitated then said, "It's all my fault, isn't it? If I'd told everyone the truth about Simon ... except maybe they wouldn't believe me ... and I was scared of Simon ... he used to say how bad things would be like if I ever said anything ... and my parents loved him more than me ... everyone said how handsome he was and they thought that too ... and they never took much notice of me ... and then they started to say they didn't know how come they could've have had such a little slut when they'd brought me up so well. Can you understand how that makes you feel?"

"No. But I can guess." She had faced plenty of slurs and undermining in the force but no one had ever called her a slut and certainly not her parents.

She handed Stacey her card and said, "I'd best take you home now but I want you to try and do a timeline for me, what happened when, so we can try to understand everything more clearly. And if you think of anything or you've got any problems you can ring me." This was the Petra Moore young Amy Porter had turned to for advice rather than the one Greg Sullivan found so daunting. And young Stacey was no threat to a career but might make DS Moore look clever and proactive as compared with Greg Sullivan's dithering and Frank Jennings' incompetence.

"And one other thing—find a way to go back and finish your education. You're too bright to give up."

Stacey didn't respond but when she was back in her bedroom she thought that a tough detective like DS Moore wouldn't be telling her she was bright just to be nice. She didn't feel that DS Moore put much store in being 'nice'. And then she wondered if DS Moore really would go and see Simon and what she would say to him.

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Petra Moore felt she was getting somewhere. And when DSS Jennings complained the complaint would go to Greg Sullivan who would have to admit that he had given her leave to go to Brisbane. She was still musing over this course of events as she drew up outside the address she had been given. Of course Greg should've informed Jennings and she should have touched base

with Jennings but she felt sure that Dennis Walsh was right to believe that no one would go after the Russian on his yacht and the young man would get no more than a slap on the wrist for disposing of young Tony ‘Geordie’ Giordano. Jennings might try to beat something up against Guy Gardiner but it still wouldn’t do much for his reputation.

Or not unless Brisbane could come up with conclusive evidence that Guy Gardiner had killed Tony Giordano ...

She rang the bell, wondering how young Simon Lynch could afford such an attractive house, if he wasn’t renting it. But then she didn’t think that the Lynchs, like the Giordanos, were short of a bob. A well-set-up young man in a t-shirt and shorts opened the door.

“Simon Lynch?”

He nodded. “I’m Detective Sergeant Moore from Winville CIB.” She showed her identification.

“Sorry, you’ve got the wrong person. I’ve never been in Winville in my life.”

“I’m here on a local matter. You have a sister, I believe, called Stacey, who had a baby.”

“So. Nothing to do with me.”

She was happy to continue to stand on the doorstep. And he obviously didn’t want to invite her in. She raised her voice as several people came along the footpath. “We are going to arrange for a DNA test on that baby that your sister gave up for adoption. There is serious doubt about its paternity.”

She knew there was almost certainly truth in Stacey’s story. The young man couldn’t help the moment of dismay.

“It’s nothing to do with me and you can’t prove it is.”

“Why do you say that?” She was still talking loudly and the couple on the footpath couldn’t hide their moment of curiosity.

“Well, isn’t that what you’re insinuating?” He dropped his voice on ‘insinuating’.

“That you are the father of your sister’s child? That is why a DNA test is important. It can provide police with evidence. We would not want to charge you with incest without the DNA results.”

The couple on the street had stopped a house along and were unashamedly listening. It struck Moore that Simon Lynch must have someone or something—awkward—inside his house to want to keep her on the doorstep and in full hearing of passers-by.

“Well, you’re not getting any DNA from me. I know my rights and I’m not letting you lot fit me up for something. And if you want to know the father of her baby you only have to go after that useless kid from up the road, always hanging round her, worse than a bad smell.”

“What useless kid are you referring to?”

“That Giordano kid, can’t remember his name. But always around like a bad smell.”

“The one you tried to get into trouble?”

“That’s baloney.”

“So why are you so sure that he was the father of your sister’s baby?”

“Like I said, the little pervert was always hanging round.”

“Why do you call him a pervert?”

“Well, he was. She was only a kid and he knew that—but it didn’t stop him after her all the time.”

“And what did you do about protecting your sister?”

“Me? Made life too hot for him every time he tried to hang around with her.”

“Made life too hot for him,” she repeated slowly and firmly. She thought Stacey was right. This young man had been treated as some sort of I-can-do-no-wrong tinpot idol. “In what way?”

“Nothing.”

“You made life too hot for him but you did nothing? Doesn’t make sense, Mr Lynch.”

“I may have said something.”

“To who?”

“Don’t remember.”

“You wanted to get him into trouble?”

“Well, wouldn’t you? She was only fourteen when he started seeing her.”

“So what sort of trouble did you get him into?”

“Nothing.”

“We can check with local police. We can go back over every complaint and check.”

“Wouldn’t do you any good, sergeant, because his family kicked him out. They knew what he was up to.”

“And how do you know this?”

“They told everyone.”

“You saw Tony Giordano after he left home?”

He seemed to draw back a little. “Maybe, I don’t remember. I think he came round again, trying to see Stacey. I said I’d make sure he didn’t come again to bother her.”

“How?”

“How what?”

“How were you going to make sure he didn’t come round again?”

“I don’t remember. I think he wrote her some letters. I made sure she didn’t get them.”

“Did they have an address on them?”

“Maybe.”

“What was the address?”

“How would I know?”

“You must have some idea.”

“I’d only be guessing—and before you ask, I threw them in the garbage.”

“Okay. Guess.”

“I think one was from Scarborough. Anyway why all the interest? He’s gone and she’s okay now he’s out of her life. So everything is okay again.”

“Did you try to visit him in Scarborough?”

“Don’t remember. Why?”

“Just to make sure he stayed warned off maybe?”

“Well, yes, maybe I did.”

“Well, we’ll get those DNA tests done so don’t try running away until we’ve got that baby’s paternity sorted out. And we’ll probably want to do a follow-up interview about your visit to Scarborough.”

“Why? He’s gone.”

“Yes, Mr Lynch, he’s gone. Tony Giordano was murdered in Scarborough and you’ve just shown me a very good motive. But we’ll leave it there for today and get things underway for the DNA test.”

After she’d gone he went back inside and slammed the door. The girl in the kitchen was very young, very blonde, and she looked at him with wide blue eyes. “Who was that, honey?”

“Some useless copper, wanting to find that useless guy who was after my sister for a while.”

“You don’t think they’ll come back?”

She suddenly looked very vulnerable and frightened.

“Of course not. It seems he’s dead. So that’s the end of that.”

He knew he hadn’t been to Scarborough recently. But although there was some comfort in that he had the uneasy feeling that the police would get or might already have his DNA from some other source. It seemed odd that that detective had shown no interest in asking him for a sample. He had an idea they asked for saliva. And then it struck him. His father. What if they already had a sample from him? It wouldn’t be identical but it would probably be close. And if Tony Giordano was dead then they would certainly have his and would know he wasn’t the father ...

He ate the not-very-good dinner Lou had prepared and then he rang home. He asked his mum if they’d had a detective around and she said “Yes, why?”

“She came to see me too. What’s going on?”

“I don’t know. Stacey’s done nothing but cry since she came in.”

“And did that copper talk to dad?”

“I don’t think so but I can ask him.”

While she was gone he wondered how he should phrase it. Just a general query. But the fear persisted that the police had got DNA from somewhere and mightn’t be discreet in how they used

it. But then he cheered a little. If they didn't have consent, and he couldn't see how they could, then they couldn't use it without putting themselves in the wrong.

"Dad, did the cops come to see you? They've seen Stacey and now me. What the hell is going on?"

"No one's talked to me. Not today. Maybe they'll come back. But what did they want?"

"Just asking about that useless Tony Giordano, you remember him, always stalking Stacey, and it seems like he's got himself murdered. I said I couldn't help them."

"So that's why Stacey's crying." But Mr Lynch seemed to be talking to himself. Then he said more briskly, "I remember him being in a lot of trouble, shoving nasty things into people's letterboxes, but maybe that was just mischief. He was always polite to me. And your mum."

Mr Lynch seemed to be following a line of thought which took him away from police calling by.

"Look dad, they said they wanted DNA, something to do with this murder case. I said they couldn't have mine and I hadn't seen Tony in a long time, none of us had. But I thought they might come round asking for your DNA."

"That's a bit odd. I haven't seen the lad in years. Why would they want my DNA?"

"I think that detective was way out of line. It's probably the police thinking it's some miracle stuff, can solve their cases when they're stuck—"

"But I still don't see why they'd want ours—"

"I don't either—but just say no if they ask, okay?"

Allan Lynch felt he must be missing something. Only people in trouble with the law had their DNA taken, so far as he knew, so such a request to him would be completely inappropriate. Unless ... but he couldn't think of any way his DNA could help solve the murder of young Tony. "No, I can't say that, not if they have a genuine reason for asking. But I haven't seen Tony in a long time, none of us have, so I don't see how we could help them."

Simon agonised over whether to press the issue. At last he said, "No, well, it was probably some local gossip got them on to thinking we knew Tony when we hardly did."

He left it at that and his father said goodnight, still sounding a little perplexed. But Allan Lynch, after putting the phone down, sat mulling over the odd conversation with his son. In many ways he was proud of Simon. A handsome fit clever young man. But a disturbing memory kept on intruding. Stacey had insisted when they had tried to get her to name the father of her baby that it wasn't Tony, that she and Tony had only ever been friends, that they had never even kissed, that it was just nice to have someone who was kind and understanding. And when they had pressed her for another name she had grown distressed and ... afraid. At one stage she had said 'I can't tell you' and burst into tears.

The knowledge that someone had taken advantage of Stacey continued to rankle. And like many fathers his feeling was that he would like to do something very unpleasant to that man, whoever he was. Now he found himself wondering why Simon had been adamant that he wasn't going to give anything to the police and that he didn't want his father to either. Yet Simon, all of them, had had nothing more to do with Tony Giordano after his parents had told him to get out and stay out. So their DNA couldn't be relevant to Tony's death.

He felt he would like to know more about the young man's death but it still didn't seem to have anything to do with the Lynch family. He didn't even know where Tony had gone after he left home. So why should Simon be so worked up about it. He hadn't liked Tony and he'd never made any bones about it. But Simon had never mentioned Tony after he'd gone. So why get worried now?

It was only when he was in bed that a different answer, a very awkward and worrying answer, came to him. He said to his half-asleep wife, "Why d'you think Simon was worried about me giving DNA to the police—if they want some—it's nothing to do with him surely?"

"Perhaps he misunderstood something?" She didn't feel like grappling with such a question at this time of night.

"No. I've got an uneasy feeling the police are looking again at Stacey's baby, that they never got anyone for underage ... maybe we should have insisted then ... because if it wasn't Tony—then who was it?"

“I’m sure it was Tony. He was sort of ... sneaky.”

“But Stacey insisted it wasn’t. Though she wouldn’t name anyone else. Maybe we should’ve gone to the police and insisted they find who was responsible. They had the resources. And it did mess up her life, poor kid, even if she was giving someone the come on.”

Mrs Lynch objected to this description. “Not Stacey. She was never like that.”

He agreed though a little reluctantly. The image didn’t fit his daughter. But it brought his original worries back in full force. “So why would they go to Simon? How can his DNA help them find anything out? And why was he so het up about it?”

“It was probably something else and he just felt they were picking on him. You know they do that.”

“That girl he’s living with—he says she’s twenty but she never behaves like a twenty-year-old.”

“You can’t say things like that. Every twenty-year-old is different.”

“Perhaps you’re right.” He left it at that. It was very unlikely they would hear any more. But over the next few days the uneasy suspicion which had come with Simon’s phone call refused to go away. For the sake of family peace he said no more and when Stacey said she’d like to find a way to go back to school and finish her education he entered enthusiastically into her suggestion and said he was sure they could make arrangements and that she was very wise to go on and pass her exams. “We’re with you all the way, Stacey, and we know you can do it. And don’t go thinking on Tony, he really was just a passing fancy.”

Stacey, glad to have his support for going back to school, hesitated. Maybe it was better left but she felt that Tony deserved something more than silence. “No, dad, he wasn’t a passing fancy. He was a good friend and I will always miss him.”

“He was your boyfriend though, so a passing fancy—”

“No, he was never my boyfriend. We just liked to sit and talk all kinds of things over. It was like that kind of friendship. And he didn’t deserve to be thrown out of his house or accused of things he didn’t do or made to feel he was responsible for my baby. And now he’s murdered,” and she broke down and gave way to renewed tears.

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“So what was it like in Winville?” Fiona asked Dennis over dinner.

“Hard to see the point really. I just ran over things with them. Gave them some suggestions on interviewing, looked at the way they were filling in forms, went out with one of them and listened to him give a road safety talk, stuff like that. Jake seemed happy enough but I reckon he’s got another agenda.”

Elise wanted to know what he meant by this. He said he thought the new super in Winville really wanted him there for other reasons. It was only a hunch. But he had not been impressed by Jake’s second-in-command. Senior Sergeant Brad Merrill. Merrill was new or fairly new to Winville. He had come here from Gladstone and he had done nothing but complain about Winville since he’d arrived. Jake Moss felt he could take any amount of grumbling if it meant he had a first class deputy. But Merrill was careless and slipshod in his work. He gave the impression that he was heartily sick of the sorts of problems which made up his day and didn’t really care if anything got resolved or not. It was true that men grew tired of the same issues coming at them year in year out. But Jake felt he deserved better than being saddled with some old time-server. There were times when he wished he could set Dinny Walsh on to Merrill rather than his young constables. It was Merrill who needed to be chewed out not his enthusiastic juniors.

And then he thought ‘He’s my responsibility, not Walsh’s—so how am I going to give him a kick up the pants?’ There was no easy answer to this. He wasn’t a martinet. He was willing to live and let live so long as the work was getting done. But he could see that sometimes that wasn’t good enough. Someone of Merrill’s experience and seniority should be setting a good example not merely ‘getting by’.

Dennis later said to Fiona, “Think Jake’s been landed with a lemon. That Merrill bloke’s a time-server, he’ll just keep things ticking over, but Jake deserves better than that ... after putting up with that useless Hassell. You know, I rang Hassell in Gympie to see if he’d try to track down that useless Plowman about an animal cruelty case and you know what he said?”



“He said it wasn’t any of his business?”

“Spot on. The lazy useless sod.”

“Well, don’t go losing sleep over it. Carl Payne will round up all the Plowmans eventually and you can get that charge added in to the mix.”

If only ...

“And that useless Jennings is complaining to Greg about Petra doing his work for him. The lazy sod should be glad someone’s doing his work for him.”

“But why did they put him in charge of that case if he’s incompetent?”

“I reckon—and maybe I’m wrong—they thought there’s no point in going after that Russian when maybe it was only some sex games that went wrong—and disposing of a body isn’t major enough to call in the big guns—so when you look at it, they probably thought this is small enough for Jennings to wrap up. That’s probably why he’s so cranky. He knows it isn’t going to give him many kudos and the few there are will go to Petra.”

“And you?”

“Don’t reckon. And it doesn’t matter. If they’re not going after that sadistic Russian bastard then—”

“And you’re sure they’re not?”

“Doesn’t look like it. But at the very least every Pacific island country should be warned about Simonov. Who’s to say he won’t do the same thing again?”

He dropped in to a long silence. Because there was a hanging question in there. Had Dmitri Simonov done the same or similar things in the past? If they could find a similar report somewhere else then it would strengthen the case against Mr Simonov.

Fiona had gone on to talk about their final day at the beach and what they planned to do for the last bit of the school holidays and he half-listened and agreed with her plans.

But would Greg be amenable to looking for other cases? He was caught between the efficiency of Petra Moore and the inefficiency of Frank Jennings—so maybe he would leap at the chance to follow up a quite different line of enquiry? It might come to nothing but Dennis was inclined to think that a man of Simonov’s age might well have got into the habit of abusing young men on his yacht.

When put to him Greg Sullivan showed not the slightest enthusiasm for the idea. “You want me to check with police here and everywhere that Simonov got a visa for? Have you gone crazy?”

“Stands to reason, Greg, you don’t get to fifty plus and suddenly decide you’ll start abusing homeless youths. There’s a good chance he’s done it somewhere else. If you can track that down—well, it’ll make you look good.”

This might be the icing on the cake but Greg only saw a lot of work and quite likely no results. “I still don’t want to know. So go away and play with your kids or something.”

It might not have gone any further except that Greg told Narelle what Dennis wanted and she had mulled on it before saying, “It just might be worth doing, love, and you can get Jenny or Brent to do the work for you.”

Put like that, it didn’t sound quite so daunting. But Greg still didn’t think it was worth the effort. And then he thought of Petra Moore coming back from Brisbane full of success and results and enthusiasm while he stood around like some old horse ready to be put out to grass.

Jenny and Brent both listened to his thoughts the next morning and they both agreed that it was certainly a useful line of enquiry. He didn’t say it was Walsh’s idea and they both naturally assumed that he was still interested in the case and looking for ways they might tie up some loose ends—and maybe make Frank Jennings look useless into the bargain.

They went through the list of the places Dmitri Simonov had apparently visited. Then they nipped out their plans. Greg said half-a-dozen times, “It’s not going to be easy.”

He was obviously referring to the amount of work involved whereas his juniors thought the real problem might be that nothing had ever been reported to police. After all, if it hadn’t been for Guy Gardiner then the yacht might’ve sailed away, its young passenger not missed, and somewhere along the voyage he might simply have fed some sharks. Had that happened somewhere else? If he made a habit of hunting out young homeless men then they might never have been reported missing.

DS Moore saw no reason to inform DSS Jennings about her enquiries into incest and underage sex in the Lynch family. She felt sure he would say it wasn't relevant and therefore it would be a waste of time telling him. She thought she would make a brief effort to find Sandra Halley. She might've changed her name, moved, died, but if she was still around Brisbane she might like to know what had happened to her son. She probably didn't need to have all the details of his life with the Giordanos, even if it was possible to know for certain which story was the most truthful, but she deserved to know he wouldn't be trying to contact her now that he was an adult.

And to her surprise and relief she found a Sandra Halley living in Mount Gravatt. She rang and introduced herself and asked if she had found the right Sandra Halley. The woman said cautiously, "Well, you have, but why is it a matter for the police?"

"I'm very sorry but I'm afraid your son is deceased. I wonder if we could meet and just have a brief chat?"

"Oh dear, oh my goodness, that's awful. Poor boy. Yes, you'd better come. Can you come here? I work from home."

Petra checked the address and went out to her car. Working from home might mean anything. And if Simon Lynch was the purveyor of the claim that Tony's mother was a prostitute then there was a good chance it was a falsehood.

In fact the unit had a sign at the front 'SANDRA HALLEY: Dressmaker, clothes altered and repaired, invisible mending, sewing lessons.' Petra Moore had the vague idea that invisible mending was a rare and valuable skill and not something you would do in between turning tricks. It seemed to be the first nail in the coffin of Simon Lynch's story.

Sandra turned out to be a neat little woman in her late thirties wearing a blouse and skirt. She had light brown hair and blue eyes. She ushered DS Moore into the kitchen as the front room, though tidy, was crowded with rolls of material, two sewing machines, clothes on hangers, cabinets which contained cottons, buttons, and other useful items. In one corner was a small desk with pigeonholes and a telephone.

"Sorry, it's a bit crowded. But if you don't mind sitting at the kitchen table ... Can I get you a coffee?" Moore accepted the offer and looked around her. Though the place was small it was neat and cheerful. She accepted a coffee and some shortbread.

Sandra sat down and said, "Can you tell me what happened?"

"It's still under investigation. It seems Tony went on board a foreign yacht and was mistreated. A young man tried to help get him off the yacht but something went wrong, we're not yet sure, and this young man panicked and dumped Tony's body. He has been convicted of the unlawful disposal of a body. But it is the owner of that yacht we would like to see held accountable. Unfortunately he is no longer in Australian waters." Or possibly not.

Sandra considered this carefully. "I've heard of Interpol. Can they chase this person?"

"We're doing our best. Anyway, can you tell me something about Tony? How did you come to give him up for adoption?"

Sandra sat for a minute or two considering the emotive question before saying, "I had a boyfriend. He came from Sweden. But he wanted to go back—and he didn't want to take me. I didn't have much money and my parents were very upset with me. They said I was just plain stupid. My dad kept saying 'there's one born every minute' and I got so I didn't want to go round there any more. But I didn't know what to do. I still kept missing Karl and I thought of keeping the baby ... and then I met this other woman who told me she had been sleeping with him too. I don't know if it was true. But I felt so angry. The lying bastard! And that was when I decided to give the baby up for adoption. I was afraid I might take my anger and disappointment out on the baby. And I thought a couple might be able to give him more ... things."

She sat there with a faraway look in her eyes. "It is hard. You know that whatever you decide might be the wrong thing. And you know the baby might wish you'd done something differently." She brought her gaze back from the window. "I know a woman, she's in her sixties, her parents spent all their time when she was young, telling her they didn't want her. She still carries all that bitterness around, she sort of can't let go of knowing she was never wanted."

But perhaps that woman might've been bitter if she'd been given up? And there hadn't been the options, the support, sixty years ago.

Petra Moore nodded. "So why did you try to get Tony back?"

"After I'd signed the papers ... and then I got a better job ... and I'd let go of thinking about Karl ... and I wished terribly that I hadn't let him go. I know it was wrong but I sort of felt driven—just to be absolutely sure they wanted him, that they wanted him more than I wanted him."

"And how did they respond?"

"They said no, I'd signed the papers, that was the end of the matter. And when I kept coming back they got really angry and said they would call the police."

"How often were you going?"

"Oh! It was only two or three times a year. I wasn't going round every week."

"They said you came till Tony was about five."

"I s'pose it was. I knew it was hopeless. I knew I was only upsetting everyone."

"So you stopped? And you haven't seen Tony since then?"

"I'm afraid," Sandra Halley coloured painfully, "I didn't stop. I just never let them see me. I would watch Tony going off to school. Several times I went to watch him play sport. And then I got married and I didn't go much for a while. I was married for four years. He drank a lot and I couldn't cope with that."

Moore was reluctant to ask a leading question but she needed to know if Halley ever saw anything ... suspicious.

"Did you ever see Tony with other people?"

"Other kids? For sure. And I occasionally saw him with his family. Once I followed him down to a local park and watched him kicking a ball around with another boy." The faraway look was back in her eyes. "One time I saw him with a girl. A nice young girl. They went into a café and I went in too and sat down where I could hear and see them. I was just happy to sit there and watch them."

"Did you hear what they were talking about?" It was a kind of stalking. And Petra Moore wondered if other mothers who had relinquished children ever hung round schools and playgrounds ... it seemed probable.

"They were talking about koalas. You know, how to save them, that sort of thing."

"Just talking?"

"For sure. They just seemed to like talking things through. And maybe they said other things, I didn't hear everything. But then she got up and said she must go, that there would be trouble with someone if she stayed too long. I thought of going over to my boy and introducing myself. But I didn't. I wish I had. And you know—Tony was their idea. I called him Benjamin. But it wasn't up to me. But I still think of him as my little Benjamin Bunny." She looked slightly embarrassed at saying this. But Petra Moore just nodded. There might be something a little unhealthy in this unwillingness to let go but perhaps other women in the same situation clung to that image of what their baby would have been in their life. And now Ms Halley was faced with the final letting go.

At last Sandra Halley said, "Is it true that they didn't really want him? And could he come back to me ... for a funeral, I mean?"

"There were problems with his family and they asked him to leave. Perhaps it was just normal parent-teenager arguing. But we are still looking into it. And do you remember who the girl said would make trouble?"

Although Sandra Halley agonised over the question she couldn't come up with a name. But she felt reasonably sure it hadn't been 'mum' or 'dad' ...

Petra Moore accepted this. She didn't think either of the Lynchs had been strict parents. But should she put a name out there? She said cautiously, "It wasn't Simon, was it?"

"I don't think so ... no, maybe she just said 'he' ... that he would make trouble. But I am guessing. You mustn't take this as gospel truth."

Mr and Mrs Lynch probably wouldn't make trouble.

And quite possibly Mr and Mrs Giordano didn't mind how long Tony stayed out—unless he had chores.

The impression she had got from Mr and Mrs Giordano was that they didn't really see Tony as theirs, that he was a stranger who had come to stay for a while, and he could therefore be told his time was up. She wondered if this intuition was correct. And had Sandra Halley inadvertently, by her intrusion into their lives, made it harder for them to feel that Tony was truly theirs? To bond with their adopted son?

She said she would pass on the information that Sandra Halley would like to be responsible for her son's funeral. And she said, "I am sorry. He didn't deserve to die so young."

As she drove away she thought that was the most significant part of the conversation. That young Stacey Lynch had someone in her life who would make 'trouble'. But there was trouble and trouble ...

She thought it was probably Simon. But there just might be someone else in there who hadn't wanted Stacey to see Tony Giordano.

## *Case No. 5: Hansel without Gretel*

Petra Moore debated her next step. Should she simply hit the road or should she check with Greg Sullivan or should she go round and touch base with Frank Jennings and whoever else had done any work on the case. She finally rang Greg and, as she'd expected, he dithered over what she should do. Finally he said, "Yeah, best to keep Jennings in the loop."

She agreed, but without enthusiasm. She was more interested in getting Simon Lynch put on the spot; not least because she felt reasonably sure nothing she could say would encourage Jennings to try and track down Mr Simonov. She caught him in the office and said she'd just like to bring him up to speed before she headed home.

He immediately said, "You should've been in touch the minute you hit town."

She said rather tartly, "I haven't found out anything you couldn't of found out."

He seemed to find this comforting because he said, "Well, we'd best meet. Say half an hour. Come to the Imperial and I'll meet you there." He gave her directions.

It would probably prove to be the sort of place old has-beens like Frank Jennings went, probably stinking of beer and not an atmosphere to bring your mother into, but she felt she would be glad to unload her information and head west. She might not have a high opinion of most of Winville's incumbents but she was a country person at heart and saw Brisbane only as the place you came to when you had to.

The bar area was busy and noisy and she couldn't see an empty table. She ordered a shandy and stood there looking round for any sign of Jennings. A minute later he came bustling in, obviously pleased she had bought her own drink, and hustled her into a room off to the left. She wondered if he did some of his work here, talking with whatever informants he might have—or maybe it was just Frank Jennings skiving off and not wanting to be publicly visible.

She suspected he spent more time in pubs than was good for him. But, with luck, she would never have to sit down with him after today.

The room was empty except for stacked-up chairs along one wall and several trestle tables and an urn pushed against another wall. He pulled two chairs up to one of the trestles and said, "Right, what've you got for me."

She had made a simplified list for him. As she handed it over she said briskly, "His name, adopted family, biological mother, friends down the road. He was accused of fathering a child on a fourteen-year-old girl—which was partly why the Giordanos threw him out. The girl says it wasn't him. It was her brother. I said we could get a DNA test done on the baby. The brother obviously didn't like the sound of that. We could get him for incest and statutory rape if you want a simple case."

"And what about this useless guy who dumped the body in a wheelie bin?"

"He's been given a Good Behaviour Bond for a year. If you want to appeal that you can."

"You should've done that."

She could see clearly that Jennings might grumble but he wouldn't do anything. "We presented the case. That was the verdict. He confessed, said he was sorry, and we still don't have a cause of death, so that's probably all you're going to get."

"I wouldn't mind to see that old witch squirm."

"What old witch?"

"That useless magistrate, that's who."

She saw no reason to protect Mrs Vohland who was perfectly capable of standing up to people like DSS Jennings. "Up to you."

And again she had the sense of someone mentally retreating. Jennings liked easy cases. She came back to the Lynch case. "Well, go for the underage sex case. Easy as pie to get a DNA test done and drag that young man into court. It'll make you look good."

Maybe this was too blatant for Jennings because he said, "Nothing to do with me. I just want to wrap up this Scarborough mess and move on."

"You've got one end tidied up. Put in a request to get Dmitri Simonov brought back to Australia. You've got the autopsy report. He won't get much sympathy for torturing a young homeless kid."

"Waste of time. They won't bring him back, not for anything short of murder."

He stood up, tapped the paper she had given him, and said. "This'll do. But send me a more detailed report soon as you get back to Winville."

She thought his newly friendly tone had something to do with her tying up various tiresome ends and being content to simply hand it all over to him. He could then make it look as though she had simply liaised with him and followed up several enquiries on his behalf. He was adept at making himself look both hardworking and successful. His technique had failed in Winville but as Petra Moore hadn't been there then he doubted whether she knew all the details.

"Will do." She got up, took her glass and went out.

He wasn't sorry to see her go. She reminded him a little of Mrs Vohland, and he didn't like tough women, even when they saved him some work.

'That's that,' he thought and tucked the paper away. 'And that's the end of this bloody mess of a case.' He drained his glass and stood up.

\*

The Winville team were pleased with Petra's report as she shared round copies of what she had sent to Jennings; not least because they had, so far, not got anywhere with their enquiries. If Mr Simonov had abused other young men it had not apparently come to official ears.

"So what is Jennings going to do about the case?" Greg said after he'd read her report.

"Nothing. Or nearly nothing. We charged Gardiner. Simonov has disappeared. The young man's mum will arrange the funeral when they've finished with the body. He thinks that will be the end of it all or the end of his involvement—"

"But—is there going to be an inquest?"

"You would think so. He could just hand in the information we've put together. And if Brisbane agrees with Watling—well, I guess they'll bring in an open verdict."

Greg nodded. As they hadn't been able to add anything to the case against Simonov that seemed to sum up the likely course of events.

But Petra wasn't done. "And what about the Lynch case? I'm certain Jennings won't lift a finger."

Greg had given this some thought. "We can proceed. But the couple who adopted the baby—it's going to be hard for them to find out that their baby was the result of incest."

This aspect hadn't bothered DS Moore. People who adopted children knew that babies didn't come up for adoption unless something had gone wrong somewhere. She said briskly, "Children deserve to know their parentage—and in the case of very closely related parents they also need to be aware that there might be health risks. They might want to get some sort of genetic 'map' done so they're prepared. We don't know if there are health problems in the Lynch family which might be doubled in the baby."

"There is that," Greg agreed. "But where is the baby now?"

"Townsville."

“So it would have to go through channels there.” He didn’t sound very hopeful.

“That doesn’t seem to be a good enough reason to do nothing. I’m sure we can work through them. But there is nothing to stop us contacting the parents and telling them that the supposed father of their baby might have been murdered. If we can resolve the question of paternity we will know whether or not it might connect with our case.”

“And is there any chance the father was neither Tony Giordano or Simon Lynch?”

“Possible. If Simon Lynch knew who it was. But I still think Simon is our man.”

Greg sat there pondering on this. It was only a potential police case if Simon was the father. Tony Giordano as father would only be relevant as in letting the family know of his death. And just possibly, if the Lynch family were certain it was Tony, they might have done something such as making a complaint to the Giordano family ...

“Well, we can make contact, but we’ll need to walk on eggshells. They might not want to know.” He had an idea that children were rarely interested until they got into their late teens or twenties. Little children accepted their adoptive parents as their real parents.

Petra when Greg agreed to the follow-up immediately looked for the address and phone number of the couple Stacey Lynch had given as the new parents of her baby. Then she put through a call and got the wife. “Mrs Jowett?” The woman said she was. “Hello, I’m Detective-Sergeant Moore from Winville CIB. I’m sorry to bother you but I understand you adopted a baby a while ago?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Were you told anything about the baby’s paternity?”

“No. I understand the teenage mother refused to say who the father was. Why?”

“There was a claim that the father was a young man called Tony Giordano. Unfortunately Mr Giordano has been murdered. We wondered if it would be possible to do a DNA test on your little boy so we could either eliminate Tony or let you know what was going on with his case.”

Greg, listening in, thought he would have ummed and ahed and found it difficult to get their interest over clearly.

There was a long silence. Then Mrs Jowett on the speaker phone said, “If you think it will help your case ... But you’re not saying he was murdered because of the baby, are you?”

“We don’t think it has any bearing. But we would like to resolve that possibility.”

“Well, okay, but what would we have to do?”

“It would have to go to a laboratory in Brisbane. Would you like me to check with them what they’d like you to send and ring you back. And we will cover the costs.”

Mrs Jowett agreed with this. But Greg said, “What sort of costs are you committing us to?”

“I’d better check with the lab and tell them to expect a sample from the Jowett baby.”

“Is this a government lab?”

“No, a private one.”

Greg, already a bit wary, felt his spirits plummet. “And the payments?”

“I’ll cover them, if necessary.” The way she said it didn’t raise Greg’s spirits. Probably this was how people felt when they found themselves riding a tiger. Hard to get off and dangerous to stay on. He had sometimes been drawn along by Dennis Walsh but this was different. Dennis was a known quantity ... and didn’t want his job. Petra, he was increasingly sure, did.

“Okay. But document every step carefully. We won’t be able to mount a case for incest if it looks more like a vendetta than proper police procedure.”

Moore didn’t have a high opinion of those who used that phrase ‘proper police procedure’. They usually used it very selectively or to undermine a colleague or to cover their backs ... “I will,” she said briefly.

She worked on it through the day and tidied up at the end of work, cheerful in the belief she could nail Simon Lynch. She hoped the Jowetts would not sit on it for weeks. The sooner they had a result, the sooner she could see Simon Lynch in the dock. Greg, aware that whatever happened would probably upset and hurt the Jowetts, went home in a glum mood.

His wife listened to his story and felt herself torn. She wanted the men who took advantage of teenage girls to pay. But she could imagine the Jowetts too. They had probably hoped year after year for a baby of their own before putting their name on a list for adoption. And now with their

baby boy as part of their family they risked being drawn into unpleasant knowledge and possibly a court case. She hoped they were big-hearted people, wise in the ways of the world. And then there was Petra Moore. Narelle didn't disagree with her going after that cowardly father, in her book men took responsibility for the children they fathered, but she suspected Petra had gone about it in such a way that it would make her look good and Greg pretty hopeless ...

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Several days later, Winville received the devastating news that the little Jowett boy had been kidnapped. Greg Sullivan found himself in the hot seat when Townsville got on to him. What had Winville done or said which had prompted someone to snatch the toddler?

Greg after a first dismayed moment in which he felt personally responsible for the kidnap, carefully spelled out the circumstances which had caused Winville to ask for a DNA test. He said the most likely person to get involved was Simon Lynch but that put him in a different problematic spot as Petra had not told the Jowetts of Simon Lynch's possible involvement.

"Why Simon Lynch? What's he got to do with the Tony Giordano case?"

Greg felt that whatever he said would probably prove to be the wrong thing but the question had to be answered and he wished Petra was in the office so he could simply hand the phone over. "As I understand it, Simon Lynch said the baby was Tony Giordano's but the mother said she had never had sex with Tony. So why was Simon Lynch trying to dob Tony in? At that point he didn't know Tony was dead. So we hoped a DNA test would resolve everything and if the baby definitely wasn't Tony's then the whole thing is nothing more to do with the case."

"So why would you say Simon Lynch might abduct the child?"

"Because there is the strong possibility Simon Lynch knows who the father is and he might be trying to stop any tests to prove paternity."

"Well, he's missed the boat then. Dan Jowett told me they sent off a sample yesterday. But that doesn't tell us where to look."

"I can get on to the Lynch family and see if any of them have left Brisbane, if you like—and get a tracker dog your end."

The sergeant in Townsville didn't seem to appreciate being told how to do his job but said he expected to hear from Winville a.s.a.p. Greg wishing ever more strongly that he had never even heard of the Lynch family, rang their home address according to Petra's notes. He got Stacey Lynch who responded firstly with shock and secondly with anger. "How could he do this!"

"Who is he?"

"My brother. My horrible nasty mean brother!"

"Do you know where he is?"

"No. But I'm going straight round there now to see what's going on."

Greg wasn't sure this was the best idea. After he'd urged her to stay calm and get back to him he hung up and then rang Frank Jennings. The detective laughed and said, "Well, we can't accuse Tony of wanting his kid back!"

"No. But it'd be a good idea if you got straight round to the house of Simon Lynch to see what's going on. He's got a girlfriend. He might of talked her into minding the kid."

Jennings didn't sound convinced and raised a number of other possibilities including that the kid had just wandered off and that the Jowetts were useless parents. Greg cut him off. "Maybe that's true—but check out Simon Lynch first."

If the request had come from someone other than Greg Sullivan Jennings might have been more sympathetic but he felt no desire to do anything to help Sullivan.

"When I've got a minute to spare, mate, but that won't be for a while."

"Okay. I'll get on to Missing Persons and get them round there—"

"Nah, hold your horses, I'll get Johnno to take over here." The cops who restored missing children to their despairing parents always looked good. And he had no particular reason to want to protect Simon Lynch except that Greg Sullivan seemed to have his knife into him.

The house, when he got there, stood silent and apparently empty. He knocked on the front door, went round peering in windows, knocked at the back door, looked in a small garden shed, went back round the front. A couple of people had stopped by the front gate, obviously curious, and

he said, not best pleased at the thought he had been sent on a wild goose chase, “D’you know the bloke who lives here?”

“Simon? Well, sort of. But he’s been gone for a few days, him and that kid he lives with.”

“What kid?”

“That blonde bimbo, looks no more than fifteen but I s’pose she must be more—”

“They’re both gone?”

The neighbour shrugged. “It looks like it.”

“What sort of car does he drive?”

“A white VW, not a beetle, the number has GO in it.”

“D’you know where he works?”

“I think it’s a sportswear place, somewhere in the city.”

Jennings had no way of knowing whether the absence of Simon Lynch indicated a trip to Townsville; he could merely be taking a few days at the beach. He handed over his card and said, “If he comes back could you give me a ring?”

The couple seemed to find all this rather exciting. “Can do. But what has he done?”

“He may not have done anything but we need to check something with him.”

“Okay, we’ll keep an eye out.”

Back at the office Jennings ran a check for Simon Lynch’s car and got a number. But Townsville was a very long drive. Had he left the car somewhere and flown up? But if he was going to snatch a kid he would probably need a vehicle. In the end he passed this on to Townsville in case they had any sightings. Then he felt he’d done his bit. Other people could go chasing after Simon Lynch and if he was merely taking a few days off then other people could look like they were hounding the man.

Frank Jennings might have felt he’d done his bit but Stacey Lynch was determined to find her brother and find her adopted-out son and if the two things came together then she would have all the proof she needed that Simon was every nasty thing she had ever called him.

She too found the house deserted but she knew where Simon worked and she went straight in and asked his boss if Simon had asked for time off. Mr Biggs said, “A couple of days, that’s all he wanted. I’ll expect him back in on Monday.”

“Did he say why he wanted some days off?”

The manager would not normally give out such information but he found Simon’s sister a very attractive young woman and he found himself picturing her in a bikini or tight shorts on a bike.

“He just said family business. I was a bit annoyed because this is a busy time. But we could manage without him. Now, what about you, are you employed at the moment?”

“No. Not just now.”

“Then—how about a bit of casual work? I’m sure you’ll soon pick it up.”

Stacey felt he had an ulterior motive but she rather liked the idea of working here for a week or two. “I guess I could. When would you like me to start?”

“Right now, if you can. I’ll show you around and hand you over to Anne. She’ll take your details.”

When Stacey returned home that evening and shared her experiences her parents said, “Good, that’ll keep Simon’s job open for him.” That hadn’t been Stacey’s intention but she didn’t say so. “But where on earth’s he gone?”

“The police think he’s kidnapped my boy from the Jowetts, him and Lou, but I don’t know anything.”

“The police!” Her father looked astonished then worried. “Why would the police think that?”

“I think ... they got a test done on my little boy to see who his father is ... now they know it wasn’t Tony.”

Mr Lynch sat down heavily and put his face in his hands. At last he raised his head and said, “We don’t know where Simon is so I guess ... it’s no point in worrying.” He couldn’t bring himself to ask Stacey the key question and at last he said, “If they ring again just tell them we have no idea where Simon and Lou are—but we’re sure they would not have gone to Townsville.”



“Why are we sure, dad?”

For a moment he looked blank then he said, “Would you want to spend three days driving with that numbskull he calls his girlfriend?”

“It would be boring, for sure,” Stacey suddenly had the wild desire to laugh, “but he didn’t pick her for her brains, you know, so he knows what to expect ... I guess.”

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The collective mind of Winville CIB was taken off the kidnap case by an e-mail addressed to them all which came in in mid-morning. DC Forman read it and beckoned Greg Sullivan over. It was from a Sergeant van Ommen in Geelong. He said he might have information they could use in connection with a young man who’d been on a Russian yacht and would ring Winville at 4 pm. Greg gave a low whistle and said “here’s hoping” and then “does he mean 4 pm his time or ours?”

No one could answer this. “So whoever’s here then, make sure you get names and dates.”

Jenny and Brent both looked nervous yet also with an undertone of excitement. Was this the breakthrough they had been hoping for—and would they do it justice?

It proved to be 4 pm Daylight Saving time but everyone except Petra was in the office when Hank van Ommen rang. He pitched straight in. “You want to know about the boy that was on a Russian yacht called A. N. Rostow?”

“We do,” Greg said immediately. “It might connect to a case here.”

“Okay. Well, the yacht was here, a young guy swam ashore, conked out on the footpath, someone thought he might be drunk but called us anyhow. I went out and found him and he was unconscious and no sign of alcohol so I took him to Emergency and they got back to me next morning, said he wanted to talk. They also said he had some injuries on him and one was like you said, a cut up the arse.” Greg said “Uh huh. And?” “Well, the kid said he was from Samoa, said he’d met the guy with the nice yacht there, the guy had invited him on board for a sail, he’d jumped at the chance—but then the guy just sailed away and he didn’t realise soon enough that he wasn’t just doing a bit of a sail round the coast. He was very shocked and upset when he found out what the guy wanted and when he said he wouldn’t, he was threatened and hit and tied up. He thinks he must’ve been drugged because a lot of the voyage is pretty blurry. He says he was in a lot of pain. He didn’t know he was in Australia but he waited his chance to get away. The yacht wasn’t close in but he was a good swimmer and he managed to get ashore but then he doesn’t know what happened because next thing he woke up in hospital. They said he had several drugs in his system, nothing illegal but pretty powerful all the same.”

“Sedatives?”

“That and anti-depressants, and other stuff.”

“And the yacht?”

“I went down to check it out, I didn’t know whether to believe the kid or whether it was an elaborate way to get into Australia. But there was no sign of the yacht. I made some enquiries and found it had sailed that night. I thought we should put out a call because we needed to know what was going on, in case it was doing some illegal trafficking ... but it was decided the Russian was gone and the kid could be deported when his injuries had healed ... and that was that. So you’re saying he’s done something in Queensland?”

“It looks like he lured a homeless kid on to his yacht and sailed out but then he came back for some reason and someone tried to help the kid off the boat but he died along the way. He had injuries to suggest he had been abused on board. But the yacht was gone next morning and no one followed up. We don’t know where Mr Simonov has gone.”

“I felt a bit bad that we just dropped the case. But the Samoan boy was alive so it didn’t seem serious enough to put the resources into tracking the yacht. And the kid had gone on board of his own free will so we might’ve found it hard to make a kidnap charge stick. But I still reckon that guy with the yacht was one sick bastard.”

“For sure. And we’d still like to find him—or at least warn other jurisdictions.”

DC Forman and DC Kelly nodded as Greg said this. And Jenny thought this calm and thoughtful response was one of the things she liked about Greg. He let DS Moore rattle him but when she was out he seemed to revert to his normal self and get things done without fuss and bother.

Van Ommen agreed with this but said it was up to Queensland to go hunting.

“Then—can you send us your report and let us know the kid’s details. I can’t guarantee we can do much but there’s always the chance Simonov will return. And I’d like to know if he’s got other victims scattered round the Pacific.”

He could understand a teenage boy being attracted to going on to a beautiful yacht with all the latest equipment and the chance to set sail. He could even envisage his own boys accepting such an invitation. The thought strengthened his own resolve to find a way to, if not catch the yachtsman, warn others.

After he’d hung up he said to no one in particular, “There’s another thing ... if Simonov left Russia with two other men—then where are they?”

“They might’ve gone home,” Brent suggested.

“We can hope.”

“And I wondered if one man could sail a big yacht on his own,” Jenny Forman put in.

Greg had little familiarity with yachts of any kind. The most he had ever done was hire a rowboat when the family was at the coast. “Don’t know,” he said frankly. “But if he’s got all the latest electronic gadgets, you know, winching up the sails, some sort of autopilot, all that stuff, well, I guess one man could sail it. But it seems he likes company. It might be that that’s the way he gets kids, that they like the idea of getting to help on a beautiful yacht.”

This made sense but it didn’t tell them how to proceed.

“Is it enough to pass on to Interpol?” Brent said. “Two young men ... and maybe more. And maybe he *is* trafficking, maybe that would get them interested?”

“If he’s rich it might just be that he can do what he likes and get away with it.”

“Maybe he made his money by some dodgy means—maybe the Russians would like him back.”

“Well, we can speculate all day but I think we just need to put all we’ve got together and see if we can get it passed to—at least, say, the Pacific places he’s likely to call at.”

As he said it, Greg Sullivan felt he would always much rather work in a hands-on way. This being dependent on other people made him uneasy. There were too many men out there like Frank Jennings who would always look to the easy way out.

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DSS Jennings didn’t see himself called upon to do more in the case of the disappearance of the little Jowett boy. The toddler had disappeared in Townsville and it was their case. He had called at the home of Simon Lynch. Unless something more happened he felt he could rest on it. After all, the Jowetts could have all sorts of feuds with neighbours and relatives which might have led on to the decision to take the little boy. Or, if the Jowetts had money, a ransom note might be received.

‘Not my business,’ he said several times and put the matter out of his mind. But a neighbour of Simon Lynch rang him the following day and said, “You wanted to know if Simon Lynch came back, didn’t you? He’s just got in but there’s no sign of his girlfriend with him. D’you want us to do anything?”

“No. Leave it to us.” He was tempted to say nothing about thanks; he certainly didn’t want to know any more about Simon Lynch’s movements. But he finally dredged up enough professionalism to thank his caller and reiterate his ‘Leave it to us’. Then he thought of ringing Simon Lynch, of sending a junior out, and then the kudos given to police who restored missing children to their loving families came back to him. He still didn’t believe Lynch had anything to do with it. Just the thought of driving to Townsville seemed to knock this idea on the head. But it was, just, a kind of lead.

He went out unenthusiastically and drove through the morning traffic. He thundered on the door in the hope he could make the young man feel he was being a nuisance and had given police considerable trouble. Simon Lynch came to the door and said an annoyed “Yes?”

Jennings showed his identification and said without any lead-in, “So where is the Jowett baby? The one you just bloody kidnapped!”

He hadn’t expected to get anything and the fleeting look of dismay in the young man’s eyes startled him. But he knew how to follow up and said loudly, “So come on! Where’s the kid? And don’t bother giving me any bullshit!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Simon Lynch had sufficient sangfroid to parry the question.

“Yep. You do. Your sister’s little boy. Police decide to do a DNA test on him to see if you’re the dad and the kid immediately disappears. Very suspicious in my book.”

“That’s rubbish. I’ve got nothing to do with Tony Giordano’s kid and you can’t say I have.”

“Wrong, mate. They sent off the DNA sample before the kid got snatched. So where’s your girlfriend and the kid?”

“She’s buzzed off. And she hasn’t got any kid—”

“How d’you know—if she’s buzzed off?”

“I’m only guessing—”

“So—we’re down to guessing, eh? So where and when did she leave you—and don’t even think of lying!” Frank Jennings enjoyed the opportunity to bully someone. It wasn’t often he could do it to a sophisticated and articulate young man but he had got Lynch on the wrong foot right at the beginning and he had never quite recovered.

“How would I know?”

“You must know.”

“Well, I don’t.”

“Then give me her full name and her home address.”

“I don’t know.” Jennings felt he had increased the young man’s unease but he wasn’t sure what the trigger had been. Had Simon Lynch done something to his girlfriend?

“Then you’d better start thinking.”

“I still don’t know.”

“Then I think we’d best continue this conversation down at the station.” As he said it, Jennings could see that this was the last thing Simon Lynch wanted.

“We just got chatting at the supermarket and she said she had nowhere to live and so she moved in. But it wasn’t a love affair, just convenient for her.”

“Sex didn’t come into it?”

“Not really.”

“You had sex. Yes or no?”

“Well, sometimes. But it was nothing serious. She was free to go at any time.”

“What’s her last name?”

“I don’t know.”

“Course you know! Spit it out.”

“No. I just called her Lou.”

“Well, we need to find her. So when did you last see her?”

“Five days ago. Maybe.”

“And you’ve been away seven days—so where did you last see her?”

There was a long silence. Simon Lynch obviously hadn’t prepared a story and he stood there while he turned things over in his mind.

“She wasn’t here when I got up. She’d taken all her stuff. She didn’t leave a note.”

“What did you do to her to make her do a midnight flit?”

“Nothing. I guess she met someone else.”

“People with a connection to you do seem to disappear. So it’s time we put this on a formal basis. So you’d best accompany me to the station.”

Simon Lynch made several rather feeble excuses but finally seemed to see it was best done and over with. He came out and got in his car and followed Jennings’ car and went in to the station in silence. He continued his unwillingness to offer anything except for giving his name and date of birth. Then he retreated into a renewed silence and watched Frank Jennings gradually lose his cool.

Jennings felt certain there was something to be dug out, that Lynch was hiding something, but he also felt that somewhere along the line he had lost the initiative. He had received Petra Moore’s detailed report but it didn’t seem to provide anything which might get Lynch talking. Then he thought it might be worthwhile to read it again. He suspended the interview and went out and hunted for the file. He didn’t hurry, thinking that leaving Lynch sitting there might do him ‘good’. He brought Moore’s report in and sat there reading it.

Then he said non-committally, “Underage. Yeah, that would make a good reason to ditch your girlfriend and pretend you don’t know anything about her. Yeah, I didn’t realise it might be something like that. But DS Moore picked up on it. Interesting. And all your neighbours ... seems they had their suspicions too.”

“That’s baloney! That copper never even set eyes on Lou!”

“How d’you know that?”

Again he thought he had put Simon Lynch on the back foot.

“Lou told me—”

“Told you what?”

“That she’d never seen that copper—”

“That’s not the same thing.”

Simon Lynch was bright enough to understand that. But he still felt certain DS Moore had not seen Lou. This Jennings was flying blind, there could not be anything in Moore’s report, and he only needed to stay calm and as unresponsive as possible.

Frank Jennings had several times felt he was close to catching out the young man, boxing him into a corner where there was no easy out, and each time it seemed to dribble away again.

He couldn’t hide the hint of frustration gnawing at him. But if he couldn’t get there by questioning Lynch then it would have to be by other means. “So how old is your girlfriend?”

“Ex-girlfriend. How would I know? I never asked her and she never asked me. We weren’t planning to get married.”

“So we’ll put out a call for her, get her side of the story, along with her name and address.”

“I keep telling you she was homeless.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll still find her.”

“Well, good luck to you.” He seemed about to say something more then changed his mind.

Jennings stood up. The desire to yell at Simon Lynch was strong but he could see he needed more background before he pulled Lynch in again.

“You’re free to go, Mr Lynch, but don’t leave town.”

Simon Lynch got up without a word and walked out. Jennings sat on for several minutes then he thought ‘will that cocky young bugger go to her, ring her, send her a message?’ And the answer seemed to be ‘quite likely’. But he didn’t think he had enough to get a warrant for a phone intercept. It was all suspicion but no evidence.

Then he rethought that.

If only he had the DNA results but that could take weeks—

He wasn’t wild about making work for himself. After all, the taking of the toddler *was* Townsville’s business. But Simon Lynch would go on bugging him until he resolved something. And other people must know, must’ve met this mysterious Lou. He went out again and drove to the home of the Lynch family. If anyone knew anything about Lou then it would probably be Simon’s mother—unless Simon had kept her hidden from his parents for ... whatever reason ...

And he was increasingly sure that Lou was underage—or had been when she moved in with Simon Lynch.

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Mrs Lynch, to Jennings’ relief, was home alone. She stood in her doorway looking puzzled though not noticeably wary. “You’re needing to find Lou,” she echoed him, “but I thought she was with Simon.”

“He says she’s gone and he doesn’t know her surname or where she lived or how old she is. We do need to find her so I hope you can help.”

She didn’t look enamoured of this entreaty but she stood aside and said, “You’d better come in then.” She ushered him in to a very pleasant sitting room and sat down. “So why are you looking for Lou? Is something wrong with her?”

“At the moment we aren’t sure. She may have been involved in kidnapping a child. But until we find her and question her—well—I hope you can provide some details. We don’t want to have to put out an alert.”

“I think her name is Louise Schultz and I think she said she went to school in Coorparoo. But I might have that wrong. And I can’t believe she could have done anything to a child. She always seemed a nice girl, not very bright but nice.”

“Do you think she might have said anything to your daughter?”

“I wouldn’t think so. But I suppose you could ask her. She’s at work.”

He asked her for her daughter’s workplace and said, “If you think of anything else about Lou please give me a ring.”

“But I can’t believe Simon couldn’t tell you everything you need to know.”

“Your son is not being very co-operative.”

She went back to looking puzzled but said politely, “I’m sorry I can’t be more helpful. But I feel sure there must be a mistake. Lou wouldn’t hurt a child.”

“The sooner we find her the sooner we can get all this sorted.”

She continued to puzzle over it all long after his car had disappeared. And she didn’t think it was very likely that Stacey could help. Stacey tended to avoid Simon and therefore Lou ...

DSS Jennings wasn’t hopeful of finding out anything from Stacey Lynch but if the name he’d been given was correct it shouldn’t be hard to find out something about the girlfriend or possibly ex-girlfriend.

Stacey was busy with a customer so he stood round looking at the items on display. He preferred sitting at a bar or in front of the TV to doing anything very sporty but he had time to think that Simon’s sister was quite a looker. The manager saw him standing there and came over. “Can I help you, sir?”

Jennings introduced himself. It mightn’t hurt to have it nosed around that police were interested in the Lynch family. He said he was waiting to talk to Stacey.

“She just started a couple of days ago. She’s doing well. She’s surely not in trouble?”

“No. It’s her brother’s girlfriend who has gone missing. It’s just possible she knows something.”

“I see. I don’t think they were ever very close but I’ll get her for you.”

A minute later Stacey walked over to him and said coolly, “You wanted to ask me something?”

He introduced himself and explained and she said, “Lou? No, I don’t think she can be missing. She and Simon went away together so he must know where she is.”

“You would think so but he swears she did a moonlight flit and he doesn’t know her surname or her age or where she used to live. Bit odd, in my book.”

Stacey looked surprised. “I’m sure he must know. She’s been living with him for more than a year.”

“So what can you tell me?”

“Well, I think her name was Schultz and her dad was a bus driver but I never asked her anything about herself. But why would you need to find her? Is it about the missing baby?”

“You think she might know something she doesn’t want to tell us?”

“Or maybe Simon doesn’t want her to say anything?”

“Why wouldn’t he?”

“It’s his baby. I guess he doesn’t want her to know.” She said this very calmly but he thought there was some firmly tamped-down emotion behind it.

He stood there debating how hard to push her. He didn’t mind to bully people, but he was reluctant to push her or be seen to be pushing her. At last he said, “Would you be willing to put that in an affidavit?”

“I guess I can, if you tell me what to do, but I don’t really want to. And what does it have to do with Lou? Or you think Simon stole my little boy and asked Lou to mind him?”

She was certainly making his job easier but he felt reasonably certain she had no idea where Lou Schultz might be. “It’s possible,” he said non-committally, “but until we can find her it only remains a possibility.”

“But Simon *must* know.”

“What was their relationship like?”

“She did what he told her to do.”

More people had come in to the shop and he thought he had probably got all he was going to get from her. "Okay, so let me know if you think of anything else."

He didn't know how many schools there might be in Coorparoo but he would look first for state schools. Coorparoo wasn't a poor Housing Commission suburb but if her father really was a bus driver then they probably didn't run to private schools and Lou didn't sound the sort of girl to be winning scholarships.

And he got lucky with the high school there and asked the office to check the details for a Louise Schultz. He explained that she seemed to be missing and that no one was quite sure of her age or family address.

By the time he hung up he had the information he needed, including the fact that Lou had dropped out of school as soon as she turned sixteen. 'So she's only seventeen now and they've been together for 'more than a year' so I'm not surprised he's been so cagey'. And if he had started out on his sister it might well be that all the girls he fancied were young and blonde.

He went back to base and tidied up some other work. He didn't normally go out looking for work but now he felt he was close to clinching a case and a conviction and he would like to see Simon Lynch in the dock and he wasn't averse to letting Greg Sullivan and Petra Moore know he had succeeded where they hadn't. This didn't have quite the same sense of satisfaction in it. After all, they were only in the position of asking for help and making a few suggestions.

He considered checking out her family then decided to leave that in favour of the Lynch family. So in the evening he went back to the Lynch household. His whole attitude radiated a sense of Don't-Mess-Me-Around. Mr Lynch took him in and offered him a drink. It was a temptation but he said briskly, "No, still on duty. Now I need to know just what is going on between your son and the girl who moved in with him when she was only sixteen. And I'd like you all to stop covering up for him. If we're going to find the little Jowett boy and restore him to his parents then you'd best tell me what's going on."

Allan Lynch started to say that they didn't know what was going on but Jennings cut him off. "Your son told me he didn't know his girlfriend's surname, her age, her address, and that she had packed up and left him in the middle of the night. All that is baloney and if he doesn't want to end up in jail I'd suggest your whole family needs to start talking."

"But I really don't know anything about Lou. We never asked and I only met her a couple of times."

"Your daughter has told me, and is willing to do a statutory declaration to say that Simon was the father of her baby. So the kidnapping of the child as soon as we ask for a DNA sample is very suspicious. If you don't want some very nasty publicity I would suggest you get straight on to your son and tell him to tell us the truth."

Allan Lynch had lived a quiet, unremarkable, and respectable life and now he saw horrible tabloid headlines screaming incest and kidnap and who knew what else. "But that can't be true—that about Simon and Stacey! We know she was carrying on with the Giordano boy—"

Frank Jennings didn't mind to push the boundaries and now he said, "Tony Giordano's DNA and other details are on record since he was killed. We know he wasn't the father of that baby." This wasn't proven but he saw no problem with implying it was.

Mrs Lynch had come in quietly and sat down beside her husband. She looked at him and then away to the vase of flowers on the unused piano. It wasn't only the undermining of their family life but a very sordid sleazy undermining ... "Then—can't we wait for the DNA tests? There might be some other explanation."

Her husband looked at her. He, too, was tempted to grasp at this straw but he couldn't dismiss that conversation with Simon about refusing to give a sample. "I am quite certain my son would never do anything to hurt a child."

"But he doesn't mind to put the Jowett family through hell?"

If there was an answer to this then neither of the Lynchs seemed able to find it.

At last Allan Lynch said slowly, "Then—can you at least try to keep Stacey out of it? She's been through enough ... problems ... and she's planning to go back to school and finish her education. We don't want her hurt."

Jennings was largely immune to these kinds of appeals. And he was aware that he had done a lot of running around to get information that they would never have brought to him.

“Don’t know. Find out where they’ve stashed the baby and we might go easy on you.”

He got up and went out.

Allan Lynch said to his wife after the front door closed on Jennings, “Do you think we need a lawyer?”

“For us, you mean?”

“No. For Simon.”

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Petra Moore had had quite a lot to say about police who were averse to work, to doing any sort of follow-up, of leaving issues in the hope they would quietly go away. Greg agreed though with no great enthusiasm as she obviously included him in this coterie of officers who hoped that difficult problems would land on someone else’s desk on someone else’s patch.

It was quite a while since he had found an excuse to go out to Buckton to talk things over with Dennis Walsh. And he knew Dennis wouldn’t understand how easily Petra undermined him. After all, if anyone looked like wanting to oust Dennis from the station he would either fight back, if he thought they had an ulterior motive, or tell them ‘It’s all yours’.

And when he told Walsh over a cup of tea and a biscuit that Petra made him feel like an old has-been Dennis just said, “So?”

“What d’you mean—so?”

“You’d prefer that she’s another Towner or as lazy as Hassell?”

“Of course not. It’s the way she goes about everything—”

“Well, that’s the thing. Are you checking all her work, making sure she’s not cutting corners? If you ever get something to court you want to be sure all her stuff stands up. Just because she looks and sounds efficient doesn’t mean she is. She’s maybe got good at looking good.” And as he said that Greg realised, with some embarrassment, that he might be in charge but he had never checked anything of DS Moore’s. He had taken everything on trust. That supreme sense of competence must mean she was doing a good job. And the more she criticised other officers the more it made her sound like the one person who would not let a case go.

“Well, Simonov’s gone and nobody is going to bring him back and I’ve been told it’s out of our hands so I guess she’s right when she says we let him go too easily.”

“Maybe. But what’s to stop you sending a notice to the places he’s most likely to head for, just a warning—”

“Nope.” Greg shook his head. “Jennings has told me to leave it, that they’ve got him in their sights.”

It was Dennis’ turn to shake his head. “And you believed that useless sod?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. But there’s not much more I can do from Winville—”

“You found that kid in Geelong—not Jennings—and not Petra for that matter.”

“No. It was Jenny who found that out.”

“So stop listening to Jennings and stop kow-towing to Petra.”

“All very well for you to say. You’re not there. Or only on some Mondays. And that’s only because Jake is fed up with Merrill and wants to show him up—” This was something Dennis had wondered about but he had no intention of getting involved in Jake Moss’s private vendetta with his deputy.

“Well, never mind that. Just get Jenny to put together a good report, photocopy of Simonov’s passport details, picture of the yacht, and send it to the police commissioners in all the Pacific countries you can think of.”

“I don’t know any Pacific countries—”

“Course you do. I’ll get Fiona to send you a list—or get your juniors on to it.”

“And what about Jennings?”

“You saw him off when he was here. So maybe he’s doing this but I’d doubt it.”

Greg doubted it too. And he knew there was no love lost between Winville and Frank Jennings. But it didn’t automatically mean that Jennings had given up on this case.

“Okay, I’ll get the kids on to it. And when they’ve all gone out, I’ll send a copy to Jennings.”

As Greg went out five minutes later he had the feeling he had often had with Dennis before now: Dennis made things sound simple and straightforward. The trouble was—Dennis only had Grant to deal with. He didn’t understand that Petra by her expressions, her body language, her comments, could make him doubt himself.

But maybe Dennis was right. People who paraded their efficiency ...

‘And I’ve never paraded any efficiency in my life ... ’

He stayed late in the station going over her work, making notes for himself, checking her notes and files and reports ...

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Frank Jennings didn’t know he was being criticised and he would’ve dismissed it if he had. He was on a roll. He rarely put together model reports but he could see clearly that although Townsville might be in charge he was the one with key information.

He stayed late putting all his information together. Someone must’ve seen Simon Lynch’s car. He must’ve stopped for petrol. And even now he was probably warning Lou. This was the key, he felt sure. Could he get a trace put on Lynch’s mobile? Or was he very cautiously only using public phones? And what phone did Lou have or was she hiding away in a place with a phone? He made notes for himself. Tomorrow he could look for credit card use. Or was Simon organised enough to only pay cash along the way?

He thought of the work involved—and then he thought of the kudos—and then he thought how much he would like to see Simon Lynch in the dock. And then he added another thought: ‘What is the charge if you kidnap your own child?’ And he hoped that aspect wouldn’t see the charges downgraded.

He was just getting into bed when he found himself wondering if someone like Lou Schultz, young, not very bright, away from home and any kind of support, was capable of looking after someone else’s baby.

And that led on to a less palatable possibility: was the toddler still alive?

But next morning saw him bustling around. Several of his colleagues saw this unexpected energy and wondered what had brought it on but said nothing. He set out first to see if he could get credit card details for Simon Lynch and eventually found he had two cards. Then he brought the full weight of his position to bear. He needed the details on when and where those cards had been used and he needed it immediately.

‘Very unwise, bud, to use your cards up and down the coast.’ It was like watching a journey unfold. He mapped it out clearly and wondered if any of those service stations and motels would remember Lou being there too, with or without a crying toddler. But a long car trip with a small boy would be very trying ... so was there a chance that Lou was still in Townsville?

Or could she have come back another way while he drove home?

Maybe he did need to find the Schultz family after all. Lou might have more knowledge of small children than he had allowed for.

And when he sought out that address the school had given him he was relieved to find that the family still lived there. Carl Schultz worked in the office of a bus company and Marita Schultz minded children in her own home. She said she currently looked after three toddlers.

But both parents said they had not seen their daughter for at least six months. “But how could she be *missing*?” Mrs Schultz sounded as puzzled as Mrs Lynch had. Perhaps there was something about Lou which negated the idea that she could ever go missing.

“Did you ever meet her boyfriend?”

“No. We wanted her to come home. We felt she needed looking after. She is rather immature for her age.”

“You didn’t try to press charges against Simon Lynch?”

“Oh no! Goodness no!” Mrs Schultz looked shocked at the idea. “Not these days. Girls go off and do ... things ... and they don’t listen to their parents.”

“You didn’t go to see where she was living—or whether she was safe there?”



Both parents seemed to silently commune before Mr Schultz said carefully. “Are you saying she *wasn't* safe there?”

“As she and her boyfriend appear to have kidnapped a child and she and the child are now missing—well, over to you.”

“But—that’s terrible.” Mrs Schultz looked at him with worried eyes. “I just can’t believe Lou would do such a thing.”

“Do you have any friends or relatives up the coast? Rocky? Townsville?”

“Well, yes, a few. Why?”

“Okay. Names, addresses, phone numbers.”

“You think Lou might be staying with a relative? But then ... she wouldn’t be missing, would she?”

“She can stay with anyone she wants—but we still need to question her. She and Simon Lynch drove to Townsville and he came home alone. So until we know where she is she has to be considered as missing.”

“I could ring around,” Mrs Schultz said cautiously, “but it would get rather expensive.”

“No. Leave it. We’ll get on to it.”

And as he went out he could see that it would be best to pass this chore on to Townsville. Someone on the doorstep of those Townsville addresses would be more likely to get results. And they could more easily follow up the Mackay address if they had no luck in Townsville. Of course Lou could be stashed away in a caravan park or Simon had found a bolthole ...

He put together a simple report and sent it north then went home. He was back at his desk early the next morning in the hopes there would be news. He was doodling himself some notes when his superior DI Hardy came by and stopped to ask what he was working on. His view of Jennings was of a man who rarely pushed himself.

“Still on the Scarborough case, Frank?”

“The perp has left Australian waters so that’s no go—but I’m working on a related case.”

“Okay.” Hardy pulled over a chair and sat down. “Fill me in.”

Jennings had sufficient experience to make sure he linked everything back to the background of Tony Giordano. Hardy simply nodded and said “Uh huh” several times. But then he said, “The missing child—how did that land on your desk?”

“That was Winville, they thought it might connect back to Giordano, so I said I’d check it out for them. But it’s pretty well out of our hands now. I’ve passed on all I got to Redding in Townsville.”

Hardy nodded. “Good. We’ve had a complaint about you hassling the Lynch family. They’ve got themselves a lawyer to put in a formal complaint. So you’re sure you’ve only worked on this business of the missing toddler?”

“Quite sure.” He wondered if the Lynch family had passed on Stacey’s claim about Simon. “Can I see the complaint?”

“Of course. Come in to my office.”

The complaint was couched in very general terms and there was nothing in it to explain why the family had been harassed by an over-zealous police officer.

“I think,” Jennings said cheerfully, “that the family hasn’t been honest with their solicitor.”

“Possibly not.”

“And we should have the results of the DNA test on the toddler by Friday. I think that might make the Lynch family sing a different tune.”

“It might.” Though the possibility that Jennings was taking leaps of faith which might not be borne out by evidence was also there. “Then I think I need to ask Peter Horne to be more specific in his complaint. But you are absolutely sure you’ve gone by the book?”

“Absolutely.”

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DSS Sullivan was also thinking about ‘by the book’, a rigorous adherence to proper procedure, and he could see that although Petra Moore had collected and collated a lot of information into clear reports she had been careless with the details. Several times she had left off dates or times, several times she had seemingly put words into people’s mouths. And she had failed

to record background details. He worked on calmly for more than an hour listing problems. And he intuited that Petra with ambitious men snapping at her heels had been meticulous whereas here she didn't see Brent and Jenny as a threat. She could let her guard down ...

At first he had had the unworthy thought 'this'll put you back in your place' but then that had faded. He was in charge. He was responsible for what his juniors did—or didn't do. If he made Petra look bad it ran the risk of making his oversight look lax.

And as he said to her first thing next morning, "If we get cases to court and your interviews don't have dates or times on them—well, it's going to go against us."

She had looked surprised but then said, "No worries, I'll soon fill those in."

"How? By guessing?"

"Of course not! I'll cross-check with my notebooks."

"That should be second nature when you do your reports."

"It hasn't been bothering you—"

"I thought that in twenty years of experience you wouldn't need to have your work checked."

That was a silly thing to say and he knew it as soon as he said it. There never was, and never would be, work that was beyond scrutiny. He had let things go and she knew it.

"Well, go over every thing. I've made notes of omissions. Get those fixed and I'll check again later." He wanted this to sound both firm and conciliatory. But he knew it only came out sounding conciliatory. He had always shied away from any kind of confrontation and Petra Moore probably understood this nearly as well as he did.

She nodded and went away and he wondered if he'd achieved anything by his careful scrutiny of her work. If she was careless of details in the future he wasn't sure he would be calling her to task again. Dennis Walsh mightn't mind confronting slack work. Whereas he knew perfectly well that if he liked Moore better he probably would not have said anything.

But over the next few days he noticed a slight change in the atmosphere of their office. DC Forman had never kow-towed to Moore, partly because Moore had shown her no particular interest, but DC Kelly had treated her as the sort of officer he aspired to be: clear, competent, someone who got results. And now his attitude had changed slightly. He knew perfectly well Greg Sullivan would not tackle anyone's work unless there was a serious problem. Greg was a pussycat. Kelly didn't know why Sullivan had criticised her but he felt there had to be a good reason.

But Jenny Forman had overheard the conversation and she repeated it to Dennis Walsh and Grant Schroeder next time she came out to Buckton for a swim in the pool. It might be being disloyal to her team but she was fairly sure Walsh had put Sullivan up to doing some checking so she thought he deserved to know that Petra Moore wasn't wonder woman.

Dennis simply listened and nodded. Then he said, "So Greg is going to do more checking?"

"I doubt it. You could see he was backing away from it all. Poor guy."

"But you learn right from the start to fill in forms, basic information, times, dates, so it's hard to believe she wasn't bothering."

"Well, we know no one is going to go after Mr Simonov so I guess she thought this was just some filling in, that nothing would ever come to court."

Maybe it wouldn't. But it was a bad habit to get into, assuming reports and documents didn't need care because they would never be scrutinised by judges, lawyers, witnesses ... And Greg probably had the additional worry: he had given Moore a free hand in Brisbane so if she had over-stepped the mark with any of her interviewees he might face some searching questions.

"So did Greg get a letter off to Pacific countries to warn them to keep an eye on Simonov if he turns up?"

"No. Not yet."

"Well, tell him to get his finger out. No, I guess you can't do that."

"I can get it done and then just run it past him."

"Okay, but soon's you can. That bloke and his yacht seem to get around."

She said she would. But she could see what Dennis probably also saw. Greg Sullivan might have years of experience, might be good at getting on with people, might be conscientious, but he wasn't in charge and he wasn't showing any leadership skills. But she was too junior to raise the

issue ... “The trouble maybe is that there’s too much of a gap between Brent and me and the two at the top.”

“Then think about promotion. Talk to Greg about it.”

She had enjoyed her work when she first came to Winville but that feeling had been diminishing slowly. She wasn’t sure why but she thought that when Greg bounced ideas around with Dennis Walsh he had somehow been happier. Now he would in the normal way bounce them off his deputy but it simply wasn’t happening. Petra Moore believed in doing, not debate. Old has-beens sat round talking. The rising stars were out doing. And Forman thought Greg was the sort of person who needed that kind of talking things through. The doing followed the discussing.

She went back to the station when she returned to Winville. To her surprise Sullivan was still there. “It’s this stuff to be sent out ... I don’t even know what languages they speak in the Pacific. Don’t they speak French, some of them?”

“It doesn’t matter, sir. They’ll have someone who speaks English. So can I help?”

“Okay.” He showed her what he had done and she took it away to type up the final version. Greg hunted around for the photocopies Dennis had suggested sending and they put the package together. “Now—where to?”

“I think if we start close by—New Zealand, Solomon Islands, PNG,” she made notes for herself as she talked.

“Okay, now we just need addresses and their bigwigs.”

Jenny Forman could see the danger signs. Greg would now want to find the names of suitable people to send it to, seeing that as a necessary courtesy, and that would take more time.

“I think, just the police commissioners in each country’s capital. But we need to make it look as official as possible. So what if I draft a covering letter and you check it.”

It amazed Greg that they had it all signed and sealed within half-an-hour. As he drove home he had the disloyal thought that he would like to swap Jenny for Petra. But he could see that Jenny had asked Sergeant Walsh for advice whereas Petra would never go to Buckton to get help on anything. She seemed to have supreme confidence in her own abilities. Over-confidence?

Jenny didn’t make him feel as though he wasn’t up to the job. That, he could see, influenced his feelings towards both women.

Then he thought more cheerfully that at least the job was done. Now they could stop talking about yachts and Russians and go back to local issues. ‘At least then I know where I am ... and I’ve got local knowledge and Petra hasn’t.’

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But Sullivan’s lighter mood next morning was given a big dent by Frank Jennings ringing up to crow that he had found the missing toddler and he was going to be thanked very publicly and it could also bring him promotion and some good media.

It might be one station letting another station know the results of an investigation but Greg could hear the exultation in Jennings’ voice and knew that he wasn’t going to be thanked for anything. He said neutrally, “So what’s happened?”

“I put the Townsville bods on to some likely places for the kid to be held and they found him last night with that Simon Lynch’s girlfriend. A bit bruised but otherwise okay. So now I’m going after Simon Lynch big time. So keep an ear out. It’s going to make me look very very good.”

Greg could think of some things he’d like to say. And the obvious one was that Jennings hadn’t done it alone and unaided. But he was sufficiently big-hearted to say, “Well, congratulations, mate. That’s a good outcome.”

Then he turned to the room and told them all that the toddler had been found. He hadn’t liked the way Jennings had said he was going after Simon Lynch so he said nothing about that. He didn’t object to Jennings having a second success but he could hear in Jennings’ voice that sense of personal vendetta. Sometimes it was hard not to but it usually meant that there was some collateral damage in the head-long rush to get a conviction. It also sometimes meant that the investigating officer hadn’t dotted every ‘i’ and crossed every ‘t’. With the siren song of a big win leading them on officers could believe themselves if not invincible then at least not constrained by petty procedures.

“And not a word of thanks to us for putting him on to it,” Greg said mildly. “But then I don’t think Jennings is much in to thanks.”

“And does he have the DNA for the toddler?”

“He didn’t mention that. But I think that’s going to be his second success. So don’t be surprised if we hear he’s a DI next time we hear something.” A very incompetent DI probably but then he wouldn’t be the only one ...

“And that poor girl, Simon’s sister, is going to be front page news? I wonder if he’s going to soft-pedal on that?” Petra Moore put in. She had liked young Stacey Lynch though she thought the girl might’ve saved everyone a lot of heartache if she’d accused her brother long ago. Petra didn’t think that a fourteen-year-old was too young to be intimidated into staying silent. She had stood up to bullies in the school playground herself. She thought every young woman should be able to.

“I can’t see Frank Jennings caring about that. And I s’pose you have to wonder about her parents. Did they really see and hear and know nothing? Or were they so certain the sun shone out of their boy and couldn’t see him for what he was? And there’s another thing—did he ever take advantage of any other young women?”

“Not our problem,” Petra said briskly. “But you do wonder about parents some times. Do they go round with their eyes shut? I’d say that girl would be wise to get right away from home and start life somewhere else.”

“Maybe. But it isn’t always easy.”

It was a question Stacey Lynch was asking herself. She had proved that she could work in a shop and manage quite well. So maybe she could find other jobs and move out of home. But when she put this to her parents they immediately said she shouldn’t settle for just being a shop assistant. Stacey said, “Why not? You didn’t push Simon to become something more.”

“Because he said he was happy working there and he was thinking of doing some sort of management course. If he’d wanted to go to uni of course we would’ve encouraged him.”

“But he didn’t. Don’t you think that’s a bit strange?”

“Not everyone sees it that way, Stacey,” her father said.

“And not everyone is fixated on young blonde girls,” Stacey said rather diffidently.

“But he wasn’t, Stacey love,” her mother put in. “They just seemed to like him.”

“Well, I didn’t like him. So who is to say they all like him.”

“But you can’t say that. You don’t know what they thought.”

“It’s always ‘they’ so what happens when they find there were other girls before Lou? Maybe they were young and stupid too, same as I was young and stupid.”

“But of course you weren’t—”

“I should’ve gone to the police, I should’ve told them what Simon was doing—”

“No, of course you shouldn’t. We don’t want other men like that awful detective that came round—and now the neighbours are talking. I’m sure, and it’s all going to be so awful.”

Stacey got up. “He’s your son. You always knew what he was like. Anyway, I’m going to pack up and leave—”

“But you can’t do that, love. You belong here. And where would you go?”

“It doesn’t really matter any more. I just want to put all this behind me and go somewhere where I can start over.”

“But what about your education?”

“Someday.”

She got up and walked out before they could say anything more. And to her relief her mother didn’t come after her. She had no idea where to go or what to do but there, still running through their home life, was her parents’ belief that Simon could not have done anything wrong, that he must’ve been talked into it, because he was still their golden boy and of course girls had come to him, not the other way around. She sat in her bedroom for a while and felt the tears trickle down.

Not once had they understood how much she still missed Tony and how much she hated Simon. And Tony would never be in her life again ... and Simon would always be the shadow she could not escape.

She put some things in a backpack and slipped out the side door and down to the telephone box at the end of the road and took out the card DS Moore had given her. Of course it might merely be routine but she thought it would be good to talk to someone who at least knew how she'd felt about Tony.

The phone rang and rang and she was about to give up when a voice said "Petra Moore". She stumbled over what she wanted to say to the detective. It sounded whiney and rather helpless. "I want to leave home and go somewhere far away from all the things that are happening here."

"I thought you had a job?"

"I have but I can find a job somewhere else."

"Well, let Frank Jennings know you're leaving. I guess you could come out here but you'll need to be available if they want to call you for the kidnap case."

"Is it hard to get to Winville?"

DS Moore didn't particularly want a needy young woman coming here. But she could understand that the Lynch home might not be a very happy household at the moment. "Look, this is just an idea. I think Tony Giordano's real mum would like to meet you. I'll give you her phone number. She's seen you with Tony so she knows you were friends. But you'll probably need to go to a hostel or a friend's house for the moment. But if none of that works out take the bus or the train to Winville and come into the station and we'll find you somewhere to stay."

It wasn't said with any sense of welcome but Stacey thanked her and rang off. Should she ring this Sandra Halley? Maybe she would blame her for not helping to keep Tony safe? But then it would be nice to talk to someone who knew, who probably loved Tony. She rang and said rather diffidently, "Is that Tony Giordano's mum?"

Some ten minutes later she was waiting for a bus which would connect with a Mt Gravatt bus. It might be a stupid thing to do. This mother might be only acting out of curiosity not kindness but it meant that she would be away from home when all the media came around wanting her story. She didn't think she was important enough to draw the media but her parents seemed sure she and they would be a target.

Her mind quailed at the thought of blaring publicity.

And whatever Tony's mum was like at least she wouldn't be there when the media came around.

In this she did the media's investigative skills an injustice. Or she didn't think of Frank Jennings tipping them off. They were at her workplace next morning as she arrived to give in her notice and say she was going interstate.

It was Sandra Halley who rang Petra Moore to tell her Stacey had been ambushed and she needed to go somewhere where the media couldn't find her. Petra sighed and said, "Put her on the bus to Toowoomba and tell her to change there for Winville. I'll find her somewhere."

"Thank you, my dear. You're being very kind and I appreciate all you've done for Tony and Stacey."

At another time and expressed differently Petra Moore would have relished this accolade. But kind was the one thing she didn't see herself as. Kind people were rarely efficient people in her book. And now she would find herself being kind to a teenage girl until she could somehow send her on.

She said to Greg Sullivan as she killed the call, "Can you think of somewhere to stash this Stacey Lynch till the media storm blows over?"

Greg's first thought was that Petra could handle that. She had bought a rambling old house on the west side of town. She could find room for one young woman. Then he thought Petra might not be the most supportive of people to a young woman being hounded by the media. "She can come to us but I think it might be better to get a non-police place for her if she's still going to be called to court. We need somewhere comfy but at hand's length to us so no one can accuse us of witness-tampering. I think we might as well send her to the YWCA place then see what she wants. Or we could see if someone would board her."

"Fine, so soon as she gets here—we'd best see where things are at."

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Dennis Walsh turned up for his Monday stint in Winville and spent most of the morning with Sergeant Merrill. Winville had been told to clamp the cars of anyone hooning, doing burn-outs round the streets, and generally making nuisances of themselves. Merrill was inclined to see that as a lot of work “and you know they’ll soon find a way to be back on the streets, some mate’ll take them out—”

Walsh wasn’t wild about clamping. He saw it as a last resort. But he felt you needed to be hands-on as soon as there was a sign of stupid behaviour.

“So aren’t the drag races still going?”

“Nope.”

“The demolition derbies?”

“Nope.”

“Well, no wonder they’re out there doing stupid things. What’re you doing to get the youngsters doing something useful?”

“Not our business. We’re not ruddy social workers.”

“Have you checked their backgrounds? Are they in employment?”

“How would I know?”

“Well, let’s check. Who’s been charged with anything?”

He finally got Merrill to go through the charge sheets for the last five charged with speeding, noise, failing to heed stop signs, and went through them carefully to get an idea of ages and backgrounds. Then he said, “Right, let’s go out and see what’s going on.”

“That’s the court’s business. We charge ’em, they give ’em a slap on the wrist. Now we can clamp but half the time they say it isn’t their car, it’s their dad’s or their brother’s or something.”

“And the dad says he needs it? Yeah. But that’s no excuse for doing nothing. Next thing you’ll have a car full of kids into a tree.”

He took Merrill and went out interviewing all morning. Merrill’s lack of enthusiasm was obvious. But by the time they got back to get a late sandwich from the canteen Brad Merrill had developed a grudging respect for Buckton’s sergeant. Dennis Walsh might come on strong, making no bones about what would happen next time a lad was caught—but he always ended up with the need for the culprits to find work, anything, anywhere, rather than being stupid and wracking up an endless list of charges. “That’s no life for a bright kid,” he sometimes said. Merrill doubted whether many of these youths were bright but he said nothing.

And he knew from experience that as soon as Walsh was back home the same things would happen over again. Walsh telling them it didn’t matter who owned the car, that a car out there doing impromptu drags would be clamped willy-nilly, might make some think again. But he was dubious.

Merrill also knew that he would never acquire the sort of effortless authority Walsh seemed to bring to his work. But that was a thought he had no intention of sharing with anyone.

Petra Moore came to find them in the early afternoon and said, “The girl involved with that Tony Giordano is here. She needs a safe place to stay. Any ideas?”

“I can get her a place in Buckton or Dinna,” Walsh said. “What’s she doing here?”

“Escaping from the media, it looks like.”

“Well, send her around and we’ll see what she wants.”

Petra went away and came back with an attractive blonde teenager and introduced her to the two men. Petra said, “Sergeant Walsh can find you somewhere in Buckton or Dinawadding, that’s where we found Tony, but it’s up to you to say what you need and for how long. D’you want to stay with a family or on your own.”

Stacey Lynch looked at the two men rather nervously. One of them didn’t look very frightening but she didn’t like the way he looked her up and down. The other appeared more forbidding but she had the odd feeling that he would keep her safe and for a long time she hadn’t felt safe.

“I don’t mind, just to feel safe. Would people gossip a lot if I went where you found Tony?” She wasn’t sure she wanted to be there but a feeling of curiosity or perhaps it was a need to feel a last moment of closeness before she let go gave her a slight push. “I never had a chance to say good-bye to him.”

Nicky Wilcox and Luke O'Neill had come in to Buckton the previous day and said hello and that they were sorry to be away at the one time something dramatic happened in Dinna. They had asked a few questions and Dennis had told them the case seemed to have fizzled out now that the Russian had disappeared. O'Neill had said to that, "A Russian connection to Dinna is hard to believe—and I wasn't around to hear you all talking about it!"

Dennis had not been fussed on listening to O'Neill bemoan his absence yet again and had said, "There's a story there—but I'm not the one to tell you. Get on to Petra Moore in Winville."

Whether or not O'Neill had Dennis didn't know or care.

Now he said, "I can give Nicky Wilcox a ring in Dinna and she can get you somewhere there. But her friend there writes crime novels. If you don't want to tell him anything then just tell him to buzz off."

"I don't mind telling people about Tony. I'm not sure I want to talk about myself."

"Fair enough."

He went over to the nearest phone and rang Mrs Wilcox in Dinawadding and asked her if she could find a bed for a young woman for a few days. "She was a friend of the young man Maisie Selby found there. She'll tell you whether she needs a place to herself or to share when she gets there. I'll bring her out later."

If Nicky Wilcox had even thought of saying no the moment had passed. Anyway there was no shortage of empty places in Dinna and she *was* curious.

"I haven't got a tenant for your house up the road—or she can stay here. Jay is off to Toowoomba this week."

"Thanks. Wish him well." After he'd hung up he said to Petra, "I'll take her out to Nicky Wilcox when I finish up here."

Stacey went meekly back to the CIB room and Petra sent Brent down to get her a pie while Jenny Forman made her a cup of coffee. "It's very kind of you all." Stacey sat down on the chair Greg Sullivan pulled up.

"Well, I'm only sorry we can't get that Russian fella that abused Tony. We've sent out letters to warn other countries but who knows where he is now. Still, not your worry. You'll need to start thinking about what you want to do with your own life."

"But ... will I need to go to court?"

"Probably not. But just don't leave the state till we know. And leave a forwarding address when you leave Dinna."

Greg was just being his normal kind self but they all knew that it still rankled to know that Frank Jennings had had a big success with the information they had fed him. And having one of the key players in that big success now beholden to them did nothing to remove the sting.

Dennis Walsh came through an hour later and said, "Ready? I'll hit the road now."

He had thought of going through the back road to Dinna but he should probably go back to Buckton first and check with Grant and then he could send Grant out with Stacey and get her settled in. She might like to be with someone young and pleasant for a while. And Nicky Wilcox was kind and capable of looking after her at the other end.

She looked round the small box that did Buckton for a station and waited patiently while Dennis went over a couple of things with Grant. Then he said, "Right, you can take Stacey out to Dinna and get her settled in with Mrs Wilcox. Give her your card if she needs any help. And tell her it's up to her if she wants to tell things to Luke O'Neill."

As the young ones got in Grant's car, Stacey said, "Why do you think this Luke O'Neill will want my story? It isn't very exciting."

"He writes books. He's trying to write a book about the murders at Japana, that's the big feed lots we'll go past, but I don't think he's got very far with it. It's all very complicated."

Grant, thinking she probably didn't want to hear about murders, instead asked her what she liked doing and before long they were both chatting about sports and sportswear and she looked at Grant with admiring eyes when he told he'd been approached by the Broncos and had decided to stay with the police here.

She had never been in a position to really stick at anything and now she saw this as the kind of dedication she might someday be able to aspire to.

By the time he pulled up in front of Nicky Wilcox's house they had agreed to play tennis one weekend and she had said she would really like to come and watch him play cricket. Brisbane and Simon and her parents and detectives coming and her sorrow over Tony's death suddenly seemed very far away ...

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## *Book Sixty-Three*

### *Case No. 1: Whose Dog?*

The small police station in Buckton on Queensland's Darling Downs was unusually muggy in the late summer heat. Not even their fan had done much to stir the heavy air. Sergeant Walsh said he was thankful they hadn't had to go out and run around after escaped stock. His junior, Constable Grant Schroeder, thought it would be nice if they were called to a small problem at the Council swimming pool.

Instead there was a call from the hospital to say that a visitor had run his car into the steps and could someone come. "Sounds a bit weird but off you go," Dennis said to Grant. And Grant had just gone out when Walsh's wife Fiona came in on her way to do her afternoon at the op-shop. She said lightly, as she handed over some buttered scones, "It seems to be all round town that you've been doing some matchmaking."

"I have?" He looked startled. "Who?"

"Apparently lots of people saw Grant playing tennis with a pretty blonde girl and someone said you sent them off together. And it seems to have grown from there."

Buckton was a great place for rumours and exaggerations. He said drily, "I only got Grant to run her out to Dinna because I was bugged when I got back from Winville. That bloody Merrill always has an excuse—everything I suggested—he says it wouldn't work. It's like trying to push a rock uphill."

"But—who is she?" She didn't want him to get going on the boring subject of Sergeant Merrill.

"Some connection to that young man they found in the wheelie bin. Friend. She's staying with Nicky Wilcox or she was. Think Nicky's going to put her in my spare house."

In fact Stacey Lynch had just moved in to the old weatherboard Walsh had bought in the hamlet of Dinawadding, south of Buckton. Nicky Wilcox's son Jayden and a couple of his mates had done some painting and tidying up of the old place but it was still very spartan. Young Stacey though had been rather thrilled at the idea of living there. "I've never had a place of my own," she told Mrs Wilcox very earnestly. "It will be lovely just to be able to do things when I feel like it. But I haven't got any money to pay rent till I find a job."

"Not many jobs around here," Nicky Wilcox tried not to sound too pessimistic. "So what do you want to do in the way of work?"

"I'd really like to go back to high school to finish my education. But I guess I might be able to find a job in a shop somewhere."

Stacey had told Nicky of some of her problems, though not when Nicky's 'friend' Luke O'Neill was there, and now Nicky responded to the first part of this aspiration; the second part



could not be achieved in Dinna because there were no shops here to want assistants, just the post office and the general store. “Well, why not go to the high school in Buckton? Jayden went there. The bus leaves from in front of the post office at eight o’clock. The term’s just started but you’ll soon catch up.”

Nicky made it seem easy but Stacey only said, “What would the high school be like?”

Nicky shrugged. “It’s a small country high school, not like what you’re used to in Brisbane. But it’s a good little school and Jay was happy there. I’ll run you into Buckton later and you can see for yourself.”

“But I would be older than the others—”

“I can’t see that that would matter much.” Nicky thought it would solve the problem of how Stacey could spend her days. Just wandering round Dinna and worrying about things didn’t seem the ideal life for a young woman.

“I haven’t got any money, you know, to buy books and uniforms.”

“Maybe you can get a Living Away from Home Allowance? We can ask. But I think we should talk to Sergeant Walsh about that. I think your parents should provide you with some help.”

“He is a bit—scary—I wouldn’t know how to talk to him, he might think I’d done the wrong thing, like, you know, not telling people about ... ”

Nicky Wilcox had a high opinion of Sergeant Walsh but she didn’t see any point in standing round talking about him. And she hadn’t yet told Stacey that the empty house she was moving in to was owned by Buckton’s sergeant.

“Look, I’ll just finish packing up these parcels and get them to the post office then we’ll go to Buckton.”

Stacey wasn’t impressed by what she could see of the high school as they drove into the front car park. It looked like a collection of dull boxes in a rather dusty paddock. She was tempted to say to Mrs Wilcox, ‘this maybe isn’t a good idea’, but she let herself be led into the front hall where Nicky said to Matty Ainsworth, “Hi, Matty, is Mr Derry in? Stacey here is interested in finishing her studies.”

“I’ll just check.” Matty had been at the high school almost since its creation and she probably had greater passion for the school and its staff and students than anyone else. She smiled at Stacey as she tried to sum her up. The girl seemed an unlikely young person to want to attend Buckton High but she would probably be an asset.

A couple of minutes later she escorted them upstairs to Mr Derry’s office and introduced them. She closed the door on them and went back to her office, sure that she would soon hear more about this mystery girl.

Almost all of Buckton saw Jon Derry as an asset. A few still clung to the untested belief that the previous principal had been unfairly hounded out of Buckton but most parents could see that the whole atmosphere had changed with Derry’s arrival. The place seemed happier, more energised, more positive, and results were better overall. Jon Derry’s family had moved to Buckton. His wife worked part time at the hospital. His daughters were now in the high school.

He took down Stacey’s details without asking her what had brought her out here. He said cheerfully she had only missed a couple of weeks and would soon catch up. Then he went on to ask her what subjects she would like to do. Stacey floundered with this as she had not really envisaged herself back at school so soon. But he skillfully led her through her likes and dislikes and what she would like to do, or vaguely thought she would like to do as a career.

Then he bounced up and said, “So let me take you round the school and we can probably fix you up with some second-hand books and a uniform till you get settled in.”

The school didn’t get any more attractive as they walked around and the ovals stayed just as dry and dusty. But she found herself responding to the friendly welcome she got from all the prospective teachers. She told herself that it was probably just for a few weeks. Because the aspect of money continued to loom. If she couldn’t get some from somewhere then she would have to go somewhere where there were jobs.

When Mr Derry saw them off saying, “Now, Mrs Wilcox will show you where to catch the bus so we’ll see you tomorrow, and don’t worry if you haven’t got everything you need yet, we’ll soon get that sorted out,” Mrs Wilcox said, “Good, that’ll take Stacey’s mind off other things,” and

then she thought maybe she shouldn't have said that. It implied that 'other things' were simmering away in the background and might interfere with her studies.

She took Stacey round to the police station. Stacey wondered if Grant would be there and if he would be embarrassed when Nicky brought her in. He might've preferred to keep their tennis a secret. And he was probably just being kind to a 'waif and stray' anyway. But only Dennis Walsh was there. He took them in to the interview room and offered them a cup of tea.

Stacey still didn't feel particularly relaxed with him but having Mrs Wilcox beside her seemed to help. "Okay, so how can I help?"

Nicky Wilcox explained that Stacey was going to go to Buckton High for a while, "till Stacey is ready to move on."

"It's not a bad little school," Dennis said non-committally. He didn't know what school Stacey had attended in Brisbane but he thought it would probably be much more academically achieving and better resourced.

"The thing is, Dennis," Nicky felt she should plunge in; she didn't have all day to spend on Stacey's future, "Stacey doesn't have any income so how can we get her enough to live on? I thought Centrelink might be able to help."

"What about your parents?" He turned to the girl. "You haven't turned eighteen yet so I'd say they still have a responsibility."

"They are very angry with me. They said I should never have told anyone about Simon." Then she wondered how much he might know about her family.

"Why the heck not? Little bugger should've been locked up years ago." Dennis didn't know much about Simon Lynch but any hint of big brothers taking advantage of underage sisters, of older men taking advantage of underage girls of any kind, made him see red.

This blunt talking startled Stacey. No one had ever called Simon a 'little bugger' in her life.

"Well, the sooner we get on to them and get them to give you an allowance the better. So write down their phone number for me."

"Dad will still be at work."

"All the better. Give me his work number."

Stacey quailed at this. Her father didn't like being rung at work. And he would know that she had given his number to the police. "Do you think you should? He doesn't like being disturbed at work."

"Which is more important? Him or you?"

"Well, I guess he is."

"Then you guess wrong. So the sooner we get this sorted."

She meekly wrote down her father's work number. Then she consoled herself with the knowledge that she wouldn't be there to hear her father complain.

She listened curiously as this big sergeant with the big voice and the calm sense of authority asked for Allan Lynch and a minute later said, "Sergeant Walsh of Buckton Police here. I'm ringing about your daughter Stacey."

An anguished father broke in to ask where she was and was she okay.

"She's fine. But she needs money to live on. So I would suggest you arrange an allowance for her."

"That's not necessary. Just send her straight home and she can live with us for nothing."

"As she doesn't want to return to you—or not until your son is charged and jailed, you will need to provide an allowance for her."

"That's being ridiculous! If it wasn't for Stacey my son would not be being hassled by police—"

"Mr Lynch, if you don't want to be charged as an accessory after the fact I would suggest that you provide for your daughter. She is not yet eighteen so you still have a responsibility to provide for her. Now I expect you to send a cheque to her, care of Buckton Post Office. Once she's got a bank account set up you can pay regularly in to it. Have you got that?"

Mr Lynch immediately disputed this demand. "My daughter belongs at home. I will not pay out money for her to go off somewhere where we have no idea even where she is."

“I can arrange to have someone on your doorstep by this evening if you would rather pay cash.”

“Don’t you dare send that awful Jennings man round again.”

Dennis gave that a slight smile. He wondered what Jennings had done to get information out of the Lynch family; it obviously hadn’t left him smelling of roses. Dennis didn’t have a high opinion of Jennings, not after the way he had treated Billy the Lad, but he didn’t mind to use Jennings to insert a wedge if need be.

“If that’s what it takes to get you to support your daughter—”

After repeating that Stacey had left home of her own free will, Allan Lynch finally caved in and said he would send Stacey a cheque. “How much does she need?”

“Accommodation, food, travel, clothes. You can start with five hundred and then a hundred a week after that.”

This wasn’t met with quick acceptance but at least they seemed to be over the money hurdle. He said to Stacey that it was up to her whether she wanted to let her parents know where she was. It wasn’t very likely that they would drive all the way out here to pressure her to come back to Brisbane.

When Nicky and Stacey took the road home to Dinna Nicky just felt a sense of relief. Stacey felt a tumble of emotions. Relief certainly, but also a kind of awe that it could be fixed up so easily, and even a vague mixture of apprehension and excitement. Starting school here would be rather daunting but she felt sure she would get the help she needed to catch up. And then there was Grant. She would surely have more chances now to see him. She couldn’t say it to Nicky or anyone but her heart leapt just at the sight of him. And somehow memories of Tony had faded as Grant loomed in her thoughts. And Nicky after lending her enough to open a bank account in the Commonwealth had taken her along the street to the little op-shop to get a few bits of cutlery and china for her ‘new’ house. And Fiona had said to them, “I’m sure I’ve got things at home I don’t need that you could have.”

She knew the house had little more than a bed, a few chairs, a stove, bath with a shower over it, and a rainwater tank. It could do with some extra furniture and some cheerful items to decorate it.

Stacey as they drove home thought that people out here were amazingly kind. It didn’t occur to her that she had been lucky to meet some very nice people and that not all of Buckton would have responded so well. Her image of the country as a huge daunting dry place full of rednecks seemed to fade.

“We’ll borrow a little beer fridge,” Nicky was saying, “and we can scrounge up a cupboard and table and some kitchen stuff for you. But are you sure you want to be on your own?” She wasn’t afraid for Stacey’s safety. There were plenty of people in Dinna to watch out for the young woman. But she could see that too much time on her own, brooding on things, might not be good for the girl. She didn’t know that Stacey’s thoughts were now taken up with Grant, not Simon, not Tony, not with her past life.

“I think I’ll be okay ... and I am going to study like anything. I’m really going to show them all I’m not a dum-dum.”

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The humidity was not partnered by gathering clouds till the following afternoon. People said they could put up with it *if* it was going to storm. Which it did, late in the evening.

The following morning, while local people were checking their rain gauges and discussing the storm with neighbours, Dennis was called out by Ellie Parsons. She and her sister Faye were two redoubtable old women with a small farm outside Buckton. Now they rented most of their land to Andrew McLaren but they still kept hens, bees, some fruit trees.

“It’s a car,” Ellie said briskly. “It’s on the road and it’s been burnt. We need to have it moved.”

Walsh’s first thought was ‘Stolen?’ and then he wondered if it’d been burnt before or after the storm. “I’ll be straight out.”

If he’d said he’d be there as soon as he could Ellie would probably say ‘soon’ was not good enough. “You can’t miss it.”

No. A burnt car on that narrow gravel road up the slope wouldn't be missable. He thought of calling Noel Barnard at the garage to say he would be needed to tow a car but then he thought he had better check it first to see if it was tow-able.

The car was a sorry sight and was just past the Parsons' front gate. He drove up past it and parked. The burning was clearly deliberate. He had always assumed it would be. But as he walked down, keeping to the gravel, though it was unlikely any footprints round the car had survived the storm, he could see there was no number plate.

As he reached it he was horrified to see there was a burnt dog inside. It had probably scabbled at a back window trying to get out before dying of smoke or fumes. Then the windows had blown out and it had remained partly up against the door with its blackened paws half over the sill. Its teeth were bared in its ghastly death.

Dennis let out an oath. Who would do that to a dog? Even if the dog had been badly behaved, always barking, chasing stock, whatever, who would visit such a horrible death on the unfortunate animal?

He walked carefully round the burnt-out vehicle. Someone, he thought, had lit the fire in the front seat, then jumped out and shut the door on the dog. Something like that. There was a slight indentation of shoes by the driver's door but now there was no way to get size or sole. The indents were filled with rapidly drying muddy water. He walked back up the hill to see if there was any sign of the car driving up and then turning. He couldn't see anything to suggest this. 'Either they did it very carefully or they backed up from the road or turned in a driveway further down.'

That aspect probably didn't matter though it would confirm the idea that this was planned, not a spur-of-the-moment thing.

He rang Winville and said they needed to send him an arson investigator.

"A house?" Jake Moss said.

"No, a car. But it also involves an animal cruelty case."

"What sort?" Jake wondered if the car had been driven into something.

"Someone deliberately locked a dog in the car before setting it alight." He knew that would get Jake. He had recently bought himself an Irish Setter which he doted on.

"Okay, where and when?"

Dennis gave him instructions and then he rang Noel at the garage. He asked if he could come out and check. Noel knew most of the local vehicles. "Looks like an old Vauxhall."

"Not many of those still around. Okay, I'll be about twenty minutes."

While Dennis continued to prowl up and down the road, the Parsons sisters came down their laneway and stood looking at the blackened car. "Who would waste a good car like that?" Ellie said critically. Not much went to waste in the sisters' world. Though the 'good' might be problematical.

"Did you hear anything?"

"No. We were inside, we'd put the news on. It was when I went out to close the chooks up that I saw a blaze and I went in and said to Faye that someone seemed to be burning something. It was already thundering away and she said the rain would put it out, whatever it was, and sure enough, when we went back out to the front gate, down came the rain. It was good rain, though a bit heavy on the dry ground, I like it to ease in first."

"So what time was this?"

They gave him what they thought was the likely time.

"And you hadn't seen headlights, heard a car on the road?"

They said they hadn't but it was summertime and only just dark and they'd pulled the curtains ...

"The car looks like an old Vauxhall sedan. I'll have to wait for the investigators. Does that ring a bell?"

They said they couldn't help him. "But you get the fella, we don't want people burning cars all over the place, if it hadn't rained it might of got away into our paddocks."

He wondered if the storm had figured in the perp's calculations at all. Did they want the fire put out or hadn't they believed it would rain? That it would all just be a bit of thunder and someone else would get the rain?

“There’s another thing. There’s a dead dog in the car.” If it had been women less tough than these two he might not have shared this ... “Not sure what breed but something quite big.”

“We haven’t got a dog now.”

“Well, if you hear of a car or a dog missing, let me know.”

They didn’t go out much and prided themselves on not listening to Buckton gossip so they weren’t best placed to hear rumours but it was always worth a try.

When they’d finished staring at the car and gone away again he rang the local vet. She just might’ve heard something and he thought it would be worth getting an autopsy on the dead dog. Was it a farm dog or a town dog? She might be able to say. It would be too much to hope that there was still a tag or a microchip somewhere. But she might be able to determine an age and a breed.

He rang in to tell Grant he would be a while. It was nearly eleven and he was starting to think a cup of tea would be welcome when a string of cars turned on to the gravel road. Noel came first with his tow-truck, then Leila Burkett in her Landrover, then a man Dennis didn’t know. He waved them in to the Parsons’ driveway.

Noel said, ‘Cripes! They have made a mess!’ But then, after walking round the car and looking closely at the tyres, he said, “Don’t know, but I think I can tow it. Don’t s’pose it matters about the rims—”

But the arson investigator who had been looking at a house fire over past Norwilla when Jake Moss caught up with him, said a brisk “No. She’ll need to be loaded. Have you got something or will I get Winville on to it?”

Dennis intervened to say he thought Winville should handle it. Sam Hassan was now in charge of Traffic there and would do careful backup for the arson investigation. Sergeant Bellows said, “Fair enough. But what about the poor bloody dog?”

“I’d like to give him—or her—to Mrs Burkett for an autopsy.”

Bellows again said, “Fair enough,” and helped Dennis carefully lift the body out and on to a canvas sheet and stow the animal in the Landrover. “Now, have you got help at the other end?”

Leila Burkett said Justin could help her, “but what d’you want to know?”

Dennis ran through the things which might help them pin down the owner or, just possibly, the stealer of the dog. She was not sorry to drive away a couple of minutes later. There was something about the burnt vehicle and burnt dog which made her feel profoundly depressed.

“If it wasn’t for the dog—would you treat this as more than a nuisance?” Bellows said to Dennis.

“You mean—someone just wanted to get rid of an old car and thought up this stupid way to do it?”

“Something like that.”

“Was the number plate taken off deliberately or had it been de-registered years ago? What d’you think, Noel?”

“Can’t think of anyone with a Vauxhall round here. So it either came from somewhere else or it’s one that’s been tucked away in someone’s shed.” He knew this wasn’t being very helpful but nothing came to mind. And then a vague memory tried to surface. But he couldn’t seem to pull it up. Mavis might remember something ... “You might get an engine number. And maybe someone saw it on the road.”

Bellows didn’t want to spend a lot of time on what was mainly a public nuisance. It was unlikely the vehicle had any value. No one seemed to have been hurt. And the dog might be a stray. As he was about to ring Winville he stopped and said, “What would it take to cut it up and shift it that way? Would the Council have equipment?”

Dennis could see that this might be a much simpler way to go about it. After all the chance of the car yielding up clues wasn’t high. There just might be some surviving fingerprints. But there was no guarantee the perp was on file. At last he said, “You’re thinking hoons?”

Bellows took his time over this. “Maybe, but it suggests something more careful and deliberate. D’you think it was aimed at someone out here?”

Dennis had wondered if someone was getting back at Ellie and Faye for some reason. They were rigid-minded wowers in the view of some Bucktonites but the car had not damaged them in any way. It wasn’t blocking their gateway and the fire had not spread into their paddocks.

“Hard to see how—unless their plan went wrong. But I’d still prefer the car taken intact if you can manage it. Something just seems a bit off.”

“Any similar animal cruelty cases recently?”

“No. Not unless they weren’t reported. I don’t think the dog was a greyhound, its head and ears aren’t right, but we’ll need to wait on the vet to find out if it was some valuable breed.”

“Okay.” Whether he fully agreed or whether he was content to be carried along by Walsh’s concern wasn’t clear but he rang Winville and said they would need a vehicle to cart the burnt-out car and could they organise that a.s.a.p. “Afraid it’s going to be a long morning. D’you want to stay or go?” He turned from Dennis to Noel who said, “I’d best be getting back but ring me if you need me.”

After he’d driven back down the slope, Dennis said, “I’ll get back to Buckton and send Grant out with some morning tea.”

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Jake Moss rang Buckton in the late afternoon and said, “Why d’you think there’s something about that car that needs investigation? Heap o’ junk by the look of it. Fair bit of rust in the chassis.”

“Any fingerprints?”

“Not that Reid’s found.”

“So if it’s not a local vehicle why bother bringing it all the way out here? Any sign of it being towed?” He was inclined to think it had been driven there but they had been taking a risk of it breaking down before they even got there. Or was that why it had ended up there? The driver realised he wasn’t going to make his chosen destination.

“Don’t think it was towed. So they maybe were taking a risk, thing could’ve conked out anywhere.”

“In which case they intended to leave it somewhere else and didn’t make it? But we’re only guessing.”

“With luck Reid’ll get us something useful.”

Dennis felt he had done what he could at his end and Reid Strohling was slow and careful. If there was anything to find he would probably find it. And the vet might come up with something useful.

Leila Burkett rang him the next morning and said, “I’d like to send a DNA sample off. Be absolutely sure of the breed. It’s a young dog. A male. I just wonder if someone was hoping to breed from it. But can you cover the cost of a test?”

Where animals deliberately tortured and killed were concerned, Dennis could always find the funds. He still had vague hopes of pinning something on to one of the Plowmans for the way they had treated their dogs. So he immediately said, “Send your bill in. We’ll cover it. Any other ideas?”

“It’s a long-haired breed. Not a greyhound. Something more like an Irish Setter. But don’t take that as gospel. The body is too damaged to be sure of anything. But I’d say he’s been fed mainly a proprietary brand, not fresh meat. I’d like to be sure too that he didn’t have an infection or sickness of some kind. Sometimes people who pay a lot of money for a pedigree dog get angry if something goes wrong, that it isn’t fertile or catches something.”

Of course there was nothing to say it *was* a pedigree dog.

“Then I’ll leave you to it. Just let us know when you get something.”

Between the various people looking into the mystery he thought they would eventually find an owner and, with luck, that would explain most things.

About mid-morning Noel Barnard came by and sent his thoughts in a different direction.

“It was an odd thing,” he sat down and helped himself to a biscuit from the battered tin, “but I was trying to remember something about an old Vauxhall and Mave said, ‘remember that one that was by the station for ages, what happened to it?’ and I was trying to remember back that far. It was before you came and ol’ Joe didn’t stir himself over it.”

“You’d better start at the beginning.”

“It might be in your files ... but then again it mightn’t.” Noel knew old Joe Bosch hadn’t strained himself over his files and some he’d managed to burn. Some Bucktonites liked to say that

their sergeant was too lazy even to stub out his smokes. “So it was found in the creek bed, maybe the last year he was here, or the year before, and I got it out of the creek and there was no number plate and so I parked it in front of the station for him until he could find an owner. We didn’t know if it was deliberate or an accident. Anyway it sat out the front here for ages, three months at least. He didn’t do anything, I don’t reckon, just put a sign on it ‘Who Owns This Car’, and there it sat. And then, one morning, it was gone. I said to Joe ‘who came and claimed it’ and he said he didn’t know. He’d just gone out that morning and it was gone.”

“He left the keys in it?”

Noel grinned. “Don’t think so. But I reckon it would’ve been a business to jump start it, the battery would’ve been flat as a pancake. No, I reckon someone just hitched up a rope and towed it away. Nobody ever claimed to have seen or heard anything. And you know what people are like when they get in the pub, I was surprised no one was boasting about taking it. Never heard if it turned up anywhere. Strange business.”

Back then Vauxhalls were not a complete rarity. But they weren’t common. They were seen as a handy car round town but not a farm car. “D’you remember what colour it was?”

“I’d say it was cream.” Noel considered this and then he added, “It was a Viva, I seem to remember, but they stopped making them in the seventies so it was probably ten, twelve years old at least, maybe more.”

“And would you say the burnt one was a Viva?”

Noel in his first horrified inspection had not given any thought to make or model; he could only think of that poor dog. But as he walked around the vehicle looking at the possibility of towing it, he had given more thought to what it might be. “It could be. Ask Winville to check. They made a bigger sedan back then, a Victor, but I don’t think this would be that big. They can measure it if they can’t find anything on it.”

“And the one found way back—did you ever hear if there was anything in the glove box? In the boot?”

“That’s assuming the old sod checked but if he found anything I don’t reckon he ever told anyone here.”

“Would John Applegarth have been in the station then?” Sergeant Applegarth was now based over at Garramindi.

“I’d say it was just before him. There was a young constable there with Joe, a Ricky Olson. He couldn’t hack old Joe and he asked for a transfer and when they wouldn’t give him one he just up and walked out. That’s why they whizzed young Johnny into the station.”

“So what happened to Ricky?” Dennis had seen his name on some old forms but he had always assumed he had simply moved on to another station. Young constables got sent round to country stations whether they wanted it or not. Sergeant Bosch hadn’t recorded anything about it in anything but then, keeping a daily record of his activities hadn’t been his strong point. Day after day was left blank or with nothing more than ‘quiet day’ recorded. No wonder many people believed Buckton was a doddle. That Bosch hadn’t recorded desperate calls from householders coming home to find their TV gone or a hayshed set on fire, let alone attended, allowed certain officers in Winville to cling to the idea that Buckton didn’t need two officers.

“Well, now, there you’ve got me. I s’pose he sent in his resignation and went and did something else.”

“So was he still here when the car was parked out the front?”

“I’d say he left just before it disappeared.”

“So might he have taken it?”

“What for?”

“Parts. Do it up. Get back at Bosch. Whatever.”

This idea had obviously never occurred to Noel and he pondered over it. “I don’t reckon Joe would’ve cared if he *did* take it. One less thing to worry about.”

“So how long was Ricky here?”

“I couldn’t say exactly. Ten months. A year. Young Johnny couldn’t cope with Joe either, said he put the kybosh on everything and he felt pretty bad about not trying to help people. And

then you came and he was scared of you, said it was like jumping from the frying pan into the fire. I s'pose you thought you were stuck with a useless junior."

"It did look like he was part of the problem. But then he started to use his initiative and get things done."

Noel gave that a grin. "Poor John." And then he brought his thoughts back to cars. "But you never know. Joe might've said something to him about that car."

"He might." But whether this was worth following up ... He couldn't really believe that departed car from all those years ago was the same one which had now been carted to Winville. Even if they were both Vauxhall Vivas ... "So d'you know of any other Vivas round the district?"

"The Tripps had one, before Russell's dad died. I'm pretty sure Malcolm Binnie had one but then people started buying Japanese cars, don't reckon Malcolm would've ... " Dennis could understand that. Men who had gone through the war often would not have anything to do with German or Japanese cars. "No, I think he traded it in on a Falcon ... "

"And there was never any gossip, no one boasting in the pub that they'd pinched the car from out the front of the station?"

"No. Not a peep. Unless someone said something when I wasn't around. But you know what this place is like. If someone'd boasted in the pub it'd be all round town next day."

"And would the car have been worth much?"

"Fifty. A hundred. Don't reckon a swim in the creek did it any good. Not that there was much water, just puddles. But it still went. And then there was another Vauxhall went into the creek one time, but that one was blue, I think, or maybe grey. Funny about that. But there wasn't anything suspicious about that, just bad luck."

Dennis left it at that. Someone had got a car for the effort of towing it away and that ancient crime was not worth pursuing ... and more so given that there did not seem to be a lead still trailing. He went back to the station.

And in the late afternoon he dropped round to see George Hickman who put out a small monthly newsheet called the *Buckton Bugle*. Hickman did it as a community service but also because he enjoyed doing it in his retirement. Dennis had a sheet of small local thefts to be printed in the hope that someone had seen something. He also wanted George to print up the story of the burnt car. Someone must've seen it on the road ...

"Yes, I've been hearing stories," George said immediately. "And you know something? Everyone reckons it was that car that was stolen from in front of the station years ago, come back to life, don't know where that started."

"And who is everyone?"

"Well, nearly everyone," George said with a grin.

"So—who does everyone reckon pinched that car from in front of the station?"

"That's a funny thing, Dennis, because nobody seemed to have a clue. One day it was there looking pretty decrepit and the next it was gone—and not a word in the pub, just people saying they wondered who'd gone off with it ... only that they were glad it was gone, it was getting to be an eyesore. I was a bit suspicious. When did a Goodrick care about an eyesore. But not a sign of it. I even wondered if old Joe came out that night and towed it away because he was sick of the sight of it. But I don't know where he would've taken it. Everyone would've known if he'd just taken it up to the tip and dumped it."

"What about young Ricky Olson? Could he have taken it?"

"He'd been gone about a month when it went and I don't see him as wanting to see Buckton again, poor lad. Now if he'd had you in there he might've got somewhere in his career but the only time old Joe stirred himself was to yell at Ricky when he wanted to go out and do things. I don't blame Ricky for giving up. Joe wouldn't even let him attend. And then people abused him for not coming. Poor kid, he couldn't win."

"So what happened to him?"

"Not sure. But he was keen on that young niece of Judy Bilton's, she was helping out one time when Judy wasn't well. I think she married a young fellow over near Crow's Nest a few years later—"

"Not Ricky?"



“I wouldn’t think so. But Judy would know.”

Judy Bilton, long time postmistress, was retiring as soon as young Jenny Applegarth was ready to take over Buckton’s post office.

It probably didn’t matter. Ricky Olson with luck had found a more congenial job than being Buckton’s constable. But he felt sympathy for the young man. He hated to see young people with messed-up lives, even if it was their own fault. And there was nothing to suggest that Constable Olson had brought his troubles on to himself by anything he had done or said. Or perhaps not done and not said.

Back at the station he thought he would just have a quick look at the electoral rolls and see if Ricky showed up. Then he would go home and put his feet up. There were two Richard Olsons. One in Gladstone. One in Toowoomba. He made a note of the addresses then went home for dinner.

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In mid-morning Justin Castley came into the station with a note from the vet. Leila Burkett had complained to Fiona that getting Justin to say more than yes or no was like trying to draw stubborn teeth and that she wished schools would try to produce students who were both literate *and* articulate. But Justin liked Grant and felt comfortable with him and had no difficulty in telling him that they had cut open the burnt dog and found a little bit of canned and processed food in his stomach and what looked like bread, but no sign of fresh meat or offal.

Grant looked at the more detailed report that Leila Burkett had sent up. “So she thinks the dog might be an Irish Setter?” he said after reading through the report. Some of it was a bit technical but that part seemed clear enough.

“There was still a bit of hair not burnt under here, under his tummy, you know.” Justin indicated on himself where they had found identifiable hair. “And she wants to be sure you want a DNA test done before she goes ahead.”

Grant said he thought Dennis would like to have it done “but do you want me to check?”

Justin was uncertain about this. He was as nervous of Dennis Walsh as he was of Leila Burkett. Grant finally took a decision out of his hands and said, “I’ll get my boss to ring your boss as soon as he gets back.”

Justin was grateful for this and asked Grant if he was playing cricket this Saturday. He would love to play both cricket and footy but he had always been too shy to try out for anything. Grant said he was “unless there’s an emergency” and then he said what he’d often thought: “Why don’t you give it a go? I’m sure you’d be good with some training.”

Dennis had talked about starting a Youth Group and had talked to the local RSL sub-branch about hiring the hall once a week. But Grant could see that Justin would not come along to such a group, nor would his younger brothers. What he needed was some private coaching and Grant wasn’t sure how that could be achieved. He was busy most of the time so he didn’t think he could offer. But he thought it was a pity that someone as fit as Justin wasn’t doing anything for the local teams.

Justin just looked a bit awkward and said he needed to get back to the surgery.

Dennis when he came in looked at the report and said, “A town dog, eh? I wonder where Jake got his Irish Setter from? He could maybe ask around and see if one’s gone missing?” Of course country dogs also got given processed food, particularly if the farm didn’t kill its own meat.

And, being Dennis, he got straight on to Jake Moss in Winville and said the dead dog in the car appeared to be an Irish Setter. Jake immediately said “the bastards!” and Dennis said, “So where did you get yours?”

“Here, in Winville. Old Pete Blundell asked Dave Gurney if he could find good homes for his last litter and his bitch, seeing as he was going to move into Parrvilla.”

“So how many pups and have any been stolen?”

“I’ll check with Dave. But surely no one would destroy a young pedigree dog? Why not sell it on if you couldn’t keep it?”

“I think we’re dealing with some pretty sick bastard. The whole thing was a set up. And I’d like to know why.”

Inspector Moss thought he would too but there was no obvious answer.

“The bloke who left the car there—how did he get away? Did he walk or did he get picked up?” This was something Dennis had pondered on. He thought the car had been backed up. But had there been another car to pick up this driver? Had he walked down the slope and hitched a ride? Or was he local and had made a brief journey across country?

“Don’t know yet.”

“Reid didn’t get any usable fingerprints.”

“Anything else?”

“He reckons it is a Vauxhall Viva from the HC series, so around the mid seventies, but the engine number’s been chiseled off though not recently. So good chance the car was stolen at some time, but the whole thing doesn’t seem to make a lot of sense.”

Dennis thought of telling him about that story of Joe Bosch and the missing vehicle and then it didn’t seem worth the time. The chance of the two cars being one and the same still seemed remote.

“Well, two good leads, the car and the dog. So good luck.”

Moss was tempted to tell Dennis he could still do some investigating not leave it all to Winville but as it seemed unlikely either the car or the dog belonged in Buckton he only said drily, “Thanks, mate.”

Dennis had initially believed the car and driver and dog were all from elsewhere but there was the question of how the driver had simply disappeared. Even in the middle of a thunderstorm the road into Buckton wasn’t necessarily empty. Someone getting into a parked car might be noticed. And country people seeing a car pulled over were sometimes kind enough to stop and ask if any help was needed. But what if the driver had walked on *up* the road? He could strike off to the left into the big farm of Cathy Binnie but he ran the chance of being seen. So what if he went on up to the small farm which had once belonged to old Gus Mortimer? It was now owned by a woman from Toowoomba who was gradually getting the house and the farm tidied up. But she wasn’t there all the time. She probably locked the house when she was away but most of the sheds were not lockable. Someone could camp there while she was away. And there was even the possibility that she had given someone permission to use her house when she wasn’t there ...

A drive by might be worthwhile. Or he could ring Susan Best in Toowoomba and see if she had ever had anyone hanging around or who had asked if he could stay over. He. He still felt sure they were looking at a he. But Susan Best was a tough cookie. So perhaps he shouldn’t make assumptions. Ms Best could probably hot wire a vehicle. And he wasn’t sure that she was most animals’ best friend. Some Bucktonites had told him she had been pretty hard on her horse when she had lived in Buckton many years ago. But being over-ready with her whip wasn’t the same as burning an animal alive. Surely?

The farm, when he took a half hour to go out and have a wander around, seemed a place of gentle peace. There were half-a-dozen heifers in the paddocks along with two nice horses, a black and a chestnut, both about fifteen hands, and all looked the picture of health. Despite the storm it was dry up here but there was still plenty of grass. He went over and checked the troughs. Everything seemed to be in good working order.

He knocked but got no answer from the house. The curtains along the south side were not closed and he peered in. The place looked renovated and tidy. Ms Best obviously liked bright colours. And there was no sign of food left on tables or clothing slung about. He went round the couple of sheds and looked for any sight or sound or smell of an intruder.

But either the person was careful not to leave any sign or no one had been here. He stood there for several minutes. Nothing disturbed the peace of the scene. The horses swished lazily at the flies. He could see a sleeping koala in a box tree by the empty fowl house. He didn’t feel like making the walk to where Ms Best had got permission to close off the old stock route which had once come through here. Now a brand-new Cyclone gate closed off the farm. But having come this far he felt he should look for any sign of anyone coming through here. A car parked on the road beyond the house would be very unlikely to be noticed.

The road was graveled up to where it forked but this fork was now grassed over and obviously Buckton had never seen any reason to keep this fork in good nick as it was almost never

used. If Ms Best jumped up and down and demanded better service she might get a response but there was no obvious reason why she would want to use this back entrance.

He walked slowly to and fro trying to find some indication of a recent presence. There was just one thing which gave him pause. The gate was padlocked but he thought someone had climbed the gate and jumped down. He stood looking at the marks and trying to decide if they really were the marks of boots landing with some weight behind them. He followed the grassy lane back towards the house. Several times he wondered if what he was seeing might be construed as a footprint. But when he finally got back in the car he was still unsure. He wanted to believe someone had come this way and therefore they had left faint marks of their passage. He wouldn't be the first investigator to see what he wanted to see. He was still pondering as he drove away.

A ring this evening to Ms Best just might be worth while.

But his first thought, not to go and bother Cathy Binnie on the next door farm, changed as he drove out. Mrs Binnie usually had one or two young men working for her. Could one of them have got involved in something nasty?

Mrs Binnie said she'd heard about the burnt car but hadn't seen anything herself. "I did hear the dogs barking but the storm started and they came inside so I didn't think any more about it."

She said she hadn't taken on anyone new lately. "Still Scott and Mark and they were both here all evening, I'm sure."

He asked her how she could be sure and she said they'd come over to tell her that there was a leak in Mark's flat and they had put a ladder up next morning to have a look and she thought it was about half-past-seven when they'd come over. He nodded and accepted this. And the lads could not have been out earlier because they had been milking and then cleaning up over at the dairy.

"But why do you think someone might've come here?" She didn't know the details of the incident and she didn't want to think that some person had been cutting across her farm.

"Where did the person go after he'd driven the car up and set it alight? If he came up this way he was less likely to be noticed than if he went down to the main road."

She could see the sense in this. "So could the dogs have been barking at someone, a stranger, cutting through? I just assumed when we heard the news that they had seen or smelt the fire?"

"It's possible. Though they'd be taking a risk. Were your dogs free to run out?"

"Oh for sure, and they're both cattle dogs. Old Daisy goes for people's heels if she gets a chance." It would be hard to nip the heels of a running man but the dogs might well have chased a speeding stranger if they had a chance.

"Mmmm, if he did come up this way he's more likely to have cut through the old Mortimer place and if she only comes out now and then ..."

"It's mainly weekends, I think, but she sometimes brings people."

"You've seen them?"

"Well, sort of." She seemed to think this needed explanation rather than risk being seen as a busybody. "I've been up in the back paddocks and seen and heard people up there, they don't mind to make lots of noise, I heard motorbikes revving like anything one time."

"And Ms Best was there with them?"

Mrs Binnie looked surprised. "I assume she was—I didn't actually see her."

"So she might let other people use her place?"

"She's certainly never said anything to any of us. And as it's only occasionally we've never said anything to her."

She hesitated and then said reluctantly, "And there's our old house. We've always been going to demolish it but there never seems to be the time."

A gate opened off that gravel road into the other part of the Binnie farm and the old house there had been the site of a double murder many years ago. Local people didn't like to talk about the house and the Binnies had talked of taking it down and re-using the timber but since Mrs Binnie's husband had died she had left the old house to moulder in peace, except for taking out things from underneath it, mainly timber.

"I'll check."

But the old house when he drove back around the block seemed unvisited. It was a sad sight, increasingly decrepit, its roof brown with rust, a board here and there slipping. Mrs Binnie had padlocked the doors and although a hard kick would probably cave the old doors in there was no sign of any such attempt. The dirty windows too seemed untouched, though if the sills continued to rot away frames and glass might start falling out soon.

He walked all around it and came back out to the gate. His first thought was ‘well, that’s that’ and his second thought was ‘why not offer the house for salvage?’ That way someone would remove it at no cost to Mrs Binnie.

He was still pondering on this as he drove back to the station.

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DC Jenny Forman from Winville called in to the station in the late afternoon and Susan Best and old houses went out of his thoughts. She said briskly that she was going to Doug Towner’s case in Brisbane next week. “Greg says I should just sit there and stare at Towner and make him feel nervous. Do you think I should?”

“It would take more than that to make Doug Towner feel nervous,” Dennis said soberly and quite possibly Towner had done it at times during his long and corrupt career and would understand the psychology behind such a stare. “But have your notebook with you and be seen to be making notes.”

“I wish you were coming. That really would put Doug off his stride. He sees me as completely unimportant.” Doug Towner was known to describe young women in the force as ‘nincompoops’.

“But you’re getting on in your career and Doug is there fighting for—well, not his life but his reputation and his secret bank accounts.”

“Do you think he really has secret bank accounts?”

“I’m sure he has. What’s the point in stashing millions away if any old plod can find it?”

She found that rather funny. “But—do you think the Hoysteds can find it and make him give it back?”

“He didn’t only steal from the Hoysteds, you know. And I’ll guarantee those two little gits have hacked in to all his communications with his Swiss bank or wherever he’s got it stored.”

“It’s strange though. I mean I know he’s got a nice house but why would he want so much? What good has it ever done him?”

“Power. And it becomes a habit. That’s why it’s so important to catch people young.”

“You think he was like that, always looking for the main chance, right from when he was a constable like me?”

“Maybe his early bosses were just careless, didn’t account for things they confiscated—and maybe he had a boss who was seriously corrupt and he got lessons early on, taught him how to get away with it.” And maybe he got lessons from his family. Maybe they even encouraged him into the force to act as their eyes and ears ...

“That’s a horrible thought. But maybe he had an inferiority complex and this was his way of secretly feeling he was as good as anyone else?”

Dennis wasn’t much in to such psychological explanations. “But whatever the reason it still becomes a habit. Like people who lie all the time just because it seems to make life easier.”

“Well, I don’t think he’ll be able to get away with much lying. You know John Duarte has called Eric Kramer and Michael Hull as his witnesses? I think he got to them before Doug even realised this was going to come to court. When the Hoysteds lost the first case against him he thought they wouldn’t dare try again.”

“But that’s going to be tricky. Unless Kramer and Hull are very nippy they’re going to end up looking bad themselves, not just making Doug look bad.”

“You mean—if they make Doug look bad then it’ll look like they weren’t doing a good job and if they make Doug look good and Mr Duarte has documents to dispute that it’ll look like they’re lying for Doug?”

“Something like that.”

“Mr Hull was a magistrate, wasn’t he, so he probably understands all that. But I don’t think Mr Kramer likes Doug so maybe he won’t lie for him.”

“You’re going to have an interesting few days.”

DC Forman didn’t look excited by this waiting treat. “And I’ll bet Doug will try to make Greg, and maybe all of us, look bad.”

“Greg’s a big boy. Don’t you go worrying about him. And I don’t think Duarte will let Doug spread the blame. But I just wonder if Doug’s connection with the Plowmans will get an airing. Carl Payne might be still wanting to keep most of that under wraps. I have an idea Doug’s lawyer just might try to paint Doug as a pawn of a powerful crime family and if they start naming names Payne won’t be too happy.”

As Jenny Forman went away to swim in Buckton’s pool she thought Dennis had a way of making complex things sound very straightforward. She didn’t know that Doug had been secretly phone-tapped and she didn’t know that Towner’s legal team were aware of that tap. But she could see that Dennis wanted the case to stay clearly focused on the way that Doug had stolen from the trust fund of two motherless teenage boys. A civil case would not have a jury to have their heartstrings torn but it would still make Douglas Towner look a greedy and conscience-less man.

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Fiona said as they finished dinner and sat over coffee for a couple of minutes, “I had another message from that Mrs Woods today.”

“Any news?”

“She says they asked their investigator to try and find if young John Fred had any special friends inside. And he told them that as soon as the young man went in he met up with an older man called Jason Smith but then he seemed to have nothing more to do with the man and kept pretty much to himself and that he’s coming out next week.”

“So who is this Jason Smith and is that his real name?” Sometimes older men gave youngsters some advice, sometimes they took them under their wing, sometimes they fancied young men for sex. But if the young man hadn’t remained in the older man’s company it might be some quick advice but it just might be the passing on of a message.

“She, they asked him for some details, and he said Jason Smith was in for murder. Apparently he and three other men were in for murdering a drug dealer known only as ‘Antonio’. One of the other men died in jail and one is out and one got transferred. So it might suggest that Jason has some connection to John Fred, mightn’t it?”

“How old would this Jason be?”

“Forty-six.”

“So could he be John Fred’s father?”

“But wouldn’t there be more of a relationship if he was?”

Anyway all this was speculation. Maybe one of the other men ... or maybe the mysterious Antonio. “So what are you going to tell Mrs Woods?”

“I’m not sure I need to tell her anything, just wish her all the best.”

“See if their bloke in Melbourne can get photos of all four men and this Antonio.” She could see that this just might find them the missing Mr Millington. “I wonder if the young fella was into drugs,” Dennis went on. He might’ve bought, sold, carried drugs for the mysterious Antonio.

“It doesn’t really sound like it, does it. And no one has mentioned any sign of ... well, of symptoms. But maybe that man he went to see who claimed to be a probation officer—maybe he was an associate of the four in jail and John Fred takes messages from him to this Jason?”

“If it means he has to steal cars all the time to get in with his message—sounds a bit risky. And the next magistrate might send him to a different jail or even give him some community service.”

“The Woods told the ... I’m not sure if they told the prison or the court that they could find him work on one of their farms.”

“And the little lout jumped at the opportunity?”

“I suppose if he was abandoned as a child he’s just got by the best he can.”

“You don’t know that.”

“No, but you don’t know either. And I don’t know if he knows his grandparents want him.”

Dennis thought ‘want’ might be a bit strong. The grandparents probably felt they should do all they could for their grandson. But it was probably out of a sense of duty rather than affection.

“Anyway, I’d best go and ring this Best woman.” He got up reluctantly.

“What best woman?”

“That Susan Best who got hold of old Gus Mortimer’s farm. Just a chance the bugger who torched that car cut up through there.”

Susan Best when he got on to her didn’t sound enamoured of the idea of some crook coming through her farm. But when he asked if she ever let other people stay there she said she did.

“Friends of yours?”

“Of course. And it’s only occasionally. Just when my cousin is on his way out to see his kids in Chinchilla. Sometimes he stops the night.”

“No one else?”

“Sometimes he takes a friend or two with him. I don’t ask. So long as they leave the place clean.”

“So when was the last time he came by?”

“He has a key, he can come by when he wants.”

“And these friends of his, do you have names for all of them?”

“I don’t see what business it is of yours—”

“You want to protect the sort of bastards that burn dogs alive?”

There was a silence. He didn’t know whether it was shock or consideration which kept her silent. At last she said, “Okay, here are their names but if they ever bring anyone else with them I don’t know and I don’t want to know.” She gave him three names and he wrote them down.

“And if you find anything out of place, anything odd there, get on to me straight away.”

“What sort of things?”

“Anything that’s changed.”

She said she would but her lack of enthusiasm was obvious. He wondered if she knew more than she was letting on or whether he had made her wonder if some of her cousin’s friends weren’t really people she wanted staying in her house. None of the names meant anything to him but he would run them through tomorrow morning and see if any of them had a record.

## *Case No. 2: The Value of Friends*

Grant Schroeder had puzzled over who he might get to encourage Justin to try out for a team. Who would Justin listen to and who would give him confidence to do something. He had seen Dennis always trying to get the young ones involved in something, sports, hobbies, part time work, rather than mooching round the streets. But no obvious answer came to him. There were people like Dennis who could tell Justin to go and do something in his spare time but as he had a full-time job that didn’t seem fair and no one could accuse Justin of getting into mischief.

If everyone around Buckton was like Justin and his family he and Dennis would be out of a job. So that kind of firm direction wasn’t the answer.

He was just dropping off to sleep when the thought came to him: I like Justin and Justin likes me so maybe I could ask him to help me with setting up this Youth Club, he might like that ... even if he doesn’t want to come along and do things with kids ...

Next morning it still seemed like a good idea but he was busy with other things including George Hickman who tied his little dog at the front door and came in. “I didn’t think to tell you something yesterday but it came to me over tea. About those Hickeys that Fiona was asking about. I told her it might be best to leave it but I didn’t tell her the real reason.”

Dennis had got Grant on to checking the names of those men Susan Best had given him and Grant had turned up one with a criminal record. He had planned to follow that up not have George, with nothing better to do all day, coming in and waffling on about the dead and gone Hickeys.

“Which is?” He didn’t try to make it sound encouraging.

“Just that one of the boys there went missing. People said his dad had whacked him so hard he’d done for him and that he’d then buried him out in the paddocks. But Dan said he ran away and he never got in touch with anyone here again.”

“So how does Dan know that?”

“Because he reckons that the boy came and stayed a night or two with his big sister who had just moved in with Dan’s dad. Dan’s mother was still there. Then the young fella, can’t remember his name, maybe Cedly, buzzed off and that was that. But Dan reckons he went to the coast and then he joined up soon as they’d take him.”

“And you trust Dan?” Dan Goodrick was hardly a model citizen.

“On this I would. After all, he’s got no reason to tout Old Man Hickey as a great dad.”

This didn’t necessarily follow. Other things could be playing out in Dan’s memory. “So that’s why you didn’t want Fiona to change the name of that lane?”

“I’d be happy for her to change it but if people start discussing things about the Hickeys all the business with bigamy’ll come out and some people’ll start wondering if the boy really did get away or whether he’s buried in a back paddock.”

“It wouldn’t be hard to find if the lad really did join up. He should be listed. You can follow that up, George, with all your oodles of free time.”

Grant gave this a secret grin.

“You wait till you’re retired, mate,” George said tartly, “and see how you like folk telling you you’ve got nothing to do all day.”

“Can’t wait.”

George Hickman gave that a slight chuckle and went out to untie his little dog and continue on with his morning walk.

“So what’ve you got on this Nathan Pearson?” Dennis said to Grant.

“He did steal a car and strip it—”

“What sort of car?”

“A Holden Commodore.”

It was a different MO but he might associate with other men who stole cars. “And that was where?”

“Toowoomba.”

It would be a long way to come in an old Vauxhall and a man who wanted to make money from stolen cars was unlikely to torch it if there was anything saleable there.

“Okay, leave it. If Winville’s getting nowhere we can pass that on.” Privately he doubted whether Winville was doing very much. Would Jake Moss’s passion for Irish Setters be enough to push things along?

The phone rang and it was Leila Burkett to say, “I’ve found a microchip but it seems to be too damaged to get anything from it. Do you want me to bring it round?”

They could just give the dog a decent burial here but he thought Winville probably should have the poor creature. “I think we’ll need the whole dog. You sent off some stuff to test?”

“I did. It won’t be cheap but it could pinpoint the breeder. Very well, I’ll bring him around later.”

Dennis said to Grant, “If she brings him in when I’m not here just make a note and you can run him into Winville later. I don’t know where they can store him but they might be able to talk the hospital into keeping him in the morgue until we get the DNA tests back.”

Grant said he would and then, rather tentatively, he shared his thoughts about working with Justin Castley.

“Good idea. Sound him out if Leila sends him with the dog.”

In theory with the dog and the car gone to Winville that would be the end of Buckton’s connection to the case but Grant knew Dennis well enough to know that he would not let go so easily. Fiona could see the dangers in this attitude but Grant only felt that if anything was ever resolved he would be one of the first to know.

Dennis was called round to the hospital so he left Grant to ponder on dead dogs and setting up a Youth Club. It was Sister Derry who had called him. He had done little more than say hullo to her since she’d come to Buckton so he knew little about her competence in the hospital.

She met him on the landing. “Thank you for coming so quickly. We’ve got a new cook since Mrs Binnie retired and he let some of his friends call in and he said they could have some morning tea and when Matron said he needed to ask permission before he started feeding his

friends one of his mates gave her a whack and knocked her down. The men left but we would like one of them charged. It was an awful thing to do.”

“The cook is still here?”

“He is. But he said he would put something nasty in the stew if they gave, if we gave him any more aggro. We hope he hasn’t or we’ll have to throw everything out.”

She walked briskly along beside him towards the kitchens.

Sister Martin came out of the office and joined them. “A very nasty business,” she said soberly, “and I don’t know where we’ll get another cook at such short notice.”

“Ring the Carbonis. They’ll help out.” He hoped they didn’t have a big function booked at the town’s little Italian restaurant.

The cook, Brian Wheatley, was a big surly man in his late thirties. Dennis wondered if his cooking was sufficiently good to offset his unattractive manner.

“Okay, so what’s going on here?”

There were two young women stacking plates and mugs into the big dishwasher. They both looked rather nervous. They seemed to find his arrival a small relief.

“Nothing’s going on here. That old bitch said I couldn’t give a coupla me mates a cup of tea. I said who did she think she was, and she said I needed permission, and then she started going on at me again and me mate gave her a whack. She’ll think twice before she starts screeching at me again.”

“Old bitch? Who’re you talking about?”

“Dame that thinks she runs this place.”

“Does she have a name?”

“You know who I mean—”

“Name?”

The man looked as though he was going to dig his toes in but then it didn’t seem worth the effort. “Denby.”

“Your friend assaulted Susan Denby?”

“Wasn’t assault. Just a tap.”

“And what happened?”

“To her or to him?”

“Both.”

“She fell over. Don’t know why. I’ll bet it was a big put-on.”

“The doctor will tell us that. And your mate?”

“Got on the road.”

“His name?”

“What’s it to you?”

“Name?”

Mr Wheatley hadn’t been confronted by Dennis Walsh in his short time at Buckton Hospital. Again he seemed to weigh up being uncooperative and getting it over with.

“Jimmy.”

“Jimmy what?”

“Jimmy Schneider.”

“Where’s he heading for?”

“How would I know?”

Dennis started to walk away. “You’ll be able to think it over when you go job-hunting.” He didn’t know if Ms Denby could give him a good description but she was an observant woman.

Wheatley yelled after him “Fuck you!” and then “They’ll all be sick as dogs tonight, serve ’em right!”

Dennis took no notice but went on out. It wasn’t up to him to sack Wheatley but he hoped the man would be gone by the time he got back from talking to Susan Denby, if she was up to talking.

She looked rather pale and sick but said she had seen the man who hit her. “A big man, curly black hair. He was wearing a red plaid shirt and jeans. He had a chipped front tooth.”



Then she said, "I suppose I should've just let it go. What was a cup of tea and a biscuit? It was really their attitude that riled me, that they had the right to come in here and help themselves to anything they fancied."

"Was he a good cook?"

"Not very. He said he'd cooked in a big hotel in Brisbane and he had letters to say so. But I should've followed up. They might've got fed up with him too."

"You want to press charges when we find this moron?"

Her first idea had been to just let it go. The departure of Mr Wheatley would be enough. But then she pictured the same thing happening elsewhere.

"I think so. People in country hospitals are ... " She closed her eyes briefly. "You know." Then she thought of having to go to court to present evidence and it began to seem more trouble than it was worth. "No, leave it. We just want him gone."

It was always hard to find good cooks for country institutions, from pubs to hospitals, and so long as a reference looked okay it would probably be accepted without question because the alternative might well be no cook at all.

Sister Martin came in quietly and said, "I've asked Mrs Hall to make up his pay. And I've asked the girls to check everything in the kitchen. I think it was an empty threat but we need to be sure." It wasn't very likely that Wheatley had already started cooking the evening meal and the lunches with hamburger patties and salads were already prepared. But Wheatley had struck her as the sort of man who would enjoy taking some sort of mean and spiteful revenge on a group of women.

"It might be a good idea when you're up and about again to check his references. If he's made a habit of this someone just might've charged him." It wasn't very likely. He was more likely to have simply been given his marching orders.

"I'll ask Mrs Hall to check," Sister Martin said briskly. "And I'll see if Mrs Binnie can come back for a few days." Old Mrs Binnie had been asked to stay on several times when she had mentioned retiring. She was now well in to her seventies and she had finally said firmly 'No more' but she might come and help out. Although it wouldn't solve the vexed question of finding a new cook.

Mrs Binnie had offered to train girls over the years but they had all seen their work in the kitchen as merely a fill-in till they could leave and go somewhere more exciting.

Dennis only said "Better luck next time" and went out.

It was Mrs Hall who rang him in mid-afternoon to tell him she had checked with the pub which had given Mr Wheatley his glowing reference. She said they had been scathing about his cooking and his behaviour and when she had read out what they had supposedly written about him they had said 'the bastard! The lying cheating bastard!'. Mrs Hall said only, "It'll teach us to be more careful but we had advertised for months and he was the only applicant."

He was sorry he couldn't find them a decent cook but no one leapt to mind. He said something of this to Fiona in the evening and she said, "Why don't they get on to one of the places that train chefs in Brisbane and tell them here is a chance to get good experience and it would be a help to country people at the same time?"

It might work but he could see all those budding chefs with hopes of careers in fancy restaurants sneering at the idea of coming to Buckton to cook stews and shepherd's pies and steam puddings. "Well, pass the idea on."

"You don't look very ... hopeful."

"I'm not. But anything's worth a try." There were plenty of good plain cooks around Buckton but cooking for forty people was not the same as cooking for a family. "And maybe the CWA ladies could pitch in."

She didn't say anything to this and he went on to tell her that one of Susan Best's friends had a record for stealing and stripping cars.

"But I don't think he's our man. Why burn a car if you can strip it?"

"People are still saying it's the old car that was pinched from in front of the station years ago. Did you speak with Sergeant Bosch before he left?"

“Hullo. Goodbye. The lazy sod said John would tell me everything I needed to know. He spent his last week packing up his stuff from the house. He hardly bothered to turn up for work. But the stove and everything in the kitchen was covered with grease. So he wasn’t staying home to clean the house.”

“So where did he go when he left here?”

“Early retirement. He was only about fifty but they pensioned him off, said he was suffering from something, don’t know what, an aversion to work I s’pose.”

“So where did he go?”

“Don’t know. John might know. But I still don’t believe the two cars are one and the same.”

“But everyone else seems to. So what do they know that you don’t?”

“Nothing. Someone thought it’d make a good story and off it goes.”

She smiled at that. She had seen it happen. But it just seemed a bit odd that it would happen with a story which had been dead and forgotten for years. “I wonder if they’re trying to get you to clear up that old mystery for them? Everyone wants to know who pinched that car from in front of the station and they think you can solve it for them.”

“Maybe. But I don’t know and I don’t care. Probably old Joe pinched it himself.”

He spoke honestly when he said he didn’t know and didn’t care but then he thought he would just run it by John Applegarth next time he saw him. John came over to see his parents in Buckton every so often.

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He spent some time mulling over a hospital cook without coming up with any ideas. But the business of taking down that old house on the Binnie farm came back to him next morning when he saw Chad Scully downtown. Chad had had some work on the Conway farm after Stella and Dean Conway had been killed in a car crash but now the Conways had found a hardworking young man to help them on the farm and Chad hadn’t found anything else.

As always he looked rather gloomy and apathetic. Dennis thought that living with him must be a dreary business. But when he mentioned the old house and that it might be worth ringing Cathy Binnie to work out a deal for taking it down a faint sense of energy seemed to pass through Scully’s drooping demeanour.

“Yeah, might try her, doesn’t seem to be much work round these days.”

Dennis had never been sure whether Chad didn’t get work because he was incompetent or because his whole attitude said life was a grim business or whether there just wasn’t enough suitable work around the district.

“Maybe some pay and some salvage. I’ll be glad to see that old house gone.”

Not that kids went out there and did silly things in the empty house. It was too far out of town and some people genuinely believed it was haunted.

Chad merely nodded. But after standing in silence and Dennis was about to say, “Good luck with it then” or something similar Chad said suddenly, “You know that old car that stood outside the station when ol’ Joe was here?”

So even Chad had heard the stories going the rounds?

“What about it?”

“Well, y’know something? I reckon Joe took it himself.”

“What makes you think that?” Not that he hadn’t thought that himself.

Chad considered this in his slow way and finally said, “I saw him get in it several times and rev the engine like nobody’s business ... and one time he took it for a drive out towards Burleigh ... and y’know something? I reckon someone would of seen it if someone hot wired it or towed it away, you never know who might come along there ... and Joe kept the keys in the station.”

“As no one had claimed it—maybe he took it away somewhere and dumped it?”

“Yeah, but it wasn’t registered—and I reckon he still could’ve got a hundred for it. It wasn’t in bad nick. Just needed a polish.”

Chad was saying Sergeant Bosch had broken the law. Dennis wasn’t going to endorse this idea though he didn’t think Bosch had ever been too hot on what was legal and what wasn’t.

“So who around here was dealing in secondhand cars—or parts?”

“Noel.”

“Anyone else?”

“Joe had mates.”

Most men had mates. The true loner was a rarity.

“Any idea on those mates?”

Chad seemed to go into suspended animation but finally he said, “Was over at Southbrook, this is years ago, helping out on a farm there, and there’s Joe coming out of the pub. I reckon he had a bloke with him, dunno who he was. But like I say ... mates.”

This wasn’t compelling. Joe, presumably, had family, friends, a previous life, somewhere. But if he drove away in the old Vauxhall then had someone, some mate, driven him home again? Walsh tucked the idea away and left Chad to his own devices. And if he did go and track down Joe Bosch—what would be the point? To charge him with driving an unregistered vehicle twenty years ago? The only advantage of putting that story to rest might be to get people to focus on the Vauxhall burnt up by the Parsons’ gate.

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Inspector Jake Moss came by just before lunchtime.

Walsh said, “You’ve got something on that bloody car for us?”

Moss stopped himself asking “What car?” and said, “Nothing to do with work. I just thought I’d duck out and see how Susan is. Did you go after the bastard that hit her?”

“She said to leave it. They’ve sacked the bloke. But I don’t know where they’ll get another cook at short notice—unless they can persuade Mrs Binnie to come back—”

Jake obviously didn’t want to be sidetracked into talking about cooks. “You’re sure she said to leave it? She probably wasn’t thinking straight.”

Maybe not. “If he’s still there you can charge him as an accessory. But I’d reckon he hit the road the minute Mrs Hall handed him his pay.”

“And what if he does it again?”

“It was a Jimmy Schneider who knocked her down. Wheatley egged him on, I’d say.”

“You’re sure about that?”

“Talk to Ms Denby, see if she’s changed her thoughts. I’ve run Wheatley through records and there’s no sign of anything. But maybe he uses different names.” He suspected that other places had just wanted Wheatley gone.

As Moss didn’t return to the station demanding action, Dennis assumed Susan Denby had persuaded Jake to leave things be. Or she had convinced him that finding a new cook was more important.

It was two days later that Dennis heard the surprising news from Sister O’Brien. “That nice man of Susan’s has found us a cook, would you believe?”

“Jake Moss? Where the heck did he find a cook?”

“His sister. She’s arriving tomorrow. It’ll certainly be a weight off our minds.”

“You’re sure she can cook?” The thought that Jake might’ve talked someone into—

“We’ll soon know, won’t we?”

And then she shared some even more surprising news. “There was something on the midday news about a man being arrested in Fiji and they think he had something to do with that business of the young man over in Dinna. I didn’t catch it all. There might be something more on the news tonight.”

“That Russian bloke?”

“It sounded that way.”

“Let’s hope. Thanks, Kath.”

The possibility that Mr Simonov had been caught and charged cheered him immensely. He just hoped Kath O’Brien had caught it correctly. But when there was nothing on the evening news he didn’t know whether someone had quashed the story or Kath genuinely had misheard or misunderstood. And it was still unlikely he could be extradited given that Brisbane also had not been able to pin down a cause of death for young Tony Giordano. If Simonov had been arrested in Fiji then it must be because he had committed a crime there, another young man perhaps, and someone had made a connection ...

He could only hope that the man had been stopped in his tracks. And a Fijian jail might well be less salubrious than something here. On the other hand Simonov might find it easier to buy his way out of the charges. Money talked. Everywhere. And Fiji was not exactly a rich country.

He could ask Greg and Petra if they had heard anything but he let it go.

And Buckton was more interested in the mysterious new cook at the hospital.

Jayne Pitka had managed a large restaurant in Brisbane up to the time of her divorce. She had considered opening her own place and had been looking at various premises to see if something seemed suitable when Jake had rung and said could she come and cook at a country hospital till they could find someone permanent.

She had not jumped at the idea. And where the heck was Buckton? And she had never cooked invalid food. But Jake was quite persuasive. Perhaps his own relationship with Susan Denby had convinced him that Buckton Hospital was a place of sweetness and harmony. In this, though, he was not alone. Most people round Buckton believed it was a well-run small hospital with a good atmosphere. Whether this was the clinching point or whether Mrs Pitka was not committed to the idea of having her own small restaurant or whether she liked the idea of cooking good plain food rather than trying to come up with new and exciting dishes to compete against countless other places she agreed to come for a short time and help out.

Jake, once he had her agreement and had asked the hospital to arrange accommodation for her, turned to the question of that Jimmy Schneider. Susan might want the matter left but he felt he would like to see the man charged. Hospitals, and especially small country hospitals with predominantly female staff, were vulnerable places.

Susan Denby might be grateful to Jake for solving the problem but it was old Mrs Binnie who was most grateful. She had horrible visions of her deserved retirement constantly punctuated by pleas from the hospital for her to please step in again. She showed Mrs Pitka around, said the girls could answer any questions, handed her over to Sr Martin to take round the hospital to meet people in the Annexe and the wards, and wished her well. It was Sr Martin who answered her question as to why it was Jake who had got interested in the problems of their kitchen. Jeannie Martin said discreetly, "I think it might have something to do with Inspector Moss and Susan Denby being friends."

It was more than friendship but Susan had told him she didn't really want to seek a position at Winville District Hospital because "Leslie Davis is there". She told him that she had been unwise enough to have a brief affair with Leslie Davis when he was in Buckton. "I still feel guilty that I could do that to his wife when she is worth ten of him."

Though perhaps it was for the best as Kamala Davis had finally divorced him and was now married to Dr Thompson in Winville. Alistair Thompson was much older than his wife but Jake from what he had seen of them thought they were happy. And most of the staff at the hospital in Winville would like to see the back of Leslie Davis but no one had yet come up with a way to remove him other than to wait for him to do something dangerously incompetent and be sued.

He could understand her reluctance to work in a situation where she would frequently have to consult with Davis but he also thought her presence might be the thing which would encourage Davis to consider relocating. Many people were reluctant to work with former lovers.

"When he came quite a few of the staff thought he was hard done by, they couldn't understand why people like Dennis Walsh were always bad-mouthing him, but I don't think he's got any supporters left there. They all know now that he's an incompetent doctor."

"And you think that I might be ... something like the last straw? That he'll see me and move on?" And all this would still depend on a vacancy there.

"I think he's had affairs with some of the staff there. He seems to think he's God's gift to women. But he's running out of candidates." This might not be very diplomatic. Susan might not want to be reminded that she was one in a long train of willing women. But she only gave that a wry smile.

It was a difficult issue: how to get rid of an incompetent doctor before he did something to wreck a life. She might be able to help persuade him to move on. But if he simply relocated to another country hospital crying out for doctors and continued along his incompetent way ...

“I wish I knew the way to get him knocked off the register ... but it isn't easy.” She said this soberly. Other places, other regional hospitals, had struggled with the same issue.

“Don't worry. We'll find a way.”

Afterwards she wondered if 'we' meant the two of them, or the police, or the community in general.

## *Case No. 3: A Very Rich Meal*

DC Forman had not been merely complimentary when she had told Dennis Walsh she wished he was coming to see ex-DI Towner face the court in the civil suit brought by Neumann and Randall Hoysted. They claimed he had stolen from their trust fund when they were minors and he had been a trustee. If there was one person Doug Towner hated and hoped never to see again it was surely Sergeant Dennis Walsh.

It might be an explosive case to people like Walsh and Greg Sullivan but it had aroused almost no interest in Brisbane. That was certainly the way people like DI Carl Payne preferred it. And it was being heard in a small room in front of a retired magistrate, David Solomon JP, who knew that Douglas Towner was facing more serious charges but secretly hoped that this would prove to be a mare's nest. Pointing the finger at a senior police officer might have unfortunate ramifications.

The Hoysted's solicitor, John Duarte, had called two witnesses, fellow trustees Michael Hull and Eric Kramer, to explain how the trust had been set up and how it had worked. Mr Solomon saw three issues to be covered: how the trust was run, what the trust deed permitted the trustees to do, and whether Douglas Towner had exceeded his rights and duties as a trustee.

Michael Hull had secretly been dreading his appearance in court. However calmly and sensibly he presented his work as a trustee for the two Hoysted boys he had had ample time to reflect on his role and the knowledge that he had simply gone along with Towner and fellow trustee Gavin Whittaker. And as Whittaker had been shot dead that only left Doug to support anything he said and Doug was hardly smelling of roses these days. To his secret relief there was no sign of any media interest. In fact apart from a couple of people connected to the court there was only Neumann Hoysted and one spectator, a young woman he didn't know. He wondered if she was there to support anyone or merely there out of curiosity. He gave Doug a nod and a smile, more for old times' sake than for any feeling for Doug.

John Duarte immediately asked him to tell the court how much the trust had paid him for his time as a trustee. Hull hoped his years on the bench could help him sound calm and authoritative. And Doug had called Duarte 'dago chickenshit' although exactly what he meant by that Hull hadn't asked. But he had heard that Gavin Whittaker had been very critical of Duarte, saying something about how Duarte would rue the day he ever had anything to do with Japana and the Hoysteds.

“All up I was paid \$120,000 for my work for the trust over six years. So that would be \$20,000 per year.”

“And what work did this involve?”

“I attended meetings of the trustees.”

“How often?”

“Once a fortnight.”

“And how long did these meeting usually last?”

“About an hour.”

“So that was about twenty-six meetings a year at one hour each, so about twenty-six hours of work per year? Would that be correct?”

“We occasionally met apart from these regular meetings.”

“How often would that be?”

“Perhaps three or four times a year.”

“And did you ever miss a meeting?”

“Occasionally.”

“And what did you do when you actually attended a meeting?”

“Listened, asked questions, gave advice if they asked for it.”

“You were familiar with their investment strategies?”

“Their plan was to make as much income as possible for the two boys.”

“And how did they go about this?”

“Well, by choosing stocks which would rise in value.”

“You checked to see that this was the case?”

“Not really. I trusted them to make good decisions.”

“They were investment experts?”

“No.”

“They had the advice of an expert?”

“Not as far as I know.” He knew he was digging himself a bigger and bigger hole but equally he knew he had never queried anything, had never done any research for himself, and had no expertise of his own to offer. He had invested his own money in blue chip stocks. He had never queried the other trustees’ decision to invest in speculative stocks some of which did not pay any dividends.

“So while you were at these meetings you asked to see a record of transactions they were making?”

This was an almost impossible question to answer and sound trustworthy. “I listened carefully to their reports.”

“These were written reports?”

“Not usually.”

“Did you ever ask for a written report?”

“I don’t remember doing so.”

“These were transactions involving hundreds of thousands of dollars and you didn’t ask for regular written reports?”

There was no way to explain that the amounts of money they were dealing with seemed so impossibly huge that he didn’t believe that their transactions could fail. Whatever they did would increase the value of the trust fund. “No. I trusted my fellow trustees.”

“So you did twenty-six hours work per year at approximately \$800 per hour and you didn’t believe that required you to exercise any oversight yourself?”

Hull looked away from Duarte to the young woman handling the recording equipment. But the question would not go away and he had no answer that could justify that amount of remuneration. “That amount of money also included my time ... ” It sounded weak. He hadn’t been paid \$800 an hour as a magistrate, and that was concentrated and sometimes draining work, so how could he justify that amount to sit and listen to Doug and Gavin talk?

“So who set that amount and how was it paid to you?”

“It was Mr Whittaker who asked me if that amount would be acceptable.”

“And you reported this extra twenty thousand to the Tax Office?”

“I’m sure I did.”

“We can check. And it was paid by cheque?”

“No. It was paid in cash.”

Several people in the room, including Jenny Forman, looked surprised. Respectable magistrates did not take \$20,000 in cash. Drug dealers might carry round pots of dirty money ...

“And you banked it in Winville?”

“I don’t remember but I think I spent it.”

“The money was removed from the trust fund with your permission?”

“I’m not sure—”

“But you would have to okay such a withdrawal?”

“I don’t remember doing so but I suppose I did. Doug brought the money around.”

“You didn’t query this way of doing things?”

“I don’t remember doing so.”

“So the trust fund you helped administer—how much money was in it?”

“It varied from day to day. And some of it was made up of land, businesses, rather than shares.”

“Well, just a rough estimate of how much the trust actually looked after?”

“I’m not sure but probably twenty to thirty million.”

“Thank you, Mr Hull. Now you read the trust deed carefully when you agreed to become a trustee, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“And did it spell out the means by which the trustees would be remunerated?”

“No. There was no mention of remuneration.”

“So you assumed you would be doing it as a kindness to two motherless boys?”

“I suppose ... yes, I did think that.”

“So twenty-six hours of your time donated to the boys seemed a small thing to offer them?”

“It seemed so.”

“And instead you ended up with more than a hundred thousand dollars. You didn’t suggest taking less or giving some of it back?”

“No.” It didn’t seem the moment to say that as two teenage boys had been left obscenely wealthy there seemed no reason not to take a little of that wealth.

“Now the trust deed was changed several times. Were you asked about the changes?”

“Mr Whittaker simply said there were small updates needing to be made. I didn’t have a problem with that.”

“You carefully read through the proposed changes?”

“I’m sure I did.”

John Duarte said he would like to ask Mr Hull to read through the relevant clause in each deed. Mr Solomon simply said, “Very well”. He had read through each deed himself.

Several minutes later Mr Hull said, “I don’t see where the issue lies. They are very minor changes.”

“Each deed strengthens the control of Gavin Whittaker over the trust fund. You would agree with that assessment?”

“I still don’t see the problem. Mr Whittaker did most of the day-to-day work on the trust so why shouldn’t he have more control over it?”

“You never queried just why he wanted more control?”

“No. It seemed sensible.”

“Now, was the remuneration of the other trustees ever discussed?”

“I believe a payment to Mr Kramer was discussed and some sort of deal allowing him the use of some premises.”

“And what about remuneration for Douglas Towner and Gavin Whittaker?”

Jenny Forman looked over to where Towner sat in his wheelchair. He had listened to Michael Hull without showing any emotion. But now she thought he was more keenly interested in what Hull might say.

“I don’t remember it being discussed. But I had no objection to them being paid something. They did most of the work.”

“So how did you envisage them being paid?”

“Well, the same way as me ...”

Duarte nodded. “You are aware that the trust gave large charitable donations?”

“I didn’t have a problem with that.”

“The boys were consulted? The trust deed allowed for donations to be made?”

“I never saw the boys. Gavin or Doug may have consulted them. There was nothing in the deed but we did have considerable discretion.”

“You never spoke with either Randall or Neumann Hoysted even though it was their inheritance you were in charge of?”

“It isn’t usual for trustees to consult with minors.”

Mr Solomon nodded slightly.

“So you have no idea in what form Douglas Towner took his remuneration and you have no idea how much that remuneration came to?”

Michael Hull had heard over the years that Doug had turned police pay into a mansion on the Gold Coast. He had seen that mansion. He had also heard rumours about Doug stealing millions from the trust fund. But he had discounted that. He may not have attended many meetings or taken very much notice but he didn't see how Doug could have stolen millions without anyone noticing.

"No."

"Have you ever heard of someone called Gavin Douglas?"

"No."

"And you believe that you carried out your duties as a trustee with absolute integrity and honesty?"

The desire to tell the truth rose and he quashed it. Dennis Walsh, all those years ago, had raised questions but who was Dennis Walsh? Just some country plod. But he couldn't quite make himself believe that.

"I do."

"Even though you have no idea how and when and how much your fellow trustees removed from the trust fund as remuneration for themselves?"

"I'm sorry, but I don't."

He glanced over at Doug and received the smallest of winks in return. He had made himself look totally incompetent if nothing worse and all for Doug Towner's approval. But it was too late to tell the truth now.

John Duarte had not seen that wink but Jenny Forman who had spent more of the morning looking at Doug Towner than at Michael Hull had. She watched Hull return to his seat. He looked old and curiously shriveled, as though something, some life force, had drained out of him.

Mr Solomon adjourned for morning tea. Jenny Forman got up and went out but waited outside the door. John Duarte came out with Neumann Hoysted. She knew something of John Duarte from a couple of things that Dennis Walsh and Rui Lopes had said. But she wasn't sure if she should waylay him while the case was in progress.

He saw her standing there and left Neumann, who lifted a hand in recognition, to come over. "Hullo. What brings you here?"

"A watching brief. For Dennis Walsh and for Winville."

"I see."

"Did you notice Doug Towner wink at Mr Hull at the end there?"

He hadn't. "No. But it doesn't really surprise me. Hull made himself look a complete fool. That would please Towner I would think. But I wondered about that case of cash from Towner. That's what he gave to Sam Hoysted and they were stolen notes, or some of them were."

The image of a respectable magistrate being paid in stolen notes both shocked and amused her. But it raised a different question. Had Hull become aware that he had taken and spent some stolen notes? And if so, was he now beholden to Doug? And had he declared that income? The whole thing made Michael Hull look like a gullible fool. What reputable business pays out in a suitcase of used notes?

\*

Leila Burkett came in unexpectedly to see Dennis Walsh. It suggested something serious. Usually he came to her or she sent Justin up with a message.

"Any news on the DNA?" he said immediately.

"Not yet. But I thought I wouldn't wait. I had an anonymous phone call last night. I've written it down as near to verbatim as I could." She handed over a slip of paper. "It was a man's voice but a bit muffled. He said 'You know that dog?' and I said 'which dog?' and he said 'they're looking in the wrong direction. Look east.' And then he hung up. I couldn't think what it might mean but I assumed he meant the burnt dog."

"Look east," he said in some puzzlement.

"Yes. If you go east, well, you'll get to the coast but I couldn't see that that would be much help. But then I thought of looking in the phone book and there is a dog breeder out near Meringandan called Eastside Kennels."

"And what do they breed?"

"Irish Setters."



“Uh huh.”

“I may be jumping to conclusions. And I don’t like people who won’t give their name. But they just might be worth contacting.”

“No harm in trying.” He pulled out the station phonebook to recheck the name and found a small ad in the Yellow Pages. “Gary Donovan? Doesn’t ring any bells.”

And there was a good chance Mr Donovan would be out and about at this time of the morning. But he punched the number in and waited. In the middle of him leaving a message for Mr Donovan to ring Buckton Police the phone was snatched up and a voice said “Donovan here!”

Dennis explained where he was ringing from and asked if Donovan had ever had a dog stolen or lost.

“No, can’t say I have.”

“Young male dog.”

“No. I sold my last litter about three months ago.”

“They all went to homes you knew about.”

“Four did. I gave the runt away.”

“Who did you give him to?”

“Bloke called in. Said he was looking for a dog and I said I was sorry I had none left, just this fella and I didn’t think anyone should breed from him as his hind legs were a bit crooked. I said he could have him just for a pet. But I didn’t give him the pedigree.”

“He was microchipped?”

“No. But nothing to stop him.”

“You don’t remember his name?”

“Didn’t ask. Fairly old fella. He didn’t offer anything, just said he’d be glad of a nice dog around the house. I said he wasn’t house-trained and he said, no worries.”

“You were happy to give him to a stranger?”

“He insisted on giving me a tenner. But you have to take people on trust in this business.”

Then he seemed to wonder why the police would be interested.

Dennis didn’t believe in mincing matters. “We found a dead dog in a burnt-out car. We’re trying to find who would burn a young Irish Setter. You’ve still got the parents?”

Mr Donovan said, “That’s a lousy thing for anyone to do. But why do you think it’s my dog?”

“We’re checking with the breeders of Irish Setters around the district.”

“Well, it’s not likely to be one of mine. But let me know.”

Dennis shared the conversation and said, “Did you notice anything funny about his back legs?”

Leila, thinking back to that horrible burnt carcass, said she had blamed everything on the fire. “But we can get Winville to check, can’t we?”

“Could you go?”

She didn’t jump at the idea. It would take hours out of her day. “I think it would be best if we asked the hospital to x-ray the dog.” She hadn’t done so as there was no obvious sign of broken bones.

“Okay, I’ll ask Jake to follow up.”

“And all this might be a red herring, someone trying to take our attention away from ... something, mightn’t it?”

“It might.”

But even red herrings could be helpful. If you knew they were red herrings.

Jake Moss didn’t ask for chapter and verse, merely saying he’d get on to the hospital. For that prompt response Dennis was grateful. There had been any number of times when Winville had gone out of its collective way not to do anything he had asked of them.

The response from Jake later that day was, yes, both hind legs were slightly crooked but not enough to affect the dog’s movement. And he had one other odd thing to say. “That microchip doesn’t seem to be a viable one. We don’t think it’s fire damage. It looks like it never had any information on it in the first place.”

This was a puzzle but Dennis couldn't see any point in wasting time puzzling over it. Leila, though, said immediately, "People do sometimes wipe their details when they sell a dog on." Maybe. Dennis left Jake and Leila to speculate on this possibility.

\*

Eric Kramer had aged considerably in the years since he had left Buckton. His hair was now white and his once bulbous blue eyes seemed to have sunk. Jenny Forman noticed Neumann Hoysted give him a contemptuous look. She knew that the Hoysteds had little time for Kramer and his political views. But this might be motivated by something different.

Mr Kramer agreed that the trust had remunerated him. "It was nothing personal," he said slowly. "I put the money in to the Caritas Centre so that the boys would eventually benefit from it."

"You didn't spend it on yourself?"

"No."

Doug Towner looked as though he would like to snort "Tell us another!"

"How was the money paid to you?"

"It was paid into the Caritas Centre account."

"Did you receive any remuneration before you took over the Caritas Centre?"

"A little."

"How much?"

"Ten thousand dollars."

"How was this paid?"

"In cash."

"You spent this on yourself?"

"No. I gave it to Sam Hoysted to spend on his boys' education."

"All of it?"

"I think so."

"And who gave you the cash?"

"Doug Towner."

Several people in court immediately envisaged more dodgy notes being passed.

"Was this remuneration discussed at a meeting of the trustees?"

"Not when I was there. But Gavin Whittaker often used to ring me up and tell me there was no point in me coming all the way to a meeting as they would just be discussing a few minor things."

"And you believed him?"

"Not really."

"Why not?"

"Because it didn't take me long to realise Gavin and Doug were crooks."

Doug Towner shot Kramer a look which suggested Kramer might regret that statement. Mr Solomon merely looked interested.

"What made you think that?"

"Because they always called the boys 'little pests'."

"Anything else?"

"When I asked for a written record of all their transactions Gavin refused. He said that they were doing their best for the 'little pests'. And I overheard them talking one time about tax havens."

"Anything else?" None of this actually put Doug Towner on the spot.

There was a long silence then Eric Kramer said, "Doug Towner said something about how with Sandra gone and her husband sent to prison they wouldn't have any more trouble."

"What do you think he meant by trouble?"

"I know Sandra Hoysted was very worried about how the trust was being run. She said she was going to contact ... I think she said something about corporate affairs ... to ask that Doug Towner be removed as a trustee."

"Did she say exactly why she wanted him removed?"

"She said, I think, that he was not abiding by the trust deed."

"Did she explain this?"

Eric Kramer turned and gave Doug Towner a long unreadable look. Then he said, "She said she knew he was stealing from the boys' trust and if I couldn't stop him then he needed to be removed. I said did she have any evidence and she said yes. I contacted Doug and told him that Sandra was critical of the way he was doing things and he said she didn't know the first thing about how they were running the trust and that she should butt out and let them get on with it. I said she was going to contact corporate affairs to lodge a complaint."

He dropped his head in his hands and when he finally lifted his head again everyone could see that tears were trickling down his face.

"What did you do?"

"Nothing. I did nothing. I killed her. Or I helped to kill her. A week later she disappeared. I thought she'd gone with Sam to Sydney but she hadn't. It was all my fault. If I hadn't told Doug that she knew what he was doing ... "

"And what exactly do you think she knew?"

"I think she knew about Gavin Douglas. I think she knew they were buying shares on their own behalf with trust money."

Mr Kramer put his head back in his hands.

Mr Solomon said, "Take a minute to compose yourself, Mr Kramer."

Eric Kramer mumbled a thank you without looking up.

"Were you aware that the trust deed had been changed?"

"Yes. But I was never given a copy of the new deed."

"You weren't asked to sign the new deed?"

"No."

"So the new deed would have been invalid without your signature?"

Mr Kramer looked up as though struck by a question he had never considered. "I never thought about that."

"You were present when the others signed?"

"No."

Mr Solomon asked that Mr Kramer be given the final deed. Jenny Forman was unaware that Eric Kramer was a talented forger. She merely watched as he looked at his supposed signature on the deed, ran his fingertips over it, turned the page over and scrutinised the back of it with great care.

Then he said, "This signature is a forgery. You can see that it has been traced."

Neumann Hoysted nodded slightly. Jenny Forman looked surprised. John Duarte looked pleased.

"So why didn't you query anything?" he asked Kramer.

"I wasn't asked to sign anything so I assumed they had decided not to change the deed."

"Did you ask questions in the meetings you attended?"

"I asked that the boys be invited to attend. They both planned a career in finance. I asked that we only invest in good solid stocks which paid good dividends. I said we should only give charitable donations to the things that Neumann and Randall chose."

"What did they say to any of this?"

"Gavin said he gave up a lot of his time to researching the best way forward for the trust. And they said the boys would be much wealthier when they took over their own money. I should have insisted on having written records but I let it go. I failed as a trustee and I am ashamed of that."

Doug Towner had neither brought a lawyer, supremely confident that neither Hull nor Kramer would admit to poor oversight, nor had he asked to be allowed to question either witness. Now he was seen to smile. And now that Kramer *had* admitted to failing in oversight it didn't seem to matter. Because none of this linked him to theft. All that Sandra Hoysted had supposedly said was hearsay. And he could see clearly that any blame that needed to be thrown around could land very firmly on Gavin Whittaker's shoulders. His very dead shoulders.

"We are not here," Duarte said mildly, "to address your failures as a trustee but to look into theft from that trust fund by Douglas Towner. Can you expand on what you have said about Mr Towner being a crook?"

“I know he was a crook.”

“It isn’t enough to *know*, Mr Kramer. We do need evidence.”

Eric Kramer looked around rather helplessly. He desperately wanted to see Doug Towner charged with theft but his mind seemed to be a useless blank. At last he said, “Why is Doug in a wheelchair? Why is Gavin Whittaker dead? Why was Mr Hull shot in the arm?”

“Perhaps you can answer your question, Mr Kramer.” Mr Solomon sounded merely curious.

“They stole money from a trust fund set up for two boys. Mr Henry Neumann knew they were stealing the money he wanted to go to his grandsons. So he had them shot.”

“And how do you know that, Mr Kramer?” Mr Solomon still sounded curious.

“I have met Mr Neumann in South Africa. I know the sort of man he is. I know that anyone who tries to cheat him ends up very dead.”

“That still isn’t proof, Mr Kramer.” Mr Solomon wondered if the police had ever tried to question let alone extradite this Mr Neumann.

“No. But Sandra had proof and the police, including Mr Towner, went all through that house when her body was found.”

“That still isn’t proof.”

Eric Kramer looked at the magistrate and then over at Doug Towner. “No, I know it isn’t proof. But Doug Towner has a lot of money put away in a Swiss bank and no one knows where he got it from.”

“And how do you know that, Mr Kramer?”

“Because he told me that was what he and Gavin were doing and he offered to tell me how to do it. I said I didn’t have that sort of money and he never mentioned it again.”

Jenny Forman was inclined to believe Eric Kramer. If he had clinching evidence he would certainly offer it. But she also thought he didn’t care any more about Doug Towner or the young Hoysteds. Something had drained out of him long ago and now he was just going through the motions. She didn’t know that he had been in love with Olivia Neumann, Sam Hoysted’s first wife. She didn’t know that he resented Henry Neumann turning him down as a suitor for his daughter. And she didn’t know that he hated Doug Towner but she suspected it.

\*

Neumann Hoysted came up to Jenny Forman and said, “Would you like to join us for lunch?”

She said she would while hoping they did not choose very expensive places to eat in. There was no guarantee that he would pay for her and she wasn’t sure she would even want him to. She walked with John Duarte and Neumann to a nearby café and ordered fish and salad which thankfully was well within her means.

“So how do you think it’s going?” John Duarte asked her.

“I wondered why Doug didn’t bring his own lawyer.” She had also wondered who had brought Doug. Did he have a carer? But then he might not want such a person to hear him being questioned. And he had a state-of-the-art wheelchair.

“It doesn’t matter to Doug. He thinks we don’t know where he’s put all the money he and Gavin stole.”

“And you do?”

“Of course. You see they made a killing as Gavin Douglas and whipped it out of the country. But they made a big mistake when they pretended Gavin Douglas was a person not a company or a partnership.”

“But they would need to register a company.”

“True. But a company can go broke and disappear, or close down. What do you do with a person? If they die the tax office can ask for proof. If they disappear the police may be called in.”

“So what did they do?”

“Nothing. Gavin Douglas suddenly ceased to put in tax returns. If he was earning ten thousand a year they wouldn’t worry. But Gavin Douglas was doing very well. Remove its donations to charities run by Gavin Douglas but they were still having to pay tax on their earnings. And they could have gone on for years, the identity of Gavin Douglas wasn’t being queried, they had put a lot of thought into this non-existent person. But they no longer needed him. They were

both rich. Gavin had the right idea. Get right out of the country. But I think Doug didn't want to go. He wanted to be a rich man here, not be an unimportant stranger somewhere else."

"I still can't believe that Mr Hull just took a port of cash without getting suspicious. People in Winville say he was a good magistrate. Very careful and fair." Jenny had heard Greg say that.

"But he's a magistrate in a country town. No matter how carefully he saves and invests he's never going to be rich. And here's two kids going to be multimillionaires just by turning twenty-one."

John Duarte understood how people's moral sense could fly out the window when they convinced themselves no one would be hurt by their actions.

"But a port of cash," Jenny persisted. "Wouldn't that ring alarm bells?"

"It was like Towner giving him permission not to declare it. And I wonder if there were a few suss notes in there if Hull later had moral qualms."

"But the trust would've paid tax?" Jenny persisted.

"It did. There was nothing to raise alarm bells. And it was Gavin doing the returns, don't forget."

"Not even the size of remuneration?"

"It wasn't large by corporate standards even if they put it down which they probably didn't. And no one got on to the tax office to say it wasn't realistic."

"So Sandra didn't?"

"Not as far as we know. Or if she did no action was taken. For her to be pointing the finger at Doug Towner, senior police officer, it might have been seen as a disgruntled member of the public. A lot of people believed in Doug."

"So you haven't really got anything to run with?" She had found it all very instructive but hard evidence was clearly lacking. John Duarte looked at Neumann who had mostly eaten in silence. Now Neumann said, "In fact we have. Eric coming out with Gavin Douglas. Best thing the old fool could have done." He saw no reason to tell this young woman he had impressed on Eric the need to mention Gavin Douglas.

"And—do you think Sandra really did have evidence?"

"I'm sure she did," Duarte said. "But it was Doug Towner who went all through her things. There's nothing logged in at the station but Sam said Doug took a small box of papers from the house. Doug missed her diary but I'd say he got quite a lot. So I think he knew what she knew."

"And he could take steps?"

She could see that this would redound badly on Winville. But it was no good worrying about it. "Do you think Doug's still got anything? Like that, I mean."

It didn't seem likely. Doug had got what he wanted. Safety. And a free hand with the boys' millions.

She wondered if talk of Gavin Douglas was really enough to bring Doug down.

\*

Doug Towner pleaded weariness. He said he needed to lie down, that sitting for long periods made him tired and unwell. Mr Solomon accepted this and adjourned the court till the following day. DC Forman wondered if this was strategic or Doug genuinely felt unwell. She couldn't see it having any impact on the case even if Doug was using this time to call his lawyer and say he would be needed after all. But then he would probably be wise to have his lawyer there anyway once he had Duarte grilling him.

And while Towner was discussing the morning with his solicitor, David Solomon was agonising over what should be a simple straightforward issue. Two names had been brought up in connection with possible tax evasion. He would seem to have a responsibility to have both names checked. Michael Hull. Gavin Douglas. Hull seemed to be guilty of not declaring that extra \$20,000 each year. His response had not been believable. Gavin Douglas, though, was something of a puzzle. He thought he would rather have the tax office explain than to ask John Duarte who had a vested interest.

With the case adjourned he had the afternoon free. He pondered on whether to ring the ATO and try to explain. He knew several people who worked there. He could ask for some personal help.

But in the end he went there himself and asked to see Geoff Hedger. He explained what had come up in court and that he would like both names checked.

Hedger had met Solomon when they both joined a keen Go group and played once a week. “Michael Hull was a magistrate in Winville until he retired to the Gold Coast. He said in court this morning that he had been paid an extra twenty thousand a year for acting as a trustee for two teenage boys. I asked him if he had paid tax on this and he said he was sure he had but it wasn’t convincing.”

Hedger said briskly, “Well, not hard to check.”

And a few minutes later he said, “No-o-o, no sign of any extra money over and above his salary and some interest on his investments. And you’re absolutely sure about the extra twenty thousand a year?”

“He said he received twenty thousand per year for six years. It’s hard to picture him saying so if it wasn’t true.”

David Solomon had always been seen as a sympathetic magistrate. He always asked miscreants if they had anything to say for themselves and he was willing to take extenuating circumstances into consideration. He extended this to a fellow retired magistrate. But unless Hull was suffering from dementia, and there seemed no sign of this, then he had very clearly dobbed himself in.

“I wonder if he had got to the point where he wanted all this to come out? He must have known someone would check.”

“Some sort of mea culpa?”

“The thought did occur to me.”

“Well, we’ll follow up.” Hedger had seen many apparently respectable people dobbed in anonymously. Sometimes it was obviously sour grapes. Nevertheless it caught a lot of people. But here he was being informed by a man of integrity. The difficult part was that Michael Hull had probably also been seen as a man of integrity ... “Now, this Gavin Douglas, who is he?”

“That’s the puzzle. I’m not sure if he is anyone.”

Hedger looked surprised. “He must be someone.”

“Gavin Whittaker. Douglas Towner. I suspect he is the entity they used for their share trading activities.”

“Then why not form a partnership to trade?”

“I don’t know the answer to that but I am sure they had a reason, it just may not have been an ethical reason.”

“Then let’s see what Mr Douglas is up to.”

David Solomon had become increasingly curious about the whole case. And yet he could understand what might have driven these men. ‘Twenty to thirty million’. And those kids won’t miss a bit. And why should they become rich just by turning twenty-one. It was greed. But it was the kind of greed that some people felt was justified. In it was a kind of inferiority. And these men living in a country town and never likely to be rich no matter how hard they worked could convince themselves that they were entitled to help themselves to a little of this wealth.

“Mr Gavin Douglas has not put in a return for last year. Letters sent to both the postal and residential address were unclaimed and returned to us.”

“That may be because Gavin Whittaker is dead and Doug Towner was in hospital for several months.”

“Even so—someone at that residential address returned that letter. And where is the money Gavin Douglas paid tax on?”

“In Switzerland probably.”

“We can visit that street address. Normal procedure. See if anyone of that name has died.”

“Douglas Towner will come up in front of me tomorrow. I can certainly question him.”

Hedger pondered on this for more than a minute before saying, “Do we need to involve the police?”

“The Fraud Squad? Yes, probably. There’s no chance you could come along?”

Hedger said he was busy but would try. “But I will give you the two addresses used by Gavin Douglas. The post office box may not have been renewed but somebody must live at that

address. If they can tell you all about Gavin Douglas then he may not be the phantom entity you're envisaging."

"Maybe not."

The address was a Gold coast address and David Solomon decided a drive south was beyond him. Still, if John Duarte didn't bring up the mysterious Gavin Douglas then he would.

\*

Dennis told Fiona about the anonymous phone call the vet had received. She said, "Do you think it was genuine?"

"Hard to say. I rang a man called Gary Donovan. He apparently gave away a puppy but he says he didn't ask the man for his name. Just said he was oldish. Could be anyone."

"Except someone not oldish," she said with a smile.

"True. I've asked for any sightings of a Vauxhall, possibly cream, but haven't had a peep. S'pose he could've come the other way or round the back. But someone must've seen something. That's an open road."

"People don't always see the things you want them to see."

No. And sometimes they saw things that weren't any of their business.

"Wondered about him coming through Susan Best's place but she's got a padlock on her back gate. I was always calling that track a stock route but Noel says it was actually a gazetted road. The council just never got round to pushing it through and then the Binnie's old dad sold that bit of land around the track to Gus Mortimer. But I still can't see the point of parking the car there."

"And you're quite sure it's nothing to do with Ellie and Faye?"

A number of people had asked this question without being able to answer it. "Maybe the perp was planning to drive right into their laneway and set it on fire there. Maybe the storm coming up made him panic. But even so, they would still just have rung us." There were paddocks of pumpkins both sides of the laneway so except for a bit of dry grass along the lane there wasn't a lot to burn.

"Would it be worth talking to Andrew McLaren? They mightn't admit to someone hassling them but he might've heard something."

It was always hard to know just how much McLaren noticed but if Ellie and Faye liked anyone then it was probably Andrew McLaren.

"Good idea."

But some sort of private feud with the two old women still didn't seem to explain away that unfortunate dog.

And Andrew when he caught up with him said, "Awful business. But it doesn't seem to have bothered them particularly. They haven't got dogs. They told me once they'd had one and it started killing chooks, they tried everything but nothing stopped it and so they gave it away."

All sorts of ideas were put forward to stop dogs once they found it was fun to chase and kill poultry. Some people swore by tying a dead hen to the dog. Other people fed the dog chicken mixed with hot curry. Some people kept the dog tied up all day and only let it out when the chooks had been shut in for the night. Dennis had heard even more extreme ideas but in his experience the only answer was to give the dog to someone without any poultry.

"So they've never had a dog since then?"

"Don't think so. They had some geese for a while. I think they gradually got eaten up." Geese were good 'watchdogs'.

"And you've never heard of them getting into feuds, fights, with anyone?"

"Well, there's been some of those," Andrew said with a slight grin. "Bit of a barney with Steve Rolls over a fence some time ago. I felt sorry for him so I said I'd help him fix it. They told me they had a quarrel with a local clergyman once. They told Paul Pickering he wasn't looking after his animals properly."

"Well, he wasn't. But how did he respond?"

"Told them to piss off or he'd set fire to their sheds."

"Did they report that?"

"Not sure, but I think they did. They said something to me about Joe Bosch one time. Told him what a useless human being he was, I think. They were pleased when you came. And they were

thrilled when you set the RSPCA on to Pickering. But s'far as I know they haven't had anything to do with him since then."

Dennis had a moment of wondering if it would've changed anything if Joe Bosch *had* followed up on that complaint. Paul Pickering, in his view, was a psychopath and not someone he would want two old ladies arguing with.

And there was another thing in there, Dennis thought, when he'd asked McLaren to let him know if he ever heard or saw or remembered anything else. Most Bucktonites simply accepted that Sergeant Bosch would not do anything for them. It was a kind of resignation. But did anyone else round Buckton, like the Parsons' sisters, tell Joe he was a 'useless human being'?

Still, it was rather hard to picture Joe Bosch coming back, all these years later, to try and make trouble for Ellie and Faye Parsons.

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David Solomon had presided over many awkward and sometimes controversial cases in more than forty years. But he found himself feeling on edge as he entered the court room. He knew Douglas Towner had been charged with murder. It had been in the news. That Towner was not in remand probably had more to do with his wheelchair. He was hardly a flight risk.

It had nothing to do with this case and he believed firmly in the man's innocence until when, and if, another court should find him guilty.

So, he told himself, this case was relatively unimportant and he shouldn't let himself get worried and tense. If he found the case against Douglas Towner not proven he had no problem in seeing him leave. But if the case stood up then what should he do with Towner? This was the question which had kept him awake through the night. If those Swiss bank accounts were not accessible, or didn't exist, then asking Towner to sell the house he had set up to cope with his disability would not be pleasant.

Doug Towner had come today with a solicitor. Mr Harmon Greaves looked around the small room and saw no audience other than Jenny Forman and Michael Hull and the Hoysted boys with their solicitor. For the lack of public interest he was glad. He didn't know who Jenny Forman was and when he asked Doug the only answer he got was a brief, "Don't mind her, she's Greg Sullivan's stooge" which didn't tell him much. Michael Hull hadn't been asked to return but he had felt miserably compelled to come back and see what happened.

Just as Mr Solomon sat down the door opened and Geoff Hedger slipped in and sat down behind DC Forman. Solomon felt his spirits lift slightly. Obviously Geoff had seen this hearing as important.

John Duarte began with the same question he had asked the other men: "Mr Towner, can you tell us how much you were paid by the Trust for your duties as a trustee?"

Mr Greaves said to Towner, "You don't have to answer that."

David Solomon intervened to say firmly, "You do have to answer the question, Mr Towner."

"Sorry, I don't remember," Towner said in a muted voice.

"But you were paid?" Duarte had been prepared for Doug Towner to refuse to answer questions or to plead loss of memory.

"Just an honorarium." Doug sounded tired and weak.

"Which would have been—how much?"

"I don't remember."

"More than Mr Hull?"

"Oh, I wouldn't think so ... "

"You did more work for the trust."

"No, Gavin did the work. I just went along and okayed things."

"So you attended—how many meetings per year?"

"Don't remember. Maybe a dozen."

"And you kept records of every meeting?"

"No. Gavin did that."

"He shared those records with the other trustees?"

"Don't think so."



“You asked to see them?”

“No. I trusted him.”

“These were large investment decisions you were making. It would be normal practice to keep records and share those records with all trustees. You did have legal responsibilities.”

“As I said, Gavin did all that. I didn’t ask for anything.”

John Duarte could see that direct questions would all be stonewalled by Doug’s apparent memory loss combined with his apparent complete trust in Gavin Whittaker. Just to go along quietly might lull Doug and keep his solicitor at bay.

“Now, we do need to get this first question resolved. Was your remuneration decided by the other trustees?”

“I don’t remember.”

“You have absolutely no idea?”

“Nup.”

“Did you pay tax on what you received from the trust?”

“Of course.”

“Then you must know how much you received from the trust.”

“How the heck do you expect me to remember all those years ago?”

“We can check with the tax office.”

“You do that.”

“I will.”

Mr Greaves intervened to say that what his client paid to the tax office was confidential.

David Solomon now said, “I think we need some expert advice on that. I am pleased that Mr Hedger from the tax office is here with us this morning. But first I think we need to be clear that Mr Towner is not being asked how much he *paid* to the tax office, only how much extra income he declared.”

Mr Greaves looked slightly put out but said nothing. The impact on Doug Towner was far more marked. Jenny Forman suppressed a grin. The chance of Doug ever letting on to the tax office the origin of those cases of cash he seemed to dispense so liberally was very small.

John Duarte thanked David Solomon and said to Towner, “Now, Mr Towner, both Michael Hull and Eric Kramer have told this court that you paid them large amounts of cash. Perhaps you would tell us where this cash came from?”

“From the bank, of course.”

Again Jenny Forman suppressed a grin. Duarte said, “From what account?”

“From the trust account, of course.”

“You will need to let us know the bank the trust used and the name and number of the account so we can check withdrawals.”

“How would I remember that now?” Doug seemed to spark up.

“My client cannot be expected to remember such details from many years ago.”

“No bank in Winville admits to holding any accounts for the Trust,” Duarte said mildly, “so you will need to let us know where those accounts were held.”

“The Hoysteds will remember.”

“But you were their trustee. Why should they have to provide you with that information?”

“They’re young.”

“You will need to provide that information. But I would like to move on to the charitable donations the trust made. Now, these are just the ones which I have heard about.” He began reading a long list, adding in names of directors and beneficiaries. For those who hadn’t heard about the charities Doug and Gavin had set up the list was a revelation. Mr Greaves had seen his client as a retired detective who had some bad luck and made some dangerous enemies during his career. Now he turned and looked at his client and the look was both puzzled and critical. Surely a babe in arms would be more inventive in setting up a fake charity.

“Are you suggesting, Mr Duarte, that these charities don’t exist?” Greaves hoped he didn’t sound shocked.

“No. They are registered charities which received large amounts of money from the Trust. They are being investigated and it appears that most of their beneficiaries don’t exist. Their real beneficiaries, wouldn’t you say, Mr Towner, were yourself and Mr Whittaker?”

“That’s total bollocks!” Towner seemed to forget that he was a sick man in a wheelchair.

David Solomon felt he should impose more control over his court. But he had been as shocked as Harmon Greaves. There were shonky charities, slipshod charities, charities where most of the money seemed to be absorbed by administration and highly paid figureheads or so-called experts. But he had never seen anything as blatant. He wondered if Duarte could be correct. But he suspected what Randall and Neumann Hoysted already knew: John Duarte had been immersed in everything to do with the Hoysted family for a very long time.

And to route money through charities so that you would benefit was theft just as surely as if Towner had lifted a Hoysted wallet.

“In what way is this bollocks?” Duarte said mildly.

“All of it is bollocks,” Doug said again. “I’ve never even heard of these so-called charities!”

“So why is your name and signature on all the paperwork?”

“Someone forged my name.”

“Who?”

“Gavin. I don’t know. Ask Kramer, he’s good at forging stuff. That’s how he got in to Australia.”

Solomon said non-comittally, “We can have an expert look at all the paperwork, if you wish, Mr Towner.”

“No, he’d be on their side.”

“Whose side?”

“Those bloody Hoysteds.”

Solomon had had a little bit of sympathy for Towner when he came in. Anyone condemned to a wheelchair and dependence on other people evoked some sympathy, even if it was their own fault. But this apparent deep hatred for the Hoysteds was instructive. What was that old saying about people hating those they knew they had wronged? Unless Towner was completely amoral he must know that he had not always acted in the best interests of Randall and Neumann Hoysted.

“We’ll move on,” David Solomon said briskly. “Your next question, Mr Duarte.”

“The name of Gavin Douglas came up as a beneficiary of one of those charities. I would ask you to tell us who Gavin Douglas is, Mr Towner.”

“How would I know? Just someone asking for a grant.”

“Gavin Douglas is a wealthy ... man ... who made millions on the stock exchange. Why would he need a grant of ten thousand dollars from a charity?”

“Must be another Gavin Douglas then.”

“We checked his residential details and he apparently lives in the home of a Mr Granville Jones at the Palm Court Estate, two doors along from your house. Now Mr Jones said he was a friend of yours but that Mr Gavin Douglas had gone away. When asked how long Mr Douglas had lived at his address he said he couldn’t remember. Perhaps you can tell us?”

Mr Hedger made a note in his notebook. Someone had just saved him some work.

“I still don’t know who you’re talking about. Shorty has people come and go, rellies, friends, how would I know them?”

“Yes, Mr Gavin Douglas does seem to be a hard man to pin down. But we have found four different sharebrokers who did work for him. One of them gave us his original address in Winville and when we checked we found that you had lived at that address. The post office there kindly told us that they had forwarded your mail from that address to your Gold Coast address. So anything sent to Mr Gavin Douglas would have come to you at the Palm Court Estate or to your post office box. So do you still say you don’t know any Gavin Douglas?”

Mr Greaves made a valiant effort to divert attention from this. “Mr Towner has met thousands of people in his career and his retirement. You can’t expect him to remember them all. I’m sure you will agree with that, Mr Towner?” He turned to his client and Doug nodded, “Of course not.”

“We are not talking about someone who came to you thirty years ago because their garden gnome had been stolen. These are very large and constant transactions. But if you don’t want to tell us about Gavin Douglas, Mr Towner, we will continue to seek all your records from those sharebrokers who enjoyed your custom.”

Gavin Whittaker had had sleepless moments when he pondered on the careless over-confident way Doug Towner had gone about everything. Because Doug couldn’t seem to understand that successful grand-scale theft couldn’t leave dangling threads everywhere. Or else he believed he had the power and the connections to negate any slip-up.

For the first time Towner showed distinct tension. He had spent so long thinking of Sam Hoysted’s boys as just kids that he still couldn’t see that they were prepared to spend whatever it took to show him up as a thief. But he could see that the walls were closing in. What little power he’d had could do nothing to change anything at the ATO. And it was too late to ask his brokers to lie, mislead, obfuscate for him, or at least find a way to stymie any investigation. And the two men he had hoped would bolster him as a trustee had failed. He looked over at Michael Hull and Hull only shook his head slightly.

David Solomon wrapped the session up by saying that he wished to adjourn the case until he had all the details of Towner’s financial dealings, the charities’ dealings, and, if possible, the tax office investigation. The Tax Office was not so much concerned with the origin of Towner’s money but rather whether it had been declared. But the gap between Towner’s declared income and what he had spent on buying a mansion on the Gold coast in itself would be instructive. He then adjourned the case until the Trust’s financial activities could be completely audited.. He felt that he was taking the easy way out but he would like to have precise figures in front of him. And he would still, probably, have to hand down his decision before the murder trial came up. No date had been set for it. But he suspected the DPP would like to have his ruling before it began.

Worse, even precise figures would not necessarily prove that Doug had actually stolen the money rather than Gavin Whittaker making the decision to provide him with excessive remuneration. Doug had looked increasingly uncomfortable through the morning. Was this because he hadn’t known how much information Duarte had? Or was it that there was more, potentially, that might come out?

But there was another problem in there and he wasn’t sure how John Duarte could possibly deal with it. If some of Towner’s money really was in Swiss banks they would not give out that information. Or they would give it out if Doug Towner was convicted of stealing it. A chicken-and-egg situation. So did Duarte have enough without it ... For the first time he felt this was too big a problem to handle alone.

Jenny Forman didn’t wish to stand round talking. She wanted to be on the road home as soon as possible. But the Hoysteds came up to her and said, “What did you think of that?”

“Dennis will be pleased. But what d’you think Solomon will ask Doug for? His house?”

“All that money is still stashed away.”

“D’you know where it is?”

They both gave the slightest of nods. She gave that a little smile. Greg Sullivan believed the Hoysteds hacked in to everything. So she could well believe they knew where Doug had squirreled his money away. Their computer skills would undoubtedly leave someone like Doug for dead.

“Well, good luck.”

Unexpectedly Neumann bent forward and kissed her on the cheek and said, “Give our best to Rui.”

She knew Dennis Walsh believed it was John Duarte who had got Rui Lopes in as manager of the feed lots. Now she only gave that a cheerful, “I will.” But days later when she called in to see Dennis and tell him what had happened he queried her idea that the Hoysteds had got Rui in to Japana. “No, I’d say that they asked Duarte to get someone in there to try and calm things down. I told him to put the kybosh on any expansion. That place is going to run out of water.”

She hadn’t given that aspect any thought and she didn’t think there was much Rui could do about it. The major decisions were made elsewhere.

“So what would happen then?”

“They’d have to remove the cattle.”

She found the implications of this too problematical to grapple with. Dennis said, "So what did you think of Doug now?"

"I still think he is an evil man. I think people like Solomon felt a bit sorry for him but I didn't. And even in prison he's not going to be given a hard time." Cops did get a hard time if they were convicted. But Doug, incapacitated, would get some sympathy. And Doug had stolen from the rich. Many inmates would probably say all power to him.

"No. But he killed Sandra Hoysted just to save his miserable skin. That's what really matters."

Yes, theft was theft, but he had also taken the life of a woman who had simply wanted the best for her stepsons.

"Y'know, Jenny," he went on slowly, "almost the only people who come out of all this mess as decent human beings are Sandra Hoysted and John Duarte."

As she drove home Jenny thought a third name could be added to that list. Dennis Walsh.

## *Case No. 4: Oh Danny Boy*

A high school student riding home from school was knocked off his bike by an old man in a pick-up. As it happened a couple of hundred metres from the station Dennis and Grant were quickly on the scene. The boy was dispatched to the hospital for a check-up. The driver proved to be Dan Goodrick. When Dennis asked him what had happened Dan immediately blamed the cyclist, saying, "The bloody kid was all over the road!"

Youngsters sometimes did silly things on bikes but he had seen young Nick Reardon riding past most schooldays and he had never seen him doing anything silly. And by the looks of things Dan had been driving in the middle of the road. As he veered over towards Nick had the boy tried to take evasive action?

And was the problem Dan's eyesight? Or was it just carelessness?

Dennis said, "I'll run you round to the doctors. You've had a shock."

Dan after considerable grumbling finally agreed to a check-up and got in with Dennis. His lack of enthusiasm was understandable. Goodricks and police were rarely bosom buddies and to be seen in a police vehicle ... well! But Dan was getting on. Dennis thought he was about seventy-nine and he wished Dan would move in to the Annexe. There his light fingers would have fewer opportunities. It was probably for this reason that Dan stuck stubbornly to his smallholding despite people saying it was a pigsty now.

As they drove Dennis said, "D'you remember that old Vauxhall that Joe Bosch had in front of the station?"

Dan agreed gloomily that he did.

"You thought of nicking it?"

Dan was not much into honest responses but he said, "Could of, but Joe had his eye on it."

"You mean he helped himself?"

"Reckon so."

"I heard it was a heap o' junk."

"Nah, I reckon he got maybe two, three hundred."

"After it'd been in the creek?"

"Didn't go right in. An' hardly any water."

"So where did he take it?"

Dan shrugged carefully. "Who knows? But I saw him take it for a run an' John reckoned he come from over near Southbrook. Maybe had rellies ... mates ..."

Dennis went in with Dan who was overdoing the decrepit bit. He said to Joanne McNally, "Dan needs a look-over, bit of an accident." Dan folded into a chair in the waiting room and closed his eyes. Dennis went on, "Make sure they test his eyes. I'd say he isn't seeing too well."

She nodded and Dennis went out and around to the hospital to check on young Nick and get his story from him. And it was Nick who said the pick-up had been all over the road, "like it owned

the road”. Dennis said he’d get Noel to check the bike and that the parents had been called. “But I reckon you’ll be stiff and sore for a few days so take it easy.”

He was sure Dan had been responsible for the accident but he needed a witness. With luck other kids coming out of the high school had seen something. He told Grant to go round to the high school first thing in the morning and try to get a witness or two.

And what about John Goodrick? Did he really know where Joe Bosch had taken that car? And did it matter enough to go in and ask. John Goodrich lived by the quid pro quo, the ‘you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours’. John would probably expect something for providing any information. If he had any to provide.

Dennis left it for the moment.

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Someone passed on to DSS Sullivan that there had been a news report of a man held in Fiji who might be extradited to Australia. Greg had sent an e-mail to Frank Jennings who wrote back ‘Nothing doing. Don’t know where you got that story. Have charged Simon Lynch with kidnap.’

Greg said to his colleagues, “Then where did the media get the story if Jennings hasn’t been told?”

No one could answer this and as the report hadn’t named names they accepted they might be jumping to conclusions. But Greg didn’t trust Jennings to tell them what was going on. Jennings might still be keeping something close to his chest. He rang the radio station and asked if he could get a printed copy of the report and where was it sourced and could it link into the dead body they had found at Dinawadding?

He only got a ‘we’ll pass on your request’ but he thought a possible local link just might snag their interest. Whereas the fate of Simon Lynch was no longer anything to do with them. Except for its possible impact on young Stacey Lynch.

Then he turned back to the information DC Forman had brought back from Brisbane and the potentially explosive suggestion that Doug Towner had removed papers from the Hoysted house but that these had never been logged in. He had never seen or heard about any such papers. When he contacted Ali Hassan who had worked here before her marriage she said no, she hadn’t seen any such papers but “Doug did go round there several times on his own. He didn’t have a search warrant but Sam Hoysted said he could look around. If he did take documents he probably took them to his house to go through them at his leisure. Did Sam Hoysted say what was taken?”

Greg couldn’t answer this. And before he planned to ring Sam Hoysted he thought he should have another look. Could they have been logged in under something other than ‘Documents’? He went through everything from the date when Sandra Hoysted’s body was found to when Sam Hoysted had been convicted of murder but there was nothing remotely suitable logged in. He caught Stephanie Pohl before she tidied up for the day but she had no memories of Towner ever coming in with a box of papers. “Are you sure he didn’t give it to you or Ali Deane to log in?”

“I wish.” Greg said gloomily. It seemed to be just one more example of Doug’s perfidy and his own failure to notice or to hear or to question anything. And it meant that he had no choice but to ring the prison and ask to speak to Sam Hoysted. When he finally got on to the man and said, “Did Doug Towner ever remove a box of documents and papers from your house after your wife died?”

“Course he did!” Sam immediately said. “Didn’t you know that?”

Greg reluctantly said he hadn’t. “And d’you know what he took?”

“We had a wooden cabinet in the office. Sandra kept her things in one drawer, like papers for the car. Doug took the drawer away with him.”

“You mean—he took the whole drawer out of the cabinet and went away with it?”

“Had three drawers, never saw that one again.”

“Did he give you a receipt for it?”

“Course not. That’s what mates are for, look after you.” Greg couldn’t miss the bitterness in this.

“D’you have the date of this? And what did he say to you?”

“Said it might help him find the bastard who hit her, said maybe she had a secret enemy.” This too had an undertone of anger. “Course she had a secret enemy! Bloody Doug Towner!”

“Coming back to that drawer—can you describe it?”

“Big wooden drawer. Silky oak, I think. Had a metal handle. Deep enough to put files in it.”

“And he never brought Sandra’s papers back?”

“No, he bloody well didn’t! Gave me a heck of a lot of trouble when I came to sell her car, and that Towner telling me he needed to keep everything in case the court wanted to see anything. I had to ask bloody Whittaker to get stuff back from Doug and then he bloody well charged me for doing that!”

Greg thanked Sam Hoysted and said he would try to find that drawer. Hoysted said, “Ask the boys, they’ve got all our photos, think there’s one of Sandra in the office.”

Greg Sullivan then went round to see the couple who had bought Doug’s house to see if they had ever found a wooden drawer anywhere there. They looked at each other then Mr Orton said. “It’s got stuff in it. But come and look.” He led Sullivan out to his tool shed at the side of the garage and pointed to a wooden drawer full of tools, various files, bits for the brace, large roof nails, along with a couple of rat traps, and a can of dried-out paintbrushes. “Sorry, it’s a bit of a mess.”

“Would you say this’s silky oak?”

Graham Orton looked at the drawer and said, “I’d say so. But why are you so interested?”

“Mr Towner removed it from someone’s house and didn’t return it. We’ll check if it’s the same one.”

“Well, I’m sorry it’s in a bit of a state but Doug just said ‘use anything’ and it seemed quite a handy thing to keep stuff in.” He began taking his belongings out of it and laying them on the bench. “And is it true that he’s been accused of murder?”

“Fraid so.” Greg couldn’t help sounding gloomy.

The other man unexpectedly said, “Well, cheer up, there’s always one bad spud in the bag but once it’s been chucked out, things can only get better.”

It was the chucking out which was likely to be the painful part of it all but Greg just nodded.

A few days later, and after Sullivan had given the drawer to Reid Strohling to fingerprint, he received a faxed photo. In it, Sandra Hoysted sat on the edge of a desk, showing some very nice legs, and to one side of her was the cabinet with the three drawers. An accompanying message from Randall Hoysted said ‘Dad said you wanted this. Hope it helps put Towner away’. It didn’t really surprise Greg that the boys had come up with it so quickly. They probably had all the family photos neatly filed in chronological order. Something a slapdash detective, like Doug, would have difficulty in understanding.

But was it enough?

He said to his wife Narelle on Sunday morning, “Maybe I’d better come to Mass with you and pray hard that Reid finds Doug’s fingerprints on that drawer.”

She was always glad to have his company at St Mary’s but she understood almost as well as he did that it was a very long shot. That drawer had been handled by different people. It had been exposed to sun and dry air. It had had turps spilled in it. And there was always the small chance that Doug had wrapped it in something. He clung to the hope that Reid was a very careful and knowledgeable man. If anything helpful was there he would find it.

On Monday morning he went over the Case of the Mysterious Drawer with his team and Petra Moore said, “So where’s the rest of the cabinet now? Was it thrown away?”

No one could answer this but Greg said, “Those kids must know. It was their house once their dad went to prison—”

“Was the house included in the trust?”

“No. It still belonged to Sam but Gavin Whittaker looked after it for the boys and then when Duarte took over, he sold it. So the boys will know where the furniture went.”

He was thinking on whether to contact the boys directly or through their lawyer when Stephanie Pohl came in with the mail. Jenny Forman took the bundle and rapidly sorted through it, handing Greg a letter with a Fiji stamp on it. Greg opened it, read it, then looked around. Everyone else had stopped what they were doing to look at him.

“From the police in Fiji. Thanking us for our information. A man was arrested there for traveling on a false passport. One sharp cookie in the port there noticed that the picture in the

passport didn't gibe with the man proffering it. They did some checking. He hadn't changed the name of his yacht so they checked and identified him as Simonov. The name in the passport was Vasili Danichev. There were no visas to say this person had been in Australia. The last time it had been used was in Chile. I wonder if Simonov didn't expect any kind of checking by small Pacific countries?"

"So who is this Danichev?"

Greg looked over at Jenny and Brent. "You'd best get on to the Russian Embassy. There's a good chance that he's one of the men Simonov left Russia with."

"So what is Fiji going to do with him?" Moore put in.

"They don't say. Maybe they're in the process of giving him the third degree. But there's a good chance they'll ask us if we want him back, not us personally but Australia. I s'pose I'd better get on to Frank Jennings to see if there's anything more about the business with Tony Giordano." He didn't find any pleasure in the thought.

Jenny and Brent looked at each other, neither of them excited about ringing Canberra. But just as Jenny was about to say Brent should do it, Reid Strohling came in.

"That drawer," he said without any pleasantries. "Got nothing from Doug on it, but I've got prints from Sam Hoysted. Looks like he pushed it in at some stage." He raised a hand to mime someone pushing a drawer with his fingers. "Pretty poor but a match."

"Anything from Sandra." Her prints must've been on the drawer if she went to it regularly.

"Hers aren't on file. When they found the body it had been dead for weeks. And she was identified by clothes, hair, teeth, wedding ring. No one asked for prints."

Greg wondered if her prints were still on anything but the house would've been cleaned throughout, probably many times before it was sold. He couldn't think of anywhere else her prints might be.

"Anything else?"

"There's a bit of paper lining the drawer. Pretty bad shape but I'm working to get it out without tearing it." The paper looked like some sort of formula letter from a bank so might not be relevant but Reid was hopeful the other side might have an address.

"Thanks, mate." Greg had been cheered by the news. Reid didn't like being called mate but he simply turned and went out. He had been known to take people to task for calling him 'mate', 'bud' and similar monikers.

"Right." He had scribbled notes for himself. "Brent, Russian Embassy. Jenny, get on to the Hoysteds and ask what they did with that cabinet. Petra, we'll need to let DI Payne know about the drawer. Soon as we find that cabinet can you send him an e-mail? I'd best ring Jennings—"

Brent, gloomily trying to decide how to ask leading questions of an unknown Russian, took no notice of the others. But Jenny was pleased to see Greg looking and sounding decisive. Petra had put him on the back foot somehow and even when he had taken her to task for some careless work he had never really got back on to the front foot. Maybe today would be the turning point.

Jennings, as soon as Greg caught up with him, said they didn't want Simonov back and he seemed annoyed even to be told he had been found. "Not my business, mate, and there's no way we'd get a case up solely on the word of that useless Gardiner kid."

"You've got the post mortem results."

"And what does that show? Diddley. And I've got more important stuff to be doing. We've got that useless Simon Lynch by the short and curlies now. DNA proves he's the father of that baby. Incest. Statutory rape. Kidnap. He'll be going down with a bang. And if you know where that sister of his is, tell her she'll be wanted soon."

Frank Jennings was enjoying himself. The case had turned into money for jam. For very little work he was now looking very very good. He had gone around to the Lynch family to tell them the news and enjoy their shock and embarrassment. He had gone around to the Giordano family to tell them Tony was not the father of that baby and there was a good chance Simon Lynch had deliberately tried to get their son into trouble to divert attention from himself.

They had looked at him in sudden anguish. "You mean—Tony did nothing?"

"Not a thing. Just a decent kid by the sound of it. And you chucked him out and now he's dead."

It didn't occur to them to wonder if he should be telling them all this before Simon Lynch came up in court. But they did vaguely discern his pleasure in making them look like the world's worst parents. He went away, whistling, and savouring the looks on their faces as he'd shared his news. 'Useless gits', he said to himself. Then he put Mr and Mrs Giordano out of his mind. They were not relevant to the case but he didn't mind making them squirm.

"Can that be right?" Tony's adoptive dad said after Jennings had gone.

"It must be." Amelia Giordano had had little to do with police and the arrival of a senior detective on their doorstep had to be taken seriously.

"Why didn't Tony say anything?"

But they both knew the answer to that. They had not believed his protestations. They had preferred to believe the worst of him.

"It was Simon Lynch, wasn't it? The young man who told us he had seen Tony putting rubbish in someone's letter box?"

"I don't think he gave his name. Just said something about how we'd want to know what Tony was getting up to."

"Why did we believe him and not our own son?"

"Because he sounded very confident and plausible—"

"And he was older. We didn't think of him as going round doing those sorts of stupid nasty things."

"But that detective must have evidence that he did ... "

Amelia Giordano felt tears well up. Their constant assumptions that their son had been out there annoying people, getting a young girl pregnant, doing small thefts, failing in school ... "And now he's dead." She found it hard to say the words.

Frank Jennings had no intention of doing anything more about the death of Tony Giordano. What would be the point of trying to get someone extradited from Fiji only to have them walk free because of insufficient evidence?

If Winville wanted to push this empty barrel ... Let them ...

\*

The afternoon wore on in Winville's little CIB room. Mid-afternoon was hot and still. Their fan seemed to do little to stir the air and no kindly department had ever considered giving them air-conditioning. Greg's spirits had gone down after talking with Frank Jennings. The Russians had said they would check. Jenny had only got messages when she tried Randall and Neumann.

And even Sam's fingerprints proved nothing. He had let Doug take that drawer. There was no reason not to touch it. And even the drawer in Doug's shed only proved that he hadn't returned it to the Hoysted home. It didn't explain where the papers from the drawer had gone. And they only had Sam's word that Sandra's papers were kept in that drawer anyway. And if Doug said he'd returned them to Sam it would only be Sam's word that he hadn't.

Reid came back at about 4 pm and said in his unemotional way, "Might be what you're wanting." He had a very dirty sheet of paper between two heavy duty plastic covers. He handed it to Greg who turned it over and saw that it had been addressed to Sandra Clare Hoysted.

"So it *was* her drawer? And it ended up in Doug's shed?"

Reid only said, "D'you want it?"

"When you've finished with the drawer we'll put both in the evidence room."

Reid nodded and went out again. Greg tried to decide just how significant this bit of information might be. A good defense lawyer would say they were clutching at straws but enough straws ...

Forman's phone rang and she said to Randall Hoysted, "Thanks for getting back to me. It's about that wooden cabinet your dad had in his study. Doug Towner took a drawer of papers from it. We've found and identified the drawer but what happened to the cabinet it came from?"

Randall said he thought the Millers had taken it. "We said they could take any of the furniture and household stuff they could use. He was a good carpenter. Maybe he made a new drawer for it."

"And—are the Millers still in Winville?" She wasn't sure who the Millers were but Greg would know. Randall gave her their address, said, "Keep us posted", and rang off.



“He says the Millers took most of the furniture.”

“Then let’s hope they haven’t turned it into firewood.”

“Who are the Millers?” Petra Moore said.

“Husband and wife, used to look after the Hoysted house and garden. So can you duck round with that photo they sent us and see if they’ve still got the cabinet?”

Petra Moore thought the trouble with Greg, or one of the troubles, was that he framed things as requests rather than simply saying ‘do this’. It helped to make him sound less than authoritative. She took the faxed photo and the address and went out. Jenny wondered why he had chosen to send Petra rather than herself but said nothing. And a few minutes later she was glad she hadn’t been sent. Brent said when the phone rang, “It’s the Russian Ambassador for you, sir,” and handed the phone to Greg.

Forman thought it was good that Petra wasn’t here to listen to Greg waffling on but she was also glad she was here. It wasn’t every day Russian ambassadors rang Winville CIB.

Greg after a muddled moment of not knowing how to present the case clearly and succinctly finally got into stride and laid the possibility out that Vasili Danichev might be one of the men Simonov left Russia with and that something had happened to him after the yacht left Chile.

The Ambassador said they had checked when Simonov had first been brought to their notice and that the two men had been Vasili Danichev and Boris Danichev, brothers.

“So if Vasili is missing, probably dead, then there is a good chance that Boris is also missing and maybe dead. There was no one with Simonov in Australia, only young boys.”

“Both brothers were young. Twenty five and twenty three.” So it was no wonder the weatherbeaten Simonov had been caught. He would have difficulty in passing for a twenty-five-year-old.

“Do you have an Embassy in Fiji that might be able to see Simonov and find out what he’s done with the Danichev brothers?”

The Ambassador did not seem to be wild about having an unknown country copper telling him what to do. But Greg’s way of making mild requests seemed to be acceptable. Or possibly the Ambassador could see that the sooner Simonov was dealt with the sooner a minor embarrassment to Russian diplomacy, Russian reputations, Russian anything, could be removed.

He said he would arrange an official to speak with Mr Simonov in Fiji. Greg said that would be much appreciated. And to the room when he’d hung up, “Don’t s’pose they still send them to Siberia but I wouldn’t mind this bloody Simonov being sent somewhere where he can’t hurt any more kids.”

Jenny thought that what Petra Moore couldn’t see was that Greg got results simply because he never backed anyone into a corner. Instead they were lulled into the idea that they could say anything to this old duffer and it wouldn’t really matter. And Greg was genuinely grateful for any help the public gave him. Some police barely acknowledged such help.

“It’s a bit like Hercule Poirot,” she said to Brent as they went out later. “People discount him because they think a foreigner doesn’t matter.”

“You’re suggesting they don’t take Greg seriously?”

“Something like that.”

Greg was just packing up when Petra came bustling in. “Got it,” she said immediately. “The cabinet’s still in their shed. Do we want to take it?”

“First we’ll need to get Reid to go round with that drawer and check that it really does fit. They may’ve had more than one cabinet.”

“And then we take it?”

“Take Reid with you. And go in the van. Give the Millers a receipt but ask them to come in and do a statement. I’d say they probably know more than they’ve volunteered. And Jennings doesn’t want Simonov back. We could go over his head if necessary. But I guess we can wait and see what happens. If he’s dropped the Danichev brothers in the drink mid-ocean ... ” He found it difficult getting his head around the possibilities.

“Yep. Whose jurisdiction?” Petra said briskly.

“Uh huh, but that can wait.”

After Petra had taken her bag and gone Greg went through to see if Jake Moss was still in the station. “Just going to walk my dog,” Jake said as Greg came through.

“Did Dinny come today?”

“Sure. But he was mostly out at Norwilla. Just dropped in on his way home.”

“Well, if you’ve got a minute I’ll fill you in. Things have been happening.”

Jake listened with some interest and at the end he said, “Well, that beats a burnt dog. But I’d still like to get the bastard that burnt that dog alive.”

“No leads?”

“Looks like the sergeant there before Dennis helped himself to a Vauxhall that’d gone into the creek and no one had claimed it. But hard to see how it could be the same vehicle turning up all these years later. D’you know where Bosch went?”

“Into a Home for Lazy Cops probably,” Greg said drily. “He was a world-beater.”

“Did he have any family?”

“No wife, no kids—or he kept very quiet about them. But he must’ve had a next-of-kin listed. We can check tomorrow.”

Greg was glad to get home. Of course things might fizzle out. They might never hear another word from either Fiji or the ambassador. And the radio station’s contact in Fiji had probably depended on speculation more than hard news; or a friend of the manager happened to live in Fiji and occasionally sent some news. But he felt they’d done good work. The trouble with the cabinet was simply how to tie it to Doug so tightly he couldn’t undo the knots.

“But it isn’t up to you, love, just pass the news on. And are you going to let Dinny know?”

“I should, shouldn’t I? He was the one who saw through Doug right from the start. I just took him at face value.”

“Doug *was* very plausible.”

“I still remember the day Dinny came in and tried to arrest Doug. I thought he’d gone mad. And if we and the bigwigs had backed him up we wouldn’t be facing this very public mess now.”

It wasn’t only one of their own being outed as a murderer, it was the related fact that they had sent the wrong man to jail and he would now be entitled to compensation. However he looked at it, Greg could only see people looking at him and wondering if he went round with his eyes closed. Or worse, that he had been ‘persuaded’ to look the other way.

\*

Jake Moss called by Buckton station next morning. It might be purely business but Dennis doubted it. Jake might be a hard-nosed cop when it came to dealing with vandals and bad drivers but he was an old hen where Susan Denby was concerned. He said he’d put out an Alert for the ex-cook and his mates. “I thought people deserve to be warned.”

“Susan still says no to a charge?”

“She says if it was that useless Brian she’d go for it but it would give me too much work chasing round Queensland after that useless mate of his. Maybe. And she says it was worth getting hit to see the back of him and get my sister in there. But I don’t know how long she’ll want to stay. She just sees it as helping out till they can get a permanent person.”

“And anything on the dog?”

“Not yet. But I checked in old records for what we had on Joe Bosch. His next-of-kin was his sister Miriam and her husband.”

“Miriam who?”

“Donovan. They lived somewhere over near Southbrook.”

Dennis immediately said, “Donovan? That was the man I rang somewhere over near Crow’s Nest that breeds Irish Setters. D’you know his first name?”

“Peter.”

“This was a Gary. It’s not all that common a name.” Then he shook his head. If it all linked up he couldn’t yet see how.

Jake, too, couldn’t see how it might connect. Instead he said, “So Bosch stole that car? Can we still get him for theft?”

“As no one had claimed the car ... but we could get him for not following procedure and maybe driving an unregistered vehicle. There’s nothing in our records and s’far as I know his only

effort to find an owner was to prop a sign on it to say ‘Who Owns this Car?’ So if it was stolen in Cecil Plains its owner probably never heard it’d been found.”

“It wouldn’t be a charge, I guess, but I’d still like to see him confronted. We’re going to look bad enough when Doug comes up for murder. I’m just hoping the media won’t go sniffing round trying to dig up any more evidence of police failures. Bosch is small fry but several people from Buckton did put in complaints about him.”

“So was it those complaints that got him chucked out?”

“That’s the funny thing. The complaints weren’t acted on. There’s notes on them to say ‘No Action to be Taken’. So if it wasn’t us it must’ve been the inspector when he did his report on Buckton.”

This was easily possible. “D’you think he ever helped himself to anything else—besides the car?” Police confiscating items and either not recording them or not returning them later to their owners was a fruitful area of minor corruption. Old Mr Ranke from over at Dinawadding had been into Winville several times to ask for the return of his son’s rifle. But the rifle very definitely was not there even though it had been brought into the station in Winville and been seen by several officers. There was the possibility that Sergeant Bosch hadn’t followed procedure in other cases. There was also the possibility that Bosch didn’t even know what the procedure was he was supposed to follow. Careful study of rules and regulations had not been his forte.

“Tricky,” Jake said after considering this. “If we asked people to come forward we’d just be reminding them there’s a lot of cops that aren’t squeaky clean.”

“Next time I see John Applegarth I’ll ask. But I don’t think we’re looking at the usual kind of thing. Joe’d be too lazy even to go out to check on burglaries.” Jake nodded. All the complaint letters referred to Sergeant Bosch not attending. “If he helped himself it must’ve been something that came to him, like that car.”

“So where to now?”

“Get one of your juniors on to checking the Donovans, see if they are related. And check on the electoral rolls for Joe Bosch. It isn’t likely he’s dead. But it’s still a leap o’ faith to think both Vauxhalls are the same car.”

“I know.” Jake knew he shouldn’t be putting so much time and effort into the case. He wasn’t short of work waiting. “And we’ll have the DNA on that poor bloody dog soon—so it might tell us something.”

After he’d gone, Dennis sat for several minutes tapping a biro on his lips. He probably should get Jake to let him know who had sent in those complaints.

There were cases where no amount of work got a result but he still hoped they could pin down the who and the why. He gave up pondering when Dr Lombardi came into the station to say he’d made an appointment for Dan Goodrick to see an optometrist in Winville “and he’s not in the best of shape healthwise. I’m just surprised you haven’t been checking on him. He shouldn’t be driving.”

“He isn’t eighty.”

Dr Lombardi shrugged and said “Your business,” before going out again.

Eighty would see Dan having to come in for a new test. But Dennis thought gloomily that if he sent every bad driver round the place to the doctor it might pick up on issues but it would fill the waiting room, something both doctors might not relish.

In the evening he went round to see the Reardons. They had recently bought the house on the north side of the Church of Christ. Steve Reardon had got a job with Luke Molloy now that young Aidan Walker had gone to Toowoomba to try his luck. Luke Molloy had arranged to rent most of Freda Donnelly’s paddocks, just leaving her those on the north side of the lane for her horses. Once he took the crops off those on the south and west he planned to put it all down to lucerne. He said the demand for good quality hay was more than he could meet.

The Reardons had been happy in their new home. Luke Molloy was a good employer and once their two girls were in full time school Mrs Reardon hoped to be able to find some part time work. Mr Reardon was a country man from Goombungee, deeply tanned and weathered, and planning to make a permanent home in Buckton. Their son’s accident had shocked and upset them. But they told Dennis that although he was still stiff and sore he was getting better. And as he’d

been wearing his helmet there hadn't been any damage to his head. And Noel at the garage said he would be able to fix the bicycle.

"I've cautioned Dan Goodrick and he's going to the eye fella in Winville. We've got three witnesses to the accident, so we know it wasn't your son's fault." When he'd told Dan he had three witnesses Dan had insisted they had probably been looking the other way. As they were all high school students this was possible but unlikely.

"That's okay," Steve Reardon said carefully, "but I've heard it's not a good idea to get on the wrong side of the Goodricks." He'd had a game of pool with Craig Goodrick at the pub one evening and discovered that Craig was a very poor loser. And the family had heard various rumours though they didn't know how reliable they were.

"Dan's pretty decrepit. If you do any business with John read the fine print. Craig's a useless so-and-so but I keep a bit of an eye on him. He has a couple of cousins come out from Winville but I haven't heard of them bothering anyone here. Pauline at the pub was a Goodrick but she's not fussed on some of her rellies, I don't reckon. So if you want Dan charged or you want to take out a civil suit—go for it."

Steve Reardon hadn't given any thought to anything he might do. But now he scratched his neck and pondered on the thought. If the police charged Dan he might lose his licence. If the Reardon family took out a case against Dan maybe they could get some money to pay the expenses the accident had left them with.

"But would it be any use charging Dan? He's only an Old Age Pensioner."

Dennis didn't see it as being appropriate to tell anyone Dan wasn't the poor old soul he presented himself as. But he could see no reason why Dan shouldn't pay them something for young Nick's expenses.

"If you want—go for it. Dan can cough up a bit to help you."

This seemed to cheer them up a little. "Mr Derry has been very good," Mrs Reardon put in. "He's come round to see Nick and the teachers have kept him in touch so he doesn't get behind the others."

But when Steve Reardon went in to see the town's only solicitor, Charles Mather, he was told in no uncertain terms that 'torts aren't my thing'. Reardon wasn't sure how to respond to this. He said carefully, "I was scared of getting on the wrong side of the Goodricks and I s'pose you are too."

Mather didn't take kindly to the implication in this. He gave Reardon a sour look and said, "You'll have to find someone in Winville."

"We gave you our business when we bought our house. I'm sorry now, about that."

"Well, just don't tell everyone."

Reardon wasn't sure what this meant either. He got up. He was obviously wasting his time here. "I'll have to find someone else." He didn't feel like giving Mather a friendly farewell. He turned and went out. Jess in the outer office had heard most of it and felt sorry for the Reardons but she didn't think she could persuade her boss to change his mind. They were doing little more now than wills, conveyancing, and occasionally witnessing something. She knew Charles Mather was thinking about retiring. The one thing that probably kept him practicing was his lack of ideas of what to do with himself in retirement.

"You could go and see Dale Kennedy in Winville," she said to Mr Reardon. "He's very good on compensation cases." She didn't know very much about the accident but she could well believe that Dan Goodrick had been at fault. She had seen him hogging the road in the occasional times she had wanted to pass him.

It would mean more trouble but Steve Reardon thought he would like to see Dan put on the spot. Dan was still going round town mouthing off about 'that stupid kid, all over the road,' and he didn't think Dennis Walsh would encourage a civil case if he didn't think Dan was at fault.

Dennis told Grant next morning about the Reardons being scared of some backlash from the Goodricks and that it was just as well that Lynnell Morton had moved to Winville. Grant, like Dennis, had been glad to see her move. But twenty minutes later while he was in tidying up the small interview room he happened to look out the window as a man got out of a car and walked up to their front door.

“Speak of the devil,” he said to Dennis, “Pidcock’s back.”

“Bully for him,” Dennis said sourly. He just hoped the man wasn’t back to try and find another way to sue Lynnell and her daughter. Not because he minded them getting sued but Pidcock was hardly a shining example of fatherhood.

Mr Pidcock said immediately, “I’m going to get someone if it’s the last thing I do.”

“Thought you were going after the Mortons?”

“No money there, it looks like.” Which might suggest Lynnell had done something clever with the money she had got from the sale of her house in Winville.

“Nothing to do with us.”

“What about me going for that Pickering bloke. He’s got a farm.”

“On what grounds?”

“If he’d called a doctor, an ambulance—she might still be alive, my little Jay—”

“She might. How’re you going to prove that?”

“You know he didn’t call an ambulance? He could’ve, the bastard.”

“He could’ve. He says he thought she was dead.” Dennis hadn’t been too happy with Pickering’s behaviour and his cavalier dismissal of any sense of obligation to the dead woman.

“He still should’ve tried to get help. Why didn’t you charge him?”

Dennis didn’t answer immediately. Saying it would be a lot of work for next-to-nothing wouldn’t be appropriate. And Pickering still seemed able to convince people he was the hard-done-by person in everything involving him. It was very unlikely any magistrate would dispute his belief he had believed Jayleen Pidcock was dead.

“Look, if you want to take out a case against Paul Pickering—go for it. You’ve got a woman in jail for life. Now, if you want to make money out of your daughter’s death that’s your business. But stop coming in here trying to get us to help you make money out of her death.”

Mr Pidcock scowled but he didn’t try to argue. Grant thought it would take a brave man to come back at his boss when he spoke in that way. The grieving father went to the door but then he turned and yelled, “You haven’t heard the last of me!”

“What did he mean?” Grant said as the door banged.

“He won’t be happy till he’s found a way to collect. So if he wants to go after Pickering that’s up to him. Pickering hasn’t got a very savoury reputation where women are concerned.”

And a few minutes later Grant said, “You’ve got an e-mail from Jake Moss.” Dennis had asked for the names of those who had put in complaints against Joe Bosch. Jake said: 3 complaints from E and F Parsons, 1 from B Applegarth, 1 from L Morton, 1 from the Coolibah, 1 from Dinawadding, 1 from S Mackie. I wonder how many we had to get before action was taken?

Dennis wondered too. But the interesting thing was that the Parsons sisters were the most vigorous complainants. And had Sergeant Bosch known that?

The other interesting thing was that Lynnell Morton had complained. He wondered if she had complained about non-attendance too. She was more likely to prefer that the police stay well away from her.

When he next called by the service station he said to Noel Barnard, “D’you happen to know anyone over Southbrook way?”

Noel pondered on this before saying, “Well, there’s the O’Sullivans, they’ve been there donkey’s years. Why?”

“I’d like to find someone who knows a bloke called Peter Donovan.”

“Well, come in and I’ll see if I can get Pat or his missus for you.”

Noel got Sally O’Sullivan on the phone and explained that he was helping Dennis Walsh. Sally said, “Pete Donovan? Sure, he lives in the hills over towards Linthorpe. What d’you want to know about him?”

“Did he have a wife called Miriam?”

“I think so. But I’m pretty sure she died quite a while back.”

“And what about her brother Joe?”

“The old bloke that lives there? Yeah, I’m pretty sure he’s called Joe. But I think they keep to themselves, I never see them at church or anything. But I have an idea they’ve got the farm up

for sale. So if you want to catch them—I'd say you might need to hurry. Pat might know more than me. D'you want him to ring you back when he comes in?"

Noel asked if he could ring the station. He thought it had gone beyond a casual enquiry. If Joe Bosch was living there it was now up to Dennis to do ... something. He wasn't sure if Dennis only wanted to clear up the mystery of the Vauxhall which had gone missing from in front of the station all those years ago.

Pat O'Sullivan rang in the late afternoon and said, "What's this about Pete Donovan?"

Dennis explained that he was interested to know if Joe Bosch lived with Pete Donovan.

"That's the old copper?"

"Yeah, used to be here in Buckton. I heard his sister was married to Pete Donovan."

"So what's old Joe up to—apart from annoying Pete?"

"Why does he annoy Pete?"

"Lazy old bugger. Moved in there years ago, said he was going to do up some old cars or something, but there they sit, and Pete said he was going to cook and garden—"

"Strewth! He was hopeful."

"Well, Miriam was very house-proud, so I guess he hoped it ran in the family ... and there Joe's been ever since, doing bugger-all. The farm's up for sale but I don't know what they plan to do."

"D'you know if they've got any dogs?"

Pat O'Sullivan obviously found this an odd question but finally said he thought Pete had a kelpie and he had an idea that Joe was thinking of going into some other kind of dog, he didn't know what. "Not that I'd trust Joe to look after any dog."

"Because?"

"Last time I saw him over at the pub I'd say he's starting to lose the plot."

"Uh huh, and would you know what sort of cars he's got over there?"

"Couldn't say for sure. But Bill Kelly told me the other day that the couple who're thinking of buying the farm told Pete to get rid of all the old cars if he wanted a sale. Don't know if that's the case."

Dennis passed this on to Noel next morning and said "It sounds like a little Ireland over there."

"Always has been," Noel said cheerfully, "maybe not so much now. So you think he could've hung on to that old Viva and dumped it out here?"

Dennis from feeling sure the two cars couldn't be the same was coming round to a different view. "Was Joe any good with cars?"

"He wasn't bad, just couldn't be bothered. Any time he'd bring the cop car in he'd say 'think it's the spark plugs' or whatever and he'd always be right."

"I found out that Ellie and Faye had put in three complaints about him. Even Lynnell Morton put in a complaint, and Bill at the pub."

"I thought of complaining and then we thought 'what's the use?' and we didn't. But I wonder what Lynnell was complaining about?"

"People who pinch stuff don't necessarily like to be on the receiving end."

"True." Noel gave that a grin. "So where to next?"

"I guess I'll have to find the time to go over and see him myself."

He thought he probably should run this past Jake Moss. Jake might like to handle it himself, given that it could result in more bad publicity for Winville. He went back to the station and sent an e-mail and sent Grant round to deal with some vandalism at the Anglican church and Nelson L'Estrange called him to say that a car had just driven into the school's back fence. Dennis put Joe Bosch aside and went out.

\*

Reid Strohling went out in the van to collect a cabinet from the Millers in mid-morning and bring it into the station. With its drawer returned, it now looked quite a nice piece of furniture. Greg Sullivan said, "We can make use of it if it ends up not being necessary for the case."

"So what now?" Petra Moore said briskly. "We'll need some affidavits surely."

“The trail, yep, what do they call it? Provenance?” He sat a minute, thinking on how to tie it to Doug. “Okay. Picture of Sandra, see if we can get a date, and statement by Randall Hoysted. Affidavit from Sam Hoysted that Doug removed it from the house after Sandra died. Then our evidence that neither the drawer nor its contents were ever logged in here. Um ... then the Ortons will need to make a statement on finding it in the shed after they bought the house.” He continued on to the arrival of the cabinet at the station then apportioned the necessary jobs. “And I’d best ring Carlton Payne to make sure we haven’t missed anything.”

Greg had quite a lot of respect and liking for DI Payne but that didn’t tell him how to present their discovery in quick and simple terms and he had the vaguely guilty sense that this was something he should’ve done years ago.

Payne, though, was pleased. “Good work. So keep copies and send me the originals as soon as you’ve got everyone’s statements. And don’t forget to get one from Reid Strohling detailing just what he did with that drawer.”

Greg hadn’t included Reid in his trail and he was secretly grateful that Payne had reminded him. “And should we pass this on to John Duarte? Isn’t he Sam Hoysted’s lawyer?”

“No. Not yet. And Sam Hoysted was always free to bring the drawer up—right from the beginning.”

Greg wondered if Sam had brought it up and Doug Towner had said ‘Forget it, it’s not relevant’ or whether Sam had assumed it was at the station rather than in Towner’s shed. And there was a more uncomfortable thought in there. He should’ve asked Doug about Sandra’s private papers, where were they, was there anything in them to suggest problems, but no, he had never given the matter a thought.

By the time he went home they had collected statements from everyone except Sam Hoysted. And Hoysted would almost certainly pass on the request to his lawyer. ‘But Payne would know this too ... so I guess I can just leave it’ ... And to his wife he said, “I don’t know if it’s important or not ... and they’ll say how come I didn’t know that Doug was storing evidence at his house. I should’ve known. I even went round there a couple of times.”

“But that doesn’t follow,” Narelle said shrewdly. “Doug wasn’t going to say, see that drawer? That’s what I took from Sam’s house with all Sandra’s papers in it, now was he?”

“I know, I know, but it’s not that simple. Do you remember when Doug said a woman had been murdered over at Burleigh and Dinny said, no, she was gored by a bull, and he went round saying Doug was incompetent?” Dennis had said something stronger than ‘incompetent’ but it came to the same thing.

“Vaguely. Why?”

“I didn’t believe him. I’d always thought Doug was a pretty good detective. Shows how stupid I am.”

“So you’re going to beat up on yourself again, are you?”

“Why not? I believed Doug over Dinny—even when I saw Doug was wrong. Even when I could see that Doug’s tunnel vision might be dangerous. But he was a senior detective and Dinny was ...”

“A nobody”

“Not exactly, but not in the same league, and he gets things wrong too.”

She thought the real difference was not in their ranks but in the simple fact that Dennis was willing to admit his mistakes and wrong assumptions; Doug would prefer to go down with the boat, still crying ‘I’m never wrong!’

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DS Moore received an e-mail to tell her when Simon Lynch would come up before a magistrate and to tell her she would need to tell him where he could contact Stacey Lynch. Petra wrote back to tell him that Stacey could be contacted c/o the Post Office in Dinawadding. She regretted that Stacey would be subpoenaed to appear in a Brisbane court and have to face her brother. And she had heard that Stacey was now at Buckton High School and doing well.

She didn’t feel that she had any particular obligation towards the young woman. Nor did she want to hear Frank Jennings crowing. She had no time for Simon Lynch but she had hoped he would simply plead guilty and be done with it. Jennings would still have his win but it would give

him much less publicity. And surely a good lawyer would be telling Simon to plead guilty anyway. The DNA tests would be seen by the court as proof.

She rang Buckton High at lunchtime and asked if she could speak to Stacey Lynch. Matty Ainsworth said she would get her and Petra mulled over what to say to the girl. Stacey when told she would receive a subpoena to her brother's trial said quite calmly that she had been wondering what would happen.

"It would be much better if he simply pleaded guilty. You would still need to be there, I would think, but you wouldn't be asked anything."

"So—do you want me to do something?"

"I'm sure he has a lawyer to advise him. But I just thought I should give you some warning."

Stacey was unaware that Petra rarely went out of her way to be kind and thoughtful and she thanked her warmly. But after she'd hung up she found herself thinking that she would almost rather see Simon have to face some tough questioning. Even if it made life more difficult for her. And then she thought that Simon would be mad to plead Not Guilty when they had so much evidence. She knew very little about courts but she suddenly felt sure she could cope with everything. The thought surprised her. Of course people had helped her but she had made the big decisions and begun a new life for herself. An independent life.

As she came out of the office Jon Derry was coming along the corridor and stopped and asked if she had any troubles. She explained about the phone call and that she might have to go to Brisbane.

"Well, my wife goes down quite often to see her mum so she might be able to give you a lift."

She didn't know Mrs Derry but people said she was nice.

"I haven't got the date yet."

"Come and tell me when you do."

There were times here when she felt lonely, when she felt far away from the life she knew, when she longed to feel close to someone and loved. But she also had the sense that nothing terrible could happen to her here because many people were minding out for her. She thought this was what gave her her new-found confidence. Home should have been where people minded out for her but it hadn't been like that.

Perhaps when she had been very young. But even then there had been Simon ...

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The afternoon grew hot and still and clouded up and people began saying 'might even be a storm'. It was still hot and breathless when Dennis went home and Grant went round to a little get-together of his cricket team. He had only seen Stacey in the distance a couple of times and he wondered if he should just make time to ask her how she was getting along.

He didn't want a girlfriend and Stacey had various problems. But she *had* been interested in his sport and his mention of a Youth Club. Delia was gone now and he had barely given her a thought since she'd left. He had taken Jenny Pym to watch a water polo match in Winville and that had been a pleasant day out. Jenny was neither a girlfriend nor a mother substitute and it surprised him that he could just enjoy her as a friend. People might gossip but he didn't really care.

And anyway he hadn't come to Buckton with any hopes of finding romance. He had been more worried about coping in the police. He still had times when he wasn't sure what to do or say but he had gradually come to the understanding that it was a rare copper who always got it right. And now with work and sport and friends there was only a small gap left for love and sex and that wasn't a gap he would ask Stacey Lynch to fill.

It still hadn't done anything by the time Dennis sat down to dinner. All the doors of the house stood open and most of the windows and Fiona had put the fan in the dining room on. She had done corned meat with potato salad and cold lemon juice with mint and ice cubes.

"Reminds me of the night up by Parsons' farm," he mused. "And I've found Joe Bosch. Ellie and Faye did complain about him. They had some pretty strong words about him. I wonder just how much he knew." Winville might have shared the complaints with him. He could see Doug Towner enjoying the exercise. He had wanted to keep Joe in Buckton so his was probably the hand



that had noted 'No Action to be Taken'. He might even have said something to Joe about dealing with certain complaints and leaving others to lie.

But Joe only had to know that Ellie and Faye had put in a 'number' of complaints to feel a sense of grudge against them.

"Actually I was thinking about the Woods and their son-in-law," Fiona said. "And I wondered what sort of visa he came into Australia on, work, tourist, student, and whether he ever applied for citizenship here. Because, unless he kept renewing his visa it would've run out and he could be deported."

"Good point." He didn't really want to be anything but a spectator to this mystery. "They could get their investigator to check."

She wasn't surprised that he didn't offer to do anything. Every so often someone was found to have over-stayed and got sent home. Though how many slipped through the net she didn't know. Perhaps Mr Millington *had* been sent home and no one realised he had his son with him?

They went on to talk over the things the children had been doing and planning and didn't come back to more difficult issues until late in the evening. Thunder muttered away in the distance but except for a few spots nothing happened.

"I was thinking about that Mafia business, or that supposed Mafia business, and I came up with several possibilities."

"Such as?"

"Well, he could have come to do business for them here and got distracted by love and marriage and they sent out a message telling him to go and do what he was supposed to be doing. And he could've come here to escape from that lifestyle and they found him. And he could've ratted on them and came here on a kind of Protected Witness thing and they still found him. And it could've been a kind of exploratory trip and then he decided this was his chance to start over in a new country. And maybe he was just on the fringes of things and hoped to find a way to get in closer to the real power."

"That just about covers everything. But we still don't have any proof about a Mafia connection. There are plenty of other groups he might've belonged to. He might even have been a lone wolf looking to find a way to make money for himself."

"Maybe he was looking for a woman with money and he thought Carmen would suit."

"Still seems most likely to be a drug connection. I wonder how much Carmen knew about his life while they were together? What kind of work did he do? Did he travel a lot? Things like that."

"I suppose I could ask her. She might not want me to but if I could find a way to suggest this might pay her husband back for all the worry and misery he put her through ... "

"I'm sure you could." He had a deep belief in Fiona's tact. "But maybe we should just leave it. If the young man doesn't want to tell anyone anything—"

"But if he's caught up with older men who keep jerking him around, telling him to do things which only mess his life up more—then maybe he's too afraid to seek help?"

"I guess we can speculate till the cows come home ... but it sounds like the Woods and their investigator are getting on okay and they must know something about their son-in-law's life while he was with Carmen."

The storm finally arrived with gusts of wind and driving sheets of rain. They could hardly hear themselves over the rain banging on the roof. They ran round the house closing windows and let old Bungey, Rob's dog, abandon his bed in the toolshed to come inside and creep in under Rob's bed. He had regained much of his pleasure in life but he still didn't like raised voices or loud noises.

Dennis and Fiona left their discussion for another time. He wondered if her desire to help young 'Andy White' get some sort of life was just Fiona being tender-hearted or whether her life here was too quiet and dull. It was something he had always worried about, that life in Buckton did not use her many talents, nor did it bring her much excitement. She had decided to do some study by correspondence and had signed up to do two units towards a B.A. Her book was almost finished. She had found it challenging and exciting to write. Though whether she would find a publisher ...

She understood his vague sense of, not exactly guilt but a belief that he had taken advantage of her willingness to fit in with his life. He could see how much pleasure she got out of being a mother but he had also heard modern young women say that motherhood should not be the be-all-and-end-all of their lives.

And there was the possibility that out of the safety and stability and happiness in her children's lives she could see the sadness in a young man's life where he seemed to be missing all that. So maybe he should just vaguely encourage and let her follow up ideas with Mr and Mrs Woods?

## *Case No. 5: A Man's Best Friend?*

Fiona had given a great deal of thought to what she wanted to study and research. There was no point in going over old ground but looking for forgotten episodes in history, overlooked writers, books that had made their mark and then been put aside could be interesting. And then there were her many moments of pondering on what had happened to the Woods' son-in-law and grandson. Dennis thought it was most likely a drug connection but in her reading of the books the local library could provide and several things she had bought over the internet she had begun to wonder if he might be a hitman, that he had been sent here to eliminate someone, perhaps several people. It might be clutching at straws but if a man looked at land as a place to bury bodies rather than grow illicit plants ... because John Royden Millington's marriage to Carmen might have had something to do with that huge acreage of land outside the public gaze. And the simple fact was that dozens of bodies *could* be buried on their farms and never be found.

So could she find a way to use her research for a degree to also delve into this puzzling case? The trouble with any sort of delving into organised crime in the United States brought her up against the unpleasant fact that she would be dealing with pathetic greedy hypocritical nasty people, the sort of people she wouldn't want in her house so why invite them into her mind?

She would have to make some decisions soon but for the moment she would just let ideas come and go.

She could ask Dennis for some ideas. Not that he did much reading, or not for pleasure, but there might be some aspect of history which interested him. But then—it would also have to interest her. She could ask Elise. Elise was a passionate reader. She was currently reading the Bible right through. Dennis had suggested that she skip 'Joshua' on the grounds there would be too many corpses. Needless to say, that had made Elise curious enough to immediately go and read it—and tell him later he was quite right and she didn't think they should've been killing donkeys because donkeys were 'nice'.

"But stubborn," he had said.

"Maybe they're stubborn because they don't have good people looking after them?"

"Or they've got minds of their own?"

Fiona always enjoyed listening to the conversations Dennis had with the children. But unless she wrote about child prodigies it wasn't much help to her now. And when she got around to asking Dennis he said, "Do something that will take you right out of Buckton."

"You mean—physically or mentally?"

"Well, not physically unless you need to go to a library somewhere."

"The Byzantine empresses? That sort of thing?"

He couldn't guess who or what the empresses might have been. "Whatever grabs you. But maybe you should write about some financial scandal, that's something you would know a lot about."

"Doug Towner?" she said drily.

"Maybe a bit too close to home but you'll know something."

He thought afterwards that he was enjoying this diversion because thinking on such scandals took his mind away from something more important he should be doing.

He was increasingly sure that Gary Donovan had lied to him. But how could he pin this down? Because Donovan had almost certainly known the identity of the ‘oldish’ man who had taken his last puppy. No reputable breeder would simply hand a dog to a complete stranger and not ask for contact details. And if he genuinely didn’t want the dog bred from why hadn’t he had him castrated? The whole thing was a bit suss but he didn’t have the time to go over and see Mr Donovan in person and he always saw phone calls as a poor relation to personal visits. People gave away their lies by their eyes, their hesitations, their demeanour.

Still he could try.

Grant had a great deal of faith in his boss’s ability to get to the bottom of things and he said cheerfully, “Even if he only gives a bit away—”

Dennis managed to get Mr Donovan when he’d come in from outside to have some lunch. He said he was ringing again from Buckton Police and that they had done a DNA test on the Irish Setter they’d found and also an x-ray. “Good chance it’s your dog but we’d like to do a DNA test on the pup’s father, that’d make things clear one way or the other.”

Mr Donovan immediately said he couldn’t allow any tests to be done on his dog and that he hadn’t done anything wrong. Dennis simply said, “Then we can get on to the people who bought the rest of the litter and check that way.”

“You can’t do that! They’ll think there’s something wrong with my dogs!”

“It doesn’t bother you that some sick bastard burnt a dog alive?”

There was a silence then Donovan said, “Can’t be my dog.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Joe wouldn’t do a thing like that—” Then he seemed to realise what he’d said and tried to fix it. “Nothing to do with me or any of my dogs.”

“So Joe Bosch bought the last of your dogs? Would’ve saved us a lot of aggro if you’d told us straight off.”

“I never said that!”

“No. I’ll take it as a given. Joe lives with Peter Donovan. And Joe thought he might like to breed a litter after all but you wouldn’t give him the pedigree and he found the dog had a microchip with nothing on it. So what did you do?”

“Nothing. He hassled me for the pedigree and I said no, I didn’t want that dog bred from. I chipped them all as puppies but I didn’t put the pedigree on his chip.”

“Did he look after the dog?”

“Pete said he did—in the beginning.”

Gary Donovan seemed to have accepted that it was no more good pleading ignorance. This copper seemed to know too much.

“And did Pete say he took your dog out and deliberately locked it in a car and set fire to the car?”

Dennis didn’t mind telling tough truths to people who needed to face up to things. He had never set eyes on either Gary or Pete Donovan but he thought they both needed to face up to the fact that they had both apparently turned a blind eye to what Joe Bosch was up to. And if Bosch was losing his marbles all the more reason to keep an eye on what he was doing.

“You’ve got that all wrong,” Donovan came back with. But any fight had drained away. “Joe wouldn’t do a thing like that.”

“You’ll need to do an affidavit about selling Joe the dog and him wanting to breed from it.”

“He only said he wanted one litter, just give him something to do when Pete sold the farm.”

“And since when did Joe Bosch want something to do? That lazy sod.”

“That’s what he said to me and I said no.”

Dennis thought Gary Donovan would cling to that position. He had sold the dog cheaply to Joe Bosch to have as a pet, nothing more.

And when he passed this on to Jake Moss he got immediate action. “I’d best get over there right away before they leave the farm and we have to chase after them. Can you come?”

Dennis had no wish to leave his own work and confront Joe Bosch, not least because he would be tempted to wring his miserable neck. “Take Grant. He knows what’s going on. He saw the burnt-out car and the poor bloody pooch.”

Grant, when Inspector Moss came by to pick him up, was both excited and nervous. He didn't think he would need to ask anything, Moss would do the questioning, but Dennis had told him to get photos of any old cars still on the property. There was the small chance that Bosch had helped himself to more than one car. Grant thought that Jake would know exactly what to do and say but he was nervous that he might miss something and Dennis would say something later.

"We'll cut through the back way," Jake said. "No need to go into Southbrook. I haven't set anything up so let's hope they're both there."

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They drove over a grid and into a lightly timbered paddock with some young cattle in it. Jake said suddenly, "Maybe that's why he didn't try to drive in to the Parsons' place. They've got a gate not a grid. He'd have to get out, open it, come back ... just a thought."

And maybe when he wanted to run the car in to block the gateway it stalled ...

They drew in by the front gate and got out. An old kelpie came out and barked. They stood a moment looking round. They had seen the For Sale sign by the front gate. Now they could see several old cars over by a machinery shed.

A man came over from the shed, wiping his hands on a rag. He said an unenthusiastic hello. Jake Moss introduced them and said they wanted to talk about an old Vauxhall and a young Irish Setter. "You're Pete Donovan?" Jake went on.

"I am." It didn't seem to give Donovan any pleasure to admit to it.

"And is Joe Bosch here?"

"In the house."

"Doing what?"

"The lazy sod never does anything but give me aggro."

"In what way?"

"I told him to shift all his bloody cars—got a sniff for the place and they said they didn't want to clear up his junk—told him to get them to a wrecker."

"Where did the cars come from?"

"Joe likes cars. He just never bloody well does anything with them. Said he was going to do 'em up but never got around to it."

"He had an old Vauxhall?"

"Yeah, it's the only one he ever got rid of—"

"By driving it out to Buckton and setting fire to it?"

Donovan seemed to draw back from this. "Dunno what he did. Not my business."

"It still went okay?"

"He'd rev it up, rev 'em all up every so often."

"And his dog?"

"Gave it away."

"No, he didn't, Mr Donovan. He burnt it alive in that car."

Moss hadn't been quite as certain as Dennis that everything fitted together. And Dennis had come late to his certainty. It was only after he'd spoken with Gary Donovan. But now as Jake saw both horror and anger in Peter Donovan he thought the Donovans had simply stood by and let Joe Bosch do—

"That's rubbish! Joe'll tell you what he did—"

"And how did he get home from Buckton that night?"

Donovan turned and looked round his farm. Then he turned back and said angrily, "How was I to know? I couldn't care less what he did with that bloody car! I just wanted it gone!"

"And did he say he wanted to get back at someone?"

"Someone always complaining about him? Yeah, he did say something."

"Two old ladies who had every right to complain when he didn't bother to attend?"

"He didn't say."

"So where did you pick him up?"

"Up the back there. Quiet road."

"And the dog. What did he tell you?"

"Nothing. Just said he'd dropped it off."

Jake turned to Grant and said, "Show him the photos."

Grant fumbled with the file he was carrying in his bag. He wondered when he should go round taking photos of those cars.

Jake handed them over. "You have just made yourself an accessory to an animal cruelty case, Mr Donovan."

"Nothing to do with me!" Donovan fired up. "He was always griping about Gary not giving him the papers." He stopped and beat both fists together. "Are you saying he took it out on the dog?"

"Looks like it. So we'd best go in and see what he has to say for himself."

"He won't know what he's done. He doesn't know what he did yesterday."

"Won't get him off the hook." Jake was usually calm and mild. But listening to this account had made him increasingly hot under the collar.

Joe Bosch was asleep in a little sun-room at the side of the house. An open newspaper was on the table beside him.

"Wake up, Joe." Donovan went over and shook him. Though Bosch was only in his sixties he looked much older. His sparse grey hair had not been combed. There were stains on his shirt. He woke with a snort and said "What the bloody hell—" before realising there were strangers in his presence.

"Police, Joe," Donovan said sourly. "They want to know about the car and the dog."

"What dog?"

"Your dog, of course."

"Don't have a dog."

"The one you locked in the car when you burnt the car," Jake said grimly.

"What car?"

"The Vauxhall you stole from Buckton Police."

"What police, I don't know any police."

"You were a copper, Joe," Donovan put in.

"First I knew about it."

Jake wasn't sure if all this forgetfulness was put on or genuine.

"So what did you call your dog?"

"What did I call him?" Bosch seemed to ponder. "Gasbag, that's what I called him, did a lot of barking."

"So why did you kill him?"

"Didn't kill him."

"Yeah, you did. Locked him in the car and set the car alight. Outside the gate of Ellie and Faye Parsons."

"Didn't have him with me. They were bitches, weren't they. Them two old biddies, never done screeching."

"When was this?"

"When I was there, of course."

"When you were a copper?"

"Dunno what I was doing but they come in and yelled at me."

"What did you do?"

"Nothing."

Jake could see that he needed a medical professional to step in. Bosch might genuinely not have been aware of what he was doing. But Moss thought he probably did know exactly ... The decision to drive all the way out there with the dog suggested decision, not any kind of vague rambling.

"Then I am going to have to arrest you, Joseph Bosch, for cruelty to an animal, making a public nuisance, driving an unregistered vehicle—and we may add in charges on how you took that Vauxhall without permission."

"Nothing to do with me," Joe said, apparently unfazed by the charges.

"What isn't?"

"That car. It's been here for years."

But Donovan stepped in to say, “You brought it here.”

“Okay, we’ll get you to make a statement, Mr Donovan. Now, I want Constable Schroeder to go and take photos of all those other cars. We’ll need to check their identity.”

“And are you going to take him?” Donovan indicated Bosch, still slouched on the sofa.

“No. He’ll get a call to the court in Winville. Can you see that he gets there or has he got a car he still drives?”

“Uses mine.”

“Okay. It’ll be a week or two before he gets a summons. If he wants a lawyer—”

“No. Just get the old bastard off my place, that’s all I ask.”

“You may get a summons yourself and your relative, Gary. He is a relative, isn’t he?”

“Cousin.”

Dennis nodded and Donovan went on, “Almost anything would be worth it to see the old sod gone. Even jail.”

“Is that why you’re selling?”

Peter Donovan walked back out to the gate. “I was happy here with Miriam. When we said he could come here, just while he decided where he wanted to go ... we never thought we’d get stuck with the lazy old bastard. He was always going to do this and that, fix cars, help in the garden, but he never did a thing.” He looked across to where Grant was making his way through the dry grass to photograph those old cars from every angle. He turned back to Jake Moss. “Look, I’m sorry about the dog. He could’ve been a nice dog with care and training. But Joe is losing the plot. Sometimes he’d forget to feed him—and all that talk about breeding puppies—I never took any notice, him carrying on about Gary being mean. And maybe he really did forget he had the dog in the car, he was so set on making trouble for those old ladies. I don’t know why he had it in for them. He never said anything about them when he came here. It was just when I told him to get rid of the cars—he started to tell me how much trouble they’d given him.”

“And these other cars—where did they come from?”

“Dunno. He just turned up with them.”

“They’ll all need to be checked.” Maybe Joe had had a much better eye for lifting unattended vehicles than anyone had ever given him credit for.

“Go for it,” Donovan said despondently. “But get him to see someone, a doctor. I tried but he never took any notice. He set the kitchen curtains on fire one time, he was always doing stupid things ... and then he’d say ‘it wasn’t me’ ... I should’ve sent that poor bloody dog back to Gary ... I knew Joe wasn’t going to look after it properly, sometimes he’d feed it and sometimes he wouldn’t, I’d have to make sure it was okay, buy an extra bit o’ food for it ... so it wouldn’t be trying to take my dog’s food ... ”

All this soul searching might be genuine but Jake Moss thought any sensible man would’ve made sure the dog was sent home when it was clear that it was going to be a bone of contention.. And worse than thinking about the dog was the almost certainty that Joe Bosch would be seen as not responsible because of the onset of dementia.

As they drove away Jake thought it was probably just as well he had brought Grant rather than Dennis with him.

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He stopped in to Buckton station to drop Grant off and to tell Dennis he had charged Joe Bosch.

“Good.”

“But he’ll plead dementia, that he can’t remember anything.”

“He used to do that here. Someone’d say, why didn’t you come, and he’d say it’d slipped his mind. People gave up mostly. But you’d best take his licence away if he really is going gaga.”

“Well, I won’t be giving up this time, doesn’t matter what he claims. I’ll bring that dog back from the morgue and park it in front of Joe when he comes up in court and he’ll have to look at it all the time he’s saying he can’t remember.” Jake looked grim enough to do just this. “And you know what he called the poor dog? Gasbag.”

Dennis just nodded.

“Anyway, what’s going on with Doug?” Jake changed the subject. “I heard they want all Doug’s financial documents. I don’t see how they’re going to get them.”

“No. The Hoysteds can’t demand them and if they tell the court they’ve been hacking in and know just where and what—then they’ll be in trouble. But I’ve been told they’re looking to send the case to Fraud as well as the Tax Office and something to do with the bods who keep an eye on charities, see that they’re doing what they’re s’posed to be doing.”

“Well, according to Jenny both Michael Hull and Doug Towner were not declaring their income. But it would be a big job for someone independent to go through everything to do with the Trust—if they don’t trust John Duarte’s figures. So have you got any more secrets still up your sleeve?”

Dennis said, “I wish,” and then, “What about talking to Sam Hoysted about his marijuana crop, how did he pay Doug off, was it in to a bank account?”

“Probably another port full of used notes,” Jake said wryly. “Maybe Sam paid him back in the suss notes Doug had first given him? Now that’d be rather funny.”

Dennis didn’t seem to find it funny because he only said, “How about buttering up that woman who looks after Doug? She must hear some interesting phone conversations—and I got the impression she wasn’t fussed on Doug. And someone must’ve set Doug up with those accounts in the first place. I think Gavin preferred to keep a bit of distance between himself and Doug.”

Jake Moss didn’t have Walsh’s passion to see Doug Towner behind bars and he only said, “Thanks for the tips.”

After he’d gone Grant told Dennis about the other cars. “None of them were registered so how would we know where they came from? And wouldn’t it be too late now to charge him?”

“It’s not that so much. It’s being able to tell the owners what happened to their car. Maybe they don’t care now, maybe they’re dead. But if there’s any way to find where they came from ... ”

Grant could see this but he could also see that it might make them look even worse. Dennis didn’t worry about things like that but he was self-conscious about what people would say when he admitted to being in the police.

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Elise Walsh had gone out riding with Leila Burkett on Saturday morning. Leila had an ex-racehorse there to be gently exercised. While on a spell he had jumped a log and fallen and cracked a leg. He wouldn’t be racing any more but he was a nice-natured horse and she hoped to bring him back to full fitness and find a home for him.

Elise said that Mr Conroy might like to buy him.

“Your teacher?”

“Yes, he would like to have a horse. He wants people to forget that he went crazy about that American woman who was teaching at the school.” Elise had heard him say something about wanting to have a horse so it wasn’t an insight just pulled out of thin air.

Leila Burkett enjoyed Elise’s company and her conversation was often as sophisticated as that of most local adults. “I think the owner would give him away to a good home.”

Elise was pleased about that. Evan Conroy never looked as though he had much money. She had no idea what a teacher got paid or whether Evan looked after his money or gave it away. She went on to tell Mrs Burkett that their racehorse was going to run in Toowoomba but she didn’t know if he was good enough. Mrs Burkett said she didn’t think Dave Hickman would take him there if he didn’t think he had a chance. She had attended the horse for a couple of minor things and she didn’t think Hansom Days would make Elise a show hack when he finished racing. He lacked the style and presence to win in the ring. He was a plain little horse. His qualities were of the spirit. But he might jump. The problem with this was that Fiona would be even more nervous about Elise showjumping. She worried enough about her doing bending and flag races ...

In the hot afternoon Fiona took Elise and Rob up to see Kieran Dobbs as he had the two little Russian girls there and Elise enjoyed trying her Russian out on them. Charles Mather seemed to be putting more and more work on to Jess Brumby’s shoulders and Kieran sometimes stepped in to mind them. But Jess came to pick them up soon after Fiona arrived.

They stayed chatting a few moments and then Jess and the girls went away and Kieran showed Rob and Elise the butterfly book he had been showing the girls.

“The names we had for them when I was a kid weren’t their proper Latin names, of course,” he said cheerfully. “We called these Lemon Drops and this was a Royal George. These we just called Purple Spots. There aren’t any of these blue Triangles out here but you can see them in Toowoomba. This was a Wanderer. There were lots of these little grey ones round the plumbago. And the Kings and Queens liked the grapefruit leaves. We used to put the caterpillars in boxes with leaves and wait for them to make a chrysalis. I had a board that I pinned all my butterflies on to but I didn’t know how to preserve them and they all just crumbled into dust.”

Elise wanted to know how he caught them and he said he would just squash their heads. “It was far kinder than putting them in a jar, like some kids did. The butterfly would bash its wings trying to get out. And if they didn’t put holes in the lid it would slowly die from a lack of air.”

“Oxygen,” Elise said knowledgeably.

“Exactly. And this one we called a Cape York. They would lay their eggs on the oleanders and then make a beautiful silver chrysalis. I always wondered why they didn’t get poisoned.”

He still wondered what the caterpillars’ secret was. There was only one poisoning he had ever heard of here in Buckton. A family, some seventy years ago, had come out from England and bought the farm along from where Len Fosdick had lived. One of the family had cut some oleander twigs and sharpened them into skewers and the mother had rolled up the Sunday roast and put the skewers through it. The whole family had died. And to make it worse they hadn’t been found for several days. Their joint tombstone was in Buckton’s cemetery, neglected now, with the stone awry and dry grass around it. And there had been that case over past Garramindi ...

As they went out later Kieran said to Fiona, “Could you get the Council to tidy up those graves on the far side of the cemetery? They’re looking rather neglected.”

“I’m sure we can do something.” A couple of hours with a whipper-snipper and a couple of men to push some of the older gravestones upright. “Have you got relatives there?”

“No.” He was going to tell her about the Gomersall family being there and then decided not to. Instead he said, “And is it true the police are going to charge the Donovans?”

Fiona hadn’t heard this. “I remember there was a singer called Donovan when I was young. I did like his songs though they were often sad.”

“I met Peter Donovan once, at a thing about improved pastures, he seemed a decent guy. But I don’t suppose he could handle ol’ Joe, no one could. I remember hearing Bron Applegarth yelling at him one time, saying she was going to get him sacked if it was the last thing she did. But it was all water off Joe’s back. He didn’t care what people said or did. I was thankful when Dennis turned up and got Dan Goodrick for stealing.” He lowered his voice. “And I’ve always felt bad that I let Raelene call the tune.”

Fiona understood exactly what he meant. “I used to laugh with Raelene about him behind his back. I’ve never quite forgiven myself for that.”

“I know. It’s an awful thing—saying behind someone’s back the things you wouldn’t say to their face.”

“But he’s not a person to hold a grudge—”

Kieran smiled at that as he opened the gate for her and the children came running from where they had been investigating an old mangle. “Well, not against you—when anyone could see he would forgive you just about anything.”

He thought as he watched them leave that Dennis might have forgiven Fiona anything but that he had been more than happy to see Raelene Perry pack up and leave.

And then the odd thought came to him: ‘I haven’t given Raelene a thought in months. It is Jess and the girls who really matter.’ He went inside and put the butterfly book away and wondered if Elise would now want to add Latin to the languages she seemed to absorb by some amazing kind of osmosis.

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# *Book Sixty-Four*

## *Case No. 1: Assumptions, Assumptions*

The little town of Buckton on Queensland's Darling Downs drowsed in the autumn heat. The oak trees in the park, planted in memory of the men who had gone from Buckton to the First World War, began to show some old gold in their leaves. The autumn crops, not beautifully lush, began to ripen.

Buckton had two doctors, Tad Lombardi and Brett Sorenson, and they had acquired a good reputation over the years as being caring and professional. They rarely saw serious infections or major injuries and Tad had begun to talk about moving on. It had been an interesting experience to work in the country but he had begun to long for the greater variety and challenges of a city practice. Usually when he brought up the subject of moving on Brett acquiesced. Of course Tad was right. Buckton was never going to get more exciting. He wasn't sure why he couldn't bring himself to enter into his partner's plans more enthusiastically.

Maryann Dillon was a common sight in Buckton's only pub, the Coolibah Hotel, but a very rare one round at the doctors' surgery. She was in most people's estimation an alcoholic. She was also seriously overweight and in those same people's estimation, lazy and useless. The little farm she had inherited was increasingly decrepit and would be a wilderness of weeds if it was wetter. Buckton Shire Council had notified her that she needed to do something about her property as it was now a fire hazard and she had several varieties of noxious weeds in her paddocks. Maryann had ignored the first notification—and all subsequent ones. Buckton Council had discussed various ways of responding to her disinterest and several Council employees had eventually gone in and cut and sprayed her weeds. When she received a bill for this work she ignored that too. The Council was now seeking legal advice to see if they could have the money taken from her Centrelink payments.

When she came in with the request to see Dr Sorenson he had responded by urging her to lose weight and cut down on the beer. It was no wonder she was feeling bloated and uncomfortable. He asked her if anything had happened recently, had she been bilious after food, and she had told them about the Council spraying poison on her land. She seemed to believe they had no right to do this. He asked what they had sprayed and she said she didn't know but "probably that Round-up stuff".

It was supposed to be safe but he had his doubts about most agricultural chemicals and there was no guarantee that the Council had been careful. Many people, including some Council employees, regarded Ms Dillon as a nuisance and probably wouldn't treat her land and her buildings and her person with great care.

He urged her to get serious about losing weight, telling her it placed a burden on all her organs. Less beer, more vegetables and fruit. And to come back if the discomfort persisted.

She came back a few weeks later with the same moan. When he asked her about cutting down on the alcohol and trying to lose some weight she simply said her grog was her only joy in life.

"If you won't try to change anything it is very hard to help you. There isn't a magic pill to remove this spare tyre, you know."

When she came back for the third time he checked just in case she had a grumbling appendix but that didn't seem to be the trouble. Again he tried to persuade her to spend less time drinking and more time doing gentle exercise and eating healthy foods. It had the sense of a hopeless appeal. But as he watched her waddle out of his consulting room he had the feeling he had

had with other patients: if only there *was* a magic pill. Because he felt reasonably sure she would never make the least effort to reduce that massive amount of fat around her stomach and hips and thighs.

It was about two weeks later that he learned that Maryann had gone in to Buckton Hospital and begged the nurses there to help her because she was feeling terribly unwell. When they said they would call a doctor she had said no, that she needed to go to the hospital in Winville. The temptation to fob her off was strong. Sr Martin could see that Maryann had made not the least attempt to lose weight and get fitter. But she also knew that Maryann would not come and ask for help unless she was genuinely worried about her health.

She finally rang the local ambulance and asked Jim Phelps to take Maryann to Winville and ask that she have a thorough check-up. “Insist that they check everything.” Jim Phelps also knew that Maryann avoided doctors. “Will do.” Though, as the woman climbed in beside him, he wondered if anything was really wrong. He too knew that she propped herself on a bar stool most evenings and drank steadily.

It was all round Buckton a couple of weeks later that Maryann had ovarian cancer and probably only had months to live.

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Dr Sorenson was seen by many local people as a good doctor and most people continued to believe that he was behind Ms Dillon’s removal to Winville. This was an added burden on Brett Sorenson’s already miserable mood. He had jumped to the easy belief it was fat and beer. He hadn’t done a thorough examination. He hadn’t taken her seriously. And now, if he jumped up and told everyone that they would be either unbelieving or critical. And if he simply let people think that then what would happen if one of the hospital sisters or someone in Winville said something? He would then be seen as a hypocrite or a liar.

While he wavered, someone, he had no idea who, spread it round Buckton that he had got it wrong and it was the doctors in Winville who had found out what was really wrong with Ms Dillon. It wasn’t beer and fat, it was cancer. Some people sympathised. Everyone, including doctors, made mistakes. But the number of appointments booked went steadily down. Even if people had some sympathy they still seemed to prefer to go to his partner.

Within a week of the story surfacing he found himself with a completely empty morning. Rather than face this embarrassment he considered going home or round to the hospital to make it look like he was doing rounds there or ... he came into the Coolibah Hotel at about half-past-ten. The place was almost deserted. He got a drink from George Johnson and took it to a table in a far corner.

Things were even worse than a blank appointment book but he shied away from thinking on everything. As no one else came in to keep George busy the barman eventually wandered over and said, “If it’s Maryann you’re worrying about—don’t. I don’t know what happened in her life to make her waste it like that but we all assumed she was looking a bit unwell because her drinking had finally caught up with her. You mustn’t blame yourself—”

“But I’m a doctor, I’m supposed to know things.” As he said it he realised he had come in here so seldom he didn’t know whether to call the barman ‘George’ or ‘Mr Johnson’. It was a stark reminder of how little he had engaged with the people of Buckton in a social way.

“I’m a barman,” George said drily, “and I’m s’posed to know drinks but it doesn’t stop people abusing me every so often because they reckon I’ve done something wrong.”

If this was meant to cheer Dr Sorenson it didn’t have any apparent impact. “And it’s worse than knowing I got it wrong ... now she’s going to sue me. Medical negligence.”

“Maryann is?” George said in surprise.

“She’s asking for twenty thousand.”

Johnson still continued to stand there looking surprised. “Well, if you say so.”

“It’s there in black and white.”

“Well, I’m sure you can go and see her and sort it out.”

Another customer came in and George said, “Can I get you another?” before moving away. Sorenson accepted another drink and then got up to go. As he put his empty back on the counter the barman said unexpectedly, “Go and talk to Dinny Walsh.”

Sorenson was tempted to ask why. Even if Maryann died it still wouldn't be a police matter. He might get struck off for negligence but that was a professional matter. He might get sued by his victim but that was a civil matter.

He hesitated out on the quiet street. He might as well go home. But instead he crossed the road and went round past Mercer's on the corner and down the road to the station. In his decision was a vague sense that home was no longer as happy and welcoming as it had once been. Tad had merely said that Maryann was a lush and only had herself to blame and she wouldn't be much loss, one less drain on the taxpayer, and that Brett should stop beating up on himself over a very natural mistake. It wasn't just the words, it was a kind of dismissive attitude. Maryann, as far as Tad was concerned, was totally irrelevant. He was more interested in discussing where they might move to, whether they should look for another practice like this or go into a shared community of doctors.

Brett certainly felt he would be glad to leave Buckton but the agonising knowledge also lurked: he didn't want to leave with Tad. It had happened so slowly he had hardly taken much notice. Just that he felt less and less for his partner, that he wanted something else but didn't know what he wanted. That he felt irritated by Tad's attitudes and views at times. That he wanted out from their professional partnership as well as their private one. And he didn't know what to do or say.

But this private agony was not something he could share with anyone. He and Tad had lived a very private life here. Except for the practice and some shopping he had had little to do with the social life of Buckton. He and Tad went away on quiet weekends, finding their enjoyment elsewhere. It might not have endeared them both to the local people but Buckton had a hospital and an ambulance service. They had never felt they were leaving anyone in the lurch. And they also knew that Buckton would rather put up with their occasional absence than possibly be left with no doctors at all.

Sergeant Walsh was in the station but Constable Schroeder and the police car were not there. Walsh looked up from his paperwork and said, "Help you?"

"It's not exactly help. More some advice that I'm needing."

Dennis Walsh could make a stab at the problem though he wasn't sure that it was something he could do anything about. He ushered Dr Sorenson into the interview room and took out a form.

"Could it be off-the-record?" Sorenson sat down and tried to think how best to present his problems. Walsh also sat down and put his pen down.

"So Maryann Dillon is dying and she wants some money from you?"

Sorenson stared at him. "How did you know?"

"I can't do anything about her medical diagnosis ... but Maryann has been known to want money, whether she's entitled to it or not."

"She's asking for twenty thousand."

"Is she now? Well, that is a surprise. She doesn't think big, two thousand would be more her demand. What does she want it for? She's got Medicare ... I wonder who put her up to it?"

There were lawyers who kept an eye out for these sorts of cases. But Dennis couldn't think of anyone in Winville known as an 'ambulance chaser'.

"People are entitled to compensation," Sorenson said rather stiffly. "I don't dispute that. But if I pay her—do you think she'll keep coming back for more?"

He had insurance but even if they dug their heels in he could certainly afford to pay Ms Dillon the money out of his own savings.

"Have you been in touch with her daughter?"

"No. I didn't know she had one."

"Tracy. Yeah. Best go and see her. She works at a supermarket in Winville. She's had a hard life so maybe her mum has finally got sorry and wants to do something."

"Tracy Dillon?"

"Yep. So have you got any other news of Maryann?"

"They operated—"

"Who did?"

"I think it was a Dr Davis and a young doctor they've got there. They said it was too late, that if they'd got on to it months sooner there might've been a chance."

“Dr Davis eh? Well, best get a second opinion before you take his ideas on board.”

Brett Sorenson had heard occasional gossip to the effect that Dr Davis was not seen as a good doctor by many local people. He hadn't known that Dennis Walsh was one of them. “Why do you say that?”

“Because Leslie Davis is a useless doctor.”

“But he's still saying what I know. If I hadn't fiddle-faddled around telling her to lose weight—then maybe it wouldn't have been too late.”

“Well, have it your own way. But I'd still find out if he operated and who put her up to asking for twenty thousand. Someone might be thinking of a commission.”

This idea hadn't occurred to Sorenson. Of course a lawyer would charge but this letter had come apparently direct from Maryann. If he would pay up then she wouldn't need to get on to a lawyer to get it for her. She then laid out a clear case for compensation. Now that he thought about it that clarity and firmness didn't suggest Maryann though of course there was nothing to stop her from asking a helpful nurse or hospital visitor to give her a hand.

He thanked Dennis Walsh and got up. As he was going out another man was coming in. And Grant drew up outside and parked. As he walked away he found himself envying Grant and Dennis, if not the rather ‘Mr Chips’-looking man calling in. They knew who they were and, probably, what they wanted. Tad, too, had a clear view of what he wanted. But he, Brett, was floundering.

He found Grant an attractive young man with his naturally sunny nature and young fit body. But Grant would eventually find himself a nice girl and have a couple of children. Dennis Walsh he found both daunting and fascinating. It wasn't a physical attraction. Dennis Walsh was in his fifties and getting thin on top and not known for his happy outgoing nature. And yet, as he'd sat there with Walsh he had had the odd feeling that he was in the presence of a bulwark; nothing could be too terrible while he was in his company. The strange feeling passed and he began to ponder on how best to get in touch with Tracy Dillon.

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The man entering Buckton's police station was DI Carlton Payne. He always wondered when he came through this dusty and uninspiring little town how it could encompass someone like Dennis Walsh. The street was half-asleep. Only some distant noise of children's voices invaded the somnolent air. But inside was a sense of energy, of things getting done. He sat down in the interview room and told Grant he wouldn't mind a coffee.

Dennis came in and sat down heavily and said, “What brings you here? Doug?”

Grant brought in their battered biscuit tin and then the coffee and went out again.

“It was touch-and-go getting that committal through the court. The magistrate several times asked if we had ‘any more’. You could see him thinking that it was all very vague and that a good lawyer would shoot it all down, that there would be other realistic explanations.”

“So what tipped him over the line?”

“The civil case. I'd put my money on it. He couldn't say so. But if something came out about Doug's finances in a civil case where the bar is set lower—then people would be asking questions. He played safe. *I* think it's a bloody good motive for murder but not everyone agrees with me. And old Solomon isn't in any hurry to resolve his case about the Trust. In fact I have it on good authority that he was told he should've turned it over to the Fraud boffins right from the start and he said he didn't think it was that serious. But I think he's trying to protect the other trustees, especially the one who used to be a magistrate. He couldn't protect him from the Tax Office but he can protect him as a trustee. Maybe.” There was also a rumour that Mr Solomon was going to turn those shonky charities over to be investigated.

“So what brings you out here?”

“I'm off to see the Millers in Winville, see how they'll come over as witnesses. And if they've got anything more to tell me.”

“About the times Doug went to the house, as well as how Sam and Sandra got on?”

“I think they did more overhearing than they'll admit to. I'd like to know if there's a button to press or whether we've got all we're going to get.”

“You’ve checked their backgrounds, where they went to church, what sport he played, where they shopped, relatives, all that?”

“No. I asked Winville to tell me all they can but it seems the Millers lived a very low-profile life.”

“So so. But I’d go and talk with people at their church. They couldn’t chat with the Hoysteds, or only Sandra, but everyone needs someone to share things with. I never got the impression he was much of a talker. So she was probably bursting at times to gossip with someone.”

Dennis might not have thought like this if he hadn’t just had Sorenson in. And Sorenson had given the impression of wanting to talk to someone but being constrained.

“Mmmm ... it’s not that the Millers are vital but we have several statements on record that Towner told them that the Hoysteds were always fighting and that Sam was violent towards his wife. I’d like to make sure that comes home to bite him.”

Dennis gave that a bit of a grin. “And the Plowmans? Anything there?”

“Slowly, slowly. I might be dead before we tie up all the family but I think we’ll get somewhere with that business with the yacht. I got a line on Milward Dutton’s car. It was sold two weeks after the yacht blew up—to a car yard in Bundy. Not a place Dutton would be likely to take in his very nice BMW. Still, don’t hold your breath.”

After Carlton Payne had left for Winville Dennis sat and mused for a couple of minutes. He hadn’t had a high opinion of Dutton when he had been in charge in Winville and he had not really been surprised to learn that Dutton was corrupt. Though that was probably a generally jaundiced view of most senior cops sent to Winville on his part.

But for all that, he wanted the Plowman family put away for their wrongdoing and the younger members of the big extended family able to live normal lives. He had helped send one of the girls off to Victoria and her brother had come up before the Legal Practitioners’ Board and lost his licence to practice for taking the property of a dead woman.

He dealt with a couple of minor matters then got out his sandwiches to have a bite of lunch. He was just about to hoe in when a man burst in the station door and said urgently, “You’ve got to come! I’ve just found Paul Pickering dead!”

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Walsh sat the man down with a glass of cold water and jotted down his rather incoherent details. The man, a Burt Wagner, said he’d been hired by Mr Pickering to replace the roof of his house but that he’d had a fall from a ladder before he could start. He’d gone out to see Pickering some two weeks after he’d agreed to start to tell him what had happened and make new arrangements.

“No sign of him around. I knocked. No answer. I went round the sheds. I couldn’t see him. I saw the back door of the house was open so I came in the back gate. I knocked again. Then I went in to a sort of laundry and opened the door into the house. There was one heck of a terrible smell. And then he was there—in the hallway.” Mr Wagner had trouble getting past this point and Dennis said calmly, “So he was definitely dead?”

“Dead for weeks! That’s what I’m telling you!”

“He was okay when you last saw him?”

“Fit as a fiddle.”

“What date was that?”

“Musta been the fourteenth, or the fifteenth. I had a job to finish. I’d told him it’d take me two or three days. He was okay with that. Then I was in hospital with a coupla cracked ribs. Then I was at home. I tried to ring him but couldn’t get him. I thought maybe he came in late or went out early—and there he was all the time, just lying there, the poor bugger.”

Dennis got up and went to ring Winville to tell them they would need to send Dr Watling and come themselves. Then he came back to say to the roofing contractor, “When you feel up to it, we’ll need a statement. And where you’ll be over the next fortnight.”

“Think I can manage now.” Mr Wagner obviously felt he had been a bit of a panic-merchant but the only body he had ever seen was his mother and she had died peacefully in her sleep and he

had found her next morning. It was quite unlike suddenly coming upon the dead body of Paul Pickering.

Dennis got him a pen and a form but said as he placed them on the table, “You’re sure it was Paul Pickering?”

Wagner looked up in surprise. “Who else would it be?”

“You knew he lived alone?”

“He said he did. Said I could stay over if I wanted. But I said no, it wasn’t far to go home. I didn’t think he’d be much of a cook from the mess I saw in his kitchen.”

Dennis went away to ring his junior. Grant Schroeder had gone out to Burleigh to investigate some wandering stock in the Environment Park. He told him to divert to Pickering’s farm on his way back and stay there till the team arrived from Winville. “Stay outside the house. Looks like it’ll be a crime scene.”

Mr Wagner overhearing this, said in renewed panic, “How can you say it’s a crime scene? The bloke just died—”

“You said he looked as fit as a fiddle. So he didn’t *just* die. They’ll have to find out how and why he died.”

Wagner had gone pale again and looked at Dennis with a frown. “You mean—someone was there?”

“Everything has to be checked out,” Dennis responded grimly. “Could be suicide. Had an accident.”

Afterwards he wondered why Wagner had been so quick to assume it was something else. Because he had called it a crime scene?

When the statement was finished, Dennis checked it over and suggested that Wagner go round and get himself some lunch. “Dunno if I could manage a bite,” Wagner said gloomily. “It turns your stomach, something like that.”

“It does. But no point in starving yourself.”

Some people might see this as a sign of police callousness but Mr Wagner nodded and said, “Well, maybe you’re right.”

It was a risk letting him go. He seemed a solid citizen. But Paul Pickering wasn’t known for hiring solid citizens to do things on his farm. In fact he wasn’t known for hiring anyone except occasionally tempting young women on working holidays to come to his farm. If his roof was leaking he would either climb up himself or simply park an empty bucket under the drip.

Mr Wagner had given a Garramindi address and Dennis rang Sergeant John Applegarth at the station there and asked if he’d ever come across Wagner.

John said, “Not personally. He’s got a couple of acres on the edge of town and does some odd jobs. I didn’t know he called himself a roofing contractor. Are you thinking he might’ve argued with Pickering?”

“Don’t know. It’s more likely to be that Pidcock bloke that said he was going to sue Pickering for not keeping his daughter safe. He said he was going to go and see him ... but that was at least a month ago, maybe more. And we won’t know what caused Pickering’s death until Watling’s had a look at him—and that isn’t a job I’d fancy, not if Pickering’s been dead two weeks.”

John agreed rather fervently.

“Anyway, just keep an ear out, just in case Wagner’s a bit handy with his fists.”

Dennis finished up his lunch, put the sign on the door, and went round to his house to get his own ute to drive out to Pickering’s farm.

Two cars from Winville were already there and Grant was standing by the yard fence. Dennis got out and came over. “Who’s here?”

“Greg and Brent are here and that’s Dr Watling’s car. It’s really horrible in there.”

“Well, you’d best get on back to the station. But check with the mailman for this area, that’d be Craig Holt, and just see if he’s seen Pickering any time in the last month, any cars going in, any cars parked by the house, and check if he ever notices what sort of mail Pickering gets.”

There was no sign of any animals in the paddocks close to the house. So far as he knew Pickering didn’t have a cat or a dog. There were hens in the pens beyond the house. And as he

walked over he thought they were all dead too, dead of hunger and thirst. But as he came up to the wire-netting pens, two of the birds tried to raise their heads. He found a bucket and filled it from a nearby tap and pressed the hens' beaks into the water. Slowly they drank and seemed to perk a little. He went through the rest of birds without finding any more to be saved. He carried the two he'd revived over to his vehicle and laid them on a bag on the passenger seat.

As he walked back to the house DSS Greg Sullivan came out.

"Phew, don't think I'll want any dinner tonight. And Watling's still trying to decide how best to scrape him up off the floor. He's thinking of taking up the lino as well."

"Any thoughts on what happened?"

"Hard to say. But he's lying on his back and there's no sign of anything he might've tripped over if he stepped back. It'll be a business finding any marks on him, the mess he's in."

"So you don't need me?"

Greg had the disconcerting feeling that he shouldn't need Walsh but that he did. "Any thoughts? Any local gossip?"

"You might like to talk to that Walter Pickcock, Jayleen's father. He was talking of suing Pickering. And I'd just check up on Wagner, they could've argued over money. But Pickering didn't get on with his neighbours so I s'pose there could be something there."

The trouble with that, Dennis thought as he offered it, was that most of Pickering's neighbours were decent people he couldn't really see doing anything to the man ... They might grumble about the state of his fences but they were unlikely to go round and punch him to the floor.

He kept the gruesome details out of it when he mentioned it to his wife, Fiona, that evening. She was used to his blunt way of mentioning awful things. But there was no point in going into the sight and smell of the dead man. She could probably guess anyway. She only said mildly, "So you think it might be suicide? That after his wife and kids ... and he was on his own ... "

"I was always suspicious of him. Maybe he didn't do it himself, her prints were on the gun, but I'm sure he pushed her to it. I can't prove it. But it didn't seem to matter to him that his family was dead."

"And what about those other girls he's had there?"

"Yep. None of them ever had a nice thing to say about him."

"No, I mean, is there any chance he's had a girl there lately?"

"Haven't heard of any. But then that's maybe a stupid thing to say. I didn't know about the other ones until something went wrong. Greg was bagging up all his paperwork so he might come on something."

"Or on-line?"

"I'll check with him."

"It's horrible. But it's also sad. Maybe something went wrong in his life. Maybe he was just born without empathy."

"Maybe." But he didn't feel like trying to psychoanalyse Paul Pickering who so far as he could see was a lazy selfish man who had never managed to do anything good for anyone in his life. Maybe his father had been too free with the belt. But other men had hideous childhoods and still managed to treat other people reasonably decently.

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Dr Sorenson, a little apprehensively, had gone in search of Tracy Dillon. Winville had two main supermarkets and several smaller places. At the second supermarket he found Tracy Dillon on a checkout and asked her, between customers, if he could offer her a coffee when she finished work. She only said "Why?"

"I'd just like to talk about your mother, if you could spare me a few minutes."

Tracy, aware of the queue forming, said quickly, "Okay, I'm off in half-an-hour. I'll meet you at The Sorrento just round the corner."

He was there before her and looked around for a suitable table in a quiet corner. He had half-expected to see a younger version of Maryann and the tall attractive young woman with the serious gaze and the more intangible sense of being older than her years was a surprise. As he sat waiting he went over his own thoughts and wondered whether Tracy knew about his own negligence or whether she had little contact with her mother.

She came and sat down across from him and let him order her a savoury muffin and an iced coffee. “Why did you want to see me?”

“You know about your mother being in hospital?”

“Uh huh. George Johnson told me. But it doesn’t seem to be your business any more.” Her manner was reserved and a bit wary.

“I am sorry I got it so wrong. And your mother is asking me to pay her twenty thousand dollars.”

Her eyebrows went up slightly. “So why is that to do with me?”

“I wondered—well, how much she needed, and what she needed to spend it on ... I mean is it medical or for other expenses?”

“And why should that be your business—how she spends it? If you want to pay her that because you’ve got a guilty conscience—then that money is hers to do what she wants with it.”

“Well yes, yes, of course. I certainly wouldn’t interfere. It’s just that I think someone else might’ve ... well, put her up to it and might be wanting to take their cut. I’m happy for her to have it but I don’t want someone else, if you see what I mean.” It sounded a bit lame to him. Perhaps it was to do with this young woman. There was nothing about her which suggested she wanted to make it easier for him.

“Why do you think there might be someone else? Do you think my mother is completely stupid or something?”

“No, of course not.” He took Maryann’s letter out of his wallet and passed it across.

She took it and read it and considered it in a long silence before saying, “It’s her handwriting but it doesn’t sound like her.”

He stayed silent while she continued to consider it.

“It might be that someone just told her what to say ... ”

“I wondered if a nurse helped her.”

“Maybe.” Then a different question seemed to occur to her. “She would have to tell Centrelink. They might reduce her pension.”

He hadn’t thought of that. “Perhaps, if I paid it in installments?”

“No. Don’t do anything. But if you could just go out and check on her farm? Just make sure it’s okay. I haven’t got a car.”

“Yes, I’ll do that. And maybe, if you’d like, I could come and pick you up when you’re free and take you out there. I don’t know if there’s things she might be needing.”

“What she really needs,” Tracy said with sudden asperity, “is for someone to tidy up that place so she can sell it. I don’t want it and she might not get well enough to go back there.”

“But you do think she’s improving?”

“They say she is.” She drained her glass and stood up. “Thanks for that. I must go.” And before he had decided on whether to ask her for another meeting she had picked up her bag and turned away. He left it at that.

Something about her suggested someone remarkably mature but he also felt she had said only as much as she felt she needed to share. As he took the long road home he see-sawed between two questions: should he try to find out who it was who had dictated that letter to Maryann, and what to do about Maryann’s little farm. He knew nothing about farming, or only what people round Buckton had told him and what he had seen for himself, and although he could recognise the most obvious weeds he didn’t think he was the right person to be doing anything to Maryann’s land. Or had she meant he should just check if the house was locked up and no sign of anyone trying to get in? He was still mulling over how and when to go and look as he came into Buckton.

He didn’t need to go in and talk to George Johnson and he would probably be getting busy but as he seemed to be the go-between for Maryann and her daughter perhaps he was the person to tell, both about Tracy’s request and that she thought her mother was improving.

He wasn’t a pub regular and he felt that people were looking at him with curiosity as he went in and said, “Can you spare a minute, Mr Johnson?”

“Sure. These guzzlers can wait a minute. You’ve been to see Tracy, I hear.”

Dr Sorenson had the sudden disconcerting thought that all Buckton knew his thoughts and ideas and plans while he knew none of theirs.



“Yes, I did. She thinks her mum is improving. But the thing is—she’s worrying about the farm and I wondered if I should go out there and, well, try and tidy things a bit.”

Whether George understood the doubts in this simple statement or whether he had been worrying about the place himself ... either way he said simply, “A working bee, that’s what we need.”

Brett Sorenson had a sudden vision of himself asking Tad to come out to the farm and cut thistles and hearing his partner’s sarcastic response. Tad was like some Bucktonites, he couldn’t understand why anyone should worry over Maryann Dillon. “How would we do that?”

“Sunday afternoon suit you? Say two o’clock?”

“Well yes, I could do that—but—”

“Let me round up a few fellas and a whipper-snipper or two.”

George came round the bar and over to a table where Don Binnie was sitting with Cliff Brady. What he said to them Sorenson couldn’t hear. He then went over to where George Hickman was sitting with Carl Pender and James Mercer. A few minutes later he came back to Sorenson and said, “That’ll be fine. We’ll meet you out there about two.”

Sorenson was tempted to ask who ‘we’ would be but it didn’t seem to matter. If anyone turned up that would be a big help. “Thanks for that, Mr Johnson, I appreciate your help.”

“Call me George,” the barman said cheerfully, “and bring some heavy gloves.” He turned back to a waiting customer and Sorenson went home.

He wasn’t quite sure what the heavy gloves would be needed for but he looked through their tools in the car shed and put some secateurs, a pair of garden shears, a watering-can, a tin of white paint and a couple of brushes, along with an old piece of rolled-up canvas into his boot. Then he went in to tell Tad he would be occupied on Sunday afternoon.

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Craig Holt told Constable Schroeder he hadn’t seen Paul Pickering in months but that he had put a letter with an interesting stamp on it into Pickering’s mailbox about three weeks ago, he couldn’t be sure just when. The mailbox now was empty, not even a bill or a circular, which suggested Pickering didn’t get much mail, which Holt confirmed, or someone had removed mail from the box. Holt pondered on this and finally said he was sure he had put a letter from a bank into the box about five days ago.

Then he said, “It might come back to me, that stamp.”

“And do you know which bank?”

“Pretty sure it was the Commonwealth.”

Once Grant would have gone back to his boss and asked him what he should do next. Now he called in to the Commonwealth in Buckton and asked to speak with the new, or fairly new manager, Mr Oakshott. He was a middle-aged man with a wife and two children and people said he was an improvement on the previous manager who had done little mixing with the local community.

John Oakshott immediately agreed that Pickering had a local bank account but that the bank hadn’t written to him. If he received a bank letter it must’ve come from head office. When he went on to say, “Would you like me to check what it would’ve been?” Grant was both surprised and grateful. The previous manager was rarely proactive; he might’ve agreed if Dennis had asked him but it wasn’t guaranteed.

“I wonder if Mr Pickering left a will,” Oakshott went on. “Let me just check whether he had a safe deposit box here or anything left with us.”

Grant hadn’t thought of wills and now he wondered who might benefit from that farm. He didn’t know of any Pickering relatives round Buckton though there might be some further afield.

Oakshott came back and said, “No, nothing. You could try Charles Mather. He might’ve done a will for him.”

Grant found Mr Mather a bit daunting but he felt he should go along and ask. And even if Mather according to many Bucktonites was a ‘sour old cuss’ at least he had a nice secretary in Jess Brumby. He went upstairs to find Jess just finishing up for the day. He hurriedly asked her to check if Paul Pickering had left a will with them. He told her he had been found dead and they were waiting to hear how he’d died.

“Oh, goodness, that’s awful, isn’t it. He wasn’t very old.”

She went over to a filing cabinet and took out a folder. “He does have a will but I would need Mr Mather’s permission to share it with you and he’s out at the moment. Would you like to make an appointment for tomorrow?”

Grant agreed with this and hoped Dennis would be free. He agreed to ten o’clock and Jess said kindly, “Just ring if you need to change it.” He thanked her and went to go downstairs again when Jess said unexpectedly, “Whoever gets the farm won’t get much. I’ve heard he was way over his head in debt because he was always buying farm machinery.”

Dennis confirmed this when he got back to the station and said, “I wonder if that had anything to do with his death—that he couldn’t pay?”

“You mean—someone came round and demanded payment?”

“It’s hardly Mafia Country,” Dennis said drily, “and the bank isn’t going to come round with a sawn-off shotgun,” Grant grinned at this, “but maybe it all got too much for him. And I’m pretty sure he had an account with the bank over the road. You can check tomorrow.”

“We’ve got an appointment with Mr Mather for ten. Will you go?”

“No harm in finding out who’s his next-of-kin.”

Though maybe Pickering had left his farm to someone or something quite unexpected.

Dennis told him to do a round of the farms near Pickering’s next morning. Grant felt he had managed quite well and thought he would enjoy going round the farms and hearing what people had to say about Paul Pickering. And then he went on to thinking about that mysterious stamp which had caught Craig Holt’s attention. Was there anyone who collected foreign stamps and which might spark a memory. Or was the mysterious letter simply sitting in Pickering’s house waiting to be found, stamp and all?

And then as he got into bed he thought of Elise Walsh. She probably collected stamps. Elise tried out most things ...

## *Case No. 2: By the Light of the Silvery Moon*

Charles Mather seemed to get a perverse enjoyment out of keeping Dennis Walsh waiting. Though if their positions were reversed he would expect an instant police response. He read and signed some letters. He made a couple of phone calls. Dennis got up and said loudly, “I’ll come back later when he’s not busy. He can talk to me over lunch.”

He headed for the door but Mather hurried out of his office. There was a limit to which he could push someone like Dennis Walsh. “Come in, it won’t take us long to see what Mr Pickering’s wishes were.”

Dennis turned back and took the chair offered. Neither man saw the small smile Jess couldn’t help. Mather took time to take out the two sheets of paper which made up Pickering’s will. He handed them to Walsh saying, “As you can see the will was not finalised.”

It said that Paul Pickering was of sound mind, something which Dennis seriously doubted, and that he wished to be buried just beyond his machinery shed on the west side of the tank there. The grave was dug and waiting.

“A bit odd, him digging his grave,” Dennis said. “He was only forty-two.”

“I queried it,” Charles Mather said with some asperity, “and he told me to mind my own business.”

After that there were long lists of possessions; apart from the farm and buildings he had meticulously listed dozens of items of machinery. Dennis turned over the page to run down a further list. Mather said, “He gave me that list and said it had to be copied exactly or he would go somewhere else.”

At the end was a paragraph to say ‘I, Paul Cranston Pickering, am thinking about who to make my beneficiary. But as the banks will take it all it does not seem worthwhile getting anyone’s hopes up.’ Dennis laid the will down on Mather’s desk and said, “Did he dictate that last paragraph?”

“He did the whole thing. I said he should name a person or persons or failing that some institution or charity as his debts could not be greater than the value of his land, if sold.”

“You wouldn’t think so. What did he say?”

“He said and I quote, “do what you bloody well want with it.” I said I couldn’t do that unless he granted me a Power of Attorney or named me as either his executor or his residual legatee. He got annoyed with that and said he wasn’t naming anyone. I thought he might re-think and come back to add to it. But there it stands. And now that he is deceased we are left in a rather difficult situation.”

“Well, the farm can’t be sold while it is a crime scene—”

“And he hasn’t authorised me or anyone else to act for him anyway.”

“So in effect he is intestate?”

“It may come to that.”

“So you have no idea of his next-of-kin?”

“His parents are dead. He was an only child. But I believe his father had a brother living somewhere in the district.”

As this seemed to be almost a dead end, Dennis got up. “If you think of anything else he might’ve said, give us a ring.” And to Jess in the outer office he said, “Did you ever hear of any Pickering relatives?”

Jess said she’d never heard of anyone but she could ask her mum and dad if that might help. As her parents were lifelong residents that was a possibility. But as he went downstairs he had the thought that if there was money going begging it was possible that that Walter Pidcock might press his claim and with no one else with a viable claim he might be in luck.

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Sergeant Walsh had just finished sandwiches and a cup of tea when he had an unexpected visitor. Mason Watling. The doctor came in and took a chair in the interview room and accepted a cup of tea. He said without further chit-chat, “I will do the autopsy tomorrow. I have arranged for an expert in maggots to come and collect them. There is broken skin infested on his forehead which might suggest he was hit by someone standing in front of him but it is an odd way to attack someone. It is possible he ran into something and hit his head. I’m going back out now to have another good look around. Was he ever known to get into fights?”

“He usually came in to the pub in mid-afternoon when it was quiet. Don’t think he ever stayed late. He had a bad reputation with women but I don’t know if he’s had one there lately.”

“I’ll look. Sullivan and Moore should be there. But I wanted another look myself.”

Dennis privately thought Dr Watling might be better at finding things than Greg Sullivan. People round Winville called the cool reserved doctor ‘a cold fish’ but Dennis had a lot of time for him and respected the meticulous care he brought to every investigation. He told the doctor they hadn’t found, so far, a next-of-kin and the will left everything up in the air.

“Very odd. Do you think he had mental issues?”

“I regarded him as a psychopath but that isn’t a professional diagnosis. He was cruel to animals and didn’t seem to know how to get on with people but he was constantly buying machinery. He had big overdrafts at both banks here. I don’t know how much will be left when his bills are paid.”

“Machinery doesn’t have to be related to,” Dr Watling said drily. “But thank you for your time.” He got up and went to the door just as a woman was coming in. Dennis saw that it was the vet Leila Burkett. He had taken the two distressed hens home with him and put them in a separate coop but he had rung the surgery and said it was better if she had them. It wouldn’t look good, him taking a dead man’s belongings, even if with the best of intentions. He did not usually introduce visitors to the station but as they both had some connection to the case he saw no harm in it. They both smiled and shook hands and Watling went on out.

He told the vet where to find the hens and said, “If you could spare the time, I wonder if you could go out and check round there just in case there’s any other stock on the place. He used to have a few steers there but I didn’t see them. They might be out the back somewhere.”

She said she would do her best and went round to his house and with Fiona’s help lifted the coop into her Landrover.

The hens still looked cowed and miserable but Fiona said they'd eaten a bit of mash.

"Good. But who do they belong to now?"

"Nobody seems to know. And Mr Pickering didn't treat any of his poultry properly so I think you should keep them or find them a good home."

This seemed sensible. After all, it might take years to sort everything out with the estate and these weren't young pullets ... "I'll give them to the Castleys when they're back to normal."

Fiona agreed with this. But just before she left Leila said, "Dennis just introduced me to a Dr Watling. Do you know who he is?"

"He's at Winville Hospital." Fiona could not picture Dennis matchmaking so she thought it must have something to do with them both being on the Pickering case. "Dennis has a very high opinion of him but I've never actually met him myself."

After Leila had taken the hens round to her place and fed and watered them she checked with her assistant to see if there were any calls then she drove out to the Pickering farm. Buckton in a dry season wasn't a place to feature on picture postcards and the Pickering property was always a dismal place. The house looked uncared-for. There were a few half-dead shrubs in the yard. Only the brightly-painted machinery in the distance added a note of colour and spurious prosperity.

She walked along by the poultry yards. There were several hens there, dead and infested with maggots. Two turkeys at the far end were also dead. She walked on past to a gate into a nearly ripe paddock of sunflowers. There was no sign of any cattle. She turned to walk back up and go down the lane beyond the house. Something glinted on the ground and she went over to look. It was a mobile phone ground down into the gravel. She was about to bend down and pick it up when she thought it might have something to do with the investigation. She picked it up gingerly with a handkerchief and walked over to the house. Even from outside the front door the smell was still overpowering. She felt sorry for the people having to work inside.

She called out and a minute later Greg Sullivan with a mask over his face came out. He seemed surprised to see her. He pulled the mask down and said "What is it?"

She showed him the phone and took him back to where she'd found it.

"Thanks. I don't think Pickering had a mobile so I wonder who it belongs to." Then a gloomier thought seemed to come to him. "If that was there ... then it looks like we'll have to search the whole bloody farm." He looked round the hot dusty paddocks. "And I wonder if we should arrange for someone to come in and harvest his crops."

She didn't see that as her problem and told him Dennis had asked her to come out and look round for any more animals on the place. "We've saved two hens but so far I haven't found any stock."

"Well, I'll leave you to it." Greg took the phone and went back inside.

Mrs Burkett was tired and dusty when she returned to her vehicle half-an-hour later. She had not found anything other than a hare which had started up from the grass verge alongside a paddock of corn. She could see what everyone meant by saying Paul Pickering was obsessed with machinery and gadgets. And there was a kind of relief that there were no more creatures to be found in a dead or dying state. She wondered what the neighbours thought of Pickering and whether there was any sort of relationship between them.

As she was about to get in Mason Watling came out of the house carrying a bag. He saw her and came over. "I'm glad you found the phone. I don't think Sullivan fancied searching the whole farm."

"And you would've—if you were in his shoes?"

"Probably. Anyway I won't keep you, I probably stink to high heaven. And it's going to be even worse tomorrow, doing the autopsy."

"Yes, I don't envy you that."

"But it has to be done, alas." He put a hand to his shirt pocket and drew out a card. "If you should ever be in Winville with a half hour to spare—perhaps we could meet for a coffee."

She took it but made no promises. A minute later she drove away, glad to be away from that depressing place. But she thought she would like to know who owned that phone and why someone had tried to destroy it. She wondered if Dennis would tell her if she asked.

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When Dr Sorenson drove up to Ms Dillon's little farm he found several cars there already. George Hickman came over to him and said, "Hullo, we've got the jobs parceled out so if you could give the back yard a bit of a tidy-up that would be good."

Sorenson looked around the small farm. The weatherboard house was small and shabby. An open shed was largely empty except for a few drums and piles of bags and some baling twine hanging from a beam. Past the shed were the remains of pig styes. George waved a hand and said, "Maryann's aunt and uncle reared pigs. They didn't have any kids so they left the place to Maryann. The way things turned out maybe that wasn't the best thing but they meant it for the best. They were decent people."

As he went back to chopping weeds Brett Sorenson walked over to the house and round to the back. Maryann had left things soaking in the old cement tubs in a sort of lean-to and the smell revolted him. But he took them out and found a plastic bucket to rinse them in and hung them over the clotheslines in the hope that fresh air and sunshine would remove the smell. He collected up the cardboard boxes that were lying around and watered the sad lemon trees.

Winston Pounder with his two boys turned up and took a close look at the peeling paint on the house. "It should really be sanded down properly first," he said judiciously. "But we'll need to find out what colour she wants it. I think it was her uncle who put this coat on." The grey wasn't the most cheerful colour but the house had long ago had a white trim.

Sorenson said he'd brought some paint. Mr Pounder suggested he come back another day after he'd had a chance to sand the trim down and put on some undercoat. Brett had been seeing the day as a one-off and he wasn't sure he wanted to return next Sunday but it would seem rude when all these men had turned up to help out. "Okay. Next Sunday?"

Several of the men nodded.

"And who should buy the paint, do you think? I've only got the one can of white."

"Don't worry. I'll ring the hospital and see if they'll ask Maryann for me." Brett thought of offering but felt that it might be better to come from Mr Pounder. Maryann might not wish to talk to her 'useless doctor'.

The farm had not become a little haven over the past three hours but it did look tidier and more liveable. As men got back in their cars George Hickman came over and said, "I don't know if you'd like to come round and have some supper with us but you'd be welcome."

Sorenson said that his partner would probably be cooking dinner but he could come by afterwards, if that would suit. He wasn't sure that he really wanted to but it would seem unfriendly to say no. He drove back into Buckton. The first hint of twilight was in the sky and he thought he would much rather sit somewhere quiet with his feet up. He turned in to Creek Road and pulled over and switched off.

Something had changed but he wasn't sure exactly what. They had simply accepted him as he was. They had given up their time without any sense of being put upon. But it wasn't exactly that. More the sense that this afternoon had brought into sharper focus his sense of vague dissatisfaction with himself and his life and not knowing what he wanted to do about it.

Of course Tad would say it was Buckton getting him down and the sooner they were gone ... Of course he had no illusions about Buckton but he wasn't sure he wanted to move, or not with Tad. They had met as young interns and he had fallen in love. It was as simple as that. He had had several unsatisfying relationships with girls and now he thought he understood why. Tad had a hint of something wild and restless, something vaguely gypsyish about him then. That had faded. And he could see better now that Tad could also be rigid and controlling. It had never mattered. What Tad wanted he had always been happy to go along with. If Tad had suggested they go to Timbuktu in those days he would've gone. But now he felt he didn't want to go with Tad when he went but he didn't know what he wanted to do instead. He couldn't stay here where he would always be remembered as the man who misdiagnosed Maryann but neither did he want to move into a better city practice with Tad.

His partner liked to say that they had done their good deed by rural people and now it was their turn to suit themselves, to go where they really wanted to be. He agreed with this in principle. But he didn't know where he really wanted to be. It sounded pathetic, put bluntly like that, but there was no good in hiding from the question.

Still, there was no point in going on sitting here, trying yet again to decide what to do. So he drove the short distance home. Tad asked him how the afternoon had gone and he said the place was looking better and they would maybe give it one more go.

“But I don’t see why you should step in just because Maryann was too lazy to do anything herself.” Put like that he could see that Tad was right. It had taken years for the farm to get in that state. Maryann couldn’t blame her health for everything.

“I know. I know. But it just seemed ... well, I didn’t mind doing it.”

That sounded a bit weak. But he didn’t really think he could say ‘I’m doing it for her daughter ... and my guilty conscience.’

He said he needed to go out again but wouldn’t be very long. Tad said, “Where?”

He was about to say when it struck him that it sounded so like married couples wanting to know where a spouse was going and for what reason.

“I won’t be long.”

“That isn’t really an answer but I’ll see you later.”

Brett thought of saying, “And I won’t be coming with you when you go. We’ll have to decide what to do with the house and the practice.” But he shrank away from this kind of confrontation. It would have to be said one day but he hoped he would be clearer in his mind when he said it. Because Tad would ask him where he wanted to go and why and when ...

May Hickman invited him in, saying she had heard that they’d done a pretty good job with Maryann’s farm. She waved him to a chair and asked what she could get him. May would be the first one to say she had missed out on the family looks but he was aware of the warmth in her welcome. George came in with their little dog Billy with him.

It occurred to Sorenson that they had never had a pet because it would tie them down or they would have to ask neighbours to help out. When they’d first come to Buckton several people had invited them round for lunch or a barbecue but they had always said no. Tad saw it as pure curiosity. Perhaps it was. But curiosity was natural. Not very many people came and went in Buckton. And Tad had said that if they went out to lunch they would have to reciprocate and they would have people poking their noses into their private lives. Perhaps that too was true. But Brett was painfully aware that they had never seen themselves as part of this community. He didn’t even have a library card. And he could see more clearly now that country towns made up for the lack of various amenities by having a real sense of community. He and Tad had stayed determinedly outside that aspect of sharing.

George and May were very easy to talk with and he told them about Maryann asking for twenty thousand dollars. George said immediately, “That’s interesting. I’ve heard that she’s asking Buckton Council for twenty thousand. She says they didn’t take care when they sprayed weeds on her land. It doesn’t seem likely, cancers are slow things, but they can’t exactly prove they didn’t do anything to affect her health.”

“Do you think she thought that up herself—or maybe someone put her up to it?”

“Well, if she’d give the money to Tracy, poor kid, then I wouldn’t mind. But I don’t really see Maryann thinking that one up. Did your letter come from a lawyer?”

“No. She wrote it herself.”

“Mmmm. I s’pose someone in Winville might’ve felt sorry for her ... ” He didn’t sound fully convinced. And there was something about Maryann which didn’t really invite pity.

“And—can you tell me something about Tracy? I went to see her in Winville and she told me her mum was a bit better.”

“Poor little kid. I s’pose you know she killed her dad, Rick Scully?”

“Not really. Do you know what happened?”

“Maryann took up with Rick Scully for a while but she kept it very quiet. His mum and dad run a car yard in Winville. They’re a bit iffy but Ricky was the bad hat. He came up with this idea that if he abducted young girls, drugged them, raped them, then Tracy would be too scared to stay in Buckton and would agree to go away with him so he could get all the sex he wanted with his daughter. I know it sounds sick and it was. Tracy was the third girl he drugged and raped and he left her lying naked by the side of the road. It was John and Dora Binnie who found her. He then

abducted another girl but didn't rape her. They sent us some experts from Brisbane." George's way of saying 'experts' was not complimentary.

"And they were completely useless," May put in. "They were having an affair. And they seemed to think we were all a lot of hillbillies who probably carried on like this all the time."

"And Ricky went round to the farm to try and take Tracy away. She didn't know he was the one who'd raped her but she didn't want to go with him and anyway she hardly knew him. She had her mum's big ashtray that she was cleaning out and when Ricky tried to grab her she gave him a whack with it. He fell down and then she found he was dead. Poor kid panicked and took him in a wheelbarrow down on to the Maxwells' farm. It is an absolute mess and they wouldn't even notice some more rubbish dumped. She dug a hole and buried him."

"So who found him?"

"Dennis Walsh. Chris Kuhl put in a complaint and Dennis went out and found the body. It made those experts look like prize idiots. But poor Tracy was charged with involuntary manslaughter and spent, I think, three years in detention. It was Mavis Barnard who looked after her, not Maryann. I think that's why there isn't a lot of sympathy for Maryann around here. People felt she should've looked after her daughter."

"Tracy was only fourteen or fifteen. She shouldn't have had to go through all that misery on her own. I heard Dora Binnie one time say she wouldn't have minded to come round and knock Rick Scully on the head herself. After all, he'd never done a thing for Tracy, not a penny, not a visit."

"And she was a really bright kid," George took up the story. "I heard she studied like nobody's business inside and got a good pass. But there was no money for uni and it's hard to get good jobs if you've got a record. A sad business all round."

"A Chad Scully came into the surgery one time."

"He's a cousin. Poor Chad. He's just one of those men who are completely ineffective in everything they do. He had those three boys and he could never do anything with them. It was Dennis Walsh who pulled them into line. You may have noticed," George said with a grin, "that a lot of men around here expect Dennis to do their parenting for them."

When Dr Sorenson walked home again he felt he understood Tracy Dillon much better. Quite likely she had had to do most of the work at home if she was to get meals and clean clothes. She had been forced to grow up faster than most teenagers. But under that everyday understanding and sympathy was something much more nebulous. He felt he would like to see Tracy again but he wasn't sure if it was just natural sympathy or natural curiosity ... or something less natural ...

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Grant Schroeder had asked Ms Applegarth at the post office if she knew anyone who collected stamps but as she was very new to the business she had only said she could ask around. As he came out of the post office Jenny Pym from the hospital was coming along the footpath. Grant liked Jenny and felt very comfortable with her. He asked her if she knew anyone who collected stamps. She immediately said, "Well, I do. Not passionately. But my dad did and I've got all his albums. Why? Are you taking up stamp-collecting?"

He explained about Craig Holt seeing an interesting stamp on a letter he delivered to Paul Pickering. Jenny didn't need all the gaps filled in. She immediately said, "Ah, the awful Pickering business. Well, tell Craig to come around this evening and have a look and something might spark a memory."

And Craig when he sat down with Nurse Pym's albums and turned the pages finally said, "Yep, that's it." Jenny came over and he pointed to a stamp which said 'Polska'. "That's the word I saw, I'm pretty sure. So what's that mean?"

"Poland. That would probably make sense. Paul seemed to like women from that part of the world."

But when all this was passed on to Winville CIB Greg Sullivan said they hadn't found any such letter or envelope. Dennis said, "She probably had the sense to change her mind and say she wasn't coming and he chucked the letter in the stove."

Greg agreed this was possible but he couldn't see that it got them anywhere.

"So what did you find on that phone?"

“Well, that’s the thing.” Greg still sounded pessimistic. “We got an expert on to it and there’s mostly a lot of stuff, a bit mucked up, but it’s in another language and they don’t know what it is. They’re checking now.”

“Maybe it’s Polish?”

“Don’t know yet.” Then he seemed to abruptly change tack from this unproductive line. “But we got on to his computer and we found pictures of him, all posed to look like some heart throb and I’ll bet that got him some girls but here’s the thing you’ll find strange—he’s got pictures of what he calls his farm—but it isn’t his farm—”

This didn’t really surprise Dennis. Who would put up pictures of that mess of a place if he wanted to attract girls there? “So whose is it?”

“Haven’t a clue. It might just be some pictures he found somewhere or it might be another place round the district. I’ll send them through to you, you might recognise the place.”

When Dennis received the pictures of a neat little house and garden, lemon trees laden, a windmill in the background, he immediately said, “Holy heck! That’s the Parsons’ farm. Uh oh, I wonder if they knew?”

Ellie and Faye Parsons would see committing murder as unChristian, most definitely, but could they have got mad enough to do something to Paul Pickering? After all, they weren’t likely to be putting pictures of their house in any public place. So how did Pickering get those pictures? Had they found him on their land with a camera? And that raised another question. They hadn’t found a camera in his house so where was it? Dennis felt reasonably sure that Pickering would have had one. But it was just possible he had got someone else to take pictures of the Parsons’ farm.

He turned to Grant and asked him to duck out to their farm with the pictures. “Ask them if Pickering ever came there, and ask if they knew Pickering, ever saw him, ever had an argument with him. I have an idea there might be some bad blood there.”

Grant found the Parsons sisters a little daunting but he agreed and finished up the letter he was typing and handed it to Dennis to read and sign. Then he got his cap and went out. Dennis had been pleased with him finding out about that letter and still thought Winville might find that damaged phone had belonged to a Polish girl. But this sense of achievement didn’t make it any easier to tackle those two old women.

The pair of weatherbeaten sisters still had their garden and orchard and hens and several beehives but they now rented their land to Andrew McLaren. He was by their front gate talking with Faye Parsons when Grant drove in their lane and parked nearby. They both waited for him to come over.

He took out the material they had received from Winville and said she might like to have a look. Faye looked at the pictures and then at him with some suspicion. “What is this?” She handed the pictures to Mr McLaren.

“They were found on Paul Pickering’s computer,” Grant said, hoping the old lady was tough enough to withstand the shock.

Both she and McLaren looked astonished. Miss Parsons said crossly, “What was he doing with them?”

“He seems to have been claiming that they were pictures of his farm.”

“Did he now.” Grant revised his initial view. Christian or not he could see this old lady barging over to have it out with Paul Pickering.

It was Andrew McLaren who said in a puzzled way, “Why would he do that?”

“We think he used the internet to attract girls from overseas to come and stay with him.”

McLaren said they would get a nasty shock when they arrived. Faye Parsons said, “Little hussies!”

Grant, mindful of his boss’s instructions, said, “Did you ever see him around your farm, maybe taking photos?”

Faye said she hadn’t and she thought if Ellie had seen anything she would’ve said so.

“And you don’t put pictures of your farm out in any public way?”

“Of course not.”

“So why did he choose this farm to claim as his own?” McLaren still looked a little puzzled.

“It might be that he just thought it looked better than his place—”



“Anywhere would look better than his mess,” Faye said tartly.

“Or he might’ve been getting back at you for some reason.”

“We reported him to the RSPCA a couple of times. I don’t know if they did anything. He didn’t look after his animals. I think they removed some of them.”

“When was this?”

The old woman pondered on this before saying, “Five or six months ago.”

“Did you ever complain to the police?”

“We complained to Sergeant Bosch that time we saw him bash his son’s head against the car window. I don’t know what he did. Probably nothing.”

Andrew McLaren looked shocked. He obviously hadn’t heard this story before. Grant also felt shocked but he wasn’t sure what he should do or say. The Pickering children were all dead, shot by their mother before she turned the gun on herself. Still, that was years ago. It sounded weak but he thought Dennis should handle this. “Would you be able to come in to the station and make a ... a statement.”

“And what are you going to do with it?”

Grant knew that ex-Sergeant Bosch was due to come up on animal cruelty charges. They had held off till they could be sure his dementia wasn’t serious enough for him to be seen as unfit to face court. But he didn’t know if this could somehow be added to the original charge. “I think Dennis, I mean Sergeant Walsh, needs to know about what you saw. I don’t know what he can do about it but maybe there is something.”

He had asked around among Pickering’s neighbours whether any of them had seen anything but he hadn’t asked them to think back further than a month. There had been several sightings of cars but nothing definite. And none of his neighbours had expressed sorrow at hearing he was dead. Several people had said it was sad to see that farm going downhill and one person said he was glad to see that there had been no girls there lately.

But perhaps there had. And no one had noticed.

Faye said they would come in ‘sometime’ and then she wanted to know what they were going to do about those photos that shouldn’t be on Pickering’s computer. Grant said the police had the computer—

“Looking at all the naked hussies on there, I’ll be bound.”

Grant didn’t know if they had found any photos of women, dressed or undressed, on the computer. “The thing is, he didn’t name anyone in his will so we’re trying to find a next-of-kin for him. But we wouldn’t give that person the computer till everything is taken off.”

She probably didn’t know much about computers and she didn’t look totally reassured. But she said briskly, “He’s got an uncle over near Oakey. You’d best get on to him.”

“Do you know his name?”

“Pickering, of course.”

She made him feel like a little boy failing in school. But he was grateful to her for this piece of information. He thanked her for her help and said Dennis would tell them what had happened to the computer. The old lady just nodded and turned and stumped away.

Andrew McLaren said after she was out of earshot, “It was probably more than one complaint. One of them had a go at Pickering in the supermarket one time. She said his mother would turn over in her grave if she could see him now with all his hussies coming through the house and not lifting a finger to clean it up. I’m not sure if they ever saw any of the girls he’s managed to entice there. But both Ellie and Faye liked his wife and said she was a ‘nice polite girl’. They both blamed him for what happened at the farm.”

“I think that house is beyond cleaning up,” Grant said. Even without Pickering lying dead the house had disgusted him. He felt sure any girl coming there would take one look and run for her life.

McLaren nodded. “And any ideas on what happened to Pickering?”

“They’re pretty sure he was attacked.”

“Well, I can think of several people who mightn’t mind to have a go at him.”

“You don’t mean Ellie and Faye?”

“No. I can’t see them doing anything. And he was bigger and stronger. Well, I shouldn’t speculate but it would be hard to find any of his neighbours with a good word for him.”

“You didn’t hear of him having any ... any quarrels with anyone?”

“Well, he didn’t pay his bills. I know that for a fact.”

“But killing him wouldn’t get any money back.” Grant tried to think this through.

“I don’t know how the banks regarded it but everyone else knew they would never get a penny out of Pickering. But you probably know all this. So I’d best get back to work.”

When he got back to town Grant wasn’t sure if he’d asked all the right questions and he wondered if he should’ve pressed Andrew McLaren for more. He was a quiet man but he quite likely noticed and heard things ...

Grant told Dennis what Miss Parsons had said and about her complaint and that he had asked her to come in and make a statement. Dennis nodded. If Doug Towner had been the one to make sure no action was taken on complaints about Joe Bosch then he would like to see Towner tackled. If there had been action on child abuse maybe that sad course of events could have been arrested.

“And Mr McLaren was sort of suggesting that Pickering might owe some money privately besides what he owed the banks. And Faye said he has an uncle over near Oakey.”

“Did she give a name?”

“She said it was Pickering and then she said ‘of course’ like I was really stupid.”

Yes, that sounded like Faye. “So his father’s brother. Get the phone book and see what you can find.” Jess Brumby round at Charles Mather’s was probably looking for a next-of-kin but it wouldn’t hurt if they could make contact. And the man, if he had any feeling for his nephew, deserved to know. Though it had been on the local news and no one had been in touch.

Grant came back with a Pickering at Aubigny. “I can’t find one in Oakey. Would this be close?”

“Close enough. Let’s give him a try.”

Grant was very glad it was Dennis doing the ringing. Of course police had to bring sad news at times but he was glad he didn’t have to talk any more about Paul Pickering.

Dennis got a man on the phone and said he was ringing from Buckton Police and before he could ask if the man on the other end was related the voice said, “You’re ringing about that waster of a nephew of mine, are you?”

Dennis said he was if this was Paul Pickering’s uncle he was talking to.

“I am. Worse luck. Why Albie had such a useless son I don’t know. But then he was a bit of a nut case himself. The less I saw of them the better I liked it. So if you want me to bury that useless sod you’ve had a wasted call.”

Dennis had heard that Pickering’s father had gone a bit odd, though he had never asked how that oddness had manifested itself. “No. He can’t get buried yet. It looks like someone killed him. But he was there nearly two weeks before he was found. So it won’t be easy to work out how he died.”

Mason Watling had said he had been dead from nine to twelve days, no more, and possibly a little less as the house was very closed-up and warm.

“Blimey! So you’re not asking me to come and identify him, are you?” He gave a bark of laughter.

“No. There doesn’t seem to be any doubt about his identity.” Though as he said it he felt a faint doubt himself. Could there be someone who was similar to Pickering in size and hair colour? “But would you have heard if someone had it in for him?”

“Not Popular Paul, that fella. And he wouldn’t of told me anyway. I only saw him every few years. Last time I saw him was when he came to my wife’s funeral and that was nearly four years ago.”

Dennis accepted that. “But there’s another thing. His estate. He made a will but didn’t name anyone as a beneficiary.”

“Didn’t think you could do that. Or the government gets it all.”

“He told the lawyer he was still trying to decide.”

“Then what’s the point of making a will?”

“I think he wanted to list all he owned, mainly his machinery.” It sounded odd but Dennis thought he understood. Pickering had probably got a kick out of carefully writing down everything he owned in that line. Who eventually got it was less important.

“Could be. I was over there about six years ago and I asked him what he wanted all that stuff for. No one needs two headers.”

“What did he say?”

“He said they were both different. I said—so what, you’ve only got a coupla hundred hectares to harvest, and he said, that’s what you think, and I said that was what I knew.”

“You mean—he was suggesting he had some more land somewhere?”

“Dunno. That fella, sometimes I wondered if he knew what planet he was on. But I thought he meant he was going to try and put more of his land down to crops. He had a few cattle out the back. Maybe he was going to plough up that back paddock.”

“It could be. And do you know if there are any other relatives?”

“I’ve got a son. He’s in the navy. Paul’s mother was a Cranston. She had some rellies over near Bongeene. Don’t know if they’re still there.”

Dennis asked him if he wanted to be kept informed but he said, “No, don’t really think I do. One time I told him he shouldn’t talk so bad to his wife and he told me to butt out of his life. So if you don’t mind I’d rather stay butted out.”

This didn’t really surprise Dennis.

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In the late afternoon Dennis took a call from DC Forman in Winville. He had just come back from looking at some vandalised trees at the high school. When he’d said, how come it had taken them all day to get around to noticing, the school’s secretary, Matty Ainsworth, had said, “I’m sure they were okay when I came in to work this morning. At first I thought someone had kicked a ball in here or something. But this looks deliberate.”

If it wasn’t the students then someone else had walked on to the schoolgrounds. They had a groundsman/caretaker and a cleaner but Dennis couldn’t picture either of them doing this damage to the young trees.. He couldn’t hope to get any fingerprints off the trees themselves but he tried the posts. And he took a photo of the clearest footprints without much hope. He picked a tiny thread from the wire of the fence beyond the trees. Someone had possibly stepped back to admire his handiwork. But if he was going to get the culprit it was more likely to be by someone looking out or coming by.

Jenny Forman said briskly, “We’ve found the owner of that phone. I don’t mean in person but we’ve put out a call. Someone called Majda Podgorsek. I don’t know the right pronunciation. And the language on most of the messages is Slovenian.”

“Slovenian! Not Polish?”

“According to the expert we got.”

“So where is Slovenia?”

He didn’t think he had ever heard of it. Or maybe it was that bit that had broken away from the Czechs?

“It used to be part of Yugoslavia. Now it is an independent country.”

“One of those Balkan things?”

“One of those,” Jenny said with an unseen grin.

“So what was she doing at Pickering’s place—or did he pinch her phone somewhere? No, silly question. We can guess what she was doing there.”

“We didn’t find any sign of a girl being there. Only the phone.”

“Pickering kept his own phone locked. It used to make it very hard for his visitors. But now with mobile phones they have a chance to ring out.”

“So maybe he took her phone and hid it or broke it so she couldn’t ring someone?”

“Possible.”

“And then she ran away—after hitting him?”

“Any idea when the phone was last used?”

“So it can’t be her ... not unless she came back. Because they think the last message was about three weeks before we found him.”

“Any news on Pidcock?”

“Greg got on to him. He says he went there and told Pickering he was going to sue him and he says Pickering just laughed and said ‘Go for it!’ And then he says that Pickering told him he was in debt up to his neck but that if he wanted a second-hand set of disc-harrows he could have them.”

“Well, the debt part seems to be right. We’ve heard that he might also have had some private debts. Has Greg turned up anything?”

“Not so far as I know. But maybe we need someone like Fiona to look through everything. Greg might miss something.” This wasn’t said critically. “But it is an interesting question, isn’t it. Who gets first bite when the farm gets sold? The banks?”

“They can fight it out. And any news about that bloke who found Pickering?”

“He’s not a saint. He did get charged with assault about five years ago. But he was in hospital with a couple of cracked ribs. He was there three days.”

“But seeing we don’t know exactly when Pickering died that doesn’t let him off the hook.”

“You think maybe he hit Pickering—or they had a fight—and then he was off work for a while and then he went back to see if anyone had found Pickering—and when he saw he was still there he came rushing in to see you—like he’d just got the shock of his life?”

“Something like that. Anyway, keep digging. See if people saw him around, if he had phone calls, all that stuff.”

“And d’you think Pidcock could’ve done it?”

“Easily. Check who saw him when and all that. And let us know when you find this girl from Slovenia.”

Jenny said she would.

“Oh, and we’ve found whose farm Pickering put up on his web-site—and they’re none too happy about it.”

When he sat down with Fiona in the late evening and shared some of this with her, she said slowly, “It really is horrible ... but it’s also sad. That he could destroy other lives but also that he had no friends—”

“You mean no friends—other than those girls he got there with false promises?”

“But you can’t call them friends. They all wanted to get away from him. I’m sure none of them stayed in touch.”

“I asked Matty Ainsworth if he went to school here and she said he went to the primary school here but to a high school in Winville. She said he had no friends there but she wasn’t sure why, that he was a bit odd even then, and that he was a very good-looking boy but the girls mostly steered clear of him. She said she thinks he went after Anne only after he heard her parents were leaving Buckton. But it doesn’t explain everything.”

“No. But it is almost like someone being able to sniff out vulnerability in young women. And when you read his web-site he seems to know how to push the right buttons to make young women feel sorry for him. That and his looks were probably a powerful combination.”

She was almost certainly right. “But it doesn’t tell us who hated him enough to kill him.”

“Maybe it wasn’t hate.”

“Then what d’you think it might have been?”

“Despair. Perhaps.”

“You mean—he might’ve done it himself?”

“Is that possible?”

He pondered on this. Mason Watling thought it was what seemed to be a blow to the head which was the cause of death but it was just possible that he had hit his head on something and staggered into the hallway and fallen. Mason had sent away various things to be tested. There might still be other clues.

“I guess it is. We’ll have to see when Watling’s finished with him. I heard Leslie Davis cut up rough when Watling said he would need to be there while the maggot man was collecting his evidence. I heard that Watling had a real go at him. But that might’ve got exaggerated along the way.”

“I can’t really blame him.”

“I can.”

She smiled at that. "Well, just be glad you didn't have to stand there and watch. Or would you have taken it in your stride?"

"Hard to say. But I've seen animals that have been dead for weeks. I s'pose it's a bit the same. I heard they had to put him in a sort of bath thing."

"Well, don't let's dwell on it. But I know people are saying that maybe someone did the world a good turn by getting rid of him. I find that pretty sad."

This was Fiona being her usual tender-hearted self. She had never seen Pickering's farm. And he wondered if she would still have sympathy if she could see the squalor he lured unsuspecting young woman into ...

"Still, I don't want that person, whoever it was, thinking they can get away with anything."

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Brett Sorenson sat out on their deck while he told his partner Tad Lombardi that he wouldn't be coming with him when he left Buckton. Tad had invited a Winville estate agent to come and look at the property and give them an assessment. The agent had said he would try to sell surgery and house as a package but that they could be split if necessary as they were on separate deeds. Tad had said, "We won't be popular round here if we leave Buckton without a doctor so do your best to sell as a package." Though they would be gone and Buckton would just have to accept that they could not expect a doctor for life, let alone two.

"I thought you hated the place," Tad said to this. He obviously didn't take the statement very seriously.

"I think it hates me at the moment. And I'm still waiting to hear if there's going to be any professional comeback." Tad had been dealing with a number of extra patients since the Maryann story had spread round the town. "But it isn't that. It's us."

"In what way?"

Sorenson couldn't bring himself to say that he had fallen in love years ago and now, slowly, he had fallen out of love. That was true enough but there was something deeper. A sense of unease that he no longer felt sure of himself, of his identity. He had never been part of a gay scene. It had always been Tad and no one else. Even now in the midst of this creeping dissatisfaction he couldn't imagine himself looking for another male partner. Or any kind of partner.

"I think," he said slowly, "I just need time alone. I don't know if I want to go on as a doctor. I don't know what I want from a relationship any more. Or what I've got to give. If you don't mind ... I think I just need time to myself."

"Oh come on," Tad didn't sound convinced. "Everyone makes mistakes. Just be glad it wasn't a little child or some popular local. But that isn't reason enough to cut and run."

Sorenson saw something a bit bitchy in the way Tad said this. But of course he was right. Everyone did make mistakes.

"I know, I know. It isn't precisely the mistake, it's the assumptions I made and I can't help thinking that maybe I haven't got the right attitude or personality or something to be a GP. I need to think that through ... not just go on because there seems no other choice. I don't know if I should look for a job in research ... or something similar ... that's partly why I need time to myself."

"So you're not coming with me?"

"No. I'm sorry. I think I'd just like to spend some time somewhere where no one knows me."

When he'd finished up in the kitchen he stood for several minutes looking out the window above the sink. A half moon had risen above the roofs of Buckton and he found himself finding an odd kind of company in that faint light. It asked nothing of him. It was just there.

And that was the thing about young Tracy Dillon. She asked nothing of him.

Whereas Tad had always asked and expected. And over the years he had grown tired of Tad's expectations, Tad's ego, Tad's quirks, Tad's demands.

'I think that's what I want most. To live for a little while free of anyone else's wants. Maybe that's being selfish but it's what I want and what I've never had. I traded my father's expectations and demands for Tad's expectations and demands. Now, just for a little while I'd like to get up every morning and feel that I am the only thing that matters.'

The real estate agent rang only two days later to say that he had a potential buyer but that they would prefer to turn the surgery into a second dwelling. To that Tad had said, "If they pay our price I guess they can do what they like."

But was it that simple?

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Leila Burkett had heard on the grapevine that some people regarded Mason Watling as a 'cold fish'. It wasn't a description which would have occurred to her. Reserved? Yes. Rather austere? Probably. But then she was probably called things behind her back here in Buckton that she would not regard as complimentary.

None of this pondering, though, told her whether she really wanted to make the effort to see Mason next time she was in Winville. She thought it might be nice to spend time with an intelligent professional person.

She would have to go to Winville next week to give evidence about the dog in the burnt-out car. She wasn't looking forward to it. Dennis Walsh had half-expected Joe Bosch to roll over and plead guilty. He would then face a fine and quite possibly also lose his licence if they added the traffic charges to the animal cruelty charge. But the old man had dug in his toes and insisted that he was innocent of any wrongdoing because he was losing his marbles and often forgot what he was doing or why. He even had a lawyer to say that for him.

Mason might be a nice corrective to talking about dead dogs and miserable deaths. But she couldn't say how long the case would go for. He said simply when she rang, "They'll break for lunch anyway, so what say we meet at The Steak House? It's usually quiet at lunch time."

Dennis Walsh was there to give evidence about the car and the dog and how the car was linked to Joe Bosch and appeared to be the car which had been removed from outside Buckton police station many years ago. No attempt had apparently been made to find the owner of the vehicle. Dennis was glad that Graham Kelso had not tried to confine the case to the dead dog. He wanted Joe Bosch to be seen as both lazy and willing to bend the law to his own advantage. This had apparently resonated with Kelso. But then Kelso had been a magistrate in Winville when Bosch had been in charge of Buckton. He had probably heard stories ... even if he hadn't ever seen Bosch in court to give evidence ...

The prosecutor, Mr Jones, said, "Are you saying that the car that was burnt was the same car that was rescued from Buckton Creek and which stood outside Buckton station for three months and then apparently disappeared?"

"I am." Dennis could bring a lot of weight to a simple statement. "A sign was put on the vehicle to say 'Who Owns This Car'. The car was then removed from Buckton to a property near Southbrook even though its number plates had been removed and no real attempt was made to find the owner of the car."

"How do you know no real attempt was made?"

"Because I have gone through every file in the station and there is nothing recorded about the car at all and certainly nothing about actions taken about it."

Both Kelso and Jones could well believe this. And they did not doubt that Dennis Walsh knew his station inside out.

"You are assuming that the unregistered car was driven away from Buckton?"

"It could have been towed but that was more likely to have been noticed."

"And how can you be sure that the burnt-out car you found was the same one?"

"Because the details of the car kept at the station were not recorded we cannot be one hundred per cent sure. I have however questioned people around Buckton as to the colour and make and condition of the car from outside the station and I have questioned Mr Bosch's brother-in-law Peter Donovan who has made a statement as to when Mr Bosch brought a car to his farm from Buckton."

Bosch's lawyer intervened to say that that still didn't prove they were the same cars.

Dennis said ponderously, "That is why I can't say one hundred per cent but I would say it's about ninety-eight per cent certain."

Kelso said, "I will keep that ninety-eight per cent in mind. Now the matter of the dog you found in the burnt-out car. What did you do with the dog?"

“I asked the local vet Mrs Burkett to come and collect it after I had photographed it.”

Leila Burkett was then called to say what she had done with the dog.

She gave a crisp and thorough account of removing the dog to her surgery where she did a careful examination of the dog, including looking at its teeth. According to what they had been able to find she thought the dog was young, no more than eight months, male, and probably belonging to a breed such as an Irish Setter.

Bosch’s lawyer said, “We? Who is we? I thought you said you checked the dog?”

“I had the help of my assistant, Justin Castley.”

“What else did you do, Mrs Burkett?” Kelso could see the same problem existed with the dog. How to tie Joe Bosch to it with one hundred per cent certainty.

“At the request of the police I sent away material for a DNA test. There was the possibility this could link the dog to a particular breeder.”

Kelso liked the sound of this. DNA results could stop a waffling argument in its tracks.

“And did it?”

“I brought the dog to Winville where its body was kept in cold storage. When I received the results I took them to Sergeant Walsh in Buckton. That was the end of my association with the case.”

Bosch’s lawyer, James Westrupp, looked relieved. Witnesses like Mrs Burkett undermined the vague claims made by his client. He was certain Joe Bosch had done what the Crown said he had done but he didn’t want to look as though he was abandoning his client; and more so, as he had only recently arrived in Winville.

But Jones wasn’t finished with her. “When you saw the dog in the car what did you think had happened?”

“The dog was in the rear seat and it appeared that when the car had been set alight he had scabbled at a rear window. I cannot say at what point he died. But when the window blew out he must already have been dead or he would have tried to escape then.”

“What was the cause of death?”

“As the body was badly burnt, the only pelt we found was behind the front legs, I cannot be one hundred per cent sure.” Mrs Burkett didn’t know she was echoing Sergeant Walsh. But Joe Bosch suddenly sniggered. “It appears to have been through a combination of smoke inhalation and burns. Cars contain materials which give off toxic smoke when burnt. That would not have helped matters.”

“How long do you think it would have taken the dog to die?”

Leila Burkett didn’t like being asked to speculate in court but she could see it was a reasonable question. “Probably fifteen to twenty minutes.”

Mrs Burkett was then excused. Both Kelso and Westrupp had dogs and both of them felt that Bosch’s claim that he couldn’t remember doing anything wasn’t good enough.

Kelso asked Bosch if he wanted to say anything on the animal cruelty charge. Bosch said, “I never did anything.”

“You might like to expand on that, Mr Bosch. You never did anything to what?”

“To any dog, of course.”

“You agree that it was your dog that died in your car?”

“Dunno.”

Kelso could see this case dragging on. “You don’t know that it was your dog or you don’t know that it was your car?”

“Dunno.”

“Then I am going to fine you one thousand dollars on this charge.” He turned to his clerk and she handed him the sheet for the next charge. This was for creating a public nuisance. And after that would come driving an unregistered vehicle and Bosch would probably say ‘Dunno’ in that way that suggested an old confused put-upon man. But when he got home that evening Kelso said to his wife after telling her what had happened, “I think I was also getting back at him for all the times he never lifted a finger to help anyone.”

He sounded deeply pessimistic. Had he handled the case fairly? He thought he had. ‘Dunno’ was not the same as saying ‘I didn’t do it’. “I’m sure though that you did treat him fairly. But it is

strange that no one picked up on anything back then.” She was a very comforting sort of person to come home to after a worrying day on the bench.

“I heard on the grapevine that they tracked down someone in Warwick who had a car stolen several weeks before that car went into Buckton Creek. That man said why had it taken them so long to contact him. A bit hard for the police to say, well, we never looked.”

She smiled at that. “And now the poor man gets nothing but the knowledge that his car was destroyed by an ex-police officer?”

Leila Burkett had had a much more pleasant day. After leaving court she had bought herself a new pair of rubber boots and several small items for the surgery. Then she made her way round to The Steak House and took a table for two at the back where a window opened on to a small patio with several miniature cumquat trees in pots. She got herself a drink while she waited, hoping he had not been held up at the hospital.

He apologised when he turned up ten minutes later but she said, “You don’t need to. We both work in areas where the unexpected can happen.”

“True. But I don’t quite have that excuse. I’ll tell you about it when we’ve ordered.”

When they had lunch in front of them and she had ordered another gin and tonic, he said, “The side of medicine they never really tell you about is all the argy-bargy that goes on inside hospitals. My cross to be borne is Dr Leslie Davis.”

“Yes, I’ve heard of him.”

“Complimentary or not?”

“People say Dennis Walsh chased him out of Buckton. I don’t know if I quite believe that. Things about Dennis tend to get exaggerated.”

“Well, if he managed to get rid of Leslie Davis I wish he’d tell me how to do it. Because I would very much like to see the back of Dr Davis.”

“Because he isn’t a good doctor?”

“He isn’t. In fact he is an appallingly bad one. Just because people live in the country doesn’t seem a good enough reason for them to have to put up with the second-rate. Still, this morning was nothing to do with his skills or lack of them. Just as I was getting ready to go out one of the sisters came to me. She had been talking with Maryann Dillon. You may know of her?”

“Buckton has been talking of little else.”

“I see. Anyway, Sister Williams said Maryann had told her that Leslie Davis talked her into asking for money and told her what to say in her letters. Apparently she has asked Dr Sorenson for twenty thousand dollars and the Buckton Shire Council for another twenty. There is nothing illegal in that. They can say yes or no. But Sister Williams thinks that Davis was planning to get a commission if she got any money. This is a woman recovering from a serious operation with a long way to go yet. Sister Williams didn’t think Ms Dillon was money-minded, so long as she had people providing her with food and drink and a comfortable bed she was happy enough. So if the idea about suing came from Davis in the first place ... well, you can see that there is an ethical dilemma in there.”

He could not have come up with a better subject than the ethical dilemmas they came up against in their work. For Leila to have someone who understood the issues she sometimes faced and of which she had no one she could really talk things over with was a huge relief. If things were serious enough she could go to the police but most issues involved the juggling of what was right, what was best ... She felt she could spend hours talking over these things with Mason. As they finished up with coffee she said, “I suppose you’ve heard that our doctors are selling up and moving? You don’t happen to know anyone who would love to come and work in Buckton, do you?”

“I feel sorry for young Sorenson. He jumped to conclusions which were wrong. But it’s easy enough to do. The trouble starts when you cling to those conclusions even when it’s time to step back and admit you were wrong. But I think he’s got deeper problems than one wrong diagnosis.”

Leila didn’t know Buckton’s doctors well though Mason had probably got to know them in a professional sphere. “In what way?”



“I don’t think he’s gay at all. I think, for what it’s worth, that two young men both going in the same direction decided to team up. And it was fun to tackle a small conservative community desperately in need of doctors, in effect, to say, you have to accept us as a couple if you want some medical care. Some people would accept them saying their private lives were their own business but for others it pushed them into making a choice. They could drive all the way to Winville or to Oakey—or they could accept a gay doctor.”

“But what about the other one, Dr Lombardi?” Mrs Burkett had never seen them in this light though she knew little about their relationship as she rarely saw them in a social setting and they had no pets.

“Oh, I’d say he is, gay, I mean, and I think he is the dominant one in that partnership. Brett Sorenson, from what I’ve seen of him, is a very gentle thoughtful man who was drawn into something he now doesn’t know how to get out of without undermining what he believes is his true identity, his true self.”

“So if he feels he can’t stay in Buckton because everyone knows he made a mistake and it isn’t best for him to get off to somewhere new with Tad ... then what should he do?”

“I think he should come here. He needs someone tough, like me, to oversee his work for several months to make sure he isn’t being careless in other ways. Then he can decide what he wants to do and get on with his life. The way things are going at the moment he’s probably convinced himself he is a useless doctor and that he should give up being a GP and go and do something else.”

“And you can’t employ him here unless you can get rid of Leslie Davis?”

“Something like that. But also we’ve got a junior who doesn’t have his heart in it and may move on soon. So if you come up with a nice Machiavellian solution do let me know.”

She thought as she drove home that Mason’s face changed when he smiled. At other times he was a bit daunting with that rather immobile face, as still sometimes as a face on a coin. And she thought she had rarely enjoyed a lunch more.

## Case No. 3: The Man from Cell 31

Dennis was thankful to have the Bosch case over and done with, and with no publicity other than a paragraph in the *Winville Courier*. It had the potential to make the police look very bad. And the possibility that Joe Bosch had done buggery about a serious assault on a child did nothing to make him sympathetic to an old man with incipient dementia. For Bosch to have to fork over several thousand dollars and lose his licence seemed a minor punishment.

But there was a different question in there. He rang Greg Sullivan one evening and asked him if any of the complaints from Buckton people and which had been ignored actually spelled out the reason for the complaint. Greg said he didn’t know. He had just got Jenny to look at the list of complainants. “Why d’you want to know?”

“Did one of the complaints from the Parsons mention child abuse?”

“Haven’t a clue. I can get Jenny back on to it. But what child are we talking about?”

“Faye Parsons says they complained to Joe Bosch when they saw Paul Pickering bashing his son’s head against a car window. Bosch did nothing about it. I thought that might be why they complained to Winville.”

“I’ll get her to check. But are you suggesting that he was violent to his children?”

“It’s a strong possibility.” Paul Pickering didn’t like letting people go. But what about a wife and family when he found he couldn’t cope with their noise, their demands, their expenses, and yet couldn’t let go? Was that why his wife had done that dreadful thing? Because he had placed her in an untenable situation and she broke?

“Mmmm, but all this will do is make people even less willing to come forward. They think whoever got him did the world a good turn.”

“I know. But you’ve got your Slovenian girl.”

“Uh huh. I was going to send Petra to Toowoomba but her friend said she’d bring her here on Saturday. Her friend thought it might be good for her to go back and see the farm, not have it sort of hanging there as the bogey.”

“Maybe. Then tell them to call in here to see me.”

“You’re not off to the races on Saturday arve?”

“No. Worse luck. Grant’s got a few days off to go somewhere.”

It wasn’t an issue in Winville where there was a duty roster but Greg always thought that Dennis was very generous to his juniors. They always seemed to be able to get time off any time they wanted it.

“Bad luck. And I’ll tell you something else. We’ve been asked to keep the Ruby Jackson case under wraps until Doug’s trial is over. Not that it matters. We don’t know where that Ferguson bod is and no one is telling us anything.”

“No, I think they’re hoping to pull the whole family in but for all we know he’s now in South Africa or somewhere.”

“It’s like no one cares about the poor old girl. She’s dead and that’s it.”

“Did you find any relatives?”

“We didn’t look.”

“Then maybe you should?”

“It wouldn’t make them look good if we did find anyone. People would say why didn’t they ever notice she was missing?”

Fiona had had a long e-mail from the Woods family to tell her that their grandson was on the way up to stay with them. Mrs Woods went in to some detail. They had persuaded the prison, with some help from their local MP, for their grandson to go straight from the prison to the airport, all this to be kept under wraps, and for him to fly to Toowoomba. They would come and pick him up there and then fly to Roma. ‘Our other concern, apart from getting him here safely, is that this might be the first place they would look, if he really is linked into something. So we hope to find someone else who will employ him briefly. Anyway, wish us well and thank you to you and Dennis for all your help.’

Dennis considered this and said, “There’s a job going at the Co-op.”

“Would they take him, do you think. He’s got a record.”

“I’d like to meet him before I recommend him to anyone but I don’t know that they’d want to stop off here. But if they’ve got more than one farm maybe they can send him to the most remote one.”

“I suppose they’ll want to spend time together before he needs to start work.”

“And I don’t envy them that. Maybe he really needs to go back to school and get something to offset all those charges. A technical skill maybe.” She had noticed that Dennis much preferred to see kids go to TAFES than to universities. It might be an unacknowledged sense of inferiority when faced with high-powered graduates but she thought it was more that he was a practical man and he wanted to see young people learning practical skills.

“We’ve done what we could. I guess it’s up to him and them ... and maybe being right away from that milieu he’ll be a different young man.”

“Maybe.” He didn’t sound hopeful. And he assumed milieu meant something to do with bad company.

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Majda Podgorsek said she was twenty-three and handed DS Moore her passport to prove it. She explained how she had come to hear about the chance to work here. Petra stopped her there and asked for the name of the web-site which provided employment opportunities for young travelers. Ms Podgorsek said she had looked for someone in Queensland because her second cousin had married an Australian and lived in Toowoomba.

“Did you do anything to check the background of the man who was offering you some work?”

“No. He looked nice. And his farm.” Then she seemed to be overtaken by emotion.

Her cousin, Mrs Eastman, said, “She could not believe when he arrived at the farm with her—it was nothing like the picture on the web-site.”

“No. He put up a picture of someone else’s farm. They were very upset when they found out.” Petra had heard that it was the Parsons’ farm and she wondered what would have happened if the Parsons had found that out *before* Paul Pickering had died. Or had they known all along—

She turned back to Majda and said, “What happened when you got there?”

This was another sticking-point for the young woman. She started to cry. In between snuffles and wiping her eyes she managed to tell them it was dirty and smelly. She had seen a lock on his phone but she had her own phone. She had put it down on the filthy dressing table while she put her bag down. He had been standing nearby and said he wanted to show her the farm. That was all so awful that she had come back to the house to get her phone and ring her friend to ask her to come and take her away. But the phone was gone. When she asked him about it he had said she must’ve dropped it herself. She was certain she hadn’t. She was in a big panic by then. And as soon as he had gone out to the kitchen she had grabbed her bag and run out of the house and up the road to the gate, afraid he would come after her. Then she had walked down to the road through and managed to flag down a car. To her relief it was an elderly couple going through to Toowoomba to see their new grandson and they had kindly dropped her at Mrs Eastman’s house.

Mrs Eastman confirmed this and said she had been in such a state when she got there—

“Did you put in a complaint to the people at that web-site?”

No. They hadn’t done anything, just been thankful that she was away from that farm. Her cousin had bought her a cheap phone. They didn’t know, or said they didn’t, that Paul Pickering was dead. They had been considering what Majda should do next. She had begun looking round Toowoomba for some sort of work.

“You’re quite sure you didn’t know Paul Pickering was dead?” Petra Moore was very good at sounding sceptical.

“If they said anything—then we did not hear it.” Both Mrs Eastman and Ms Podgorsek spoke with an accent but their English was good. For that Petra was glad.

“When you met Paul Pickering how did he seem?”

Ms Podgorsek seemed to find this a hard question to answer. “You mean—his health?”

“Everything.”

“I had not met him. Only e-mail. He looked okay. Maybe he was crazy. But he looked ... okay.”

“No sign of him being unwell or upset about anything?”

“He looked okay.”

Petra nodded. That probably was part of the problem: that Pickering looked like a fit good-looking youngish man and not like the psychopath Dennis Walsh saw him as.

“Now, what I’d like you to do is to show us on this computer what the web-site was and what you did when you logged on.”

The site which Majda Podgorsek had accessed had the innocuous title ‘Work for Young Travellers’. They could look for the area they wished to visit then look for the names of people in that area offering work and accommodation. There were fifteen names on it for southern Queensland, including Paul Pickering’s, which nobody had taken down. Majda clicked on his name and up came his picture along with the fake picture of his farm and a description of the kind of work he had available. He also gave a brief description of local facilities including the swimming pool and library in Buckton; facilities he clearly didn’t want his young women to access.

And this also gave his private web-site for interested young women to go to. This was no longer reachable as they had taken his computer and removed everything on it including his home page which was designed to bring tears to the eyes of any tender-hearted young woman.

“There is one thing,” Petra said briskly, “he doesn’t say he only wants women to apply. How did you know that?”

For a moment Majda looked non-plussed, then she said, “Oh, but I did not know that. Only that he is handsome.”

“Did you think he might be looking for a second wife?” This was possibly a bit blunt. Majda looked embarrassed. At last she said, “I think I felt a bit sorry for him.”

“And things are not all that good in Slovenia,” Mrs Eastman said mildly. “To look for something better is natural.”

Petra nodded. "So you didn't inform whoever runs this web-site that they shouldn't send anyone to work for Paul Pickering?"

"No. We—I jus' want to forget."

"So no wonder so many girls have gone there and then tried to run away again if no one ever informed them." But this assumed the site itself was on the up-and-up. It might be designed to get lonely young women into situations they would find it hard to extricate themselves from. She made a mental note to do some checking of those other men on the list of people to work for.

"You mean, other girls have gone there?" Melka Eastman said in surprise.

"They have."

"So why did nobody stop him?"

"Except for putting a photo of someone else's farm, and we did not find that out till after he died, he was not breaking the law."

"Then I think the whole thing is disgraceful," Mrs Eastman said firmly.

"Paul Pickering was murdered," DS Moore said. "Did either of you come back to have it out with him?"

For a moment both women stared at her. Then they both responded, Mrs Eastman with anger, her cousin more in confusion. Of course they had not done any such thing!

"Well, somebody did," Moore said coolly, "and you have quite a good reason to want to hurt him. He had tricked you, lied to you, stolen your phone, taken you somewhere where you couldn't easily leave."

"But I never did! Never! Never!"

"Of course Majda would never do such a thing!"

"Well, thank you both for coming. Now I would like you to do a brief statement, then Sergeant Walsh in Buckton would like to see you. So I'll ring him to tell him you're coming while Majda does her statement. And I would ask you both not to leave Toowoomba until we can get the whole business sorted out."

They didn't look happy about the way things had turned out. Mrs Eastman obviously felt that Majda should have been treated with the sympathy a victim deserved. Petra Moore thought she probably was just a victim but she was a strapping young woman and they both gave the impression of being fairly volatile people. The two of them just might have gone back to confront Paul Pickering.

Sergeant Walsh did have a lot of sympathy for anyone who found themselves on Paul Pickering's farm. But he too accepted that young women were not necessarily little angels. Young women rarely tackled fit strong men but the two women together just might have ...

Both women sat down in the interview room with Dennis after he'd made them cups of coffee. He said, "I won't go over everything with you as Petra Moore has done that." Petra Moore had been known to cut corners but he thought she was usually pretty thorough. She and Greg had not become bosom buddies but they seemed to manage to get things done. "But I am curious to know what he talked to you about?"

"You mean in the car?"

"Yep."

"About his machinery, all the time, what he had and what he wanted to buy. He said he was getting more land to plough."

"Getting more land? You think he meant he was buying more land?"

"I do not know. He said getting."

"Well, he was obsessed with farm machinery." But the 'more land' was harder to interpret. "Did you know what he was talking about?"

"Not really. I do not know much about machines."

"Do you drive?"

"No."

"Did you tell him that?"

"When we e-mailed I told him. He said he would teach me."

So far as he knew Pickering had never taught anyone to drive. "Mmmm, so that attracted you?"

“I thought, yes, I would learn new things.”

It all built up to an attractive picture. Sad that the whole picture was false.

“So you thought you’d like to go back and see the place?”

“Not really. But Melka says I should.”

“Okay, well, I’ll run you out.” It was only a slim chance but having her there just might bring something else to the surface.

When both women were in the police car he put the sign on the door and joined them. “I’ll take you to see the place he pretended was his.”

And both women when they saw the Parsons’ house from the road said it looked just as nice as the picture. He told them about the two old ladies who lived there as they drove on out to the Pickering farm. He let Majda get out to open the gate for them. He had considered putting a padlock on it while the legal ownership of the place was sorted out. But it wasn’t the sort of place to attract either vandals or thieves. And the knowledge that a body had lain dead in the house for nearly two weeks acted as a further deterrent.

He parked by the front gate and got out. Both women got out and also stood there. “It just looks a sad place now,” Mrs Eastman said as though she thought Majda would find comfort in that.

“It is. Did he tell you about his wife?”

“Just that she and his three sons died in a terrible accident.”

“It was a murder suicide. She shot the three boys and then herself. I know he was abusing the kids. Just be glad that you got away so quickly.”

“But why did you not arrest him?”

“They said he wasn’t responsible for his wife going off her head like that. All I managed to get him on were animal cruelty charges. I’m sorry you got caught up in it all.”

Where she had been defensive with Petra Moore she seemed to relax a little with him. It wasn’t that he was a more sympathetic person than DS Moore but rather that she felt safe standing there with him. “Another thing he said in the car,” she said suddenly, “he said he had a lot of debts. But when it rained everything would get better. He said I must not mind that everything was dry.”

“So he was wanting sympathy or just preparing you for this mess?”

“I do not know. I think he wanted me to be sorry for him.”

He nodded. It made a sort of sense.

“Do you know—how he died?”

“They think he was hit on the head.”

“Did he have enemies?”

“That’s what we’re looking at.”

“I was an enemy,” she said quickly, “but I did not hurt him.”

“No, you weren’t,” Mrs Eastman said. She didn’t want the police to keep Majda on any list of suspects. “You were a victim.”

“People can be both,” Dennis said drily. “But unless you came back he died about a week after you left his farm. So is there any thing else you want to see?”

“Why did he have so much machinery, do you think?”

“Because he liked machinery. Machinery just does what he wants. People and animals don’t always.”

To his surprise she said, “Yes, I think I understand that. And they all looked so bright and shiny.”

After he had delivered them back to Buckton he felt she had said something of significance. Because farm machinery didn’t stay bright and shiny. It got dusty or mud-caked, it got scratched, it got worn. It was almost as though Pickering went out and bought something new as soon as his existing equipment started showing signs of wear and tear. He needed regular loans to keep bringing in new equipment. So what about the older machinery? Was it all still here or did he sell it, dump it, trade it in?

Charles Mather didn’t like being rung at home. But Dennis didn’t feel like waiting and anyway he would be in Winville on Monday morning. Mather said tetchily, “It will have to wait for a working day.”

“Have you checked the list he gave you with what is actually on the farm?”

“No, I haven’t. And until they decide who inherits it isn’t my business.”

“So you’ve had him declared as intestate?”

“It is in the process ... but I don’t see that that is police business.”

“No. But I think there may be a problem with that list of machinery.” This might be going out on a limb. But even between the time he made that incomplete will and the present that list of machinery might have changed.

“Does it matter?”

“Wish I knew. But I need that list and I would prefer that you be there while I do the checking.” Dennis found a faintly malicious enjoyment in saying this. So far as he knew Mather had never been to the farm. So it would be interesting to see his response.

Mather said that he had no intention of going to Paul Pickering’s farm today or any other day.

“Well, if you’ll come in to the office and do me a copy I’ll be round in ten minutes. And if any questions are ever asked I’ll say you refused to accompany me.”

When Walsh got round to the lawyer’s office upstairs from the Main Street entrance Mather was there with the copy. He said reluctantly, “I suppose I had better come. I don’t trust you to do a straightforward stocktake.”

“Fair enough. Hop in and I’ll run you out.”

Mather sat in grim silence all the way. He made no attempt to get out and open the road gate. Dennis got out, opened it, came back, drove through and then as there were no animals on the farm he left it open and drove down the slope.

He parked the car over in the lane that ran down past one of the machinery sheds. “So that’s where he wants to be buried,” Dennis pointed to the tank at the rear of the building. “He’s already dug himself a coffin-sized hole.”

If Mather found this puzzling he didn’t say so. Did Pickering have an intimation of death approaching? “If you would tell me what you see I will cross them off.” He said this coldly although the sun beaming down on the shed was bringing a sheen of sweat to his face and neck. He had come in a suit and now he wished he had left his coat in the car.

They spent half-an-hour going over the ploughs and headers and a few other items of machinery listed including an auger and a posthole digger.

“Almost everything here is new,” Dennis said when they had gone through the list.

“He was always buying farm machinery.” It seemed self-evident to the lawyer.

“So where is the older machinery?”

“How would I know?”

“He was in debt to three or four banks, solely for buying farm machinery. So if he was selling or trading in nearly new machinery why was he in debt up to his ears?”

“You don’t get much for second-hand machinery.”

“No. But we need to know where he sold it and how much he got for it. Something doesn’t add up.”

Charles Mather did much of his business with farmers or people who depended on farmers for their living and he could see that there was a problem here. Why did banks keep lending to a man who already had all the machinery he needed?

He said carefully, “Where did he buy from?”

“We need to know. And if he ever traded in. And if he could lie his head off to get young women to come here maybe he was lying to everyone else?”

“His debts are not my business.”

It wasn’t clear whose business all those debts were and Dennis did not have a lot of sympathy for banks which lent sight unseen to a farmer. A ten minute visit to the farm should have set alarm bells ringing.

“I’d suggest you try the place in Winville. He probably shopped there.”

Charles Mather didn’t thank him for this suggestion.

As they walked back to the car Dennis said, “Did he pay your bills?”

“He did. After a couple of reminders.”

“And your reminders were polite? But maybe someone else gave him a different kind of reminder?”

“Are you suggesting that a reputable machinery company came round and—” Mather couldn’t bring himself to say ‘coshed him’, ‘bashed him’, ‘gave him what-for’.

Dennis admitted it didn’t seem likely. “But we do need some questions answered.”

“Your questions. Not mine.”

When he’d dropped Mather off at his front gate he went back to the station and spent a while doodling. He drew a rough time line and shaded in the time when Pickering was very definitely dead and a few strokes to show the time he may have been dead. Then he put in Majda Podgorsek’s date of running away, the date Burt Wagner claimed to have come to give him a quote and the days he was definitely in hospital, then the date Walter Pidcock claimed to have gone to see him. If they were all telling the truth, and he wasn’t sure about that though none of them gained by killing Pickering, or not obviously, then there was someone else who came round seven or eight days after Majda Podgorsek had left in a hurry.

He was reluctant to knock any of them off his list, not least because he had no one else he felt should be on it. He spent a lot of time mulling over it for the next couple of days. And the only thing he could come up with was Wagner’s claim that Pickering wanted his roof re-done. Would Pickering have spent money on his house? He felt dubious about that. The old tin roof was rusting. But there was no sign that Pickering cared tuppence about the state of his house.

Mr Wagner might be pure as driven snow but Dennis couldn’t remove the faint suspicion. Something there just wasn’t quite right.

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Sergeant Walsh was in Winville on Monday morning. There had been several smash-and-grab raids on local shops in the last week and he went over their evidence-collecting and interviews with the constables who had worked on them under Sergeant Merrill. One of the stores which had been hit was the Gifts Galore place. There had been considerable discussion when the young owners had walked out and disappeared. The shop was leased but the lease still had a year to run so it couldn’t simply revert until it was clear the young couple weren’t coming back. It was DI Carl Payne in Brisbane who said “They’ve gone into Witness Protection so they won’t be coming back for their stock. So get the shop rented, get their stock sold and put half the profits in an escrow account.” The young couple had preferred to make their own arrangements rather than trust police to keep them safe but Payne regarded it as a form of Witness Protection. And there was a further issue. The business was supposed to be a franchise agreement. Payne believed this was a red herring, that there was nothing which could qualify as a franchise but that it was some form of family arrangement. “If it is a franchise,” he said to Jake Moss, “then they will have to come out of the woodwork. If it isn’t they’ll write it off as a loss.” Nothing had ever been heard from any relatives and a couple in their thirties, Mike and Linda Courtney, had taken it on.

Dennis looked very closely at the pattern of break-ins and the things stolen. It might purely be local thieves but he wondered if the Fergusons-cum-Plowmans had decided that no one should be able to make money out of what had been their business without finding there were consequences.

Dennis went over the amount of damage done to each premises, the value of what was stolen, whether anything was left or any damage done that couldn’t be linked directly to the burglary. He said, “See if there’s a pattern there. Look at the security in each place. See how long the burglars were inside before an alarm went off.” Sergeant Merrill saw this as a lot of work for no result. “Their insurance will pay,” he said several times.

“That’s your excuse for doing nothing, is it?” Dennis had said contemptuously. “You are paid to do a job, not sit round drinking coffee.”

It was one of the young constables who said, “The thefts seem to be getting bigger, slightly, and more valuable. It hit the Courtneys the hardest.”

“And yet their stuff would be harder to sell than the CDs and tapes taken. You would need specialised knowledge to make money from uncut or unpolished stones.”

If the robbery was a form of payback, and the others merely window-dressing, then there was little chance, on their current record, of catching the culprits. But equally the burglaries might stop. Still, that was no reason not to treat them all with equal seriousness.

Jake Moss accepted that there weren't always outcomes. But he didn't want his juniors to be infected with Merrill's laziness and pessimism. He would prefer that they be infected with Dennis Walsh's energy and determination.

Dennis went round to see Greg Sullivan just before he headed home to see if there were any developments in the Pickering case. Greg said gloomily that they had been all through the papers they had taken from the house and logged everything. "He wasn't keen on paying his bills—or maybe he couldn't—there's a lot of reminder notices, stern letters from banks, it's hard to see what he lived on." And that letter delivered in to his mailbox had apparently been a circular about interest rates. But this didn't explain who had taken the letter out of the box seeing that Pickering was beyond caring about interest rates.

"And anything from that Wagner bloke? A quote for his roof?"

"No. Not that we've found. S'pose it could've been an oral quote." As he considered it he was struck by the oddness of this. To do business with Paul Pickering all on word-of-mouth didn't seem like a realistic way to get your money back. Or had Pickering gone for a man who didn't know him personally or by reputation?

"Did you get Pickering's phone records?"

"No. Didn't seem much point. He contacted his girls by e-mail."

"So did he contact Wagner by e-mail?"

"We haven't found anything."

"Well, how did he get on to the bugger? And when?"

Put like that, Greg could see the question was relevant. It wasn't likely Burt Wagner just happened to call in and offer to do Pickering's roof.

"And what else did you find out about Wagner?"

"Nothing much. He's been in Garra about three years. Before that he was over at Cecil Plains. People say he does a decent job and isn't expensive."

"Yeah, but what about him as a person? Has he got a wife? Kids? What was his connection to Garra? It's not the obvious place to set up in business. Has he got mates there? Went to school there? Anything?"

"Just an ordinary country bloke by the sound of him."

"Don't be so bloody trusting, mate. And what did Payne find out from the Millers?"

"Don't know. He's taken them to Brisbane—"

"Has he now. Scared Doug would get to them, I'd say."

"Doug's in a wheelchair, mate."

"Doug's got the Plowman family behind him, don't forget."

"Well, even if he has I don't want to even think about them. Anyway, you can ask Payne anything you want. He seems to like you." The way Greg said it suggested Carl Payne was about the only person who would do such an odd thing. Brent Kelly hid a grin.

But after Dennis had gone on the long drive back to Buckton Greg turned to him and said, "Brent, get on and get Pickering's phone records. Let's see if he did actually ring anybody up."

And when they got the records for the last six months of Paul Pickering's calls Greg said, "That's odd. No sign of him ringing Wagner. So how did they get in touch? Carrier pigeon?"

"So should we check all these other calls?" Brent Kelly asked. Though 'all' was a misnomer. Pickering was hardly a phone addict. Some months he made as few as three calls. "He might've rung from someone else's phone."

"Might as well. See if he was getting on to his banks or his women."

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Sergeant Walsh had implied his junior was off for a few days of fun but Grant Schroeder had actually gone to Brisbane with Stacey Lynch. Her brother had been committed for trial on charges of kidnapping his sister's baby from the couple in Townsville who had adopted the little boy. They had decided not to proceed with the charge of statutory rape against Simon Lynch as the father of his sister's baby, nor incest charges. But if Simon wanted to claim he was merely taking



back his own baby as he hadn't given permission for it to be adopted out—then he would open himself to further charges. Stacey had not been party to the agonised discussions which had gone on in the Lynch household between Simon, his parents, and their lawyer. Stacey had been called to bear witness to having the baby and choosing to have it adopted.

Grant had asked her whether she just wanted him there in civvies as a friend or if she wanted it to look a bit more official. She had chosen the second option. She felt it would boost her courage.

She had kept it all very quiet. Nicky Wilcox in Dinawadding knew her story as did Jon Derry at Buckton High. But Jon Derry had simply told her class teachers she needed to be away on 'family business' for a few days and could they bring her up to date on what she would be missing. He was impressed with the young woman. She had eaten up the work like someone hungry to succeed and to give herself real options for the future. She was still unsure what she would like to do in that future but she was leaning towards being a physical education teacher of some kind. But much as she loved sport she could see that the best teachers also had a deep knowledge of human bodies, of bones and muscles and the way things worked ....

If the immediate future had not been so worrying, just the thought of facing her parents and her brother, she would have loved the drive down with Grant. He had several times said to her, "Don't worry too much. Dennis thinks your brother will agree to plead guilty to avoid some things about his life coming out."

So far Simon had given every indication of preparing to fight the charges. Maybe Dennis Walsh was right but then he didn't know Simon.

Grant had decided to go to stay those few days with his parents. He had first thought of just staying in a motel and if they asked why he hadn't come to them he could give some waffle about the court case. But Dennis had said, "You've got your own life. Go and show them you're doing well in that life." Maybe. But Dennis was better at standing up to people. He was still afraid that, as soon as he walked in the front door, the old unconfident Grant would take over again. But between Dennis and Stacey believing in him he hoped he could manage. Stacey had decided to go and stay with a cousin rather than go home. She felt her parents still blamed her for this very public washing of family linen. And she knew her father didn't like paying for her to stay in Dinawadding and go to Buckton High.

For Stacey it was even more traumatic when she walked in to the foyer. There was her own family. And there was the couple from Townsville who had adopted her baby. She wondered if they regretted the adoption seeing that it had drawn them in to all this worry and bother and expense. The only good thing about it all was that she would spend most of the time sitting in the witness room, not in court having Simon look at her. But she felt she should say something to Mr and Mrs Jowett. Grant came over with her while she said, "I am so sorry you've got drawn into all this."

Mrs Jowett hesitated and then said, "It wasn't your fault, love, so don't you go worrying about it. But we would like to see your brother have to face up to all the dreadful things he's done."

Grant thought this was very forgiving of them. He gave her hand a squeeze and said, "I'll let you know just what happens."

He went on into the court with both families caught up in this drama, a scattering of strangers, and several people from the media. But that was where the drama ended.

Simon Lynch had at the last minute changed his plea from Not Guilty to Guilty.

A number of people in the court heaved sighs of relief though for varying reasons. Grant was just glad that he and Stacey would not now be cooped up in court for an unknown number of days. Being in court reminded him rather painfully of his own stumbling attempts to present cases to the magistrates in Winville. That they were fairly sympathetic didn't make it a lot easier. It was time and experience which had helped most.

The judge said he would pronounce sentence the following morning at 10 a.m. People filed out of the court. Stacey came to join Grant. Someone from the media came up and said, "Can I get a few words from you as the baby's mother?"

Stacey looked at him with suddenly panic-stricken eyes and turned away abruptly. The man turned to Grant and said, "Are there more charges pending, sir?"

Grant wasn't used to being called 'sir' and he looked flustered. But his years before Mr Kelso and Mrs Vohland stood him in good stead. "That will be up to the DPP."

"Do you know what those charges will be?"

"No."

"And your name, sir?"

This faced him with another dilemma. If he linked himself to Buckton would that give the media an indication of where Stacey was?

"You need to talk with the court officials, not me." He turned and hurried out before he could be faced with another awkward question. He just hoped they had not caught him on camera. Stacey had gone out already and he looked around for her. The adoptive parents came out. Then Mr and Mrs Lynch. He wondered if Stacey was hiding from the media *and* her parents.

Allan Lynch came over to him and said curtly, "What have you done with Stacey?"

Grant found this almost as nerve-racking as facing the media. "I haven't done anything with Stacey."

"Yes, you have. She's not our daughter any more."

Grant was very much aware of the failings of Stacey's parents. His boss hadn't minced words when he'd talked about it. "No. She isn't."

To Grant's horror he realised the same newsman had come up and was listening to what was being said.

Mr Lynch said curtly, "And what d'you mean by that, young man?"

"If you want to discuss it with the media—now's your chance." As Mr Lynch turned round to see who was behind him Grant hurriedly walked away. He heard the same man saying, "Now would you like to tell our readers what you thought of this morning's proceedings?" And he heard Allan Lynch saying, "No, I bloody well wouldn't!"

Just then he saw Stacey waving from over the road and he crossed to join her. But now there was a different question confronting them. They had expected to be in court for several days. Those free days now beckoned. What should they do with themselves?

They found a café and went in and Stacey said, "Dad's going to be furious with me. I wonder if he'll stop my allowance?"

"If he does you could get a Living Away from Home Allowance."

"Maybe I should have done that right from the beginning ... "

"I don't see why he shouldn't pay. It's your life that's been messed up, not his."

This seemed to be the right thing to say because she looked more cheerful. "So what are we going to do—or should we go back to Buckton?"

"No. Dennis has given me this break and he's got someone from Winville to fill in so I think I'd like to go somewhere and go swimming. How about you?"

They finally decided to ring Grant's parents to see about dinner that night and then they would go to the Gold Coast and go swimming and do some bushwalking and maybe to Dream World. Grant, well aware of all that Stacey had gone through and telling himself each time he thought what an attractive girl she was that she was still a teenager at school, felt they could manage to just keep it all on a nice friendly basis.

When they got back to Buckton they were tanned and tired and happy. Grant felt he had coped with his parents and his brothers the best he had ever done and even if Buckton looked very small and dusty after the Gold Coast he didn't really mind. But Dennis had seen him on television and had a copy of the *Courier-Mail* with him quoted as saying 'more charges were pending' and the author of that article had done his homework and named him as 'Constable Grant Schroeder of Buckton Police'.

"I don't s'pose you said more charges were pending," Dennis said drily.

Grant felt a bit gob-smacked to see himself quoted in the paper. "No, I only said they should check with the court to see if more charges might be pending."

"And why did you say that?"

"I just wanted them to leave me alone. But they never mentioned that girlfriend of Simon's that hid the baby. I wondered if she might get charged as an accessory now that he's pleaded guilty."

“Possible.”

Privately, Dennis thought Grant had handled it as well as could be expected. Politicians might become immune to microphones thrust in their faces but it was always hard for ordinary people to handle. And thinking on his feet was not Grant’s most obvious talent.

\*

Fiona had tackled Dennis on where and when he planned to take his holidays. He had returned a non-committal “June” and said he had nowhere in mind. And then he had said, “I’d really like to get this Pickering business out of the way first.”

To that she had said, “Don’t you think your kids should come before Paul Pickering?”

“Of course. But I can relax better when I’m not trying to think what else Greg hasn’t got round to doing.”

“If that’s your criteria—then the process might be never-ending.”

“Oh come on, sweetheart, he’s not that bad. And seriously, maybe a few days at the beach.”

“No. I want you to take a proper break. We can go anywhere you like. Sydney. Alice Springs. And not spending most of the time driving.”

“S’pose we should go and see the oldies. Dad’s finally moved into Townsville and left Terry to run the place.”

She could see this. Both his parents were in their late eighties. They might not be around for much longer. But much as she liked them she didn’t really want to spend their whole time in Townsville. “Then we’ll make a flying visit and the rest of our holiday will be your surprise.”

“Should I be worried?” he said with a grin.

“Probably—if Elise has anything to do with it.”

“But what I’d really like would be to park the kids somewhere and just have you to myself for a week.”

“Yes, we don’t get very much time for togetherness. But you can’t disappoint them.”

And when she was alone with the children earnest discussions went on and maps were pored over and passports considered ...

Dennis, though, was right when he kept coming back to the thought that they were missing something when it came to Paul Pickering and Greg telling him that Burt Wagner was not on the list of calls Pickering had made during the last six months of his life.

“Did Pickering go over to Garra at all?” Wagner had said he wasn’t on the internet.

Greg said, “You talked to his neighbours. Did they see him going out much?”

“No. They all said he kept pretty much to himself. A couple of them knew nothing about him getting girls to come there.”

Dennis had tried to link the cars neighbours had mentioned seeing to specific people but unless someone said, “I saw that DPI bloke go through, I recognised his Nissan,” they weren’t much the wiser. And a number of people round the district had white utes, white pick-ups, black utes, even green and blue utes.

He had got Grant on to their book of the district’s vehicles. It had not been brought up-to-date but it would be a starting point. “Check everyone listed who has a vehicle that might match.” It might then be possible to whittle things down. Of course they could be strangers passing through ... “And go and talk with Freda Donnelly. She sometimes rides up that way.”

Grant felt that Mrs Donnelly wasn’t very keen on them since they had accused her boyfriend of shooting Lyn Harding’s mare. But he said he would.

“And there’s another thing,” Dennis said half to himself. “If Pickering got rid of his old equipment someone must’ve seen it on the road.” Agricultural machinery did move on the roads round Buckton but it didn’t move fast and it often held up traffic or annoyed strangers wanting to get through Buckton quickly.

And as there was no guarantee that Charles Mather would look for the businesses where Pickering had bought his machinery he thought he probably should try around Winville by phone or wait till next time he was there. There wasn’t a big market for secondhand equipment but he’d had a browse in the *Winville Courier* to see what was on offer. Two tractors, one header, some minor items. He wondered if Pickering had ever advertised anything but it didn’t seem very likely. He would not have wanted a stream of farmers coming on to his land.

He had never heard of anyone constantly rolling over their farm machinery but some people did change their cars fairly regularly. And there were people who didn't like wearing other people's clothes, that sort of distaste. There was something obsessive about Paul Pickering but if he had a compulsion to constantly buy new machinery and get rid of the old—then how had he done the getting rid of part?

All this went out of his head when Fiona dropped in to the station to say she had just heard from the Woods. They had gone to Toowoomba to meet their grandson and he hadn't been on the plane. They had no idea where he was or what had happened.

"Did they get on to the police in Toowoomba?"

"They say they did and that the police there told them it wasn't a police matter."

"No, s'pose it isn't. Not unless he was abducted somewhere—"

"But—isn't there something you can do?"

"Do they know for sure he got on the plane in Melbourne? And where could he have got off?"

"In Brisbane, I would think. Maybe he's gone to see his mum."

"Is that likely?" He didn't want to get involved with young John Fred Millington. Again.

"Not very. And maybe he thought he could sort of disappear in Brisbane, get away from everything, start a new life, but I don't really believe that either."

"Well, first they need to be sure he actually got on the plane in Melbourne and got off in Brisbane."

She could see this made sense. "I wonder if their private investigator can follow up for them?"

"If they pay him."

She said she would pass on his thoughts to the Woods. But she could see that if he had voluntarily chosen to disappear in Brisbane there was nothing more to be done about him. He might well prefer to hang about a beach than a cotton farm.

But had he done his disappearing voluntarily?

\*

Dr Sorenson had spent several Sunday afternoons out at Maryann's farm. He wasn't sure that he was being very useful but he had helped Winston Pounder by painting windowsills after the other man had sanded everything down. To his surprise he found himself enjoying the job. And he had helped Kieran Dobbs dig holes for some planned fruit trees. Kieran had brought several jerry cans with small holes punched in the bottom. "You fill them with water, park them beside your fruit trees and they deliver a gentle seepage. That way it doesn't matter if you can only come out once or twice a week."

"Do you think Maryann will want to live here again?"

"No reason why not. You know, it seems funny, doesn't it, that women who looked after themselves sometimes die from ovarian cancer and someone like Maryann who never looked after herself gets better."

"You've heard that she's better, a bit better?"

"Well, George says she is. He goes to see her."

Kieran planned to put in a mulberry, a mandarin, a plum and a grape vine. "There's no guarantee she'll look after them but I'm hoping this has given her such a scare she'll make an effort this time around."

They both looked round the spruced-up little farm but would Maryann see it with new eyes?

"That bottom fence needs fixing," Kieran went on. "But Greg Maxwell never fixes fences unless someone pays him. And anyway it's half his responsibility."

"I suppose I could pay him—"

"No. It's not your responsibility. Okay, so you didn't pick up what was wrong with Maryann but that's no reason to make Greg Maxwell better off." Kieran thought of saying more about Greg Maxwell and then he felt the less he thought about Greg Maxwell the better. He knew Brett had bought the paint to re-do Maryann's house although it was Winston who was giving his time and bringing out his sander and ladders.

"I've only met Maxwell once, I think, though his wife has been in a couple of times."

“Because he beat her up, I suppose,” Kieran said drily.

Brett didn't think he should answer that and instead he said, “Do you know how Jess came to get her orphans from Roumania?” He had treated the girls at various times but had never asked Jess any personal questions.

“The Carbonis got two kids and Jess decided to see if she could too. But later we found that her orphans were actually Russian and they've got a mother there. Jess sends photos of them every month to the mother.”

“I see. Was it a problem—her not being married, I mean?”

Kieran thought he could see where this was going. “Are you and Tad thinking of adopting?”

“No. I mean, he isn't. We're going to go our separate ways when we sell the house and surgery.”

“There's a rumour going round that someone wants to turn the surgery into a house.”

“I'm afraid the man who's keenest has said that's what he wants to do. I guess it won't make us very popular.”

“No. But you'll be gone.” Kieran knew there had been some not very complimentary talk going the rounds but it would not touch Tad and Brett. “So can you put some sort of caveat on it?”

“That it must remain as a doctor's surgery, you mean?”

“Something like that.”

“Tad wants to go as soon as someone signs on the dotted line—”

“Can you afford to buy him out?” Kieran found it strange to be having this conversation as he barely knew Brett and Tad but he had the strong feeling that Brett desperately needed someone to talk things out with. Someone who was an ‘outsider’.

“You mean—stay on here? But that wouldn't work. People have been voting with their feet ever since they heard about Maryann.”

“That would soon change if you were the only doctor here.”

“A sort of blackmail?”

As Sorenson drove home he wondered if Kieran was suggesting something more, that it would be worth toughing it out. He liked Kieran but he didn't know to what extent he had a finger on the town's pulse.

He said to Tad over dinner, “Which is more valuable? This house or the surgery? I mean as separate sales?” The house had more land around it, a garage, and they had put quite a lot of work into making it a pleasant place to live. The surgery had its fittings but was smaller and would take some work to turn into a dwelling.

Tad looked at him in surprise. “The house, of course. Why are you asking?”

“Then—can we do a deal? You have the money from the house and I'll take the surgery as my share. But I'm not ready to sell it yet.”

Moneywise it would not bother Tad. But he wondered if this was more of the fall-out from the Maryann business. “You're planning to stay on here until you've paid that woman.”

Tad was often dismissive of women and his ‘that woman’ would have shriveled any complacency Maryann might have had—if she could've heard him.

“I think I should.”

“And you're going to continue to practice?”

“That's the hard one. I guess I will while I look around for someone to take it over. I can rent somewhere. That wouldn't be a problem.”

“I think you're mad. We could get a much better practice in town and you can leave all this mess behind you.”

“I thought of that but I think I have to see it through. I can't run away.”

He could see that Tad wasn't buying this sense of martyred determination. And of course there was no certainty that it would work or that he could eventually sell on the practice.

“Well, I think you're a fool but we can take the surgery out of the sale and get this place sold. So you'd better start packing.”

Sorenson could see that this was more than the end of their business partnership. Tad, it seemed, would be glad to walk away from their private life together. He stayed up late putting his non-essentials into suitcases. But several times he had renewed doubts. Even if he and Tad parted

was that a good enough reason to stay on here, to rent a place of his own, to hope patients would still come. And yet there was also a sense of peace deep down. It had bothered him that they would remove both doctors and surgery from the town. Surely Buckton didn't deserve to be left high and dry because of their own mistakes or disagreements? But then, working on Maryann's place with those other men who had given their time so generously had changed something in his own attitude to Buckton.

\*

Fiona Greehan came into the café on Tuesday before she went into the Combined Churches' Op-Shop for her stint to have a sandwich. She could have had one at home but she liked to patronise all of Buckton's businesses as much as she could and she always liked coming in to the café with its old-fashioned feel and friendly manager. There were two Jess Brumbys round town (and both were very nice people) and two Kate Brumbys. She wondered if the Brumby families liked to share names around. But then Dennis had told her there were two Tom Curtises "and both a bloody nuisance".

Someone she thought she should know was sitting in one of the booths. He smiled at her and she wracked her brains. Something about him suggested 'police' and it came to her that he was Dennis's boss, Jake Moss. She said hullo and he said "Care to join me?"

She ordered and came over to sit down opposite him. "I am a bit early to pick up Susan so I dropped in here. I called in to see Dennis on my way."

"And have you persuaded him to take his holidays?"

"He didn't say anything about holidays. Why?"

"He says he can't go away till they solve the Pickering case. I said it wasn't his business, that Greg can solve it."

Jake gave that a smile. "So has he got any insights that Greg hasn't?"

He didn't know how much Dennis shared with Fiona but she had lived here quite a while and probably knew the district and its people quite well.

"He seems to think it has some connection to Pickering's farm machinery. You know Pickering was obsessed with machinery but it seems that he kept buying new stuff when the older stuff started to look a bit dusty or got a scratch on it. But he doesn't know what Pickering did with the old stuff, whether he sold it or traded it in. And he doesn't believe that man just dropped in to talk about Pickering's roof because you can't see the house properly from the road so how would he know the roof was in a mess and he doesn't believe that Pickering would spend money on the roof anyway. I don't know the ins and outs of it but I think he suspects that roof man of being involved somehow."

"I thought it was that man who wanted money out of Pickering that he was suspicious of?"

"He was. But it doesn't seem to add up. And Pickering didn't have any money. I think you should get an expert to go through all Pickering's financial dealings because the only way he could ever pay his debts was to sell that farm."

He considered this. Greg had taken papers from the farm house but did that mean he had got all of Pickering's papers? Or had Pickering destroyed papers?

"So would you be willing to look through Pickering's papers? You probably know more about finance than any of us."

"I don't mind. But do try to persuade Dennis that he needs his break."

"He's a hard man to persuade but I'll do my best."

After he'd gone out Fiona wondered what he and Susan Denby were planning. Maybe Susan would move to Winville ... And then she went back to wondering what had happened to the Woods' grandson. What would she do if given a plane ticket and a chance to come and stay with her grandparents? But she couldn't put herself inside the mind of young John Fred Millington alias Andy White ... and even less into the minds of the other people apparently involved in his life ...

## *Case No. 4: A Documented Life*

Grant Schroeder went with Buckton's team to play rugby on Saturday afternoon in Winville and called around to the station to pick up the large box of papers DSS Sullivan said he was more than happy to pass on to Fiona Greehan to see if she could see clues where he had only seen a mess.

In Buckton he took them round and delivered them to Fiona who looked at the grubby crumpled papers and said, "He made his book-keeping sound good when he came into the bank to get his loan with us rolled over. I would've thought twice if I'd seen this mess." But then she'd been new to Buckton when she'd first met Paul Pickering and she had been reluctant to show her ignorance of farming and farm machinery.

She put the box in the back room where she worked on their little financial advice business with Karen and Ruth. It wasn't just the state of the papers but she felt a deep reluctance to touch the papers, almost as if they emanated frustration and secret anger. 'I'll start tomorrow morning,' she thought as she went back to the kitchen. 'Or Monday ... or maybe Tuesday.'

Dennis had a different issue on his mind when he came in. He had had a visit from Dr Sorenson who had gone to Winville and caught up with Tracy Dillon. Dennis wasn't sure that Sorenson was wise to do anything which would look like pestering Tracy to get information about her mother. But he listened with care as Sorenson told him Tracy had asked her mum about being 'helped' to write letters asking for money. "She says her mother told her she and Dr Davis were going to split the money when I paid up, ten thousand each. So I'm certainly not going to pay Leslie Davis ten thousand dollars. I'll give Maryann ten thousand and that's it."

Dennis agreed with this. He certainly didn't want Leslie Davis profiting from another doctor's mistake—when he regularly made mistakes himself. But after Sorenson, looking rather gloomy, had gone away again he rang Winville Hospital and asked to speak to Dr Watling. It didn't surprise him that Dr Watling was on the premises. His home probably rarely saw him. Dr Watling said, "Ten thousand! He certainly thinks big. Well, leave it with me and I'll try to get confirmation."

It didn't surprise Dennis that Mason Watling did not take hearsay as proof. But as he packed up to go home, Grant could handle the Saturday night call-outs, he thought he would quite like to be the fly on the wall as Watling tackled Davis.

Leslie Davis was unenthusiastic about returning to the hospital in the evening. He had bought himself a bottle of bubbly and some take-away Chinese to have his own private little smirk. It was not something to be tried on too often but Maryann Dillon had been as butter in his hands. He got ready to go round to the hospital hoping the summons was not for a three-car pile-up or something which would keep them there all night. Mason Watling was his cool expressionless self as Davis parked in the staff carpark and came in.

"Just come in here for a moment," Watling said non-committally as he ushered him into his small office. Both men sat down. Davis waited. "Not an emergency then?"

"It depends. I have been told that Maryann Dillon has agreed to give you half the money she expects to get from Dr Sorenson, that is, ten thousand dollars. Is that correct?"

"Of course not. I just suggested a small commission."

"How small?"

"I don't think I put a figure on it but I thought, perhaps, five hundred dollars."

"So why does she plan to give you ten thousand?"

"She must've misunderstood. She has been receiving quite strong medications and they may have made her a little confused."

"Then we'd best go up and see her and get this sorted out."

Leslie Davis showed no enthusiasm for this but he accompanied Dr Watling to the first floor and along the polished corridor. He made several light remarks about the weather but Watling did not bother to respond. And the meeting with Maryann was inconclusive. She said he wanted ten thousand and she didn't care if he got ten thousand. Davis said he had only suggested a small commission. Watling said to Ms Dillon, "Are you sure an amount was suggested?"

"Course I'm sure," Maryann said belligerently. "Think I'm stupid, do you?"

"Did anyone overhear your conversation? A nurse, a visitor, another patient?"

"That woman that was here." Maryann waved at the next bed, currently empty. "She must of heard."

“Mrs Gough?”

“Yeah. Her.”

Watling thanked her and asked at the front office for contact details for that “Yvonne Gough who went home yesterday.” Then he took Dr Davis back to his own office and rang Mrs Gough.

“Make yourself a coffee,” he said to Davis as he sat down and put through the call. Leslie Davis sat there hoping Mrs Gough either was hard of hearing or had gone off to stay with relatives far away from Winville—or that she had died overnight.

Mrs Gough did not sound very strong but she said, yes, she had heard Dr Davis and Maryann talking about money. Could she be any more specific? She thought they were going ‘to split something in half’. “And you think this was a financial arrangement?”

“I’m sure it was. Everyone says Dr Davis likes money.”

“Everyone, Mrs Gough?”

“I hear things.”

“Did you overhear any amount mentioned?”

“Maryann told me Dr Davis said she should ask her doctor that made the mistake for twenty thousand dollars. I know people do have to pay up sometimes, doctors I mean, so maybe he wanted half of that.”

It wasn’t as strong as he would have liked but he thanked Mrs Gough and asked her to ring him if she thought of anything else.

He turned back to Dr Davis and said, “I’m afraid this will have to go to the Board to be sorted out. It isn’t up to me.”

“You surely don’t believe what that old bag says, do you?”

“What old bag?” Mason said coldly.

“That Dillon woman.”

“That isn’t the point. There will need to be a formal enquiry.”

The desire to stand Leslie Davis down while he took his complaint forward was very strong but he didn’t have the power and Davis had not hung on so long despite his incompetence by meeting anyone half-way.

“In the meantime stop trying to make money on the side.” It sounded weak.

Davis seemed to detect Watling’s reluctance to say what he would really like to say. He gave the slightest of smiles and said, “If there’s no more I would like to get home to my cooling dinner.”

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Brett and Tad had circled their problems with restraint and relatively good humour. But Brett had had all day to mull over the simple fact that they had both put the same amount of money into their partnership, the house, the practice, all the fittings and furniture, but Tad was going to walk away with considerably more from the sale of the house. And the surgery without the house would go down a little in value. When he said he should get something from the sale of the house as well Tad flew off the handle and accused him of money-grubbing. And “It was your deal, I have the house, you have the surgery”. And who had been keeping the practice running while he wandered round feeling sorry for himself? Brett experienced a brief regret that he had raised the subject. But where once he would have folded and agreed to let it go he now came back with his own arguments. And in a few more minutes it had turned into a wild slanging match in which all sorts of accusations were brought up and hurled. All kinds of frustrations fed into the increasingly illogical argument. And this time neither of them was prepared to back down.

If neighbours heard yelling they blamed it on the TV. Tad and Brett never yelled at each other. And at the exhausting end of their first major fight Brett got up and went out. He would sleep over at the surgery. He couldn’t bear the thought of sharing a room with Tad tonight.

The surgery had a shower and toilet as well as a fridge and kettle and sink. But the only bed available was the pristine white-sheeted bed in his consulting room. He found a blanket in the storeroom and lay down. But sleep was hard to come by. It wasn’t the criticisms and accusations Tad had hurled at him. It was the hard-won knowledge that he was weak and craven. They had seemingly always got along so well because he had always been prepared to go along with Tad, not



push for his own ideas and opinions. And looking at himself with this new clarity fueled a deepening sense of failure.

It was Joanne unexpectedly coming in of a Sunday morning which woke him. She had only come in to finish a bit of office work and she was as surprised and embarrassed to find him there as he was to see her. She said quickly, "I won't be long and I won't get in your way."

He liked Joanne but just now he wished her at the ends of the world. And her presence, and the possibility that she would mention to someone that she had found him sleeping in the surgery, seemed to crystallise things for him. He would advertise the surgery and the practice in various medical journals as well as the *Winville Courier* and *The Chronicle*, he would see Tracy, he would give ten thousand dollars to Maryann, and he would leave Buckton, never to return. And with this sense of decision he felt a faint renewed sense of peace.

When she had gone again he set about nutting out suitable advertisements and e-mailing them. He looked in the appointment book and saw he had three patients for Monday morning but nothing in the afternoon. He would go to the bank and transfer money. He would see Tracy and tell her what he planned to do. And then he would hope to find someone longing to live in Buckton. He could, of course, re-list the surgery with the estate agent and place the proviso on it that it had to be used as a doctor's surgery but it didn't seem very likely that a Winville agency would be receiving a lot of interest from doctors wanting to re-locate.

His morning patients, Mr Low, Mrs Clarke and Mrs MacLeod, were all too polite to say anything or possibly hadn't heard that he, that both of them would be leaving. He gave them all plenty of time rather than the rushed ten to twenty minutes many doctors would provide and when he set out for Winville he felt that Buckton had provided the compensation of people like them who would never try his patience with spurious ailments and who were polite and appreciative of the time he gave them.

Tracy was just getting ready to go on for her afternoon shift and just said to his news, "That's fine. She'll be home soon so with luck she'll put it into the farm or sell up. Anyway, that's her business." Her mother had told her Dr Sorenson was 'a poof' and she shouldn't encourage him to hang around as he wasn't interested in her, only what he could pump her for in the way of information. When Tracy had said that he had helped to tidy up at the farm, Maryann had said angrily that she didn't want him to even step on to her land. Tracy understandably felt she didn't want to be caught up in the whole business. Dr Sorenson had been kind to arrange a working bee but Maryann, for all her many faults, was her mother.

He thought of asking her to meet him later. He hadn't set out to like her or admire her or feel sorry for her but he felt a faint inkling that he *would* be sorry never to see her again. If she felt anything it wasn't obvious. She just thanked him for letting her know and said she must go.

With Maryann it was a little more dramatic. He handed her a cheque for ten thousand dollars and said he certainly wasn't going to give money to Leslie Davis. To his surprise she immediately said angrily that he should know she couldn't take it or she'd be in trouble with Centrelink and might lose her pension. He wasn't sure what kind of pension she got though he certainly didn't think she was capable of holding down a job. And if she owned a farm ... surely they were aware that she had assets? But it wasn't his business. She thrust the cheque back at him and he simply said, "Okay," and set about tearing the cheque in to small pieces which he thrust into his pocket. He said he was sorry she had been unwell and that she would soon be home and then he turned and walked out. He didn't understand why she would've asked for money and now said she couldn't take it. Perhaps someone had said something ...

But a nurse who had heard Maryann's raised voice had seen the tearing of the cheque and had gone away to sell Sister Uniacke. Maryann was supposed to be resting, not getting upset. She wasn't sure if she should take the matter further but Dr Watling was in the next room with an elderly patient so she thought she might as well let him know. He came out and saw Dr Sorenson hurrying down the corridor to the lifts and went after him. He called out but Brett Sorenson simply wanted to get out of the building, out of Winville, possibly out of the whole Darling Downs, and he didn't stop or turn. Sister Uniacke treated the two nurses who had also witnessed this chase along the corridor to a wry grin. Doctors might regard themselves as superior to nurses but there were times when they acted like overgrown schoolboys.

Dr Watling came back to his elderly patient but it was plain that he was still fuming. Young doctors were supposed to treat their elders with respect, not simply ignore them.

By the time Brett Sorenson got back to Buckton he had had time to realise that deliberately ignoring someone with clout like Mason Watling might not have been a wise move. But he had felt that he couldn't bear to talk about anything more to do with Maryann Dillon, Leslie Davis, or anything to do with illness and treatment. On the other hand his ten thousand dollars was still in his bank account.

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Joanne McNally said nothing as the back storeroom at the surgery filled with Dr Sorenson's belongings. He planned to send his few bits of nice furniture to the auction firm in Winville and put books and clothes and other odds and ends in the surgery. But he knew he couldn't go on sleeping on the patients' couch. He didn't want to rent a place. He had thought of getting a small caravan which he could take with him when he went. But as he was getting petrol at the garage he noticed an old van parked beyond the bowlers and asked Noel Barnard if he could hire or borrow it. He could park it by the surgery and live in it till he found a buyer.

Noel Barnard said, "That old thing? I was going to strip it for parts. It's not registered but I can tow it round for you if you want it for a few weeks."

It would be making his split from Tad very public but Tad had hired a removal van for next Monday so the two of them would soon be history as far as Buckton was concerned.

"I would really appreciate that. How much would you charge?"

But Noel waved away any need for payment. Though Mavis later said to him, "Why shouldn't they pay? They're not exactly crying poor."

"But it's such an old wreck. I hardly like to put anyone in it."

"Well, *I* think they're both behaving like spoilt children. So let's just hope we can get someone good—and sensible."

Sorenson had taken to having his evening meals at the café. It meant sharing the place with people like Artie Kees and he had overheard several uncomplimentary remarks about himself while he was sitting hidden in one of the booths screened from other customers. He heard discussion of the Paul Pickering business, the weather, the forthcoming show, Maryann Dillon and various remarks about people he didn't know.

He knew very little about Paul Pickering. The man had come in once with a large splinter just below his eye. It was, of course, hard to sum someone up in that short time but he had vaguely felt that Pickering was a natural loner so it had been a surprise later on to hear that Pickering often invited girls to come and stay at his house.

But it was the previous time Pickering had come to him, he thought there were only the two visits, that he had felt that Pickering was not telling him the truth. He couldn't call the details to mind and went searching in the patients' records next morning.

But he had only glanced over the card when he had a phone call. A woman introducing herself as Gillian Long said, "Do you remember me? We were in med school together." He vaguely recalled a tall girl with ash blonde hair but nothing else came to mind.

"So you want to sell your surgery and practice in Buckton," she went on briskly.

"I do. Would you like to come and see around?"

She said she would and they talked briefly on the amount he was asking and then he told her how to find Buckton and the surgery. He had no idea what she was like as a doctor or what her experience had been. But if she would buy in it would solve all his problems. Or most of them. And he wouldn't be leaving Buckton doctor-less.

Joanne found Pickering's card still sitting on her desk and wondered why he had wanted it. She read it through before going to ask if he needed it this morning. But when she looked for him there was no sign of him. She wondered if he had gone back to the house to remove more of his things or was outside doing something in the van which Noel Barnard had just towed around.

She thought of putting the card back but he must've taken it out for a purpose. She looked at it again, wondering what its significance might be. Or had he thought of throwing it out now that Pickering was dead. There were earlier cards on his wife and children from the time of Dr Molle. She wondered who had decided those should be kept.

But as she looked through the recent card again she thought she saw something puzzling. Dr Sorenson had treated Pickering for a nasty infected cut which he'd said he'd got when some wire had snapped back at him. She knew fencing wire strained tightly could be dangerous if something went wrong and it snapped back. But the puzzle was that the doctor had noted down a number of fading bruises on Pickering's upper body. Clearly fencing wire could not have bruised him like that. He had been prescribed antibiotics and a light dressing placed over the cut. He had been asked to return for a check-up but hadn't.

She couldn't imagine any of his 'girlfriends' hitting and punching him. So what had happened? Paul Pickering kept to himself so had he got in to a fight with a neighbour and the whole thing had been kept quiet? Had they fought over boundary fences or had someone complained to him about the way he treated his livestock? There might be many reasons for arguing with someone, and the argument got out of hand, but it was somehow difficult to picture such a fight. People preferred to ignore him. She had heard on the grapevine that the Parsons sisters had complained about something he had done or perhaps not done but she couldn't call to mind anything else. Of course there was Anya Mackie who had been only too happy to leave his farm. She had even cut her wrists so that the police would have to remove her to hospital. But she simply couldn't imagine that Anya would go back to see him for any reason.

She fielded several calls from people wanting to know if the doctors were still there. And then she thought 'what the heck' and rang the station. She got Dennis and told him about Paul Pickering's record. Dennis had also wondered if there had ever been any bad blood between Pickering and a neighbour or business associate of any kind. But so far he had not been able to get anything to run with.

"So where is Dr Sorenson now?" he said. His memory of treating Pickering might be helpful.

"I don't actually know," Joanne said apologetically. "I can't find him here so he must've gone back to the house or downtown."

"Soon's he comes in send him round to see me."

She was used to his demands and simply said she would.

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Fiona could not summon up any enthusiasm to plough through Paul Pickering's paperwork. But the faint possibility that she might find something to help solve the mystery surrounding his death—and therefore free Dennis to go off on his holidays with a clear mind—impelled her to settle down in the back room as soon as the children had gone off to school.

She first made rough piles of the material into what seemed their category: farm papers, things to do with his machinery, bank letters and other documents, bills and receipts from other businesses, and what she thought of as personal which included a couple of letters from women. At the bottom of the box was a letter torn in half from his wife's parents, a passionate if ungrammatical demand to know why he hadn't kept their daughter and grandchildren safe. She was surprised that he had even bothered to keep it after tearing it across. And there were no recent letters from women so the possible letter from Poland certainly wasn't here.

Then she went through and put things into chronological order if they were dated.

It was almost lunchtime by the time her piles were ready for more careful scrutiny and making notes. She was glad to go and wash her hands of the grime she'd collected and treat herself to some cream of mushroom soup.

The papers to do with the farm itself seemed straightforward. And things like phone and electricity bills. He had an account with the Co-op but no sign of any memberships. The most glaring fact about all his financial problems was that he was *always* late with paying. Reminder notices and threats made up half the piles. But she couldn't see Telstra representatives coming round to do him harm. One letter from the Co-op said that they couldn't be expected to wait while he negotiated a sale. She wondered if this meant a sale of grain or cattle or whether it referred to something else. She put that letter aside for further investigation.

The material from not one but four banks also followed the same pattern. Constant requests for extensions of loans, requests by bank managers for him to come in and discuss his problems. A stern letter from Westpac in Winville. Several from the Bank of the Darling Downs here. But there

was nothing older than 4 years. She wondered about that. Because these were ongoing loans. So had he thrown away everything earlier—or was it stored somewhere else? One letter from Kyle Risby at the bank over the road said that Pickering’s plan to mortgage his farm was something he could come in and discuss. She thought she would go over the road and find out more later. She wondered if Pickering had told one bank about his dealings with other banks. He certainly hadn’t informed her when she was manager that he was dealing with two or three other banks.

And then there was nothing such as title deeds to his farm. Did he store some things with one of the banks in Winville?

She put the papers dealing with his purchases of farm machinery aside for Dennis to look through. Then she rang the Bank of the Darling Downs and asked Eve Binnie if she could make an appointment for tomorrow morning to look through Paul Pickering’s file. Eve said, “Is this to do with his death?” and Fiona said the police had given her all of Pickering’s paperwork from the farm to look through and there was a letter about a mortgage. She thought it would be worth seeing if the bank could throw any light on this. “And did he ever ask to store anything at the bank?” Eve said she would look but she couldn’t remember him ever asking.

When Dennis came home Fiona gave him the bundle of papers dealing with machinery and said, “I can’t find any sign of the costs being offset by a trade-in.”

“So he must have been selling stuff privately ...” No one had come forward but that didn’t really surprise him. He could’ve been selling to someone a bit iffy like the Goodrick family. And the possibility that Pickering had been in a fight with someone a couple of years ago might suggest that the relationship was not always a happy one. Of course the fight, if there had been a fight, might link to something quite different. Even a hefty girl realising she had been conned ... Pickering certainly wouldn’t want to tell the doctor that he had been punched by a girl ...

“But if he was selling on a header or a combine or something,” Fiona said tentatively, “he would try to sell it locally, don’t you think? It would be hard to send it over to Allora or somewhere, wouldn’t it?”

He thought this made sense. But if someone local was buying Pickering’s second-hand machinery then they would need to have the means to sell it on. No one would want dozens of Pickering’s discards for their own use.

And the other question: had they missed hidden papers at the house or somewhere on the farm? “Would you like to come out to the farm with me? You might see something those sods have missed.” She wasn’t sure that she did but maybe it would help her understand better. “I’ve got an appointment with Kyle at 11. Pickering was considering mortgaging the farm.”

“We’ll get the monsters off to school and go. And how the heck he expected to pay off a mortgage when he couldn’t pay off anything else ...”

“But in his own way he was a good con-man. He was very selective with the truth but he got away with it.”

“Because none of the banks ever actually went out to see his farm?”

“Maybe.”

And the farm itself was an eye-opener for Fiona. She walked through the squalid house looking for cupboards that hadn’t been checked and under beds and even inside the old washing-machine. The place depressed her utterly. It was a relief to come out into the autumn sunshine again. She walked over to the poultry runs and looked around. Pickering might’ve dug a hole and buried things but she wondered if she was getting into *Boys’ Own Annual* territory.

She walked down to the machinery sheds where Dennis was sitting thoughtfully on a box. “Nothing hidden in the machines?” she said lightly.

“Can’t find a bloody thing.”

“Could he have buried something?”

“You know something? That’s a bloody good idea. He’s got his grave out the back. Maybe it isn’t a grave?”

He took her around past the tank and they looked down into the oblong space about half a metre deep. It simply looked like dry earth waiting. “Of course he can’t get buried here anyway,” Dennis said, “not without special permission from the Council.” And the ‘grave’ was too shallow for a coffin.

He went and got a spade and came back and got down in the hole. “The other thing is—why did he want a post-hole digger when he hasn’t touched his fences in years?”

She couldn’t answer this and stood watching him peck at the dry ground.

After ten minutes he hit what he thought was a rock. He tried to work around it to get an idea of its size. Then he said, “funny rock”. After another ten minutes of scraping and digging he had uncovered a metal surface. Fiona forgot that time was passing, that she didn’t want to be late for her appointment, and leaned over for a better look. With some heaving Dennis lifted up a metal box and set it on the ground beside her. It looked like a rather battered tool-box.

“I think we’d best take it back with us. I’ll let Greg know and maybe Mather should have a gander. Might be another will or something.”

“How strange.” And it was a *Boys’ Own Annual* story, after all.

“He told Mather he’d dug his own grave and we all thought that was the sort of weird thing he would do. Yet it didn’t make sense when you think about it. He was only in his early forties.”

But then if Paul Pickering did weird things, she thought, they couldn’t be expected to make sense.

She was sorry she wouldn’t be there to see the mysterious box opened but she could see it wouldn’t just be a matter of opening it up and tipping everything out. And who knew—it might be the sort of box a Bluebeard might keep.

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Dennis dumped the box on a sheet of newspaper in the storeroom and asked Grant to get on to both Winville and when he had a time for them to come to Buckton to call Charles Mather as well.

“What if there’s nothing in it?” Grant was hopping with excitement but he could also picture Paul Pickering having a joke at somebody’s expense. An empty ‘grave’, an empty tool-box.

“Yeah. Wouldn’t put it past him but it’s fairly heavy so there’s something there even if it’s only some earth he’s shoveled in.”

And there was always the possibility that if one box had got buried there might be more ...

DS Moore said they would be straight out, expect them in an hour, while Charles Mather grumbled and said he was busy. Grant said politely that it wasn’t necessary for him to be there and they could let him know if they found anything. But Charles Mather, too, had wondered about that story of digging a grave and said unenthusiastically that he would come around.

“That’s just about a first,” Dennis said with a bit of a grin. “Usually the old bugger expects us to come to him.”

And he enjoyed the sight of the old lawyer coming in with his mouth turned down as though he had been asked to come somewhere distasteful. But Petra Moore and Brent Kelly were as pleased as Grant to be there. Grant’s family kept twitting him that he was stuck in a nowhere place but he sometimes thought that life with Dennis was more exciting than almost anywhere else.

They lifted out several large envelopes of papers, one containing the deeds to the farm and a copy of his father’s will. It had been done by Gavin Whittaker in Winville rather than Charles Mather in Buckton and he took it and read it with interest. In it Pickering’s father, Albert, said, “In the event that my son cannot cope with running the farm he is to pass it to my brother Ronald.”

That might solve the problem with the inheritance but it also raised other questions. And how should ‘cannot cope’ be interpreted? The will also left a sum of fifteen thousand dollars to Paul “sufficient to buy himself a house in a country town such as Buckton.” And fifteen years ago this would have been true. But everyone there thought it was very likely that the money had gone on machinery.

The second large envelope contained a list of girls along with photos though not addresses and some very explicit comments about them and their sexual prowess or lack of it. Dennis noticed the names of Catriona and Anya (and after her name Pickering had written ‘doesn’t know anything’). “We can’t destroy these till everything is finalised then they go in the fire.” Everyone accepted that.

More to the point was a list of sales of machinery. It ran to three pages of details along with the amounts he had apparently sold things for. And after almost every sale was his comment ‘not enough’ or ‘he cheated me’.

“Who is he?” Petra Moore said in puzzlement.

“That’s the big question, isn’t it?” Dennis said drily. “I’d like to take a copy of this so I can ask around.”

“It’s obviously been going on for years,” Mather said, also drily. “Someone must know.” He looked at Dennis as though to suggest he should be the one to know.

“And this ‘he’ must be selling the stuff on. No one would need three post-hole diggers.”

Something niggled faintly at the back of his mind but the others had gone on to the pile of small items under the packets. These suggested that Paul Pickering had been Buckton’s version of Bluebeard after all. The items were mostly small. Several hair curls. A small diary. Some foreign coins. A hair clip. Several hankies. Several novels in other languages. A packet of cheap brass rings. A couple of postcards. Several pairs of women’s underpants. A bra with its hooks torn out. A couple of tissues with body fluids dried on them ...

Charles Mather’s look of distaste deepened as the items continued to come out of the box.

And when it was finally empty Dennis said to Grant, “Have you got everything listed?”

“I think so.”

“Right then, I’d say the documents should go to Mr Mather to help with finalising the estate and everything else to Winville. We’ll just keep copies of those lists and, I think, it might be useful to have a copy of the will.”

“Two copies then,” Petra said quickly.

Grant went away to do the photocopying and Dennis said, “I wonder if that’s why he didn’t bother putting down a beneficiary? He knew it would go to his uncle but he didn’t want to make it easy for him?”

Mather nodded slowly. He would be glad to get everything finalised quickly and more so as there was a very good chance he would not get paid. “After the banks get paid Mr Pickering may not get much benefit from it anyway.”

As Dennis went home later he was wondering if Pickering had heard about a box of documents found buried in a garage in Buckton—and thought he might do the same thing. But they would never know. And, who knew, perhaps other Bucktonites were now busy burying their documents in their yards ...

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Gillian Long was as good as her word, arriving in Buckton two days after she had contacted Brett Sorenson. He had vaguely remembered her as tall and willowy. She was still tall but she had also put on weight. She was now a big rather overpowering woman. He felt secretly glad that he wouldn’t be working with her.

Although she brought out several memories from their time at uni he didn’t try to respond with his own stories. He took her around, introduced her to Joanne, took her over to the house to meet Tad, then suggested he take her up to the hospital to look around there.

She told him she had recently been divorced and that it was a “pain” constantly running in to her ex-husband. He tried to make Buckton sound like the ideal place to avoid an ex-husband. And in a way it sold itself. Nothing could turn it in to a picture postcard town. But the hospital staff, who had all been secretly worrying that they might have to depend on visits from Winville doctors, went out of their way to make her welcome.

She didn’t ask what was going on between Tad and Brett and she had the faint intuition that they had not exactly *mingled*. It might be the town’s fault, that it had not welcomed them, but after talking with Susan Denby and the staff she couldn’t picture them cold-shouldering their doctors.

She talked about her experience as a GP over a cup of tea and asked about the kinds of patients they took and those they sent to Winville. She then went over to the Annexe and chatted with people. She gave the impression of someone who would not suffer fools gladly but she also gave the impression of someone energetic and competent. As she went out with Dr Sorenson, Sister O’Brien said sincerely, “We look forward to having you with us and I’m sure you’ll be happy in Buckton.”

They went back to the surgery and Joanne said, “Dennis Walsh is here to see you, Brett.”

He turned to Dr Long and said, “Our local copper.” He felt certain that Dennis was here to talk about Paul Pickering as he hadn’t gone round to see him as requested. “Perhaps Joanne could answer any more questions you might have.”

Joanne thought any doctor would be welcome but she was less sure how she would get on with Dr Long. But to her surprise she found her interested and sympathetic. They ended up walking over to the main street and having a coffee together.

“Just wanted to check with you about this fight Paul Pickering had.” Dennis had no time to waste and he thought that a doctor with no patients could find the time to come round to the station.

“I can’t prove it was a fight,” Sorenson said quickly. “He had some fading bruises on him. He told me he’d had an accident with some fencing wire. But that couldn’t have bruised him, I don’t think.”

“You’re sure he said fencing wire?”

“Yes. I asked him what happened and that’s what he told me.”

“What kind of cut was it?”

Sorenson demonstrated on his own chest. “It was like a wire had cut him. A narrow cut.”

“Had he been wearing a shirt, a singlet, at the time?”

“Probably not. He had a good overall tan.” A lot of farmers tanned to their shirt sleeves on their upper arms and tanned except for a white band where their hat had sheltered their forehead. But possibly Paul Pickering had thought white bands would put women off ...

“So you were confident he *had* been caught by a wire but you wondered why he also had bruises? Is that it?”

“Pretty much. It was a while ago so maybe I’ve forgotten anything else he said.”

“You didn’t ask him about the bruises?”

“No. And they would be gone in a couple more days. There didn’t seem any point.”

There didn’t seem any more to be made out of the incident so Dennis left him and walked back to the station. But that explanation wouldn’t wash. There was no sign of repairs to fences, of new fences or netting runs being put up. So why had Pickering talked about fencing wire? There had been no fencing wire hanging anywhere. It was just possible that Pickering had got someone in to give him a quote and they had argued ...

A quote.

Wagner had mentioned a quote.

So did Wagner ever do any fencing? A good handyman in a country town could usually turn his hand to most things.

In the evening he rang John Applegarth over at Garramindi and asked if he’d ever heard of Burt Wagner doing any fencing work. John said he would ask around and get back.

Fiona told her husband that Pickering had talked about a mortgage over the farm and when Kyle had asked him where he thought his cash-flow problems were Pickering had fired up and said it was none of his business. So that had been the end of that discussion. But the bank manager faced with the puzzle of a farmer who owned his own farm, nothing owing on it, and without a wife or family to support, being unable to make a modest living off his land, had been curious. When he’d mentioned it to his staff he had been told by Janice Low that Paul Pickering was always buying machinery he didn’t need. Kyle, like Fiona, was a city person and didn’t fully understand how having the unnecessary machinery could put Pickering into such a parlous position. Janice and Eve had both pointed out that Pickering could get his ploughing and harvesting done by a contractor for a fraction of what he spent on farm equipment “but he is just obsessed with machinery”.

Whether Pickering had ever sought to mortgage his property elsewhere Kyle Risby couldn’t say. Fiona thought now it was a pity the bank hadn’t taken out a mortgage. They could’ve got Pickering’s big loans paid off immediately. And the mortgage repaid with the sale of the farm because she was sure the uncle would sell. But of course none of them had known that Pickering was going to die.

## Case No. 5: The Pecking of Crows

Charles Mather reluctantly rang Ronald Pickering over near Aubigny and told him it was increasingly likely he would inherit his nephew's farm. He was under no obligation to do this but he knew that the value of the farm would go down if it was neglected and he still hoped to get his own bills paid although he knew the banks would make sure they were first in line. If the uncle knew about farming and didn't have his nephew's obsessive ideas he could probably make a go of the place.

Mr Pickering said, "So I'd best come over. Is that what you're saying?"

"I think you should check first with police in case they're still investigating anything there. But yes, the farm needs some attention."

He gave Pickering the phone number for police here and felt he had done his duty. He didn't envy the man the job of cleaning up but on the other hand the man was family and would undoubtedly make a bit out of the place if he decided to sell.

Dennis when contacted said, "You can come and check the place but we are still doing some searching. So we'd best arrange a time so we can both be there."

Ron Pickering unenthusiastically made a time and hung up. Dennis felt equally unenthusiastic but until the case was tidied up he didn't really want the uncle removing things. Things such as some very expensive farm machinery.

He had hardly made his arrangement with Pickering when a bad penny showed up. Mr Pidcock said to Grant, "The boss in?"

Grant put his head out the back door and called to Dennis who had just ducked out to see why the stray kelpie they had in their pen was barking. As he came back in he thought the dog was probably warning him. He wasn't really surprised to see Pidcock now that he had been dropped as a suspect.

"What can I do for you, Mr Pidcock?" he said grimly. There were still Bucktonites who said what he really meant was 'what can I do to you' and right this minute it summed up the way he felt about Walter Pidcock.

"My lawyer says it doesn't matter that that bloke died, I can still sue."

"So? If you want to sue his estate that's up to you. It's not police business."

"He said, my lawyer bloke, I should find out if you're finished investigating."

"Got cold feet, has he?" Dennis remained grim. "Still thinks you had a barney?"

"Course not. Reckons he doesn't want me looking like a ghoul, his words."

"Well, a heck of a lot of people want money from the estate so you'd best get in line. Seems he wasn't hot on paying his bills."

Pidcock didn't seem grateful for this advice because he merely made a snide return and went out again. Dennis said to Grant, "Let's hope that's the last of him."

But Walter Pidcock was nothing if not tenacious when it came to unearned money. Dennis heard a few days later that his lawyer was mounting a civil case for him. Jess from Charles Mather's office rang and asked Dennis who Walter Pidcock was and why he thought he should get one hundred thousand dollars from Paul Pickering's estate.

Dennis whistled. Mr Pidcock obviously wanted to be able to retire in style. "Walter Pidcock is the low life who says Paul Pickering failed to save his daughter's life when she went out there and died."

"Oh, yes, I remember something about that. I suppose I shouldn't ask but do you think he's got a case?"

"Jayleen Pidcock died somewhere around ten at night. Pickering rang us next morning. When I asked him why he'd waited so long he first said he didn't like to call us out at night. But later he said there was no point as he could see she was dead. The key point is that we can't prove one way or the other whether she could've been saved if he'd immediately rung the ambulance or someone as soon as he saw she wasn't well. He says she just conked out but the medicos don't think it would've been instant."

Jess had listened carefully and made a couple of notes. "So you think he might have a case?"



He privately thought Pidcock might. “My problem with it is—why should he get a penny from his daughter’s death? She was an adult woman, not a dependent child, and he should’ve been ashamed of himself for letting her go out and behave so badly.”

Jess knew Dennis’s attitudes to things like the very public selling of sex were old-fashioned and his version of ‘behaving badly’ would not be everyone else’s. But Jayleen *had* done her best to upset a lot of people here. Even so she didn’t deserve to be poisoned. No one did.

“But he will still have to prove his case,” Dennis went on, “before he can line up for any money. Or perhaps,” his mood lightened, “you could give him a tractor?”

“I don’t think he would want a tractor.” Jess didn’t immediately realise this was Dennis making a ponderous joke. “He’s not a country person.”

It possibly helped to explain Jayleen’s belief that the country yokels would leap at the chance of sex with her. It pained him to remember that she had been right ... up to a point.

“Well, I wouldn’t worry. It’s going to be Ronnie Pickering’s headache now.”

“That isn’t certain yet. We’ll just have to wait and see.”

“But don’t let that Pidcock low life bother you. He’s still got to convince a magistrate he’s entitled to a slice of the pie. And somehow I don’t see him impressing Kelso or Vohland.”

Jess privately didn’t see this either. And she felt more relaxed after talking with Dennis. Just before he hung up he said, “How’re the girls?”

“Oh, they’re great. They’re much more confident about going to school now.”

He thought as he hung up that that was a small story with a happy ending. Perhaps their loss was hard on their mother but she had re-married so perhaps things would work out for her too.

\*

The departure of Dr Lombardi and Dr Sorenson was a two-hour-wonder. People were more interested in the new doctor moving in. Fiona found it sad that their two doctors were leaving in a mood of muted discord. Some people thought it was all a result of their chosen ‘lifestyle’ but Fiona clearly remembered the unhappiness of Kamala Davis when she and Leslie Davis were here. Two human beings could hurt and upset each other when their relationship failed. It was a simple fact of life.

Dennis wasn’t very interested in their departure or their plans. He was more concerned over Maryann Dillon coming back to live on that farm and drift back into her old habits. George Johnson had tried to cheer him up by saying, “You know, she’s had such a scare she might do things different. And maybe she won’t want to live out there anymore. I heard Greg Maxwell saying he’d buy her farm and he was just annoyed with us fixing things because we’d made it worth more.”

“Yeah, and I wouldn’t want that bastard spreading his junk up there.”

The Maxwell farm was a gigantic mess and yet people said Maxwell always had work, that he went far and wide as a fencing contractor, and that the bit he made off his farm with selling hay was the icing on his cake.

“That’s a thing, George, d’you reckon he’s got that sort of money sitting round?”

“Hard to say.”

“He doesn’t look after his kids but that doesn’t mean he hasn’t got the dosh.”

“True.”

“He’s just a nasty piece-o’-work who doesn’t mind to beat up on his wife and kids. In my book.”

George nodded. Maxwell was a fairly regular customer but that didn’t mean he had to like him.

Dennis took his beer over to a quiet table. He thought about Greg Maxwell as little as possible. The Goodricks gave him some trouble, ditto some of the Curtis family and various youths with time on their hands. But none of them were nasty in the way that Maxwell was nasty. And as he sat there he suddenly thought ‘fencing wire’ ... Paul Pickering had told the doctor he’d had an accident with some fencing wire ... but whose fencing wire ...

He tried to picture how fencing wire, say a short length, could cut someone. A cut end of a piece of plain wire with its tensile strength. A piece of barbed wire. Some of the heaviest netting if cut through or the ends sharpened ... He swilled down his beer and hurried out. Dr Sorenson might still be at the surgery taking his goods and chattels out ...

Dr Sorenson didn't look happy to see him when he turned up. "If it's about Maryann I don't want to know."

"No. It's about Pickering. The cut you saw on him—was it a clean cut?"

Sorenson stood there looking at him rather blankly. "No-o-o, I don't think it was. But I can't swear to that."

"Did he have any other cuts?"

"Not that he showed to me. He did have a piece of Elastoplast on one hand but he didn't say anything about it. I couldn't tell you which hand."

"D'you remember where the bruises were?"

"I'm not sure. I think there was one on one arm, the rest on his chest. He hadn't shaved for a few days so there might've been one on his jaw ... I'm not sure." He tried to throw his mind back but it just hadn't seemed very important; not least because Pickering himself downplayed his injuries. "Does it matter what had happened?"

"Probably." Dennis thanked him and went out. Sorenson sat there pondering on it but couldn't make anything of it except it might suggest the same person had had a second fight and this one proved fatal. But as he hadn't heard the results of the autopsy he didn't actually know what had killed his former patient.

Dennis went back to the station and rang Winville District Hospital and asked to speak with Dr Watling only to be told he was away from the hospital. The switchboard offered him Dr Davis instead. He said unenthusiastically that he would have to do. Davis sounded equally unenthusiastic when he heard it was Walsh on the line. Dennis said, "One quick question. The cut on Paul Pickering's forehead—how long was it?"

"Not long. Say two centimetres."

"So it could not have killed him?"

"No. Not likely."

"Could it have been made with fencing wire?"

"Of course not. It was a cut."

"I know it was a cut but what made it?"

"We don't know. A blunt knife perhaps."

A blunt knife seemed even less likely than a length of fencing wire. "Okay, that's all. But get someone round from Centrelink to talk to Maryann Dillon."

"I don't think that's your business, sergeant." Leslie Davis hung up.

So why had Maryann been so keen to get money and then said she couldn't take it when it was proffered. Dennis suspected someone, the someone possibly being Dr Davis, had got her worried about losing her payments. He might well have thought that if he couldn't have money why should she. He was a spiteful man.

Dennis then rang Winville CIB and got Jenny Forman. "Did you find out any more about that Burt Wagner?"

She said apologetically that it didn't seem important. Wagner was no longer seen as a suspect.

"Well, check and see if he has any connection to Greg Maxwell, business, family, went to school together, anything."

She said she wasn't sure that Greg and Petra would want to try and tie him to anything—and then in the middle of her explanation she suddenly changed course and said "Why Greg Maxwell?"

"Pickering had a fight with someone a while ago and I think it might've been with Greg Maxwell. So who's to say they didn't have another fight? But I'd like something more definite before I tackle him."

She said she would talk to her seniors in the morning. But after she'd hung up she thought 'why should Dennis think there is a connection between Maxwell and Wagner?' She thought of ringing back but left it. Greg might know what Dennis was getting at.

Greg, though, said, "Wagner seems an ordinary bloke. No sign of him fighting with clients."

“But he *did* have a fight with someone some time back,” she said firmly. It was on his record but they hadn’t followed up to see who he’d assaulted. It suddenly seemed a question needing to be answered.

Greg had not been particularly pro-active, not least because he still believed it could be an accident. Pickering had hit his head on something and staggered inside and fallen and died. And no one, not even Dr Watling, had been able to definitely rule this possibility out.

And the details of Burt Wagner’s assault were not particularly illuminating. Wagner had gone fishing with a mate called Bob Bartle up the river from the weir at Cecil Plains. They had argued over something and Wagner had punched him and stamped a boot on his chest. Bartle had managed to get up and had run over to their ute and driven away. When he told Wagner he wanted his rod and Esky back Wagner had assaulted him again. Bartle had then gone to the police. Wagner had eventually been put on a Good Behaviour Bond.

Greg might’ve dismissed Wagner as a suspect but she wasn’t so sure. The trouble was—none of this gave any indication of a connection to Greg Maxwell. And if she started hunting Greg would say it wasn’t relevant. She wasn’t sure if she should try to do anything on her own. She sent a quick e-mail to Buckton about the attack on Bob Bartle then left it.

It didn’t really surprise her that Walsh got on to Greg Sullivan half-an-hour later. He wanted to know why Greg had dropped Wagner from his list.

“It was an accident, mate, a simple accident, the sort of accident farmers have every day of the week.”

This was an exaggeration but farmers did have accidents, did do stupid things, were careless. Dennis, though, wasn’t buying this as a wrap-up. “So you didn’t check to see if there’s a connection between Maxwell and Wagner? You didn’t check Wagner’s background?”

“No, mate, we didn’t. Wagner was in hospital—”

“Then you don’t mind if I tackle Greg Maxwell?”

“Do what you like. Just don’t do something stupid.”

This didn’t go down well and Dennis said as he hung up, “Don’t know what it is about Winville, everyone there seems to get infected with a laziness bug.”

“Was that Greg?”

“Yep.”

Grant liked Greg but he could see that Dennis never took other people’s reluctance to follow things up with any sort of grace. But then, Dennis did more work than most coppers he had ever known. “But I’m not keen on tackling Maxwell till I’ve got something more definite.” He might’ve said he wasn’t keen on tackling Maxwell, full stop. “I think I’d best go over to Garra and tackle Wagner. He’s probably smirking now he thinks he’s in the clear.”

“But—do you think it really was Wagner?”

Grant secretly preferred it to be Burt Wagner because he found Greg Maxwell pretty scary and he was just glad he wasn’t one of Maxwell’s kids.

“What I think is ... it was Maxwell that had the fight and killed him ... and then he got Wagner to go in and be the one to report his death. But it took longer than expected because Wagner was in hospital.”

“Would it have mattered if someone else found him?”

“Probably not. They’d want five to seven days for the flies to really mess him up. After that ... but a casual visitor wouldn’t go in the house ... so it maybe had to be Wagner with his story about the roof and looking round the place for Pickering.”

Grant could see that they didn’t have any proof but he suddenly felt sure it had happened pretty much like this. “But why would Maxwell be fighting with Pickering?”

“It’s bugged me all along—who was selling Pickering’s older equipment for him. I’d say Maxwell, going all round the district, might’ve been selling on stuff on commission. And if Pickering thought he wasn’t getting enough or he’d like to end the agreement—well, having a barney with Maxwell isn’t a good idea.”

Grant had done another round of the neighbours and had not found anyone who had been visited by Burt Wagner with offers to re-do their roofs. Several people said they had seen machinery on the road past but it had always been in the evenings and they couldn’t say who was

driving or where the machinery had come from. It might be from Pickering's farm but they couldn't swear to it. One thing, though, was clear: Mr Wagner did not seem to have come round the district 'on spec'.

"Do you think Mr Wagner will tell you anything?"

Dennis got up and clapped a hand on his junior's shoulder. "You never know till you try." He might've added, 'that's Greg's problem, he's not doing enough trying'.

\*

Sergeant Applegarth in Garramindi said he would expect Walsh around five for the two of them to go round and tackle Burt Wagner. Applegarth had never had any complaints about Wagner and he still found it hard to picture him having anything to do with Paul Pickering's death. Dennis e-mailed him Wagner's assault charge and said, "I'm looking at him as an accessory not the perp himself."

John Applegarth spent the rest of the day wondering what was going to happen and whether Wagner would tell them, or tell Dennis, what he knew. Dennis when he came in just said, "Right, ready to go?"

Burt Wagner was unloading some timber from an old flat-bed truck in his yard when they drove in. Dennis said without any lead-in, "A few more questions, Mr Wagner."

"I'm busy."

"Course you are. We'll wait."

But this concession didn't seem to please Mr Wagner. "Okay, what is it? I'll finish this later."

Police in TV shows always said 'can we come in?', John thought, but Dennis seemed perfectly content to stand in the yard in full view of the neighbours and ask his questions.

"How did Paul Pickering get on to you about his roof?"

"He rang me."

"No. He didn't. We've got his phone records. Try again."

"He musta used someone else's phone."

"He went over to his neighbour's place to ring when he's got a perfectly good phone at home?"

"Dunno. He was a weird guy."

"How do you know he was a weird guy?"

"I just thought he was."

"In what way?"

Wagner seemed to cast round for an answer before falling back on his "Dunno, just seemed a bit odd to me."

"Because he wanted a new roof?"

"Don't reckon."

"What did you quote him for the roof?"

"Don't remember."

"You wrote a quote down for him?"

"Nah, just told him what I thought it'd cost."

"That the way you do business?"

"Mostly."

"So when you went to his farm the first time what date was that?"

"Dunno."

"You keep records of the work you do?"

"Sort of."

"Right. Well, we'll want all your work records going back for a month before you found Pickering. Sergeant Applegarth will handle that."

Wagner suddenly fired up. "You can't do that! I've done nothing wrong—"

John could see that Wagner was supremely uncomfortable with this conversation. Uncomfortable enough?

"So why did Greg Maxwell ask you to go over to Pickering's farm?"

Applegarth was surprised by the question. But it was nothing to Wagner's shock. He recovered quickly but both Applegarth and Walsh had seen it.

"Don't know what you fellas are talkin' about." It sounded unconvincing.

"Don't worry, Mr Wagner. An accessory might get three years but it's not like what Maxwell will get. So tell us how he dragged you in to it."

Burt Wagner had gone from an ordinary Ocker bloke to a hunted man. He said hurriedly, "You'd better come in."

The place was sparse and not very clean but Dennis dropped comfortably into a chair and seemed to make himself at home. "Now, Mr Wagner, you were saying? But I think you'd best start from the beginning."

There was a long silence then Wagner said, "Greg's my cousin. He started selling on stuff that Pickering didn't want. That's why I said Pickering was weird. It was perfectly good stuff. Greg took a commission and a couple of times when I got a sale for him he gave me a bit."

Mr Wagner from being uncommunicative seemed suddenly to want to get it all over with.

"Did he tell you about his fight with Pickering?"

"Uh huh. Pickering always claimed he wasn't getting enough. Greg'd had one go at him when he got antsy and saying he'd go to someone else. Greg took his shillelagh around every time after that, keep that bloody Pickering in line."

"What sort of shillelagh?"

Wagner hesitated. "He made it with bits of wire and a sort of handle. I've never seen it but he told me about it."

Dennis wondered if, in that first fight, Pickering had managed to get it away from Maxwell getting a cut on the hand in the process and Maxwell responded by getting stuck in to him with his fists.

"So why did he kill Pickering if he was making money out of him?"

"He didn't mean to, just wanted to scare the pants off the useless bugger. And then he found he was dead. He asked me to do a favour for him, go in and check what was going on. Y'know, report it. But I told you I was in hospital, didn't I?"

Dennis nodded. "Go on."

"It'll be with me till I die, seein' that fella like that, all over maggots—"

He turned away and put his hands over his face. Dennis and John sat in silence then Dennis said, "So he took his shillelagh every time he went round to see Pickering?"

"I'd reckon so. He didn't mean to kill him."

"Well, John will charge you with aiding and abetting so you'd best go with him now."

"Can't. I'm busy."

"You will go to the station with Sergeant Applegarth and make a statement. *Then* you can come home and get on with your work."

In another man it might come over as merely conversational. With Dennis it was very clearly an order. Wagner shot him a nasty look but got up and went to the door. Dennis also got up and said under his breath to John, "Make sure he doesn't ring Maxwell. Give me an hour to get Sullivan out to the Maxwell farm."

They went out and John put Wagner into his car for the short drive to the station.

Dennis then rang Winville and as Greg had gone on home he asked Petra Moore to meet him at the gate to the Maxwell farm, preferably with Greg. When she said, "What on earth for?" He said, "To arrest a murderer," and hung up. Then he rang Grant and asked him to come out and wait at the gate. It would be their bad luck to find Maxwell away but if he was Dennis wanted that farm scoured for that 'shillelagh'. Not that scouring the farm would be a pleasant occupation but someone in the family must have some idea where he kept it.

Then he left John Applegarth to take Mr Wagner's statement and got on the road. It was twilight by the time he parked near the Maxwell gate. Grant got out of his own car and came over. "What do we do now?"

"No sign of Greg or Petra?"

"No."

"Then we give them time to get here. I'd rather have back-up."

It was more than ten minutes before another car drew up and Greg Sullivan got out. "Have you gone mad, Dennis?" was his greeting.

"No. Burt Wagner is Greg Maxwell's cousin. Maxwell killed Pickering and got his cousin to be the one to come in and report it."

"Says you."

"Well, let's go and see what Maxwell has to say."

Greg reluctantly followed in the wake of the Buckton cars. Dennis always scared him with the way he could jump to conclusions. But he hadn't known the two men were cousins and he privately admitted that if he had known that he might have been less trusting about Wagner. Only might.

Lights were on in both the house and the big trailer home. Greg got out and was immediately struck by the smell from the rotting rubbish dumped by the side of the track. Dennis got out and debated on where Maxwell was most likely to be. "He used to live in the caravan so we'll try there the first."

They needn't have worried. Greg Maxwell appeared out of the gloom, stuffing a dirty rag into a pocket. "What're you bastards doing here!"

Dennis didn't immediately answer and Maxwell said louder, "Well, what the hell is going on?"

"Paul Pickering, Mr Maxwell."

"So? The bastard's dead and good riddance."

"Yep. He is dead. You hit him with your wire cosh and punched him to the floor and walked out and arranged with your cousin Burt Wagner to come in and pretend to find him. He was very convincing but not convincing enough."

The three police standing there waiting half-expected Maxwell to vigorously deny this. So none of them were prepared for Maxwell to suddenly charge at Grant Schroeder. Possibly he thought Grant as the slightest in comparison with overweight Sullivan and big solid Walsh to be the easiest to attack and get a head-lock on. And Maxwell, though at least fifty, was a big fit man.

But as Greg Sullivan later told his wife, "You wouldn't believe it, that kid was cool as a cucumber the way he just got him in a judo hold and tossed him right over. Maxwell looked like he didn't know what hit him. I've never seen anything like it."

Dennis hadn't either. And as Maxwell got up he also thought that charging Maxwell with attacking a police officer might not wash. Police probably weren't supposed to try out their judo on suspects.

As Maxwell slowly got up, mouthing obscenities, Dennis said, "Gregory Maxwell, I am arresting you on a charge of murder." He thought they might bring it down to manslaughter but that wasn't up to him. He cautioned him, cuffed him, and with Grant's help shoved him into Sullivan's car and strapped him in. Greg looked extremely worried. "You mean I have to take him?"

"I can take him if you want but I'd rather hunt around for that barbed-wire cosh this joker used on Paul Pickering. Then you'll have your murder weapon."

Greg gave him a dying duck look as he got in his car and drove away with his unwelcome passenger. Dennis and Grant went over to the house and knocked. In a minute or two Diane Maxwell peered out. "What's going on? What're youse doin' here?"

"We've arrested your husband for the murder of Paul Pickering and sent him to the watch house in Winville. Now we need your help in finding that barbed wire thing he hit him with."

Buckton's incumbents had usually found Diane Maxwell less than helpful but now she said, "You've really arrested him an' taken him away?"

"We have."

"He keeps it up in the sheds somewhere, I dunno where."

"Then we'll be back first thing in the morning to start looking. So do what you can to help, think where you've seen it."

"I never seen it, only when he used it."

"On you?"

"He used it to scare us, that's what he did."

"Okay, do some thinking and we'll see you in the morning."

“And—you’re not kiddin’ me, he really is gone?”

“He really is.”

She seemed to relax and a slight smile came to her lips. Someone had told Dennis Diane Maxwell had been beautiful when she was young. As she smiled, and he thought it was the first time he’d seen her smile, he caught a vestige of that lost beauty.

\*

Over the next couple of days Grant spent every spare moment out at the Maxwell farm searching. He knew police sometimes had to search through people’s rubbish bins but this was ten times worse. He was a tidy person himself and he wondered how anyone could live in this squalid mess. Paul Pickering’s house had been dirty but it was this sense of deliberately choosing to keep all your rubbish around you rather than dispose of it that he found strange. He went through every aspect of the first shed without finding anything. Except, as he told Dennis, “I think some of Paul Pickering’s machinery might still be on the Maxwell farm.”

“Could be. In that case it makes up part of his estate. We didn’t look to see what Wagner had. I’d best get John to check.”

On the third morning Dennis came out with him, first to look at the machinery, then to help look for that shillelagh.

He walked around with his two lists, one of Pickering’s will, the other his list of sales in his buried box. “But I think we’re also going to have to check with those invoices to see if there’s anything that he bought but isn’t sold and isn’t on his list for his will.”

They finally found the weapon, invisible on top of a rafter. Grant up a ladder had seen something and climbed down and moved the ladder and climbed up again. He showed it to Dennis down below and said, “I think this is it.”

“Stay up there and get a photo of it there, then bring it down and we’ll get some more pics from down here.”

The thing when brought down was a vicious-looking weapon made of various bits of barbed and plain wire bound together with thinner wire, perhaps picture wire. The brown stain on several of the barbs just might produce a reaction to blood.

Mrs Maxwell came and looked at it as they carefully wrapped it for the trip to Winville. Then she said, “How will we manage?”

“Ask the priests and Nanci Coleman from the childcare centre to help you.”

“Will he go to prison?”

He could see clearly she didn’t want Greg Maxwell back. “Did you ever try to leave him?”

“Would you—when he’d come after you with that thing?”

“Did he ever hit the kids with it?”

“Dunno.”

“Then you’d better do some hard thinking, Mrs Maxwell, because if he ever used that on the kids I want to know about it.”

She might want her husband gone but it didn’t mean that she really wanted to help the police. He said more grimly, “I mean it, Mrs Maxwell, child abuse is a crime.”

And as he drove back to Buckton with Grant he said, “I’ll bet she knows lots she’ll never tell us.”

Grant thought this was probably true. But just at the moment he was experiencing a sense of elation. They had shown up Winville, he had sent the man everyone was scared of flying, and he had found the weapon Maxwell had used.

\*

The Buckton Agricultural and Horticultural Society had spent a bit of money on greening the show ring. It didn’t bring more people in but it made the show more pleasant for everyone who did come.

Fiona was there to judge the flowers and the Miss Showgirl competition along with Dotty Simpson from Dinawadding and a Mrs Tippett from Pittsworth. Jenny Applegarth who had only entered because someone had told her they needed more entrants was surprised to win.

Fiona had said very firmly to Dennis a week ago that she had booked their plane tickets to Townsville and the mysterious elsewhere and “if you haven’t solved the Pickering case Greg and

Petra will just have to soldier on without you". She had the feeling that he was relieved to have the decision taken out of his hands. "So you'll just have to arrange with Jake Moss to send someone out—and if Jake complains you will just have to be firm with him."

Though Inspector Moss was unlikely to complain. He was more likely to use it as an excuse to come and spend an occasional day in Buckton to see Susan Denby.

The children had brought their ponies to the show though without expecting anything more than a placing or two—and Elise was delighted to win the children's bending race. It was Brent Kelly, though, who stole the show. He had brought Sir Ned and Lady Luck. Sir Ned was showing his age, the hollows above his eyes deepening and lacking a little in zest but he still jumped a careful clear round. Lady Luck, though, her coat gleaming a beautiful red-gold won Brent a hack class and then jumped like an Olympic hopeful. Lyn Harding had brought two young horses for the experience but they couldn't beat her former champion mare.

Several people, including Dennis and Leila Burkett, wondered if she had ever regretted selling the mare. If she did nothing showed on her face and her congratulations to Brent seemed unexpectedly warm. Dennis had seen Brent lurch from one dating disaster to the next but it was hard to picture him fancying Lyn Harding. She was considerably older for starters and 'one tough cookie' in most people's estimation. Still, that was their business and after catching up with his children and taking the bag of things they had bought through the day and the two ribbons they had won he went on around to the makeshift bar by the pepper trees on the east side of the grounds. George Johnson was there with a temporary barman from Winville. "Hot work keeping an eye out, Dennis?" George drew him a beer and accepted payment. Then he said, "I hear you're off next week."

"I am. I need a break."

"Yeah, but I wouldn't think Sydney'd be very restful."

"We're off to Townsville not Sydney."

"That's not what I heard."

"You think I don't know where I'm going for my holidays?"

George gave that a grin. "If you say so. But I'll want to hear all about Sydney when you get back." Then he gave a snort of laughter and turned away to serve another thirsty patron.

Dennis wondered if something had got muddled along the way as he went back to the car and put the children's things in. Leila Burkett would take the ponies back to their paddock later and Fiona would bring everything else home in her car.

In the evening he said, "George seems to think we're going to Sydney. I said it was Townsville. I wonder where that idea got started."

"The children, I expect." Obviously one or both of the children had not been able to resist sharing their exciting news.

"Looks like they've got it muddled. There's nothing to do in Sydney, just get pushed around by a lot of strangers."

"After you've taken them to the zoo, on a Manly ferry, to the museum to see the dinosaurs, maybe to a beach, you might think differently."

"So that *is* the surprise?"

"I'm afraid it has ceased to be surprising. But don't let on to them. And I've been meaning to ask you—what put you on to Greg Maxwell?"

It was always hard to explain how little things could niggle. "Nobody seemed to know where or how Pickering was selling on his machinery. Seemed a bit odd to me. And Sorenson told me when Pickering came to him years ago for an infected cut that he'd done it on fencing wire. Well, there was no fencing wire on the property and he never did anything to his fences. Sorenson thought he'd been in a fight as he had bruises. It just sort of twigged. Maxwell was a fencing contractor. He went all over the place. So maybe he was the one selling on the machinery. And Wagner's story about doing Pickering's roof just didn't add up." His explanation didn't really sound convincing.

"And once Pickering had started that arrangement he couldn't opt out even though Maxwell was probably diddling him. Wagner said Maxwell always took round that barbed-wire cosh



whenever he went to see Pickering. The only way he could've got out of it was by stopping buying more machinery and he didn't seem able to rein himself in."

"Or—he could've come to you."

"He did need help, I guess, but he wouldn't have taken it from me. I can't think of anyone he would've listened to."

"I know he wasn't a nice man and he didn't treat those poor girls—or his wife—properly, but it still is sad."

He didn't want to be asked to feel sorry for Paul Pickering so he said, "Did you see Mrs Whatsaname there at the show?"

She smiled. "I saw quite a few Mrs Whatsanames there."

"No. I mean the dame we bought Benbow from."

"Oh! No, I didn't see her. Did she speak to Rob, do you know?"

"He hasn't said anything." But then Rob tended to keep things to himself. She thought in that he took after his father.

\*

DSS Sullivan didn't see the end of the Pickering case as either sad or successful. He was faced with the knowledge that he had done the bare minimum. The only comfort in that was that his deputy had also thought it was likely to have been an accident.

But he did the paperwork conscientiously and interviewed Maxwell with all the calm he could muster. Maxwell had refused to admit to anything, even to having anything to do with Paul Pickering. But he couldn't explain what a combine harvester was doing on his property as he grew and baled lucerne, not grain.

And the tests on that fearsome shillelagh came back with the information that it was human blood on the barbs. Getting a match with Paul Pickering might not be possible given the lack of material to work with. But Greg Maxwell was placed in the invidious position of having to claim it must be his own blood because saying it was his wife or children would take him from one horn of the dilemma to the other.

Greg took Petra Moore with him when he went to interview Diane Maxwell. He hoped she would say something which would strengthen their case against her husband. He had been refused bail but the case was still not watertight. Greg was not particularly hopeful. From what he knew of Diane Maxwell helpfulness was not her main characteristic. And true to form she said she knew nothing and couldn't help them.

"So you want your husband back, Mrs Maxwell?" Petra Moore said drily. "But there's no guarantee you'll get him back."

"Course I don't want the bastard back!"

"Well, you'll have him back if we don't get a conviction." Petra Moore was trying hard to sum Mrs Maxwell up and finding it surprisingly hard.

"Nah, you can keep him."

"Doesn't work like that, Mrs Maxwell." Petra was still trying to decide whether there were buttons to press. Greg found himself wishing he could leave this farm and never return. "So what was your relationship with Paul Pickering?"

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Did you know Paul Pickering?"

"A bit."

"How was that?"

"When Greg took his stuff, I'd drive the car home."

"Did you like Paul Pickering?"

"He was okay."

Greg was wondering why his deputy was pursuing this line. It didn't seem likely this woman would feel sorry for Pickering. But he was content to leave her to run with the thread.

"You liked him?"

"Dunno. He got lots of girls there."

"And your husband was jealous?"

"Dunno. Pickering'd tell him all about them. They never sounded any good."

“D’you think Paul Pickering liked you? Though it doesn’t seem very likely ... ”

“Course he liked me. Why shouldn’t he?”

“He had problems with your husband, it looks like he was scared of him, so he wouldn’t mess with his wife.”

“That’s what you think.” Mrs Maxwell seemed to find this all a bit convoluted but she obviously wanted to suggest that Paul Pickering liked her. Was it just her vanity showing or the fact that not many men would go for her overweight blowsy figure?

“Why should he be interested in you when lots of attractive young women came to his house?”

“Cause I’m better.”

“Are you? And did your husband mind you fancying Paul Pickering?”

“None of your business.”

Greg now could see what she was getting at. He intervened to say quietly, “Did your husband ever say anything about Paul Pickering being dead?”

“Said he was glad the bugger was dead.”

“When was this?”

“Dunno.”

“Before Pickering’s body was found?”

“S’pose so. It wasn’t nice to leave Paul like that.”

“He was a good-looking man, wasn’t he?”

“Yeah. And Greg said he wouldn’t be when the maggots’d finished with him.”

“But Greg went away quite a lot.”

“So?”

“Mrs Maxwell,” Greg went on, “I’m sorry about Paul Pickering if you had a relationship with him but would you be willing to tell the magistrate what you’ve just told us, about the maggots?”

“S’pose so. Just tell me what you want me to say.”

“It doesn’t work like that. What you say to the magistrate, Mrs Maxwell, has to be the truth.”

She said she could tell them lots of things about her husband, just so long as they kept him locked up.

“Thank you, Mrs Maxwell, we’ll arrange to do a formal interview with you later this week.”

She just shrugged and seemed to be glad to have the meeting at an end.

Greg and Petra had developed a reasonable if slightly wary working relationship though they didn’t socialise. He said non-committally, “So you think she had a relationship with Pickering?”

“I’m sure she did. You could see the way she softened when she said his name. Hard to see anyone wanting Pickering and his young women certainly didn’t but maybe compared to Greg Maxwell ... and was it their secret revenge?”

“There’s another thing—could any of the Maxwell children be Pickering’s?”

“That’d be running one heck of a risk.”

“But would it? They had pretty much the same colouring. Pickering was much better looking and younger. And Maxwell didn’t take any interest in his kids from what I’ve heard.”

“I don’t suppose it matters. If she and Wagner will testify, with the other evidence I think we’ve got him.”

Greg agreed. And then he said gloomily, “If it’d been left up to me Maxwell’d still be running round free, belting his kids and beating up on his wife.”

Petra Moore looked across at him and said with unexpected sympathy, “I know. It’s just as well Dennis didn’t listen to us.”

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# Book Sixty-Five

## Case No. 1: Where oh where has—

The town of Buckton on Queensland's Darling Downs was not the most pleasant place to be in mid-winter. Cold south-westerlies could sweep across the landscape. Children sniffled and snuffled. Fewer people came out to the pub for the evening.

Local sergeant Dennis Walsh had been around to see local solicitor Charles Mather, at the latter's request, because Mather was still trying to finalise the estate of local man Paul Pickering who had been killed several months ago. Charles Mather in many people's estimation was a 'sour old cuss' but he took his work seriously. And his private idea of tidying up and notifying his clients of his impending retirement had not yet happened. He seemed to have aged and sagged in the last couple of months.

"I've spent more time on this estate than almost anything else. They've told me that Ronald Pickering is the legitimate heir. So he is going to have to pay off Paul Pickering's debts."

"So what's your problem?"

"I've got two problems. A Mr Pidcock has won his case for compensation because he says Mr Pickering should have called the ambulance when his daughter got sick and he didn't."

Dennis had heard that Walter Thomas Pidcock had won his case because he had done a statement as to the time when Paul Pickering had rung the police to say Jayleen Pidcock was dead. The supposedly grieving father had asked for a hundred thousand dollars from the estate but Magistrate Kelso wasn't buying that. He had asked a long list of probing questions about the relationship between father and daughter, including, "Did you know your daughter was working as a prostitute?" To which Jayleen's father had found himself faced with a difficult answer. If he said 'no' it would imply father and daughter had little contact, so not the close loving relationship he had claimed; if he said 'yes' he would risk putting the magistrate offside.

"I knew she was just doing it on the short term. But she was a grown girl and I didn't interfere in her choices."

"Do you know why she was doing it?"

"To make a bit of money."

"In Buckton?" Kelso couldn't keep the surprise out of his voice.

"Why not? Lots of single guys there."

Walter Pidcock with money at last beckoning was slick and unexpectedly clever. Kelso could see very clearly that Pidcock would always have an answer when money was involved. "Are you certain your daughter only targeted single men?"

"I don't s'pose she asked those sorts of questions, up to them, I guess."

"Have you arranged to pay the tax on her earnings?"

"She didn't earn a lot."

"Did you take anything of your daughter's earnings?"

"Of course not!"

"So how has her death disadvantaged you?"

"I'm never going to see my little Jay ever again—and all because he couldn't be bothered to get help for her." He put a lot of spurious emotion into this.

"Was your daughter capable of ringing for an ambulance herself?"

"She couldn't. He kept the phone locked."

Walter Pidcock had learned this from talking to people in the pub in Buckton. And it seemed to be the thing that swayed Kelso. Ordinary citizens, in his experience, didn't lock their

phones. He ended up granting Pidcock \$20,000 from the Pickering estate—but with the caveat that he couldn't claim until the estate was finalised and the farm sold.

Dennis said, "Well, I guess you'll have to see what's left—or does he go to the top of the list?"

"That's one problem. He has to be paid but he can't be paid until the farm is sold and people don't want to buy it because it's in a mess and has a bad reputation."

"So what's the other problem?"

"It is Diane Maxwell. She claims her youngest son is Pickering's child and therefore deserves to get something."

"Well, first she would have to prove that."

"I know, I know." Mather looked more harried than Dennis had ever seen him. "She reportedly went to Ronald Pickering and said the farm was hers and he told her to get lost. So now she wants me to sue him."

Dennis could see what a mess the whole thing had become. "What about the machinery? Can that be sold to pay off a few claims?" Several items of machinery had been found on the Maxwell and Wagner properties and returned unsold to the Pickering farm.

"I wish I knew. I have never sold machinery, only itemised it as part of an estate."

"Then what say you get Noel Barnard to take over the selling, he will know what needs to be kept for working that farm and how to sell the excess. And Pickering's car."

Mr Mather seemed to accept this suggestion. "I would like to retire but I can't retire until this mess is cleared up."

Dennis didn't feel called upon to commiserate and he went downstairs and over the road to the pub. He and Grant had done some more digging at the Pickering farm but had not found any more boxes to potentially throw more light on Paul Pickering's life. And going into the pub didn't cheer him up. Maryann Dillon was plonked on a bar stool downing a beer. He said to Pauline Scully behind the bar, "Since when has she been back?"

"Two weeks ago she came in. It's not as regular as it used to be but I don't think she should be drinking at all. Can you do anything?"

He doubted it. She didn't drink over the limit. She was rarely a nuisance.

"So what's happened to Smithies? I haven't seen him around in a while."

"He's in hospital. He's asked John to give him a quote. Then he'll sell up and go."

"Hospital here?"

"I think so."

He went over and drew a stool up beside Ms Dillon and said, "Still on the piss, Ms Dillon?"

"None of your business."

He didn't respond to that but just continued to sit there regarding her with his pale blue gaze. After a minute or two of this she began to look uncomfortable. "You can't do this to me."

"I'm not doing anything, just wondering why someone who's had cancer would be so stupid as to want the cancer back. But as you say that's your business."

"So go away!"

"But I think I should let Centrelink know that someone with a perfectly good farm shouldn't need a pension."

"You can't do that!"

"Why not?"

"I need that money!"

"For grog. Yep. And I don't see why the taxpayer should keep you in grog."

She suddenly looked frightened. "You can't do that." It had little conviction in it. Dennis Walsh *could* get on to Centrelink. She pictured nasty men with clipboards coming round to go over the farm and ask why she wasn't making any money from it. Her uncle and aunt had had a thriving piggery. She only had thriving weeds.

"I can. But you're the one that's got to make the hard decisions. Sell that farm to someone who will look after it. Invest your money and live off it. Give up the grog and come in here and have a soft drink if you want the company."

She looked away and didn't make any response.

But a week later Pauline told Dennis with a kind of disbelief in her voice, “You know what? She’s actually asked John to sell her farm for her.”

“Good. And tell her to go in to the bank and get some good investment advice—or she can come and talk to Fiona and Karen.”

Dennis’s wife Fiona Greehan had begun the small financial advice business with Karen Dalton. Fiona now had a publisher for her financial thriller and was letting Karen Dalton and Ruth Drexler do more of the day-to-day work. It seemed to be working out well.

“But she’s still drinking beer. I said she would enjoy a creaming soda and she said, no, she wouldn’t. And I can’t force her to cut back on the grog.”

Dennis and various other people had hoped that Maryann, denied alcohol while she was in hospital, would stay ‘dry’. It had proved a forlorn hope. “I’ll have another go at her when she has the farm sold. Has she got her eye on a place?”

“She wants to buy Bertha Grundy’s house. That was a bit sad. The vet came up and took all those cats away and put them down because no one wanted all those mangy old things.”

“Well, let’s hope she looks after it if she buys it.” Bertha Grundy had died a month ago and her pleasant weatherboard house behind the primary school was up for sale. Bertha had got someone in once a month to tidy and garden and prune her trees. There was no guarantee that Maryann would bother to do anything.

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Fiona was still faintly disbelieving that she had managed to finish her novel and even more surprised that a small publisher in Brisbane had snapped it up. Of course they wouldn’t be able to run a big marketing campaign but she didn’t mind. And if it did reasonably well she thought she would re-publish her financial textbook.

But she had a different writer in mind when she brought Dennis up-to-date one evening. “Did you know Robin Warrender is back in town?” He hadn’t known. “The Chandlers are moving to Toowoomba, to St James, and he’s helping them pack up. But he’s heard about the Pickering case and thinks he would like to try writing a true crime study. I don’t know if you can talk to him before Greg Maxwell’s trial comes up.”

“It’s not that. He can go to the trial, he can ask to interview Maxwell, all of that. But it’s the business with the farm that’s going to drive a few people up the wall.”

Fiona had heard people gossiping about Diane Maxwell trying to wrest the farm away from Ronald Pickering. “Because of Diane Maxwell?”

“Her, for starters. She went back around there and he found her in his house and told her to get out unless she wanted to be paid for cleaning it and she said it was hers and he’d better get out and when he told *her* to get out she socked him, knocked him down, and asked if he’d like to feel her fist again. He came in and asked me to charge her.”

He had caught up with her while she was cleaning at St Monica’s and charged her with assault. He had also told her Ronnie Pickering could have her up for trespass. She had merely snorted and said, “Tell me another!” He had pointed out to her she had no right to go on to Pickering’s farm, that she had no claim on the estate, and that the estate had to be sold to pay off all Paul Pickering’s debts. This had merely flowed over her and she said it was her farm because her son had every right to it.

“Doesn’t work like that, Mrs Maxwell. Paul Pickering kept a list of all his lovers and you are not on that list. So first of all you have to prove you committed adultery with Paul Pickering. Then you have to prove your son is Pickering’s child, not your husband’s. Then, because all children born to a married couple are legitimately theirs you will have to discuss with your husband your wish to have his son given a different father. So go away and do your homework and don’t go near Pickering’s farm again—and you’ll get your summons for assault.”

Mary Davidson had been listening to all this. Now she intervened to say quietly, “Diane, my dear, you will need to show that you live an irreproachable life if you wish to continue to work here.”

Dennis wasn’t sure that Mrs Maxwell knew what irreproachable meant but he wasn’t surprised when Diane Maxwell said bluntly, “I don’t need your bloody job—so you can give me

me pay an' I'll be off!" She turned back to Dennis and said, "And you can go to hell, you bloody bastard!"

When Mrs Maxwell had gone out, Mary Davidson said to Dennis, "I gave her the job because I felt sorry for her and I thought she needed it. She told me her husband gambled."

"Not as far as I know. He certainly gave her and the kids a hard time. But her own behaviour towards her children wasn't the best. And that farm of theirs could be a really good farm if they got rid of all the rubbish and farmed it properly. Someone like Luke Molloy could turn it into a showplace."

"I've never been to their farm."

"Then perhaps you should?"

She didn't respond to this. "I don't like to be nosy," she said in her gentle saintly way, "but do you really think she was having a ... relationship with Paul Pickering?"

"No. I think she fancied him. He was a very good-looking man, you know. But she would be taking a very big risk if her husband found out. And Paul Pickering had a stream of young attractive girls from overseas that he had tricked into believing he could offer them farm work in a sort of farm work program."

He always felt awkward talking with Mary Davidson and more so when it was about the more sordid aspects of life. She always gave the impression of someone who lived on a higher plane than ordinary mortals.

He said something of this to Fiona and then he said, "It gets worse."

She was sorry he could not have distanced himself from the whole mess once Greg Maxwell had been charged but she could see that it was a mess which refused to leave him alone.

"Noel sold a couple of things for Ronnie Pickering and gave him the money and Ronnie complained that Noel hadn't got enough for it and that he'd charged too much commission—"

"Noel? I can't believe that."

"I told him not to do it for peanuts—but I'll bet he did. But the thing is—Ronnie then gave the money to Pidcock to get him off his back. But that made Mather upset because Pidcock as part of his case was told he couldn't get his twenty thousand till the farm was sold. And Mather said it all should have gone into some kind of special account—"

"Escrow?"

"Could be. And so they're blaming Noel. But at least Pidcock is gone and I don't s'pose the court will get after him."

"Poor Noel."

"He said he wouldn't deal with Ronnie any more and Ronnie said he wouldn't buy petrol there any more." Noel had also found Pickering's camera under the seat of his pick-up. Police had taken everything out of the glovebox but hadn't seen the camera. There was no film in it and Noel had sold it to a customer. Ronald Pickering thought his should've been the final decision and that Noel should've asked for more.

"And what is happening with the other debts, the ones to the banks?"

"Ronnie says he's still trying to sell the farm and then they can fight over it. I guess they'll bring in—what—an auditor? Something like that to sort it out."

"And—has he got the farm tidied up? The house cleaned?"

"I guess so. No one'd buy it the way it was."

"And if there *was* any money left over—I think something should go to all those poor girls Pickering tricked in to coming out there."

"Bit like getting blood out of a stone. Still, at least, I'll never need to rescue any more girls."

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DSS Sullivan from Winville called in to the station in Buckton one afternoon. He said he'd just been to a funeral in Oakey. That might explain the air of doom and gloom which enclosed him but he said over a mug of tea, "Have you heard from Doug's team?"

"Nope. Why?" Doug Towner's trial for killing Sandra Hoysted had an October date.

"The bastard asked me to be a character witness for him. I said no. He had a go at me then, said I'd never had any issues when I worked with him so he expected me to get up and say that."

"But you'll be called by the prosecution, won't you?"

“Don’t know. And that’s going to be even worse. I thought of retiring and going to, heck, somewhere they can’t find me—”

“North Korea?”

“Yeah, somewhere like that. But Narelle wasn’t fussed. Or I could have a heart attack.”

“Don’t think they come on demand.”

“No. But I reckon I could do a pretty good job of pretending, I’m that stressed.”

“Well, you could be a character witness for Doug and tell everyone what a lazy useless corrupt bastard he was—”

“And have his mates come round? Sure.”

“Hard to say but I think he might be running out of mates.”

“Don’t you believe it, those Fergusons, Plowmans, whatever they were, they’re still around. Jake even caught one of them for breaking into shops, they tracked him to Brisbane because someone got a number for the car outside one place, then he’d moved and they took a while to find where he’d gone.”

Dennis had heard Winville had caught someone. He was the one who had suggested there might be a connection as the business which had lost the most was the Gifts Galore shop which had been the property of the young Plowman relatives who had upped and gone to Victoria. But if Jake had got someone then that was one less thing to worry about. Jake said it was a Glen Moberley and it looked like he thought a country town would be easy pickings, less security, less CCTV. Dennis accepted this, but not entirely. Why the focus on Gifts Galore? And although they had recovered some electrical items they had not found anything gone from Gifts Galore. So he passed the name on to DI Payne. The man just might be a Plowman relative.

“So what’s that got to do with Doug?” Dennis was well aware that the Plowman family just might do something to abort the trial. After all, Doug was a relative and he had been very useful to them over the years. It just depended on whether they thought they would be better off without Doug ... after all, his usefulness to them had just about run out ... in which case he would be abandoned without a qualm ...

“Strewth, mate, don’t you ever wonder what they’re up to?”

“Not if I can help it. So has Carl Payne been on to you?”

“Nope.”

“Has anyone—apart from Doug?”

“Nope.”

“That’s a bit strange, isn’t it?”

Put like that, it did seem strange. They must surely have their list of witnesses pretty well finalised. “Maybe they’re waiting to see if Doug talks me into being a witness for him?”

“Then they must be monitoring his phone calls or something? Or have you told everyone about Doug asking you?” Doug was on bail and left to live in his Gold Coast mansion. They probably thought that was easier than dealing with a disabled man on remand. And there was still no word on the civil case brought by the two young Hoysteds.

“It’s no bloomin’ secret.” Greg seemed to drop down into total gloom. “Everyone there knows.”

“I think you need some legal advice. Or maybe talk to Payne.”

“He took the Millers away, don’t know where he’s stashed them. You think he might like to stash me away somewhere?”

It didn’t seem very likely. “Haven’t you got your long-service-leave coming up?”

“Yeah, but not till January. That’s when we decided to go.”

“Has Ali Deane been called, Ali Hassan?”

Greg obviously hadn’t thought of this. “Don’t know. But she was junior. It’s okay for her to say she did what she was told. It’s not okay for me—”

“You were still junior to Doug.”

“S’pose I was.” The thought brought no comfort. “It’s like that Nuremberg thing, you know, saying you were just following orders. Doesn’t excuse you.”

“It does in the police. Well, up to a point. And Doug’d had a lot of practice in pulling the wool over people’s eyes. That’s a thought. Are they going to call that Granville Jones that worked with Doug in Mt Isa?”

“Haven’t a clue.”

“Are they going to let Sam Hoysted out to testify?”

“Haven’t a clue.”

“Then I think it’s about time you start to do your own private investigating—instead of behaving like some poor bloody steer on its way to the abattoir.”

Greg understandably didn’t find any comfort in that. He heaved himself to his feet and said, “You’re a fat lot of use.”

Dennis Walsh only gave that a grin.

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Ordinary things went on. Traffic accidents. Break-ins. Vandalism. Arguments that got out of hand. As well as the more peaceful jobs like witnessing documents. Dennis by the time he got home most evenings felt he had put in a full day and there was always the possibility of being called out at night. Grant was increasingly capable and confident but there were some things too big for one man to handle.

He plonked himself on the sofa and put a cushion under his head and his feet over the other end and closed his eyes briefly. The children were still outside with their various pets. Fiona came in and sat down on the edge of the sofa. “Tiring day?”

“I had Greg in having a moan. He’s certain he’s going to be made to look a prize idiot with this Doug business.”

“Because he didn’t look closely at what Doug was doing when he charged Sam Hoysted? But surely that won’t be relevant to Doug’s trial? Won’t it focus on the evidence that will convict Doug ... and then they can go back and enquire into Sam Hoysted’s conviction?”

“You’re probably right. But Sam’ll still sort of be there.”

“The elephant in the room? Yes, I can see that. But Greg only has to focus on the things that link Doug to Sandra’s death. I know that sounds simple and it probably isn’t. But do you think they’ve got enough evidence to convict without needing Greg?”

He took one arm that he’d had around her waist away and held up his fingers. “Well, one, they’ve got the Millers who looked after the house, don’t know how much they did while Sandra was there, but they certainly saw her and Sam together. Don’t know just how they’re going to be used or maybe Carl just wants to keep them safe while Doug’s mates are still around. And then there’s the business with the hangar and the keys. Then there’s Sandra’s hair that was found in Doug’s shed. Then there’s Doug taking Sandra’s papers and not returning anything.”

“And Sandra saying she was going to complain about Doug stealing from the trust fund. Can they bring that in or will it be hearsay?”

“Unless we can find anything Sandra actually wrote down then, yeah, it’s only Kramer’s word, but they might let it in. Who knows. But that’s a thought. Why was Doug so keen to take Sandra’s papers away? Was he wanting to see if she *had* written anything to anyone? Maybe a draft letter or a carbon copy or something.”

“And if he found anything—what would he have done with it?”

“Destroyed it. Maybe. But I wonder if they’ve searched his house?”

She had seen it happen so many times before. Dennis apparently tired and rather despondent—and then suddenly with a new idea, a possible new line of enquiry, even a new insight, could appear magically re-energised. “I’d best check that with Greg.”

She got up and murmured something about dinner in half an hour.

But Greg Sullivan said he didn’t know if Doug’s house had been searched and he wasn’t going to go telling Carl Payne his business. No, Carl Payne probably would have thought of that. And Doug was probably too canny to just let incriminating papers sit around. But had he ever told anyone else or stored things somewhere else? A box of papers might even now be sitting in a cupboard in a Plowman house on the Atherton Tableland. Or around in his brother-in-law’s house in Brisbane.

“Greg, what if he called in a favour from one of the De Jongs?”



“I’d say they’re keeping their distance now.”

“Yeah, they always say you know who your friends are when you’re facing prison.”

“Well, if they imprison me for perjury or stupidity or something—I don’t want to see you—and I’ll tell Narelle to find a bloke with more brains.”

“Very funny.”

This sarcastic rejoinder wasn’t designed to cheer Greg up but, oddly, he thought he might be able to get through the next few months intact. And then he would start planning their long holiday away from Winville, from Dennis, from memories of Doug Towner ...

And it was Dennis who found his spirits plummeting next day when he received word he would be called as a prosecution witness. “I’d best refresh my memory,” he said gloomily to Grant. “It’s years since we found out about Doug’s shenanigans with the hangar and the keys.” Grant had heard Dennis going on about Doug Towner at various times but he didn’t pretend to understand the whole saga.

But he did see what Dennis was acutely aware of: that Doug Towner would garner pity rather than revulsion in court. He was old or at least he looked old, frail, disabled, apparently abandoned by friends and colleagues, in the present. The things he had done to destroy other lives were in the past and increasingly forgotten.

“Do you think people will feel sorry for Doug? Like the jury?”

“Some people will. But this is a man who sent another man to jail for a crime he himself did. And Sandra Hoysted was a nice woman who genuinely wanted the best for her stepsons. And he cleverly and cold-bloodedly set up her death and hid her body so that her mother and her family and her friends could not say goodbye to her. But I don’t know if they’ll give me a chance to say that.”

Dennis had been told that Grant was to be transferred and he had asked that it be deferred till after Christmas. This was partly so he would not have to be showing a new junior around while he was preoccupied with other issues and partly to give Grant and Stacey a chance to decide if they wanted to keep in touch. Presumably Stacey would leave Dinawadding and Buckton High at the end of the year and move on. But the two of them seemed to enjoy playing sport together.

And Grant had got the Youth Club up and running. It met once a week. And as soon as the idea looked like becoming reality a number of people, including Jon Derry, had come forward and offered their help. It hadn’t done much through the winter but with spring now here there were plans for various activities. Grant, of course, thought in terms of sporting activities and the Council had provided a grant to buy two ping-pong tables to be stored at the RSL hall. But people like Jon Derry could also see the need for somewhere friendly for teenagers to go. Young people could not drink in the pub and they couldn’t spend all their time in the café or the video shop. They needed a friendly place where they could come in and read comics or play Ludo or sit and chat; and more so if they did not have a very congenial home atmosphere. A genuine Community Centre was something to be thought about.

Fiona had said, “It’s a pity that Jenny Pym is too old for him and Stacey too young. But I think he’s been lucky to have two nice women in his life.”

Stacey had looked after Dennis’s house in Dinna, planted a vegetable garden, put up curtains, painted the bathroom, and in general been an ideal tenant. But he couldn’t see her wanting to stay on permanently. And she was a bright girl. She needed to do something more with her life than ‘play house’.

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Ronnie Pickering had put a padlock on his front gate. This was partly to keep his farm safe while he was over on his other farm but mainly to keep Diane Maxwell out. In thinking this he was being rather naïve. Dennis Walsh had told him he could take out a restraining order against Mrs Maxwell but he had little faith in the idea and had done nothing about it. Dennis also had never found AVOs particularly effective but he thought they would strengthen Pickering’s hand ... And Diane had been put on a Good Behaviour Bond for punching Pickering. This might or might not deter her from returning to Pickering’s farm ...

Pickering didn’t at first associate the car parked on the verge by the gate with her. He had come back to do some painting. He unlocked and drove through and relocked. But he grew uneasy

as he drove down. He had screwed a bolt and padlock to the front door but now it was standing open.

He wasn't a nervous man but he felt that whoever had broken in so brazenly might not be someone he would want to confront.

He parked away from the house and walked over quietly and went in. Diane Maxwell was there and she had made piles of items in the hallway. The few pictures Paul had had were leant up against the wall. Kitchen items. Ornaments. Some old magazines.

He said loudly, "What the heck are you doing here!"

She straightened up and said equally loudly, "This is my place an' I'm taking these things to look after 'em for my son—"

"Like hell you are!"

"This is my house an' my things an' you can get out! Go on! Get out!"

"This is my house—and you don't have a leg to stand on! So you get out!"

It might've gone on in this vein, Ronnie Pickering furiously angry with this blatant invasion, Diane Maxwell grim in her determination to get a place that was all hers, but as he stepped towards her Mrs Maxwell brought up one hefty arm and slammed a fist into his jaw. Pickering dropped like a stone. He was nearly seventy. He had never done any fighting apart from occasionally wrestling with a recalcitrant calf. And she had caught him unawares. He had not believed she would resort to physical force again.

She had brought a heavy chair into the hallway so as to lift down the one picture on the wall, an amateurish painting of a young woman with a bunch of flowers. Pickering's head thudded against a chair leg as he fell.

She said "Wow!" and then, "That'll teach you, you lousy bastard!" But as he continued to lie still she bent down and slapped his face. "Come on, get up." His eyes seemed to roll up into his head and she stepped back, suddenly disconcerted.

She looked round at the things she'd collected and thought she'd better get them out of the house and up to her car as fast as she could. The thought of telling the police had no appeal but she knew they would find her. They had been slow to get her husband but they had got there and now she would be their number one suspect.

She hunted round in the hope of finding the key to the padlock on the lane gate but without luck. She looked in his car but there were no keys in it either. It would be hard to get it off the place anyway, even if she could manage to smash down the gate, so she found an old wheelbarrow and took her goods, load by load, up to the gate and lifted everything over. By the time she'd got everything home and stowed away in a shed till she had time to decide what to keep and what to try and sell she was tired.

But it would look better if she went to the police with a sob story, not wait for them to come calling, and now that the Pickerings were gone she could still stake a claim to the farm.

When she told Dennis Walsh what had happened and that Ronnie Pickering had threatened her and she had fought back, she tried to sound the injured party.

"And what were you doing on Pickering's farm? You were *told* to stay away—" he stopped himself calling her the names that naturally rose to his mind.

"It's my farm, my son's farm, I've got every right to be there."

"*You have no right to be there!* The court requires that that farm be sold to pay off Paul Pickering's debts. Even if your son was Pickering's son—which he bloody well isn't—he would be responsible for those debts." He felt like crashing his head into something in his frustration. It was an effort to calm down and say, "So where is Mr Pickering now?"

"Where d'you bloody well think! On the floor, of course."

"Right then." He cautioned her and put her in his cell, where she kept yelling at him that it was self-defence, and rang Winville to ask that they send people and get on to Mason Watling.

Petra Moore said, "Are you sure? Maybe she only winded him?"

"I'm on my way out there now. I've charged her with manslaughter."

The idea that Diane Maxwell would come in as part of a gigantic hoax wouldn't wash. No Maxwell ever went to the police except in the most extreme circumstances. But he needed to go and get that gate open for starters. He called Grant and said, "I'll have to go out to the Pickering

farm. Mrs Maxwell says she's killed Ronnie Pickering. She's in the cell here. Keep an eye on her when you get back." Then he called Fiona and asked if she could come over and just sit in the station till Grant got back. She and Karen Dalton had been working on some accounts but she said she would.

He got his camera along with a pair of wire cutters and an axe. As Fiona came hurrying up the path he said, "Diane Maxwell's just killed Ronnie Pickering. Just sit there till Grant gets back."

Her eyes widened and she gave a small exclamation but she went on in and sat down. Mrs Maxwell at first yelled abuse at her but then changed tack and tried to wheedle her into opening the cell door, saying she wasn't feeling well and would need to see the doctor.

Fiona had never been so thankful to see Grant as that afternoon. He was calm and confident as he said, "Don't worry. I'll mind her till we can get her to Winville."

"I wonder what will happen to the children now?"

Once she would not have wished the State on to any child. She was not alone in believing that the State had often been negligent or even abusive in its role as substitute 'parent'. But now she wondered if becoming wards could really be worse than the childhoods foisted on them by Greg and Diane Maxwell.

"I guess Dennis will know what to do," Grant said.

"Probably." She gave that a slight smile. People, not least she and Grant, *did* expect Dennis to know what to do when faced with unexpected and even bizarre situations.

Dennis, faced with a padlocked gate, took out his equipment and eventually cut through the chain leaving the padlock dangling. He thought it would probably be best if he put his own chain and padlock on for the moment till a new 'heir' could be found. He could see a wheelbarrow tipped over in the grass and assumed it was something Diane had brought up, in which case, she had probably been helping herself to things when Ronnie Pickering found her. It would mean going out to the Maxwell farm again to try and find what she'd taken. The sense of anger and frustration which had overtaken him in the station grew up effortlessly again.

But he put his own feelings aside as he reached the house. Someone, and he assumed it was Mrs Maxwell, had prised off the lock on the front door. He nudged the door open with an elbow and stepped inside. Ronnie Pickering still lay unnaturally still on the floor. He bent for a non-existent pulse. "Poor bloody sod, he never knew what he was getting in to ..."

He stood a moment in silence then went carefully through the house in the hope of getting an idea on what was missing. Someone, probably Pickering, had given the house a bit of a clean but it still had a squalid look about it. It was a relief to come out in to the spring air again.

He rang Winville again and said, "Yeah, he's definitely dead. And I'd say Diane Maxwell's been helping herself to things from the house."

Greg said gloomily, "Well, Petra's on her way. Mason was in the middle of an operation and I didn't think you'd want Leslie Davis so you'll have to wait."

Greg was right in thinking he wouldn't want Leslie Davis. But he wondered if it might be worth trying to get Buckton's new doctor to come out? She could pronounce Mr Pickering dead. She might even be able to see an obvious cause of death. And she might like to watch Mason Watling when he came ...

He got Joanne at the surgery and asked if Dr Long would be able to come out to the Pickering farm. "Ronnie Pickering is dead but we'll need to have that official and Mason Watling is in the middle of an operation in Winville."

"Oh dear, poor man. Look, just hold on and I'll check with her." And a minute later she was back to say, "Yes, she can be on her way in ten minutes."

"Okay, tell her how to get here."

And Gillian Long was as good as her word, cautiously easing her car down the track only twenty minutes later and parking beside the police vehicle. She got out with her bag and came over to where he waited by the front door.

He took her inside and she knelt down cautiously beside the recumbent man. She tested for a pulse, put a hand on his chest, gently closed both eyelids. And looked up. "He's starting to stiffen. I'd say he's been dead at least four hours."

“Yep. I’d say that could be right. I’d reckon Mrs Maxwell took all the stuff she’d taken out of his house home first and stored it before she even thought of contacting us.”

“You mean,” her eyes widened, “someone killed him?”

“She said she punched him. But it might’ve been the fall—or even a heart attack or something, which killed him. Not up to me. I’ve charged Diane Maxwell with manslaughter. But it’ll have to wait on the post mortem to be sure.”

“I’ve never done a post mortem on anybody—”

“No, it’ll be Mason Watling in Winville. But he’s the best in the business so you might learn something from him—if he’d let you help.”

She wondered how many doctors doing autopsies he’d actually known but she wasn’t going to argue with him.

There was the sound of a car outside and a minute later DS Moore and DC Kelly came in. Dennis introduced them to Dr Long and said he had Diane Maxwell in custody.

“Diane Maxwell?” Petra Moore said in surprise. “But we’ve got Greg Maxwell on remand.”

“This is his wife. She told Ronnie Pickering that Paul Pickering was her son’s father—which is complete hooey—but she kept coming over here and telling Pickering it was her farm and telling him to get off the place. This time I’d say she went one step too far.”

Petra Moore stood there with heightened colour but only said, “So you’re sure this is Ronald Pickering?”

“Yep. Dr Long thinks he’s been dead at least four hours.”

Gillian Long nodded. “So do you need me to stay till Dr Watling gets here?” She was curious to meet him but on the other hand she still had a couple of patients back at the surgery.

Petra Moore was usually decisive. It was only ditherers like Greg Sullivan who ummed and ahhed. But now she looked to Dennis to make this decision for her.

“No. You can go, Dr Long. But thanks for coming. And I’ll let you know when he’s to be autopsied.”

He made it sound like a treat and maybe he saw it in those terms although most police only attended in the morgue if they couldn’t get out of it.

She said she’d appreciate knowing and went out. Dennis then said, “So what d’you want done with Diane Maxwell? Can you take her back with you?”

“It looks straightforward here,” Petra said coolly, “so I guess we won’t be long.”

“She was here pinching things, I’d say, so you’ll need to fingerprint the house and do that wheelbarrow up by the gate so you can back up the charges with theft. You’ll need to go to her farm and see what’s there.”

“We won’t know what’s rightfully hers—”

“Grant can help you. And there’s another thing. The kids. The older ones can mind the younger ones, they’re in their teens, but permanent arrangements’ll have to be made.”

After Dennis had driven away Petra let fly with some choice language, about Dennis’s cavalier attitude, about the failure of anyone to stop this rush of tragic events. Brent Kelly looked at her in surprise. “I don’t suppose anyone knew she was going to try to get this farm away from Ronnie Pickering,” he said mildly. His own relationship with Dennis had been very fraught at times but, contrarily, he didn’t like to hear Petra criticising Dennis.

“He knows all these people. He should’ve seen what was going on.”

Petra was senior to him so he hesitated to query this. “But I wonder why she suddenly claimed the farm was hers?”

“How would I know? She sounds pretty weird.”

They both stood there in silence for several minutes then Petra said, “We’d best get Reid to come and fingerprint the house tomorrow though I wonder if it’s really worth it, if she’s confessed.”

“I guess he thinks theft charges will strengthen the other charges—and show what her motive was.”

“Maybe.” She didn’t sound convinced. They both dropped back into silence.

A few minutes later there was the sound of another vehicle and they both went out, secretly relieved, to find Mason Watling getting out of the morgue van.

As he went in he slipped gloves on before turning on the hall lights. Then he stood for several minutes simply looking down at Mr Pickering. “Who has been here?”

“Dennis Walsh and Dr Long,” Petra said briefly. Time was getting on and she wanted to be away from this claustrophobic house and its body. Watling got down on both knees and gently lifted the man’s head. There was a very slight cut on the back of it.

“Did either of you move anything?”

They both said no.

“Good chance he hit his head on something ... but what? Look around the house for something portable with a fairly sharp edge.”

While they went away to search he took out a thermometer. It would be at least an hour before the body could be got to the morgue. Then he checked inside the man’s mouth. His false teeth were out of place. They might have moved when the man fell but there was also the possibility that he had been hit so hard the blow had displaced them slightly, particularly if the person hitting him had been slightly shorter.

He took several photos before removing both sets of teeth and putting them into a plastic bag.

Brent Kelly brought a heavy chair in and said, “I wonder if this was in the hall earlier on?”

The doctor took out a magnifying glass and ran it up and down all four legs. “Very likely. There is a hair caught here. It’s not a likely place to get a hair naturally. Where did you find the chair?”

“Outside the back door.”

“Right, pack it up and put it in the van. I’ll test it tomorrow.”

When they finally had the body carefully lifted into the van, Watling said, “Odd that there was nothing in his pockets. So you’ll need to check the car and all around the house. She may have helped herself to his wallet as well.”

When the van had gone they turned off the lights and closed up as best they could. The lane gate also was now only able to be pulled shut. “We’d best tell Dennis to come out with another padlock and a couple of keys,” Petra said rather snappily.

“Maybe Mrs Maxwell has the key to this padlock—if she took his wallet and things?”

“Maybe. But let’s just get her to Winville and Greg can take over.”

If Brent was surprised by this he didn’t show it. He had never heard Petra want to hand anything over to Greg. She was more likely to angle for more control over their cases—and especially what might be called ‘big’ cases.

Diane Maxwell said there was no way she was going to Winville and her ‘babies’ would be crying if she wasn’t there when they came home. DS Moore wasn’t fussed on trying to manhandle the solid weight of Mrs Maxwell into their car and she wondered if questions would be asked about the children.

“You should’ve thought of that this morning, Mrs Maxwell,” Dennis said grimly. “But Nanci Coleman has agreed to spend the night on the farm to keep an eye on the youngest.”

“Her!” Mrs Maxwell’s contempt was obvious. “She wouldn’t know the first thing about kids!”

“Doesn’t matter. You’re off to the watch house so you can do some hard thinking there.”

Mrs Maxwell then changed tack and said they had no right to go on to her farm when she wasn’t there to keep an eye on them. Dennis just repeated his comment about thinking of that before she killed Mr Pickering.

“Dr Watling thinks she may have stolen Mr Pickering’s wallet,” Petra said suddenly.

“Wouldn’t put it past her.” He brought out a pair of handcuffs and said, “Right.”

Petra Moore had had to handcuff the occasional person but she didn’t think she could have ever done it with the speed and skill Dennis Walsh brought to it. Mrs Maxwell started bellowing that he had no right to touch her. Dennis ignored this and said, “Right, she’s all yours. Get her a lawyer tomorrow. But I think you’d best keep her away from her husband.”

Greg Sullivan didn’t accept the Maxwell case with alacrity. The only good thing he could find about it was that it looked fairly straightforward. And when Mason Watling told them how and why Ronald Pickering had died they could finalise the charges.

Sergeant Walsh when he got home said, "I s'pose she abused you all the time you were there? Sorry about that."

"She did for a while and then turned around and said she needed to be let out because she was sick and when I didn't respond she said she had to leave so she could look after her little 'babies'. I didn't know how old her children were but as she looks nearly fifty I didn't think they could actually be babies."

"No. But it'll be another hassle finding what's best for them."

"Perhaps they could be fostered for a while?"

He thought about this but said, "It'd be a brave foster parent to take on a Maxwell child. Still, maybe there's some decent relatives somewhere. Diane came from a big family but most of 'em weren't exactly pillars of the community."

"And I wonder how she got so fixated on the idea she'd had an affair with Paul Pickering and her child was his child? Maybe she sort of lived a fantasy life?"

It was hard to connect Diane Maxwell with any kind of fantasy. "A lot of women fancied Paul Pickering—until they saw inside his house. And that's another thing. Now, Mather'll have to find a new heir."

Charles Mather predictably groaned when told Ronald Pickering had just been killed. "Are you quite sure, Sergeant?"

"Dead as a door nail," Dennis said grimly. "They're doing the post mortem this morning. So what about that son of his?"

"I will have to find out if Ronald Pickering made a will and, if so, what its provisions are. Until then," he said rather coldly, "there is no point in speculating."

After Dennis had gone on out to the farm with a padlock and keys, Charles Mather told Jess to try the most likely lawyers, "try Oakey first, and we'll have to find someone who knows his son's address. If not, you'll need to contact the Navy to see where the son is based."

"Do we know the son's name?" Jess wasn't sure whether this startling turn of events would make it easier or harder to finalise the estate.

"Pickering, of course. Oh! I see what you mean. No, he didn't name him, not unless I missed it."

This was an unexpected admission from her boss. Usually he was right and other people were wrong. "I'm sure someone over near Aubigny would know. He might've gone to school there. And maybe they can mind his other farm?"

"I'll leave it with you then."

Jess thought she would try Noel Barnard first. Noel was the sort of friendly chatty person who might've been told more about Pickering's life than anyone else. It wasn't fair that Pickering had later accused Noel of taking too much commission or something, Jess didn't know the details, but she couldn't imagine the Barnards taking advantage of anyone.

And Noel, true to form and after he had expressed astonishment at hearing Pickering was dead, said they'd invited Ronnie Pickering to have dinner with them and been told his son was Mathew Pickering and that he was based at Jervis Bay.

"But shouldn't it be the police that contact him to tell him his father is dead?" Jess said to her boss. "It is a police case."

"So it is. Well, tell Dinny Walsh where the son is and we can put the whole mess aside for the moment."

And when they found Pickering's lawyer and his will, if he had one, that person would be responsible for finding the son. And would that lawyer also be responsible for seeing that the debts Ronnie Pickering had inherited got paid? The trouble with all this was that it was unlikely Ronnie Pickering had changed his will as soon as he inherited his nephew's farm.

'Let's just hope his will expresses things in general terms, 'all I die possessed of', that sort of thing,' Charles Mather thought but didn't say.

Dennis when he got back to the station, leaving Greg Sullivan, Brent Kelly and Reid Strohling's new assistant, Kim Richards, to finish searching and fingerprinting, found Mary

Davidson waiting for him. It was the first time she had graced the station with her presence and he assumed something awful had happened around at St Monica's.

But she sat down and folded her hands in her lap and said, "It is all my fault. If I hadn't sacked Mrs Maxwell she would not have been around at the farm taking things to sell."

Dennis had had his own moments of wondering if he could have prevented Ronnie Pickering's death. Could he have been more forceful in telling Diane Maxwell to stay away? Should he have insisted Mr Pickering get a large savage dog? But whatever else he might think of Diane Maxwell as he hadn't thought of her killing Mr Pickering.

"Mrs Maxwell has a very nice farm. She had no need to steal from anyone. But Mrs Maxwell seems to think if she wanted anything questions of right and wrong didn't come into it. She thought she could get that farm away from Ronald Pickering if she created enough trouble for him. And maybe it would've worked. He wasn't a young man. He didn't particularly want all the worry and trouble with Paul Pickering's farm."

"So you think he might've given her the farm?"

She obviously hadn't seen the whole saga in this light.

"I told her the farm would have to be sold to pay all Paul Pickering's debts so if she claimed the farm she would become responsible for those debts—but she didn't take any notice. I think she was very good at not hearing anything that didn't suit her."

"I felt sorry for her," Mary Davidson said quietly. "I still feel sorry for her but for different reasons."

"The thing now is—what's to be done with the children?"

"Mrs Maxwell is Catholic though she rarely if ever came to Church. Her youngest boy is at St Monica's." She seemed to be trying to think it through as she spoke. "I can ask someone from the Church to step in ..."

The Maxwells' oldest boy, Johnny, was in a sheltered workshop somewhere, Dennis had never enquired where, just glad to have him gone. He was tempted to say, "Get Father Colgan to step in, he doesn't believe in birth control, five needy kids will be a doddle ..." but there was no point in putting Mary Davidson offside. He contented himself with saying "Good. That seems best." And even if Father Colgan had talked to the Maxwells about Planned Parenthood or the Billings Method there was no guarantee they would have taken the slightest bit of notice.

"We could arrange for them to be fostered, the younger ones, and the older ones might like to suggest ... something."

Dennis nodded. "And then there's the farm. We'll have to find someone to look after it."

She didn't see that as her responsibility and got up gracefully. "I won't keep you any longer."

He had sent Grant out to help search the Maxwell farm. He hoped that Grant's sharp young eyes would see things the Winville team had missed. Not that there was much of value on the Pickering farm, apart from machinery, to be pinched. But he hoped they would find Mr Pickering's wallet which might also contain various bits of personal information.

But all this planning and searching might end up going for naught. He had a ring in the early afternoon from Jake Moss to tell him Diane Maxwell was going to be returned home immediately. Her lawyer had come in, with legal 'fists' flying, to say she should never have been charged when no one knew how Ronald Pickering had died, her hysterical confession was meaningless, and she should never have been sent to the watch house while she had young children and animals to be cared for. "So she'll be home this evening," Jake said apologetically.

"Bully for her," Dennis said grimly. "So let's hope they've found all the stolen stuff on the Maxwell farm."

He immediately rang Grant and said, "How's it going?"

Grant was feeling hot and sweaty and tired. And frustrated. "We can't find the stuff. The place looks the same as when we were hunting for that wire thing Greg Maxwell used."

"The stuff must be there." Of course she could have buried it, taken it up a back paddock, put it under a ton of hay ... "You're going to have to go through all that rubbish. She could've shoved it in a few bags and just parked them with the other rubbish and you wouldn't know. Sorry, mate, but get going, she'll be home this evening."

Grant, by the time he got back to Buckton, looked like someone pulled backwards through a number of hedges. But the police Ford was packed solid with the stolen items.

“I don’t think I’ll be able to move for a week,” he said as he came in. “But I think we got it all, including the wallet and some keys.” He put them down on the counter. “But there’s another thing. There’s things in those bags that shouldn’t be there, I don’t reckon.”

“Stolen, you mean?”

“No. Toxic stuff. I think you’ll need to take a look.”

Dennis felt like giving out a long groan. He had often wondered how one family could generate so much rubbish and why they were opposed to leaving it at the Darbin Road tip. Now, perhaps Grant had found the answer. Maybe Greg Maxwell was taking in things the tip would not accept. Taking them in for a consideration. A favour. Or to use against someone ...

## *Case No. 2: The Farm from Hell*

Sergeant Walsh offered his junior the chance to come over to his house and soak in a hot tub. But Grant Schroeder, though tempted, said he would be okay. He would write it up if Dennis wouldn’t mind bringing in the rest of the stuff from the car. By the time it was all stowed away in the interview room to be sorted and labeled in the morning and Dennis had rung Kieran Dobbs from the DPI and Lindsay Holt from the Council’s Waste Management office to arrange for them to come to the Maxwell farm in the morning he thought he’d be ready to put his feet up too. Grant rang the Carbonis’ little restaurant to see if they could bring a pizza to him as he was too tired to go to them. And he hoped fervently no one would ring at midnight to say there was a bad smash out at Prickly Creek.

When they got to the farm in the morning they found the front gate padlocked. “What d’we do now?” Lindsay Holt was unenthusiastic about the morning’s excursion and secretly hoped he could now turn around and go back to Buckton.

“We climb over.” Dennis still had the wire cutters and other equipment in the boot but he didn’t want to give Diane Maxwell’s lawyer any excuse to say police had entered illegally. He wondered who in Winville she had got to come out swinging for her.

The three men set out on the trek up through the paddocks. Half way up, Holt said, “Phew! What’s stinking? Dead animals?”

“God knows,” Dennis said simply. It was likely to be a very unpleasant morning but it might satisfy his curiosity. Had the Maxwells been content to live surrounded by rubbish because there was a monetary advantage in living surrounded by rubbish? And how toxic was their rubbish?

Some of the rubbish was still bagged up; elsewhere Grant or someone had set out rows of tins, boxes, bottles, drums and bags. Dennis handed latex gloves to the other men and said, “Go for it,” then he walked on up towards the house. To his surprise, Nanci Coleman came out to meet him.

“What is happening?” She looked down the track to the other men and then back at him.

“How come you’re here?”

“I came out as soon as all the children had been picked up from childcare and brought the two youngest with me. But Diane turned up about six. I said I could go on home now that she was here but she asked me to stay because she said, for sure, the police would be back to hassle her. Is that why you’re here?”

“You can thank her lawyer to have her back here. I can’t do anything about that. We removed a number of items she stole from Ronald Pickering yesterday but I’ve brought Kieran and Lindsay because there’s a good chance the Maxwells have been making money by storing some toxic waste.”

Mrs Coleman looked startled and raised a hand to her mouth. “You mean—there’s poisons in those bags?”

“Could be.”

“I always wondered why she wouldn’t let me do anything about the rubbish.”

“There’s things the tip here won’t take.”



“You mean—like radioactive things?”

“More likely to be dangerous chemicals.” There was a place in Winville which took things like sump oil but there might be people who didn’t want to go to so much trouble and Greg Maxwell had kindly offered to take it off their hands—for a consideration.

He looked around. “So where is Diane?”

“She went out early with the kids. But when I went to leave I found she’d padlocked the gate. I rang Kate to say I couldn’t get in till I’d found a way to get the gate open. I was just up at the shed to see if I could find something to get the padlock off with.”

“We climbed the gate but if you’d like to drive down, I’ve got wire cutters so we should be able to let you out. D’you know where she’s gone?”

“I thought she was taking the kids to school extra early but as she hasn’t come back ... ”

As he went down in Nanci Coleman’s car he pondered on where Mrs Maxwell might have gone. “She didn’t say anything about going to relatives or something?”

“No-o-o ... but she kept saying that Paul Pickering’s farm was her farm.”

“When did she start saying that?”

Nanci pondered on this a while before saying, “I’m not sure but I think it was soon after you arrested her husband. She started telling me how she’d had this amazing affair with Paul Pickering. I said I didn’t believe her. The only time she’d ever mentioned him before that was to say what a useless lazy slob he was and how she’d really like to hear her husband getting stuck into him with his wire cosh. She said she’d like to see Paul ‘hopping and howling’. She sounded like she really hated him—and then, suddenly, she was telling me how cute he was and how they’d had a baby together. I said, ‘and your husband didn’t mind?’ and she said he never knew.” They drew up at the gate. Before Dennis got out to climb over and get the tools from his boot, he said, “Would you be willing to put that in an affidavit, Mrs Coleman?”

She didn’t look cheered by the suggestion but said slowly she supposed she could. He said, “Go in to Mather and get it done. It just might strengthen our case against her.”

The puzzle in there was why the sudden turnabout by Diane Maxwell? Was it simply that she had suddenly seen a way to get a place of her own and away from all this rubbish?

And there was another thing in there. If Nanci Coleman had come forward with this story when she first heard it—could they have kept Paul Pickering safe? And it would undoubtedly have made it easier to catch his killer.

When he’d got the gate open and let her out to drive into Buckton he went back up the lane to say to Kieran and Lindsay, “Diane’s gone missing. I’m just going to duck over to the Pickering place to make sure she hasn’t gone back there.”

Kieran nodded and said, “I think we’re going to have to get an expert in here. I’m not keen on opening unmarked drums and tins here.”

The Pickering farm lay in peaceful sunshine. Dennis unlocked the gate and drove down. Someone had put crime scene tape front and back but there was no sign of anyone. Dennis stood there looking around and trying to decide where Diane Maxwell might’ve gone. She had made a big fuss about her ‘babies’ but she might equally think that if she was going to be parted from them for a number of years then why not walk out on them now? He had no idea what sort of ready cash she might have. But she had almost certainly helped herself to whatever cash Pickering had had in his wallet. And might she have gone to the bank before she came in and confessed?

He rang Grant and said, “Looks like Diane Maxwell’s gone AWOL so could you check both banks and see if she drew any money out lately?”

She might not have known she would be home so swiftly but she probably banked on being given bail to come home and make arrangements for the children and whatever animals were on the farm.

It wasn’t likely that Ronald Pickering had kept money in the house but what about his car. Dennis took out the bunch of keys and looked to see if anything would fit Pickering’s old Holden ute. Nothing. These were presumably keys for things over on his other farm. So where would the car key be? He tried to think himself in to Pickering’s shoes. He had driven down, parked, seen the front door standing open. Had he simply put the key in his pocket? But in that case Diane Maxwell would have taken it. And what about the key to the padlock on the gate. Where was it?

He would almost certainly have assumed it was Mrs Maxwell back. So had he done something ... he didn't think Ronnie Pickering would have come up with any sort of profound response. He was more likely to have just put them down somewhere handy but not obvious. He got down rather awkwardly and looked under the car. And there they both were, faintly visible, behind the tyre on the driver's side. He scraped them out with a small stick.

He got up slowly, feeling his age as he straightened up. As he did so his phone rang. It was Grant to say that Mrs Maxwell had drawn out two thousand dollars the day before yesterday at the Commonwealth and she had come back in the minute the bank opened this morning and taken out the rest of her money, all but ten dollars.

So where had she secreted the day before yesterday's withdrawal, he wondered. Had she come in to Buckton, drawn it out, gone home with it and then come back in to the station? Or had it been in her car all the time? The car had been parked outside the station when Petra had taken her to Winville and then she had been brought back to Buckton yesterday afternoon and then she'd driven home in her car. It probably didn't really matter where the money had been kept.

"Grant, any idea how much she took out altogether?"

"It was a joint account with her husband, they said, but when he went to jail she got her lawyer to get that changed so she could get access to it without his signature. So she took around seven thousand dollars out, they said." Whether Grant was better at wheedling information out of bank managers or whether they had already heard about the death of Mr Pickering or whether they simply didn't like the Maxwells, Dennis couldn't guess.

"Thanks." It didn't surprise him that Greg Maxwell had set it up so that his wife could not withdraw money without his say-so. But Greg Maxwell almost certainly had accounts of his own. Seven thousand sounded too little for all his money-making 'projects'. "So can you check all the schools and just make sure Mrs Maxwell isn't at any of them."

Mrs Maxwell was probably several hundred kilometres away by now. Then he rang Winville to say that Mrs Maxwell had cleaned out her bank account this morning and quite likely had done a runner. Petra Moore said she didn't think that was likely. "She has five children and she told us she loves them all."

"This is Diane Maxwell we're talking about." But it didn't seem worth arguing over. Either the woman had done a runner or she was sitting peacefully in the little war memorial park pondering on how much she loved her 'babies' ...

There seemed to be nothing to do but return to the farm and see how Lindsay and Kieran were getting along.

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When the children were in bed he sat down wearily with Fiona and asked if she wanted to watch TV. "Not really. You look as though you've had a tiring day. Would you like some quiet music?"

"So long as no one mentions Pickerings or Maxwells I don't mind what we listen to."

"Would you like to hear the latest on the Andy White saga then?"

For a moment he couldn't think who Andy White might be. Then he said, "Uh huh, has anyone found him?"

"No." The Woods had paid more money to their private investigator who had found the taxi driver who had taken Andy White alias John Fred Millington from the prison to the airport. He had also managed to get to see some CCTV footage. There was no sign of Andy White on it. So somewhere between being dropped off and the plane leaving with a supposed Andy White on board he had met up with someone and handed over his ticket. What he had done next was anybody's guess. The only thing he couldn't do, Fiona had suggested, was go back to stealing cars.

Now she said, "Their investigator has found out that a John Royden Millington left Australia two years after their son was born and apparently did not re-enter. So he must have returned under another name and using a different passport because he lived with Carmen till John Fred was four and then he packed up and left." It raised questions about Carmen's investigator—but then he would only have looked for after the father and son disappeared, not before.

It was possible that he had left all his other papers with her and simply put his new passport somewhere she wouldn't find it ... "There's no chance that Carmen is in it with him, is there?"

Fiona was tempted to rush to Carmen's defence but maybe it was a question which needed to be asked. "I really can't see how. She spent all those years wondering where he was—"

"Yeah, but maybe she agreed to something and then he didn't keep his end of the bargain. If she was so much in love with him—even telling her parents to butt out—then maybe he talked her into something?"

She considered this carefully. Women did do wild, foolish, even criminal things because their husbands, fathers, boyfriends, business partners, talked them into it.. At last she said, "No. I can see her giving him money if he asked, even maybe saying things to protect him, an alibi maybe, but I can't see her letting him take her son. I think she felt that John Fred made up for sort of dropping out, not going to uni, not having any sort of career ... "

"Okay." He felt that she knew Carmen much better than he did. "So would she tell you where her husband went when he left Australia?"

She didn't relish the thought of trying to grill Carmen but she could see that it was now a question hanging fire. "There is another thing," she felt it was not something to mention to Carmen, "but if John Royden was not his name and he reverted to his own name—then maybe she was never actually married to him."

"That's a thought. And people when they change their name often choose a name that's a bit similar, similar initials, similar sounds. It makes it easier to remember."

"The trouble with all this is that we have nothing to pin anything to. We don't know why he came to Australia or why he wanted Carmen."

"Sooner or later Andy White'll have to surface. And he must be the key to it all."

She didn't relish the idea of ringing Carmen and when she caught up with her Carmen immediately stonewalled, saying it was all in the past and she didn't want to even talk about it. "I do understand that, Carmen," Fiona said gently, "but we've found that your husband left Australia two years after John Fred was born and then he returned here under another name. We wondered if you knew where he went when he left Australia?"

"No. I'm sure he didn't leave Australia."

"He didn't take a couple of weeks away at any time?"

"No, never. He was in love with me."

"Not for work or anything?"

"No. He didn't need to work. He had money."

"I see. So in those four years he never spent a day away from you?"

"Maybe one or two days ... not that that's any of your business."

"Perhaps it isn't. But your son, I feel sure, is caught up in something which is destroying his life. I think he desperately needs help. And it's hard to provide help when we don't even know where he is now."

"Then just leave him be. He's clever. He can work things out for himself."

Fiona could see that Carmen was determined to never admit she had been duped, that she had never been loved, that her husband had used her for reasons of his own.

"I'm sure he is, clever, I mean. But don't you think he deserves more than the life he's got?"

"You don't know what sort of life he's got. Maybe he likes it. Maybe that's why he didn't want to come here and be bossed round by my dad."

"Yes, perhaps. But sooner or later he's going to go to prison again and that's no life for a bright young man."

"Look, Fiona, I don't want to talk about it. He's not your son and I don't like you telling me what I should be doing and why I am too stupid to know if my husband was with me or not!"

Fiona said she would never think such a thing but Carmen reiterated that she wasn't going to talk about it any more and hung up. Fiona sat back and thought, maybe I went about it the wrong way but I don't think Carmen is ever going to tell me, us, anything. And the trouble is—I can't get Dennis involved because it isn't a police matter. It was John Fred's choice whether he came or not ... but I wonder if it really was his choice or whether he is someone else's pawn ...

Dennis was sympathetic when she shared the conversation. He pondered on where they might look next and at last he said, "There is a crime but I think it's too long ago. Using a false

passport is a crime. But we don't know which name was false. If he wasn't John Royden Millington—then is there a John Royden Millington somewhere, alive or dead?"

"Like that South African thing where they were using the names of dead children?"

"Maybe. But would the Yanks investigate if we put this to them?"

"They didn't respond to my original letter but then I didn't know all this. And I was just writing as a ... well, a concerned citizen."

"You think I should write sort of officially?"

"Would that be okay or does it have to go to someone for approval?"

"Jake. I guess."

He drafted out a possible letter next morning but thought it would need more specific dates to be taken seriously. He printed it out and dropped it off to Fiona at lunchtime to see if she could pin down the dates when they had married, when John Fred had been born, and when Mr Millington had disappeared.

Then Nanci Coleman brought him back to the immediate problem of Diane Maxwell. "I went out last night in case she hadn't come back. I made sure the children had dinner and brought them in to school this morning. I don't know where she is. But something will have to be done. There's almost no food in that house and there's chooks to be looked after."

"And Diane didn't ring?"

"No. Nothing."

"Okay. We'll need to involve a social worker for starters. But if you wouldn't mind going out tonight, give the kids a meal at the café before you go. I'll see you get reimbursed."

He then rang Winville and said to Brent Kelly, "Tell Petra Diane Maxwell's done a runner. Tell her to make arrangements for a social worker to come out to the farm this evening. We can't leave five kids with no parents there." There was a new social worker based at the hospital there now. With luck he could take the Maxwell kids in his stride.

Then he went round to the garage to see the Barnards. Diane just might've got petrol. "She did," Noel said cheerfully. "So you've lost her, have you?"

"Which way did she go?"

"Straight down." He waved an arm. "Going to Winville, most likely. She's still got a sister there."

"Has she now? D'you know the sister's name?"

"Nellie Something. She said one time her sister doesn't want to know her, now that she's got style."

"And what did she mean by that?"

"Mmmm ... I have an idea it's Nellie Gould so I wonder if she married Harry Gould? He's on the Council. Don't s'pose he'd want Diane coming round when he's having a cocktail party." He gave his idea a grin. "But Diane said one time she didn't mind to make them cough up. Don't know what that was about but maybe she got some money out of them. Maybe she said she'd stay away if they paid her to stay away?"

"Wouldn't put it past her. How did she pay for the petrol?"

"Pulled out a big roll of notes and peeled one off."

Winville wasn't keen on asking Harry Gould if his wife was Diane Maxwell's sister, not least because they were still not convinced she was 'on the run'. This time it was Greg Sullivan telling him to leave it. "We've already got enough trouble with the other Maxwell. They're sending someone up from Brisbane because they reckon we made a cock-up of that case. So you just pull your head in—"

"But that doesn't make sense. We got Greg Maxwell. What else do they reckon we should've done?"

"They want to see all our records and we've hardly got any. They reckon we're going to be investigated for incompetence."

"Then do a detailed report and put in the things you asked me to do—"

"I didn't ask you to do a bloody thing! I thought he'd had an accident."

"Doesn't matter. You asked us to do interviews with neighbours while you followed up on that Wagner bloke. Team work. They're keen on team work."

Dennis always made it sound simple. “Anyway it still doesn’t make sense. Why would they be investigating now—*before* his trial? If his lawyer gets wind of this investigation he’ll play it for all it’s worth. Poor investigation. His poor client got railroaded. You know the drill.”

“I do. But nothing I can do about it.”

“You sure about that? Maybe ask a few questions about why now—”

“I don’t reckon Greg Maxwell has any friends in high places—”

“No, but Doug has.”

“Don’t think Doug knows or cares what’s going on out here now.”

“You’re not thinking, Greg. It’s only three or four weeks to Doug’s trial. Get us all investigated for incompetence and what happens when we say Doug did this and that and everyone knows we’re being investigated?”

“I’m beyond caring. Stand me down now and I won’t have to get up in court and make a fool of myself.”

“Speak for yourself.” Dennis hated having to give evidence in court but he almost thought he would relish facing down Doug Towner. “Anyway, let’s find Diane Maxwell and get that sorted.”

“It’s not our business what she’s doing, she’s got this new lawyer in her pocket, and he’ll get her off—”

“He won’t get her off if no one knows where she is. Now that’s a thought. Maybe it’s her lawyer not her sister she’s gone to see. Anyway best warn him, tell him she’s left her ‘babies’ to starve, that’s how much she loves them.”

None of this inspired Greg to get back to work with renewed zest but he rang Diane’s lawyer, James Westrupp, and said, “Do you know where Diane Maxwell is?”

“At home.”

“No, she isn’t. She dropped her kids off at school yesterday morning, drew all her money out of the bank, and hasn’t been seen since. Did she come to see you yesterday?”

“No.”

“Well, if she doesn’t turn up soon she’ll be in big big trouble.” Greg enjoyed saying this but he didn’t think it made any impact on Mr Westrupp. He gave up on that line of search as Jenny Forman came in and said, “We’ve got the preliminary report from Dr Watling. He says Pickering’s jaw was broken. That must’ve been some punch she gave him. But he died of a cerebral haemorrhage. So it must’ve been when he fell. He said his bones were rather brittle. So maybe he was an accident waiting to happen ... and that all the stress of trying to deal with that farm had probably made his blood pressure worse.”

“So it is manslaughter definitely. Now, all we need is the perp.”

“And Dennis doesn’t know where she is?”

“Thinks she might be here.”

“So do we know her car? We could put out an alert.”

“Jenny, go for it. There was a ute and a sedan on that farm. I assume she’d take the sedan if she was taking kids to school. I think it was a blue Camry.”

Jenny, when she had the number and make certain, went through to ask Jake Moss for help. They got a number of sightings, blue Camrys not being unusual, but it was the one seen outside the home of Harry and Nellinda Gould yesterday which seemed most hopeful. “Can I go round and ask them?” she said to Greg.

“Okay, take Brent and—”

“He’s already gone home.”

Greg had some choice things to say about his junior disappearing on the dot. Then he said gloomily, “I’d best come then.”

Nellie Gould did have some style to herself and her home but Greg saw beyond the surface things to a woman who was both worried and embarrassed. “Diane did come yesterday,” she said quickly, “but she didn’t stay long, only twenty minutes maybe.”

“Did she say where she was going?”

“No.” Then she thought this was too bald and added. “I assume she was going home.”

“No. She’s not at home. She is wanted for killing Ronald Pickering so if you have the slightest idea where else she might’ve gone tell us now.”

“No, I really don’t know, Mr Sullivan.” He felt there was a faint hesitation there but he wasn’t sure whether to keep pressing her or let her do some thinking.

“It is a very serious matter, Mrs Gould. Her five children are home alone. So if we have to put out a major alert for her I’m afraid it won’t be very nice for you or your husband.”

“No. I’m sorry, I really don’t know where Diane is. But I will ring you if she comes back.”

“Did you believe her,” Forman asked as they went out again.

“Not really. I think she’s quite good at lying. She probably needed to be to get Harry. I heard his family wasn’t fussed about getting a Hegarty for a daughter-in-law. But she was worried, you could see that, so we just might hear back from her.”

Jenny agreed. You could hardly shine in the small social circles of Winville if your sister was up in court for manslaughter.

They were both right to think they might hear back from Nellie Gould. Though it was Harry with his wife in tow who came round to the Sullivan home at about six o’clock. He apologised for calling in but said he thought they might be able to help the police find Diane. “I have a property just the other side of Bullawon. I’ve got a manager there in the main house but there is a cottage over by the sheds. I think you might find Diane camped there.”

“So what’s she doing there?”

Nellie Gould looked round the pleasant little sitting-room with its knick-knacks and a couple of prints of bucolic farm scenes on its walls. Some very realistic plastic flowers stood in a pretty vase on a corner shelf.

Harry Gould said critically, “She’s just making everything more difficult for herself, that’s what she’s doing. But Diane never thinks things through. The thing is, though, Greg,” he made it sound as though they were bosom buddies although they had never been in each other’s houses before today, “it’s going to be very unpleasant for my wife having both her sister and her brother-in-law up in court here. The husband doesn’t matter particularly, I always said she was stupid to marry him, but I wondered if there would be any chance of moving her trial somewhere else.”

Nellie looked over to him and Greg saw what was almost lost in Diane Maxwell, a touch of the beauty which had probably enticed Harry Gould to marry someone who would never do his career any good.

“First we’ve got to get Diane home to her children. But it won’t be up to me about the trial. You could talk to the magistrates. They might be able to arrange something. A closed court maybe. And if Diane pleads guilty in court then it’ll be over in ten minutes. But don’t forget that Ronald Pickering is dead and your sister was responsible.”

Harry Gould was a big florid man at the best of times. Now he seemed to grow redder at this plain speaking. He drew a hand over his wavy graying hair while he decided whether or not to try any more butter on Greg Sullivan.

Narelle came in and said, “Would you like to join us for dinner? There’s enough to go round.”

“No. We won’t, thank you, Mrs Sullivan. We do have someone else to call on.” He and his wife rose and went to the door. “Well, thanks, Greg, and keep us in touch, won’t you?”

After they’d gone out, still making pleasant noises, Greg rang Petra. “There’s a good chance Diane Maxwell is over in the cottage on a property Harry Gould owns. But I think we can leave her there for the night.” Petra, busy cooking herself some dinner, agreed. But she too wondered what Diane Maxwell had hoped to achieve by hiding herself away.

And there was a less pleasant thought in there. She had assumed that Mrs Maxwell had been sent home to her children so she could make arrangements for them, all that talk about her ‘babies’, and now it was clear that she had been thinking only of herself. But she wasn’t going to admit to Dennis Walsh that he had a clearer view of Diane Maxwell than she had.

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The investigator turned up while Petra Moore and Brent Kelly were on their way out to the Goulds’ property. He came in with his briefcase and after introducing himself as Inspector Kerrin Stone he asked for a desk and said they might as well get started.

Greg had taken Dennis's advice and done a short overview of the case and handed it over with a pleasant, "I think you'll find this helpful. Just let DC Forman know what files and exhibits you would like to see."

Stone was a tall thin man with a weak chin and a sharp nose. Greg didn't see himself as having intuitions and insights about people but he thought this man didn't want to be here and possibly thought it was all a waste of time.

"Allegations of incompetence are serious so I'll want everything, and I mean everything."

"No problem. But a lot of the work was done in Buckton. Walsh and Schroeder were on the spot and knew most of the people involved—"

"But they didn't manage to avoid two avoidable deaths." His tone was dry.

This man was senior to Greg but Greg with two unhappy cases nearly resolved didn't feel like kow-towing to anyone this morning. "I think you should keep an open mind, sir. I can take you out to the Maxwell farm and the Pickering farm so you will have a better understanding of the investigations."

Stone said that wouldn't be necessary. Their files would tell him how the investigation had been run and whether it was up to standard.

"Who made the allegations about the investigations?"

"You know that is confidential."

Jenny Forman brought out their paper files and showed the inspector what was stored on their computers. She also brought out the bag containing the wire cosh from the box of exhibits.

He looked at it carefully then said, "You're saying that killed a man?" He sounded disbelieving.

"As Paul Pickering was not found till about ten days after he'd died the pathologist could not be sure of the cause of death. The man was covered in maggots."

"And the local police had no idea he was dead?" This time he sounded critical.

Greg was tempted to ask Stone if he had minded out for everyone on his patch before he was recruited into Internal Investigations. But there didn't seem much point in getting his back up.

Stone spent the rest of the morning on the files and asking the occasional question. There was an interruption at midday. Petra and Brent came in and said, "We've got Diane Maxwell in the interview room and we've rung her bloody lawyer." Petra hadn't seen Stone and Greg hadn't been quick enough to damp her down.

"Bloody lawyer?" Stone said

"This is Inspector Stone," Greg said hurriedly. Petra merely nodded, more taken up with the trouble they had had getting Diane Maxwell in to the car and in to the interview room. The woman was probably still yelling abuse at the duty sergeant.

"Do you wish to sit in on the interview with Diane Maxwell, sir?" Greg didn't fancy interviewing Diane, with or without company.

"I had better start on these files," Stone said coldly.

"Okay. Let me know when Westrupp gets here. And as Inspector Stone doesn't want to go out to see the Maxwell and Pickering farms—is there any chance of getting Dennis here?"

"Reid fingerprinted Pickering's wallet and it has Diane Maxwell's fingerprints on it. I have charged her with one count of burglary and one count of breaching a Good Behaviour Bond and Dennis charged her with manslaughter. I think we should do the two smaller cases first. But it's up to you." She looked at Greg for confirmation.

He was tempted to say 'the more the merrier' but just nodded. Jenny Forman didn't particularly want to be left with the inspector when Greg and Petra went out but she assumed the man would simply sit down at an empty desk and go on reading.

Instead he said, "Why were they so keen for me to go out to the farms? A crime is a crime."

She thought that understanding the background was essential and she said after giving it some thought, "You really need to see how these people lived to understand the how and why of their crimes."

"And do *you* think everything was done by the book?" An inexperienced junior might say things her boss would be clever enough to keep under wraps.

“I think so. It is difficult out here where people are out on farms and aren’t necessarily seen around the streets regularly. Paul Pickering was a very strange man and he didn’t go out much. If he had been found sooner the case would’ve been easier. But even in the city it is sometimes weeks before someone is found dead at home.”

She didn’t feel that she had to bolster Greg and Petra but she didn’t want Dennis blamed for not finding Paul Pickering sooner.

“Why do you say he was strange?”

She explained a little of the background. But she felt he wasn’t really taking it in.

“Well, I’m here to see if your investigation stands up to scrutiny so it doesn’t matter if this guy was strange or not.”

He began leafing through their material again. After an hour he said, “What action was taken against Greg Maxwell for assaulting a police officer?”

“Nothing. He had been charged ... and he didn’t actually assault Constable Schroeder.”

“Then why is it in this report?”

“I’m not sure, sir, but possibly because it was only an attempt. Constable Schroeder took evasive action.”

“Did he now. Well, I don’t think much of your record-keeping. But I suppose you just do as you’re told?”

“Yes, sir. But I would be happy to take you out to Buckton if you think you would like to see Buckton’s records.”

“It won’t be necessary.”

When Greg and Petra came back it was to say that they had charged Diane Maxwell and sent her to the watch house. Stone said he would like to observe their way of recording everything. When they finally broke for a late lunch and Stone had knocked back Greg’s invitation to join him at the canteen, he said, “The thing that’s been puzzling us is—why are you investigating *before* Maxwell comes up. Surely any knowledge that we have had to be investigated will play into the Defence’s hands?”

“Normal procedure.”

Greg didn’t think it was but he let it go. It had been a long morning.

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While Lindsay Holt was getting all the drums and tins from the Maxwell farm moved to a secure facility—and privately wondering if they had over-reacted—Dr Mason Watling was writing up his report on Ronald Pickering while being acutely aware that the Hospital Board was meeting to discuss his complaint about Dr Davis.

He had been told that his presence wasn’t needed. He had uneasy visions of Leslie Davis sweet-talking the Board members into believing it was purely sour grapes on his part. But he had arranged to have dinner with Leila Burkett and he wanted to finish up, shower, and relax for a little while. Ronald Pickering’s post-mortem examination had not been as stressful as his nephew’s but in there was the knowledge that his death might have been prevented. He hadn’t met the Maxwells and he wondered if they could really be the monsters some people suggested. People liked tossing round words like ‘monsters’ without seeing any need to provide evidence. Still, two deaths to their ‘credit’ ...

He said something of this to Leila when they went in to Winville’s only Chinese restaurant..

Dr Davis when the complaint was read into the minutes said it was all an unfortunate misunderstanding. “At no time did I suggest to Ms Dillon that she provide me with any money other than perhaps a small token. She was having chemotherapy and not always fully aware of her surroundings. It was easy for her to become confused and mishear things.”

“And the statement made by Mrs Gough about overhearing you discussing money with Ms Dillon?”

“Mrs Gough admits that she did not hear everything that was said, nor the context in which money was mentioned.”

Dr Watling had believed that Mrs Gough supported Maryann Dillon’s original contention that she and Dr Davis would split the money they hoped to get from Dr Sorenson. The Board seemed less willing to believe in this arrangement. They continued to ask Dr Davis exactly what he



had done for Maryann and what he had said to her. His responses merely suggested kindness and altruism alongside his professional care. At no time did he feel it necessary to mention that it was actually Dr Watling who had operated on Maryann. And without Maryann there to refute anything it was a forgone conclusion that he would be given the benefit of the doubt.

But at the end one member broke ranks slightly to say, “Dr Sorenson had agreed to pay Ms Dillon ten thousand dollars, saying that he had no intention of paying a further ten thousand to you, Dr Davis, but that Ms Dillon then said she could not accept money because it would impact on her Centrelink payments. Do you know why she changed her mind?”

Dr Davis wasn't sure whether this meant that the member had spoken to either Dr Sorenson or Ms Dillon or whether he was merely recycling hearsay.

“She didn't confide in me the reason why she had changed her mind. Perhaps she had misunderstood her reporting obligations. She was pleased she would be going home so perhaps it had become irrelevant.”

“And why do you think Dr Sorenson said he wasn't going to pay ten thousand dollars to you—if you had not asked for ten thousand dollars?”

“As you know Dr Sorenson and his partner were in the middle of a relationship break-up and were arguing about most things. I do not think that he was taking much notice of Ms Dillon and she wasn't keen to see him after he had failed to find her advanced cancer.”

The same dubious Board member said, “How do you know they were arguing about ‘most things’?”

“Perhaps ‘most things’ is a little broad but it is common knowledge that Dr Lombardi threw his partner out of the house and that he slept in an old van for the rest of his time in Buckton. I don't think Ms Dillon's situation was really his priority.”

Several of the members gave that a brief smile or chuckle. Then he was allowed to stand down after a non-committal reminder that all financial relationships, no matter how minor, between doctors and patients needed to be recorded, not done off-the-cuff.

Dr Davis was careful not to allow a pleased smile light up his face as he went out. It was not simply this walking away from the investigation undamaged, it was the knowledge that Dr Watling had failed in his latest bid to get him either sacked or moved on.

Mrs Burkett was sympathetic and said, “It is such a worry, knowing he can't be stood aside until he makes a major mistake. There must be some way to ... I don't know ... ease him out?”

“I don't want him just to move on to another country hospital and wreak havoc there. I want him struck off the register. I know that makes me sound vindictive but he is a constant worry. I'm sorry I'm beginning to sound like someone obsessed with a fellow doctor when there are other things to be concerned about.”

“Do you think they are unwilling to censure him because of the difficulty in finding doctors for country hospitals?”

He considered this. “Possibly. Finding *good* doctors for country hospitals is the hard part. I'm sure they could replace him. But they may feel it's a case of ‘better the devil you know’ ... anyway, let's talk about you ... that is far more interesting than my obsessions.”

Leila Burkett was not immune to the attraction of having someone interested in her as a person rather than just her veterinary skills. But the conversation somehow wandered back around to the Maxwells because she had been out there in the morning to remove their hens and a half-grown very skinny puppy. “It still seems incredible to me that a father would store toxic waste only a hundred metres away from his children. I can't decide whether he was just incredibly stupid or whether he really didn't care what happened to any of his family.”

“Perhaps there was another woman in his life?”

She had never thought of this. All the talk around Buckton was whether or not Mrs Maxwell had been carrying on with Paul Pickering. “It is hard to imagine. He sounds such an unpleasant man. But I have heard that he visited that woman who was working out of the Coolibah Hotel as a prostitute. I suppose I should say sex worker these days. And I imagine Greg Maxwell would've been work, not pleasure. But whether his wife knew about any extra-curricular activities I don't know. I rather hope he hasn't left any other children to find out someday that he is their father.”

“Mmmm, and when you think about people like Maxwell and Paul Pickering you wonder about their mental health and whether any kind of intervention was ever possible.”

“Dennis Walsh called Paul Pickering a psychopath, not that he is an expert on psychopaths—but he just calls Greg Maxwell a nasty piece-o’-work.”

It wasn’t the most cheerful of conversations but they both found it of absorbing interest and Watling was startled when someone came over and said, “Sorry to interrupt but I’d like a chance to chat, maybe tomorrow, Dr Watling.”

“Sure. I’ll be in my office by 8.30 tomorrow—if there’s no emergency before then.”

The man nodded and went away again. “Who was that?” Leila said. “And don’t people ever allow you to take time out?”

“It’s my fault really. I’ve spent so much of my life at work that it’s hard to sit back and say, I’m going to relax today, and that was Russell Bolger, he’s a member of the Hospital Board. So I wonder if he wants to share good news or bad news.”

“Good news, I hope. And maybe if you gave them an ultimatum—between yourself and Leslie Davis, I mean, then maybe it would push them. I wonder if he’s on a contract or—”

“No. We are both salaried employees. And although it’s a temptation to move on, at times, I have found an extra reason to stay on ... ” He leant forward and took her hands in his. “I always look forward to seeing you.”

He hadn’t said anything more about Mr Bolger to Leila but he had the vague intuition that Bolger was sympathetic, that he saw through Leslie Davis’s slick excuses, but that his views were minority views on the Board.

Mr Bolger came in punctually and briskly next morning and took a chair. “I won’t waffle around. The simple fact was that I didn’t believe Dr Davis’s explanation to the meeting yesterday. Joanne who is the receptionist to the doctors in Buckton is my second cousin and I used to give her son holiday work. She is certain that Dr Sorenson was willing to pay Maryann ten thousand dollars but that he wouldn’t pay anything to Leslie Davis. She says Maryann asked for twenty thousand dollars from Dr Sorenson and another twenty thousand from the Buckton Shire Council. She is certain that Maryann would never have tried to sue the Council unless someone put her up to it.”

“I hadn’t heard that—about the Council. I wonder what their response was?”

“I think they were still considering their response when she suddenly backed away.”

“So why did she suddenly back away?”

“It isn’t really my business. But I felt that I was only hearing half the story at the meeting. Everything Leslie Davis said about her was hearsay. We shouldn’t be making any decisions based on hearsay. At the very least I would’ve liked to hear from Maryann Dillon herself.”

“Personally I would like to see Leslie Davis struck off the register but that just sounds like me doing down a colleague.”

“Is it just you?”

“No. When he came here he had a lot of support from the staff. But that has melted away. Most of the nursing staff now would like to see him gone.”

“Do they have specific complaints?”

“He’s lazy, careless, tries to get out of work, always claims he is right and the other person wrong, behaves inappropriately with some of the younger nurses ... and I think this is not the first time he’s tried to get money out of a patient.”

“There was that court case where he provided a death certificate when he shouldn’t have. He was told to be more careful. But it doesn’t seem to be enough.”

Dr Watling thought but didn’t say that ‘enough’ might mean a patient death. “Try to convince the other Board members to be less trusting. And I think they should get Ms Dillon’s version of events before the whole thing is put to bed.”

Mr Bolger didn’t look thrilled by the prospect of tackling the Board about inviting Maryann Dillon and merely said he must get on to work.

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Dennis Walsh had been brought up to date on the Diane Maxwell situation and the arrival of Inspector Stone. Greg said gloomily that he was obviously there to make work for them, along with trying to make them all look like prize idiots. “Well, send him out here to grill us—and send him

out to the farms. They've just taken a load of stuff away from the Maxwell farm to some sort of secure facility to check all those drums."

"He refuses to go. He says the farms are irrelevant."

"Does he now? So what sort of useless investigator have they sent you?"

"No good asking me. He's senior—"

"So is he coming out here to talk with us?"

"Don't reckon so."

"And that doesn't make you smell a rat?"

"Maybe. But I can't believe he's here to get Maxwell off. Why should he?"

"Has he met Maxwell?"

"Don't reckon so."

"Or Diane?"

"Dennis, the only thing he's interested in is us. He's here to do a hatchet job on us. That's it, mate."

"Yeah, but why? Some big potato from Brisbane doesn't just suddenly decide to go to Winville to see if your investigation ticks all the boxes. He's not a station inspector. Someone put him up to it. I'd like to know why. And who."

"Then you ask him."

"Think I'd better. I'll bring all that Pickering stuff in tomorrow and store it with you—and maybe Reid better fingerprint everything, not just the wallet."

Grant put on gloves and carefully packed everything they'd taken from the Maxwell farm into boxes. The couple of pictures he put into large plastic bags and stood them by the door of the interview room. "Do you think they'll say we should've had a search warrant?"

"Probably. She's got a sharp lawyer. But don't know who we're s'posed to've shown it to, the kids maybe."

Grant was always nervous about 'sharp lawyers', any kind of lawyer really, but he wondered why anyone would involve themselves with Diane Maxwell when she'd already confessed. "Do you think she's paying him with that money she took?"

"Good point. And I wonder if he's already acting for her husband. Maybe he thought the sob stuff would work for Diane and it might rub off on Greg. But he might start to have second thoughts now that they had to hunt her down and Leila Burkett's taken all the livestock."

Grant sincerely hoped his boss was right. The lack of a search warrant had secretly worried him. He wasn't worried about the Maxwells but as soon as he'd heard there was a lawyer in the mix he had started to get nervous. Any lawyer determined to win rather than just go through the motions was going to try and make the police look bad. He was secretly relieved that it would be Dennis taking the stuff and Dennis wanting to nail Diane Maxwell for theft.

## *Case No. 3: Far Away Crimes*

Grant might spend his evening stewing over the habits of 'sharp lawyers' but Dennis was glad to put all thought of the Maxwell family to one side for the evening. The draft letter he had given to Fiona to add in any dates and information she could provide was sitting on the side board, waiting for him.

"What are you going to do with it now?"

"S'pose I should run it past Jake. Not that it's anything to do with us but it would carry more weight if he would put his name to it. But before I do that I thought I might run it past Ashley again. I was thinking about what name that Millington character might've taken and ordinary people often pick a name that has some significance for them or is a bit like the one they've already got ... but if we're dealing with a Mafia character then the passport is probably stolen or forged—or they've taken it off one of their victims. But I've made a note of the names that've come up in connection with the son. There's just a small chance something might jibe."

Ashley Turner wasn't wild about being rung by Dennis. Dennis invariably brought work. But she was intrigued by the man who left as one thing and came back as something else. One and possibly both of those passports didn't belong to their mystery man. "I think, Dennis, that I should visit the ex-wife first. She probably knows more than she would tell Fiona but if I come officially then she may be less willing to stonewall."

He gave her Carmen Gannon's address and said she worked at a library.

"Which library?" Going in to someone's workplace sometimes got quick results. An employee usually just wanted the police gone as quickly as possible. He got the library from Fiona and passed it on, grateful to Ashley for taking on more work and on a case which so far hadn't gone anywhere helpful.

Carmen was embarrassed at having a policewoman turn up at work and said she would be going for lunch in ten minutes. Could they talk then?

Ashley said, "Wherever you like. Do you still have anything belonging to your ex-husband?"

"Could we talk about it later?"

Ashley sat down in a comfortable chair and waited for Carmen to finish her morning's work. She came over and said, "My house is only two blocks over. Can you come there? I think I've got a box somewhere."

Ashley was happy to give the woman a lift. A 'box' sounded hopeful though the likelihood of getting a viable fingerprint at this late stage was small. Still, the things just might give an insight into the ex-husband.

Carmen made them coffee and sandwiches. "So what do you want to know? He isn't really missing, you know."

"Perhaps not. But his son is. And one of the passports he used is fraudulent. So we have the date he left Brisbane for Los Angeles. Can you give me an idea of when he returned?"

Carmen sat there with various emotions passing over her face before it settled into a blank look. "I don't remember."

"Two weeks, three, a month. We only need an approximate date to check all passengers."

"I really don't remember."

"Mrs Gannon, we are looking at criminal activity here. Immigration fraud is a serious matter and it is possible you might be seen as an accessory to his attempt to enter Australia illegally."

She hadn't really wanted to get tough with the abandoned wife, nor did she know why Carmen was so reluctant to try and help, but she needed information if she was not to have to plough through thousands of arrivals in the hope of finding reasonable matches.

"I don't believe he ever used another name. I think you're having me on."

"You are sure that the man who came back to live with you was the same man who went away?"

"Of course I'm sure! Do you think I'm stupid!"

"Then he re-entered Australia illegally. So please tell me when he returned."

At last Carmen sighed and said, "He was away for thirteen days. So it must've been ... " She sat there doing some sums in her head. Ashley had already done them. "So he returned the same day he came back to you or the day before, most likely. Thank you, Mrs Gannon. Now, you said you thought you still had something that belonged to him?"

She half-expected Carmen to say she had no idea where the box was but Carmen, aware that time was passing and she didn't want this woman returning in the evening, said, "On top of my wardrobe, I think." She got up and went out and returned in a couple of minutes with a shoebox. "You can have it."

Ashley took out a handkerchief and carefully lifted the lid off. She hadn't known what to expect but this looked like a small treasure trove. A couple of photos, two nice pens, a pack of cards with American scenes on them, a little bag of US stamps, a silk tie, a pair of cuff-links set with onyx, a small pewter dog, a book of Garfield cartoons, a small torch, and a silver cigarette case with the letters VB on it. Ashley held it up in her handkerchief and said, "Why VB?"

"He said it stood for Victoria Bitter. That's a beer."

Then she looked at the wall clock and said, "I must get back to work."

"May I borrow this box?"

"Keep it if you want. I haven't got a son to give it to."

The chance of getting a fingerprint hadn't grown any stronger but the photos might help. "These photos, that is your husband?"

"Mmmm ... I must've been mad to keep anything. Throw them in a bin when you've finished looking."

Ashley thanked her and took her back to the library. She had other more urgent cases to be getting on with but she thought she could spare enough time to check immigration records for those dates. Carmen might have deliberately misled her but she thought she had been telling the truth. And something might show up on ... she thought inside the cigarette case might be the best chance of finding something.

\*

Winville didn't greet the boxes of items taken from the Maxwell farm with open arms. Greg said, "You're s'posed to keep them until her case comes up, not us. And I haven't heard when they can fit her in."

"You mean she's being sent home?" Dennis felt like saying something stronger.

"Don't know. No one's told us anything."

Inspector Stone coming in overheard this and wasn't impressed. Sullivan said, "This is Sergeant Walsh from Buckton. You'll want to interview him while he's here." This gave the impression of Greg trying to throw Dennis to the visiting wolf.

But Dennis only said, "Best you come out to Buckton and you can check our files and talk with Constable Schroeder."

"That won't be necessary, sergeant. I don't think there's any need to take up your valuable time." Both Greg and Dennis heard the sarcasm behind 'valuable'.

"So what exactly are you investigating, sir?"

"The slipshod way the death of Paul Pickering was investigated."

"You always make up your mind before you start an investigation?"

"I don't think that's any of your business, sergeant, so you can get back to your station—"

"And I don't think it's up to you to tell me where to go or what to do." Greg could see Inspector Stone starting to boil up and he hurriedly tried to think of something to intervene with. But Dennis went on calmly, "So which of the De Jong brothers set you up with this kangaroo investigation? Can't be Charlie because he's retired and it can't be Eric because he doesn't know what day it is—so it must be Frank or one of his corrupt buddies."

Greg had seen the shock on Stone's face when Dennis mentioned the De Jong brothers. But Stone even if he had been completely unprepared for the question rallied enough to say, "I will report you for insolence, sergeant, and don't think you can treat me like one of your lackies."

"My lackies, as you call them, sir, are honest, decent, and hard-working. And they don't do anything to help Doug Towner get off murder charges. So I would suggest you go back to Brisbane and tell your bosses that when they send an investigator out here we expect to get someone who does his job properly and with an open mind."

Stone had tried to interrupt this but Dennis had over-ridden him with his big voice. Stone had gone red and seemed about ready to blow a fuse. It was obviously a struggle to get himself back under control enough to say, "You haven't heard the last of this, sergeant! Now get out of here while I get on with my investigation."

Dennis just shook his head slowly. Greg turned and went back into the CIB room. Dennis mightn't care about disciplinary measures but he had no wish to be called to explain himself. He had been through it once. He had no intention of going through it again.

"Then I'll expect to see you in Buckton tomorrow, sir, and best wear strong shoes to go out to the Maxwell and Pickering farms and it might be a good idea to wear a face mask. They've found toxic chemicals stored on the Maxwell farm."

Stone very publicly ignored this by turning his back on Dennis. It struck Jenny Forman as an exceedingly juvenile way to behave. Dennis shrugged and went out. It would be interesting to see if Stone put in a complaint and just what he would focus on.

Dennis heard from Greg late next morning that Stone had in fact complained to Jake Moss but that Greg didn't know exactly what was the substance of the complaint. He knew 'insolence' had come into it. "I don't s'pose Stone can get you sacked but I'd say he'll have a pretty good try. He called you a useless bugger and a few other choice things after you'd gone. But that's not why I'm ringing. Diane Maxwell got bail this morning and is on her way home. Don't know if you can keep a bit of an eye on her."

"She won't be able to go home. The farm is off limits now. They've found PCBs in a drum there. The whole farm'll have to be searched. The priests have found temporary places for the kids. The vet has removed the animals. But nothing else can be taken off the farm. I've just sent Grant out to see what extra security is needed."

"Oh lordy, what a bloody mess! So what do we do with her now?"

"She's confessed. Can't they bring it all on as fast as possible before she does another runner?"

"I wish. Can Grant handle her if she turns up at the farm?"

"Probably. Well, tell her bloody lawyer he has to find accommodation for her if he wants her out running round the district. I wouldn't put it past her to sneak back on to the farm after dark—"

Greg agreed gloomily and said he would get on to Westrupp. This was easier said than done and when he finally caught up with the lawyer and told him what had happened Westrupp refused to believe him.

"Try another, Mr Sullivan."

"They've found PCBs stored on that farm. The whole place is off-limits. So you'd best find somewhere for your client to stay because she can't go home. And if you don't believe me you'd best ring Buckton. They're out there putting up signs and padlocks and everything. The kids have all been sent to stay with church people."

"Well, it's up to Mrs Maxwell to ask me for any help she might need."

"If Mrs Maxwell does another runner I will be charging you with wasting police time." Greg got some pleasure out of saying this but it didn't impress the lawyer. Greg hung up, suddenly dismayed to find that Stone had been standing behind him listening to everything he had said.

"You're sure this isn't an episode of the Keystone Cops?" Stone said sarcastically.

Greg couldn't think of a clever comeback, which annoyed him, and just said, "I've got work to do."

"Of course you have." Stone went out and it was Stephanie Pohl on the front desk who saw Stone's smirking expression as he went along to knock on Inspector Moss's door.

\*

All of Buckton was buzzing with the happenings at the Maxwell farm and wondering just where Diane Maxwell was and what she might be planning to do. She certainly turned up at the farm gate and found a notice on the gate and two padlocks and men in white suits were doing something. She stood there for several minutes just looking, then she got back in the car and drove away towards Buckton.

Her first stop was at St Monica's. The children were coming out for their lunch break and she beckoned her son over and said he would need to come with her. He looked back as though to ask someone's permission but Mary Davidson was not in sight and next minute his mother had grabbed him and put him into the back seat. "Now! Don't you move!" She drove off towards the primary school in the hope of grabbing her next child but here she was not so lucky.

The principal, Nelson L'Estrange, might annoy police, parents, staff and other people with his constant picky little complaints but he usually went out and wandered around the grounds while the children sat and had their lunch. He saw Mrs Maxwell come barging in the gate looking round to find her son. He found her a little daunting but he went over to her and said, "What is the matter, Mrs Maxwell?"

"None of your bloody business so get out of the way!" She went to rush past him but several of the teachers heard their voices and came out to see what was happening.

"Go on! Fuck off!" She evaded them and went rushing round the end of the school calling her son's name. Julie McLaren saw the boy in the car parked in front of the gate and went out to see

why he was there and not in school. He was crying. She opened the back door and lifted him out. Mrs Maxwell had disappeared but the keys were still in the ignition. Possibly she had planned a swift getaway once she'd found her son. Mrs McLaren removed them and slipped the bunch into her pocket.

She took the little boy inside and asked the school secretary to ring the police.

“What's happened?”

“We've got Mrs Maxwell on the warpath by the look of things.” She took the little boy into the room next door to the office and asked him if he would like a drink. His only response was to cry louder.

Mrs Maxwell, dragging her son by one arm, reached the car and told him to get in. Then she noticed her younger boy was missing. “You stay there while I get after those useless bastards!” She went running back towards the front door of the school. Mr L'Estrange wishing he could wake up and find this was all a bad dream confronted her in the doorway and said, “Mrs Maxwell, calm down and tell us why you want your children—”

“Course I don't want me bloody kids—but I need an ace—so move your useless carcass!”

“But if you don't want—” He couldn't help showing his bewilderment.

Julie McLaren came up to support him and said, “The police are on their way. And Mrs Maxwell is not going anywhere. I have her keys.”

“She is free to take her children—” Parents did sometimes turn up and arbitrarily remove a child and he had always found it best not to argue. Then it seemed to register what she had said. “Her keys? What keys?”

“My keys! So hand 'em over!” She came up close to him and then, as he stepped back, she shot out a fist and caught him on the nose. Mr L'Estrange staggered back as blood sprouted from his nose. Julie McLaren rushed to support him before he fell. Several other teachers had come in and seen the punch and Elaine Coffey screamed. In the middle of this, with Diane Maxwell standing there four square with her arm still up, Dennis with Grant leading came up the path and stepped in to the dramatic mix.

Before anyone could try and explain or ask for help Dennis had moved over and clamped a large hand on to Mrs Maxwell's upraised arm. “Oh no you don't!” She tried to turn and pummel him but he said calmly, “Cuffs, Grant.”

Grant, wide-eyed, fumbled to get a pair of handcuffs on to the squirming screaming woman.

“Diane Maxwell, I am arresting you for assault. Grant, go and get the car, we'll get her straight back to Winville.”

“She's got one of her sons in the car and another is here at the office,” Mrs McLaren said.

“We'll worry about them in a minute. Did anyone see her punch Mr L'Estrange?”

Several people said yes. “Okay, we'll get statements in a while. Can someone take him around to the doctor's surgery?” He indicated Nelson who had sat down and was still trying to stem the blood.

In about ten minutes Grant had arrived with the car and Mrs Maxwell had been strapped in to the back seat and sent off to Winville, the principal had been taken round to see Dr Long, the two boys had been taken round to the canteen for drinks and pies and Mary Davidson had been rung up. Julie McLaren handed Dennis the car keys she had removed and said, “What happens now?”

“We need to involve the social worker for the kids. Can you keep them both here for the afternoon while I tee that up? You'll all need to do statements, everyone who saw her hit Nelson and let's hope she hasn't broken his nose.”

When he had gone out someone said, “Whoever said Buckton was a quiet place?” Julie McLaren smiled at that but only said, “We'd best get back to work ... and thank goodness none of the kids saw her hit Nelson.”

\*

James Westrupp kept his own counsel and when he was rung by Winville Police to say that Diane Maxwell was back in the watch house he only said, “Is she?”

But Greg Sullivan was not alone in believing that Mr Westrupp might be losing whatever faith he had ever had in Diane Maxwell as an unfortunate victim of the police and her bullying husband.

Grant said he'd seen Mrs Maxwell punch the school principal and so had at least four other people. So the assault was not in doubt. "But why was she trying to take her kids out of school and where was she going to take them?" Greg wondered. There might be ways to understand Diane Maxwell's thought processes but he didn't think he even wanted to try.

Grant, too, didn't feel he had any understanding of Mrs Maxwell but he said tentatively, "Maybe she wanted to use them as hostages?"

Greg considered this and finally said, "I guess it's possible. And I wonder if Stone thinks we should've second-guessed that she would go round and break the school principal's nose?"

Dennis rang him later in the afternoon to confirm that the nose was, in fact, broken and that he had statements from all the teachers who had witnessed the assault and they all agreed that Nelson had said Mrs Maxwell could take her son out of school and therefore the assault was completely unprovoked. No one mentioned Mrs McLaren taking the car keys, possibly because that had been forgotten in the greater drama.

Grant said to Dennis, "What do we do now?"

"Nothing. If they can't keep her there this time I think I'll retire and take up growing pumpkins."

Grant gave that a grin. "And what about the kids?"

:"Father Meagher came around and took the little fella back to St Monica's and that social worker is coming out to talk with them tomorrow."

Late in the afternoon Kieran Dobbs called by to ask where Greg Maxwell was. "We'll need to ask him where he got those drums from. And whoever asked him to dispose of that stuff and where it'd been before he took it, there might be more contaminated areas ... and to think he had it sitting there only a hundred metres from where his kids were. I think they'll all need to be tested to make sure they haven't got anything in their systems."

"Greg Maxwell's still in Winville. They've got his trial set down for November but I think he should be sent to Brisbane while he's on remand. But you're right, he needs to be grilled, just don't expect to get anything out of him."

Kieran didn't regard himself as good at grilling people but the possibility that somewhere else was seriously contaminated and unsecured gave him cold shivers ... and maybe Maxwell would decide he had nothing to lose by dobbing someone else in.

"So can I go to see him?"

"Sure. Ring the watch house. If they give you any trouble ring Jake Moss. But I can't see any problem with it."

Dennis was right. Kieran had no trouble getting a time to come in. But getting Greg Maxwell to talk was quite another thing. The man simply sat and stared at him without a word. Most of Keiran's work was with farmers who even if not wildly enthusiastic about making changes to the way they farmed were usually polite and communicative. Greg Maxwell disconcerted him.

"You don't mind if somewhere else is seriously contaminated and might be affecting the health of children?"

Maxwell merely folded his brawny arms and stared at Kieran. After half-an-hour of unanswered questions Kieran was ready to give up. There might be a way to get answers out of this man but he didn't know what they were. But was there any way to get Maxwell to talk—about anything? If he could break down this wall of silence ...

"You know all of Buckton is talking about how your wife had an affair with Paul Pickering right under your nose. They all wonder if you knew and didn't mind."

"Killed him, didn't I?"

"I thought that was because he said you were diddling him over his machinery?"

"Who cares? He's still dead."

"Your wife said Pickering's farm should be hers."

"Go for it."

Kieran wasn't sure what this meant. "You didn't mind her killing Ronald Pickering?"

"Never met the useless bastard."

"And you don't mind what happens to your children?"

"Nah, she wanted all those brats, not me."



“And you had an affair with that girl at the Coolibah so I suppose it was okay for her to have an affair with Paul?”

“What girl?”

“You know, that Jayleen.”

“Oh! Her! Yeah, she was okay, knew more than Diane anyway. And what’s that got to do with anything?”

Kieran had heard stories about Jayleen being with a Greg but several people had queried whether it was Greg Maxwell—on the grounds that Greg Maxwell didn’t like parting with money and certainly not for sex.

Kieran just shrugged. “As you won’t tell me who gave you those drums to store I’m wasting my time here.” He had the vague intuition that Greg Maxwell had started to enjoy the conversation once it got away from toxic chemicals and he had no intention of pandering to the discussion any further. “I’ll let them know you wouldn’t co-operate.” He got up and rang the buzzer on the door and was let out.

He didn’t feel like telling anyone that sitting with Greg Maxwell had made him feel he was part of something ... dirty ... and that it was a relief to go away and scrub his hands and try to put Maxwell out of his mind. But he was no further forward with finding where those drums had come from. He wondered if Mrs Maxwell might know and whether she would be more willing to talk.

\*

It was two days later when Ashley rang to say “Bingo, I think we’ve found your mystery man.”

“You have? That’s great, Ash. Who is he?”

“Jason Smith. He arrived in Australia on the date Carmen Gannon gave us, arriving from Los Angeles.”

“So he’s now in jail in Victoria?”

“If it’s the same man. I got an expert on to his things that Carmen had kept, very degraded but it was enough of a thumbprint to send off to the US. It’s only guesswork but the initials on his cigarette case were V B so Jason Smith is probably another alias. Anyway, I’ve sent copies of the photos to Victoria and asked if they can send us his prints. They may be in the system but there are several Jason Smiths. Also I’ve asked whether he sounds American.”

“Good going. Let’s hope we can finally pin him down.” He felt like adding, ‘Seeing we’re not getting very far with anything else.’

“If Jason Smith really is the father it might explain why the son kept doing things to get back in to prison. I wonder if there was any sort of arrangement to get him sent to the same place? After all, stealing cars is not in the same league as homicide.”

“And who was the Antonio he was said to have killed? I thought he might’ve come here because he made the States too hot for comfort but maybe he was a hitman sent here to get rid of a couple of people? And a wife and young son might’ve been good cover?”

“Maybe. So keep your fingers crossed that we can get a match with a print.”

That and those two photographs ...

\*

Robin Warrender had been wandering round Buckton talking to people about Paul Pickering in between helping his uncle and aunt move to Toowoomba. It might all make an intriguing book but there were times when he wondered if he really did want to delve into the squalid lives of Paul Pickering and the Maxwell family.

Charles Mather also had times when he wished that neither Paul Pickering nor Greg and Diane Maxwell had ever entered his life. The youngish man who came in to his office the next morning seemed a world away from his experiences of the Pickering farm. The man introduced himself as Mathew Pickering and said he had two weeks leave in which to organise his father’s funeral and decide what to do with the farm which had unexpectedly become part of his inheritance. He was tall, clean-cut, with his share of the Pickering good looks. Mather was surprised to learn that he wasn’t married.

“And is it really true that my dad was killed by a woman?”

“Diane Maxwell will come up in court in Winville. I haven’t asked when but I can ask police here if they’ve got a date. You might like to attend court.”

He got Jess Brumby to ring the police for his client and was told Friday, ten o’clock. Then he went back to the more pressing matter of the farm.

“The police have it padlocked and they removed the couple of hens that hadn’t died from starvation. I don’t think it’s a crime scene any more. So my own suggestion is that you sell it for whatever you can get.”

“And what about the debts you said are still owed?”

Mather had spoken to the banks and advertised for anyone else owed money to come forward. The unsold machinery was still there as Ronald Pickering had ended the arrangement with Noel Barnard. He brought Mathew Pickering up to date with this and said, “You can either sell the farm as is with that extra machinery there or ask Noel Barnard to sell it for you.”

He thought but didn’t say that Noel might not be enthusiastic about taking on another Pickering as a client.

“No. As soon as probate is finalised I would just like it sold. I’ve got the other farm to sell so it would be one less thing to worry about.”

“He owed the Co-op here a couple of hundred dollars and he had an account with the Caltex depôt in Winville for his fuel ... so you might like to settle those up as your father hadn’t had time. Then you will need to talk with the banks and remove any personal items from the house and that will be the end of everything this end.”

Charles Mather couldn’t help a degree of relief creeping in to his voice. Perhaps retirement was at last becoming a reality. He would sell the practice but keep his house for the time being. And whoever bought his legal practice would be asked to keep Jess on ... It wasn’t something he would ever say but she was one of the few people in his life for whom he had genuine affection. Most people were just legal fees, nuisances, or irrelevant ...

\*

It didn’t really surprise anyone, and certainly not Dennis Walsh, that Inspector Stone did not drive out to Buckton. But neither was it really clear just what he was doing in Winville. He said he needed to check whether Winville’s slipshod work extended to other cases beside the Maxwell cases.

“Which cases did you have in mind, sir?” Greg said mildly. His resentment at having Stone standing round listening in to every conversation had grown. And if their detective work really needed to be investigated then why send a uniformed officer who had worked in a quite different area?

Stone might say that good record-keeping was good record-keeping no matter what the area but they had all grown suspicious that Stone had another agenda. And when Stone stayed late several nights, telling them all he could find his own way around their files, this had served to increase their suspicions.

It was Brent Kelly who said what they were all vaguely thinking. “Is he hoping to dig up something which will help Doug Towner?”

“Probably.” Greg sounded gloomy. “But everything we’ve got has gone to Carl Payne anyway so I don’t know what he expects to find.” In fact files had been copied and sent to Brisbane when there was talk of taking the case away from Winville CIB but no one seemed to know where that material had ended up. Possibly it had been archived, or dumped, when Sam Hoysted was convicted.

“Are you sure about that?” Petra Moore had never seen Doug Towner as someone she needed to know about. She just didn’t think Inspector Stone was ‘genuine’.

“And if he wants to make us look incompetent—then why hasn’t he tried to make Dennis look incompetent?” Jenny Forman put in. “He’s been called by the Prosecution. But Stone has never gone near him.”

“Okay. So who is willing to stay late to keep an eye on him?”

They all volunteered. Greg said, “Okay, Petra, then Brent, then Jenny, then me. But we’d best make it look like we really do need to stay.”

Stone, when he found Petra Moore still busy after the others had gone, said sharply, "Couldn't you do that tomorrow?"

"We've been finalising everything to do with Diane Maxwell. We want to be sure we get her convicted this time, not wandering round the countryside making more trouble."

"That should already be done."

"It is done. I'm just doing some fine-tuning ... and there's a couple of other things that've got pushed aside by this case. I'd like to get them done. And as I don't have a husband or children I'm always happy to stay on. But I won't be in your way so I'll let you get on with whatever you needed to stay on to do."

Stone didn't look happy about this but Petra turned away and busied herself with another case. The room was almost silent for twenty minutes then he said peevishly, "There's some files missing."

"Are you sure?"

"The files in here don't match my list."

"So which ones are you looking for?"

He seemed reluctant to be specific but finally said, "The ones on Doug Towner and Sandra Hoysted."

So we were all right, Petra thought cynically. "That's okay, they're not missing. We had them out to photocopy everything to send to Brisbane and I think Greg was going over them to refresh his memory, seeing he comes up in court as a witness soon."

"Well, where are they?"

"I expect they're on Mr Sullivan's desk."

She turned back to her work.

"Then would you mind looking for them."

She swiveled round on her chair. "You said you were looking into our handling of the Maxwell case. That's got nothing to do with the files you're wanting."

"I am looking into all your work, madam, so don't you get smart with me."

She made herself sound cheerful and casual. "There's lots more files in that cupboard. You can go through them if you want. And I'm sure Greg will find you anything you want tomorrow morning. Now, I really must get on."

She was sure Greg had taken those files home with him and she wondered if Stone would say anything to Greg in the morning.

"I can have you reprimanded, sergeant, for your attitude."

"You can, but you won't. So can we please stop playing games and get on with some work."

She knew she had annoyed him because he slammed a drawer in Greg's desk so hard the things on the desk rattled. Then he got up. "You're pushing your luck, girlie, and don't you forget it."

"Girlie!" She laughed out loud and then made herself keep laughing. "That is priceless! Girlie!"

Stone gave her a nasty look then he turned and went out. DS Moore went on working for the next hour then locked up and went home. She felt very sure he wouldn't put in a complaint. But she also knew that Stone would pass this on and if Dennis was right then there might be different kinds of repercussions. Stone might be a mere foot soldier but there were still powerful men with things to hide. And she would ring Greg and warn him. He might like to come in before Stone and put the files back.

\*

Graham Kelso had had the 'pleasure' of dealing with both Greg and Diane Maxwell. But it was Mrs Vohland listed for Diane's 10 o'clock appointment with justice. Mrs Maxwell might think a woman would be more sympathetic to her plight or easier to get around but everyone in CIB knew Marian Vohland was both tough and pro-active on the bench. Kelso might ask a question here and there. Mrs Vohland practically ran everything to do with her cases.

Two youngish men had come in and sat at the rear of the small court room while a young reporter from the *Winville Courier* sat in front of them. No one had come to support Mrs Maxwell.

If the Goulds had hoped the case could be kept quiet they had misjudged both magistrates. But Mrs Vohland showed every sign of wanting to move briskly through the morning's docket and remove Mrs Maxwell from Winville once and for all.

She began with Mrs Maxwell's breach of her Good Behaviour Bond. "You were put on a Good Behaviour Bond because you assaulted Ronald Pickering. Now you have breached your bond by returning to his farm and assaulting him again—"

"It isn't his farm!" Mrs Maxwell burst in. "It's mine! He had no right to be there!"

"Your farm, Mrs Maxwell? Did you buy it?"

"Course not. Paul give it to me."

"How did he give it to you? Did you inherit it when he died?"

"Course I did."

"How? Did he mention you in his will?"

"Nah. He just give it to me. So it's mine."

"How did he give it to you, Mrs Maxwell? Did he transfer the title deeds to you?"

"Nah. He didn't have time."

"Why didn't he have time?"

"Because he died, of course."

Mrs Vohland had not experienced Diane Maxwell's thought processes before and wondered if questioning her was worth the effort. "So why did you claim he wanted to give his property to you?"

"Because him an' me we had a thing going."

"For how long?"

"Dunno."

"Weeks? Months?"

"Dunno."

"You must have some idea."

"He's the father of me little boy—"

"And how old is your little boy?"

Mrs Maxwell looked at the magistrate blankly. Then she said, "Six. No, five."

"So you have been having an affair with Paul Pickering for six or seven years?"

Mrs Maxwell looked taken aback.

"Well, have you?"

"I must of, I guess. Didn't realise it was that long."

"The fact remains, Mrs Maxwell, that that farm belonged to Ronald Pickering as Paul Pickering's next-of-kin, not to you. You have admitted breaching your Good Behaviour Bond so I will have to find you guilty of that breach. Do you have anything to say?"

"Me little boy's the next-of-kin—so there."

"No, Mrs Maxwell, he is not. Not unless you agree to a DNA test to check his paternity. And even if he was not your husband's child that does not make him the owner of Paul Pickering's farm. Now, moving on." She read out the charge of assaulting Mr Nelson L'Estrange and breaking his nose. She had wondered about these assaults on two men but with Mrs Maxwell in front of her she could understand. She would not like to be in the way of those brawny arms and big strong hands.

"How do you plead, Mrs Maxwell?"

"Sure, the useless bastard tried to take me little kid away from me. An' me keys."

"What keys?"

"Me car keys, of course."

"I have four affidavits here, Mrs Maxwell, all stating that you made an unprovoked attack on Mr L'Estrange and you have admitted to making that attack. So I find you guilty of assault. Do you have anything to say?"

"I woulda punched the lot o' them—useless fuckin' bastards, the lot o' them!"

Mrs Vohland ignored this and moved on to the theft charges. But this inevitably brought Mrs Maxwell back to her claims that it was her farm and everything on it.

“Mrs Maxwell, I am now going to ask Detective Sergeant Moore to tell us what fingerprints the police have found on Mr Ronald Pickering’s belongings.”

Petra Moore had brought all the things they had removed from Mrs Maxwell’s possession. She spent several minutes carefully laying everything on the table in between the magistrate and Diane Maxwell. She held up Mr Pickering’s wallet and told the court where it had been found and that it was minus any cash or credit cards Mr Pickering might have had but still contained his driver’s licence.

“So why are your fingerprints on Ronald Pickering’s wallet, Mrs Maxwell?”

“Cause he give it to me!”

“When?”

“How would I know?”

“You admit that those are your fingerprints on his wallet?”

“Who cares?”

“And did you remove all these things which belong to Ronald Pickering from his house?”

“It wasn’t his house! How many times do I have to tell you!”

“So you admit you removed them?”

“Course I did. They was all mine, not his.”

“How do you know that?”

“Course I know that! They all belonged to Paul!”

“How do you know Ronald Pickering did not bring them there?”

“Course I know.”

The magistrate was not the first person to find Diane Maxwell wearying. She turned back to Petra Moore and said, “Were all these items checked for Paul Pickering’s fingerprints?”

“No.” She realised this was a problem only if Mrs Maxwell could claim any of Paul Pickering’s belongings.

“Then we will leave these items while tests can determine whether they belonged to Paul or Ronald Pickering or both. So I will charge you with stealing Ronald Pickering’s wallet, Mrs Maxwell. Do you have anything to say?”

“It’s mine. I just stuck his licence in there.”

“Stealing a licence is an offence, Mrs Maxwell. So that charge will remain.” She looked at the clock before taking up the next sheet handed to her by her assistant.

She read out the charge that Diane Maxwell had killed Ronald Pickering by punching him. “Normally we would ask for an inquest before charging you, Mrs Maxwell, but as you went into the Police in Buckton and told Sergeant Walsh you had killed Ronald Pickering, the fact that Mr Pickering died from a cerebral haemorrhage and a broken jaw, is not the key point but rather that you caused the injuries which killed him. You have admitted to killing him so I will have to charge you with manslaughter unless you went there with the plan to kill him. Did you?”

“Course not. He was s’posed to stay away from the farm. He didn’t. So I whacked him.”

“What happened when you whacked him?”

“He fell down an’ he wouldn’t get up.”

“Because he was dead?”

“S’pose so.”

Mrs Vohland began to gather her papers together. “You will remain in custody, Mrs Maxwell, and I will pronounce sentence on all four charges Monday morning at ten o’clock.” The minor charges could be done on the spot but she felt she needed time to think everything through. And she would need to check that no one wanted to see Mrs Maxwell sent to trial. She couldn’t imagine anyone trying to slow things down.

“Here! You can’t keep me! I’ve got to get home to me kids!”

All kinds of sarcastic comments flitted through Mrs Vohland’s mind but she simply looked at Mrs Maxwell without speaking. And for the first time Mrs Maxwell seemed at a loss. The magistrate continued to sit in silence while Mrs Maxwell was removed from the room. She had a half-dozen more minor cases to be got through but she felt drained. The possibility that Diane Maxwell was mentally ill had several times come to her and been dismissed. Mrs Maxwell might genuinely believe she was entitled to that farm but Mrs Vohland had heard a great many people lay

claim to things they weren't entitled to and she saw it as a try on. If the woman had the smallest piece of evidence to back up her claim, a letter, something said before witnesses, she would've brought it forward.

But it was something else that made her so tiring. Something to do with her personality. That kind of passive-aggressive attitude maybe. It was a relief to adjourn the court for lunch.

\*

Petra when she came back to the station said simply, "Got her. Found guilty on all four counts."

"Good." Greg had believed she would be but he didn't have great confidence in his own judgement.

"Where is Stone?"

"In there with Jake. Don't know what's going on."

"Then I'll tell you one thing. We should've got all those items fingerprinted for both Paul and Ronald Pickering. If she hadn't grabbed the wallet we might've lost out there because we couldn't prove who all those things originally belonged to."

"Does it matter?"

"It might've. So keep it from Stone."

As she had come out of court she had been stopped by one of the men who had sat at the rear of the court. He introduced himself as Mathew Pickering and said, "How long will she get, d'you think?"

"I'm hoping she'll get twelve to fifteen but don't be surprised if she gets ten. And it depends if the other charges get added on or run concurrently. I'm sorry about your dad ... "

"Yeah, poor old bugger. It was the last thing he needed at his age, having that crazy woman coming round all the time."

"So what are you going to do with everything?"

"I'll sell both farms, sort everything out, and be gone again. Anyway, thanks for getting her." He turned and walked away. Petra wasn't very interested in men but she had felt the faintest of flutters while talking to him. He was the best-looking man she had seen in a long time. For a brief moment she was tempted to call him back and ask if he'd like a coffee. But the desire passed and she was aware only of relief that it was all over. The other youngish stranger came out of the court and looked around. He thought of going over to her but the idea of trying to write a book about the Maxwells and Pickerings had faded and died. 'Perhaps I am a fiction writer to the core. Perhaps I am too fond of being the one to manipulate my characters. I think trying to interview Diane Maxwell would be a punishment I would prefer not to undergo.' He too went out.

\*

Both Walsh and Schroeder were pleased to hear that Diane Maxwell would not be out and roaming the countryside again. The pity in the whole thing was for the children. Even if they were not the nicest of children they would now have to live with the knowledge that both parents were in jail.

"But maybe that will be a good thing," Grant ventured. "Maybe they will get to live with someone nice?"

"Let's hope."

And the working day was not quite over when they had another piece of news. There was an e-mail from Ashley Turner to say they thought they had identified the mysterious Jason Smith. 'We sent a print to the US not with great hope but they have linked it to a man called Vito Bonnano. One of the foot soldiers of a New York crime family. There might be quite a few people wanting him back. Will ring later.'

"Wow!" Grant considered this in secret amazement. "So he really is a Mafia hitman?"

"Either that or it got too hot for him there. Or both maybe. We'll see what else Ash has to say when she gets back to us."

Sergeant Stone was not privy to this excitement. When he went in to see Jake Moss he sat down and said, "Nearly finished."

"Good. Can you let us have a copy of your report when it's finalised?"

"No. Confidential."

“Then how can we implement any changes you recommend if it’s going to be kept secret?”

Stone looked blank for a fleeting moment then said, “Any changes will be passed on.”

“Good. So who put in the initial complaint? It can’t have been the Maxwells.”

“That is also confidential—”

“I always get suspicious when people hide behind claims of confidentiality, Inspector Stone.”

Stone had insisted on first names when he’d arrived. Now he looked annoyed. “You know perfectly well that people’s identities have to be kept under wraps at times.”

“Yeah, we always go round and beat up on the folk who complain,” Jake said sarcastically.

“Well, there’s other ways for us to find out what was really going on in Brisbane.”

“You’re risking a complaint about non-cooperation,” Stone said coldly.

“Well, how ’bout you cooperate and head out to Buckton to finish your investigation. The Buckton end was as important as the Winville end. Or are you scared of Dennis Walsh?”

The colour flamed up in Stone’s face but he only said tightly, “I will have to mention your attitude.”

Jake Moss had seen previous station commanders treat Walsh like a wild beast prowling, something to be kept firmly outside the door, but he thought that if you have a good experienced officer you take advantage of the fact.

“Be my guest. Now, if you’ve finished I’ve got an appointment.”

Inspector Stone stood up, seemed about to say something, then simply walked out.

Moss buzzed Stephanie and said, “Are the Goulds here?” He wasn’t looking forward to hearing them grumble about the awful publicity around the Maxwells. But it was a curious thing, he thought: would Diane Maxwell have been a different person if she had not married a man like Greg Maxwell? If she had married a pompous but unremarkable and law-abiding man like Harry Gould? Then Stephanie ushered in Mr and Mrs Gould and he was calm and pleasant and non-committal again.

## *Case No. 4: Fall-out*

Sergeant Walsh was in Buckton station on Saturday morning finishing up some paperwork. Grant had gone out to a farm to check on some missing calves. Then he planned to go on to Dinawadding to bring Stacey Lynch into Buckton later for the high school dance. Dennis planned to take the family to Toowoomba in the afternoon as his horse Hansom Days was having his first-up start at Clifford Park.

The bell tinkled and Kerrin Stone walked in. “I’ve come to check your files on the Maxwells,” he said without any greeting.

After Stone’s firm refusals to come to Buckton Dennis was surprised but merely said, “Then take a seat in there and I’ll get them for you. Tea or coffee?”

“Nothing.”

Stone sat down and looked around. There was a photocopier, two computers, two phones, and nothing else in the way of technology. Almost unwillingly he compared this with the resources he could draw on.

Dennis put down a couple of files and the day book. “Let me know if there’s anything else you want.” He went out again. The phone rang. The door tinkled again and a woman came in. The phone rang again. The door opened again to let a middle-aged couple enter. Stone’s attention drifted away from the sheets in front of him. For the first time he asked himself what it would be like trying to deal with the Maxwells while dealing with a constant stream of other work. The problems and complaints and requests might be small beer but they all had to be dealt with.

He looked without much interest through the files and closed them. The desire to just say ‘they seem okay’ and get on the road was very strong. But he thought that having come this far he might as well see the farms. It would probably annoy Walsh on a busy morning so his response

might be instructive. When everyone had been dealt with he said coolly, “Now, I’d like to see those farms.”

“Okay. Two ticks and I’ll take you out.” He put on the answering machine and got the car keys. The suspicion that Stone might like to take up most of his day was there but he was determined not to show any impatience. If Stone thought he was in a hurry he might deliberately string things out.

The gate into the Pickering farm was shut but not padlocked. Dennis got out and opened it and drove down. A car was parked by the house. Mathew Pickering came out as they drew in.

“More trouble, Sergeant Walsh?”

“No. This is Inspector Stone. He is just doing an audit of the Maxwell cases. D’you mind if we look inside?”

Pickering waved them in.

“It was here we found Paul Pickering,” Dennis said to Stone. “He had to be lifted on a piece of lino and put in a tub, poor bugger, to go to Winville. Most of his hens had died of thirst but we rescued two.”

“I hardly think the fate of his hens matters, Sergeant.”

“Well, not to him. The vet brought them back to health and found a home for them.”

“I didn’t see that in your report.”

“Didn’t you?”

“No. I didn’t.”

“Well, it’s there.”

“Don’t get stropky with me, Sergeant.”

Mathew Pickering had come in quietly behind the two men and was now listening.

“I’ll do you copies of everything in the files and you can go through them at your leisure. Now, is there anything else you want to see?”

“No. There isn’t.”

Dennis turned and said, “Yell if you need any help with things here” to Pickering and went out. Stone followed him in silence.

Dennis drove back up the slope and got out and closed the gate. Obviously Stone wasn’t a country person or he would have hopped out at the gate to close it. In fact, Kerrin Stone found these open dry spaces with only the occasional homestead daunting. But he had no intention of giving anyone here the satisfaction of knowing he was completely out of his comfort zone.

They drew up beside the gate to the Maxwell farm with its padlocks and large sign to say DO NOT ENTER. “There were bags of toxic waste stored here,” Dennis said. “They must’ve removed it all by the look of it but the soil will have to be tested.”

“What sort of toxic waste?”

“I know they found drums of PCBs. Not my area but they think they might’ve come from old transformers on power lines. But Maxwell refuses to tell anyone who paid him to store them.”

“Are you sure he was paid?”

“Greg Maxwell never does anything unless there’s something in it for him.”

“That’s a glib statement, Sergeant. Do you have evidence?”

“It’s not a crime, Inspector Stone. This farm was probably worth nearly a million, say seven or eight hundred thousand, and now it’s worth next to nothing because no farmer in his right mind would buy land possibly contaminated by toxic waste. So don’t tell me Greg Maxwell took the stuff out of the goodness of his heart.”

“Well, as we can’t get in,” and privately he had no wish to get in even if it was possible, “we might as well head back.”

“So d’you want copies of anything?”

“I probably should go through all your files to see that your work is up to standard—”

“Why?”

“It’s not just the Maxwell case I’m interested in. It’s general responses to crimes.”

“So when did Doug Towner get someone to twist your arm?”

“I have never met Doug Towner.”

“Doesn’t matter. He’s got mates to do his dirty work for him.”



"I really don't know why you're always banging on about Doug Towner. It's very childish."

"Doug Towner dragged Winville's reputation through the mud. He was a useless detective. He was lazy, skiving off to play golf most afternoons, and he sent an innocent man to jail for something he'd done himself. So to get Greg and the others seen as incompetent will play very nicely into Doug's hands, or his lawyer's hands."

"You don't know that. And I hardly think Sam Hoysted was a little saint."

"Of course he wasn't. Who is? But he didn't kill his wife so he is an innocent man."

"I think you're jumping to conclusions there, Sergeant. Doug Towner is innocent unless found guilty. Sam Hoysted was found guilty. Simple as that."

"So why are you out here guddling through their files on Doug Towner and Sam Hoysted?"

"I am not. I am looking at all their files—"

"Going back to when?"

"That is not your business, sergeant."

"Well, Doug hasn't got many champions left in Winville but I s'pose you could go and see John Daly at the *Courier* there. They used to be mates. And you could go and see old Gus Ranke at Dinawadding. He used to live next door to Doug. Anyway, up to you."

Dennis was glad to get back to Buckton and park the car. "Now, anything else you want to see." He made it sound casual though he was aware of time passing. It wouldn't matter if they missed the first couple of races but he would hate to miss seeing his horse run. Stone got out of the car and stood there looking round. Except for noise coming from the high school ovals and a couple of cars up at the Wests for the market stalls the place seemed deserted. Then he said, "I'll just get my briefcase and be on my way."

"Good oh." Dennis unlocked and went in. The phone was blinking. "Sure you don't want copies of anything?"

"No, I'll be on my way."

"You don't want to check the entry about the chooks?"

Stone closed his briefcase with a snap and walked to the door without responding. Dennis watched him drive off in the direction of Winville. The man might've come to some conclusion but the only thing his stance suggested was a desire to be gone. Dennis wondered what he would do and say when he got back to Brisbane.

But while Dennis and his family were watching Hansom Days run a close third Kerrin Stone was around at the watch house asking to see Greg Maxwell. Winville had hoped that Brisbane would take Maxwell. They only had two cells and with people regularly needing to be kept over the weekends and Diane Maxwell in custody they had had to arrange with the hospital to have the use of their two isolation rooms.

Kerrin Stone had come more out of curiosity than duty. He hated the thought of trying to create a report which would please Brisbane without doing anything to undermine the trial of Greg Maxwell. He sat down opposite Greg Maxwell and wondered if this was a good idea, after all. It was not that Maxwell was unprepossessing. He was a well-set-up fit-looking man with brown wavy hair and a firm chin. But his gaze had something unblinking and reptilian about it, Stone thought, then chided himself for being fanciful.

He introduced himself and said, "It will be a while before you can return to your farm or think about selling it. But I think the men in white suits have nearly finished removing everything. And I understand a social worker has been to see your children."

Maxwell simply sat and stared at Stone who finally looked away and then was annoyed with himself.

"I am not authorised to do a deal but it would probably help your defence if you dobed in whoever got you to store those drums."

Maxwell showed no interest. Stone hesitated then went on, "I have been told that you had a quite valuable farm, good land, good position, but that now it is virtually worthless because no one wants to buy contaminated land."

Maxwell still said nothing but Stone was astute enough to catch a slight shifting in Maxwell's stance. It was possible he still believed he would win his case and return home and the need to sell his farm would not come up.

But alongside this intuition was the feeling that he just wanted to get away from the man's presence. Over the years he had been in the company of other men who gave him the creeps. Now he felt Greg Maxwell had joined that list. He hesitated to call it evil but he felt he was in the presence of someone amoral. And the possibility that his actions, even if he was here not of his own volition, might have played into this man's hands increased his discomfort.

"Think about it, Mr Maxwell. You've got nothing to lose by passing on information about the origins of that toxic waste." He got up abruptly. The desire to be gone had grown stronger.

Maxwell made no response except to give an exaggerated yawn.

As he came out Stone ran into Brent Kelly. Greg Sullivan was indulgent with Brent's desire to ride every spare moment of his life and felt that his horses were good for him. But he still insisted on Brent being on call on every second Saturday unless he could make some arrangement with Jenny Forman.

Stone said only, "You might be able to get him on the huge decline in his farm's value. A good farm is now contaminated and virtually worthless. He just might crack and tell you what you want to know."

For a moment Brent was all at sea. Who was 'him' and what farm. And then it all fell into place. "Okay, thanks, I'll tell the others."

"So what are you here for?"

"Sergeant Merrill is bringing in two people to be kept overnight but I don't know where we're going to put them if they can't share a cell."

Stone lost interest and said, "I'll leave it to you then."

He simply wanted to collect his things from the hotel and be on the road. The whole thing had been a waste of time and worse than that he felt used. The thought of Greg Maxwell walking free because of anything he'd done or said ... but there was no point in agonising over it.

\*

Mrs Vohland rarely talked about her cases with her husband. It would be hard to make endless traffic violations, minor punch-ups, drunk and disorderlys, thefts, and occasional drug cases sound interesting. But she did share something of her morning with Diane Maxwell and the feeling of being drained.

He said perceptively, "Is it the children in the back of your mind?"

"In a way. I have no objection to them being made wards of the state but I wonder if we can give them the care and counseling I'm sure they need. I've spoken with the social worker and they've all been found temporary homes. But I don't think I've ever had to remove two parents in short order and leave children with no carer already known to them."

"You could talk with their teachers."

"Yes. And the other thing is whether to run all the charges concurrently. I am inclined to add on the assault charge and run the minor charges concurrently. But there are times when it gets me down. I don't know if she really lives in a fantasy world or has made herself believe things she knows are not true or whether she is just cunning."

"Did you think of getting her assessed?"

"I did. But I'm sure she knew exactly what she was doing."

"And whether they were wrong?"

"That's a bit harder. She almost seemed proud of what she'd done. Not because she's a mental case but almost because she was saying to herself, women can be tough too, and I wondered if it was because she had never been able to hit back at her husband when he abused her—and these other men were sort of substitutes for all that aggression boiling away inside her."

On Monday she sat calmly on the bench looking at Diane Maxwell with more perceptive eyes as she handed down a twelve-year sentence with a non-parole period of eight years. Mrs Maxwell didn't take this calmly, screaming, "You're a stupid bloody old bitch an' you don't know nothing!"

"Mrs Maxwell, if you have anything to say, say it politely, or I will have you charged with using offensive language."

For a moment the woman seemed startled, then she just said, "Get on with it then."

"You will have a chance to see your children before you are transported to Brisbane."

Greg Sullivan had come into court to hear Mrs Maxwell sentenced and he felt a great sense of relief to see her escorted out of the court room. Stone had abruptly departed. Jake had said, "Don't worry about Stone" and Brent Kelly had passed on the suggestion about tackling Greg Maxwell from a different angle.

He wondered if it had occurred to Stone to bring up the market value of the property, seeing that he seemed to want to know nothing about country life. "I'll bet it was Dennis," he'd said to the room, "but I s'pose we can let Stone have that little bit of credit."

Petra looked at Greg and wondered if he would still feel magnanimous when Stone put in his report. Because, if Dennis was right, the report would surely be critical of them. Stone would paint them all as incompetent, disorganised, and lazy. And then she re-thought that. He would ... if he could be sure it would not help Greg Maxwell get off ... And then she wondered if her intuition was right ...

"I still don't see Greg Maxwell cracking," she said, "which suggests it was either a company or someone with a bit of clout. He wouldn't protect some old duffer. But what will happen to the farm if he gets twenty years?"

"That's not our business. Those environmental blokes can decide what can be done with the farm."

He thought but did not add 'and Dennis will know what to do.'

\*

Ash rang Dennis about 9 pm. He was just thinking about going to bed. It had been a long day and Grant should be able to handle any nonsense going on after the high school dance.

"Very interesting, Dennis. I'm always amazed at the stuff you come up with."

"So who is this bloke?"

"Well, John Royden Millington did exist. He was in New York and he disappeared. But a couple of years later they turned up a body buried on a hillside in bushland and it was identified as Millington. It looks like someone got word to our perp that he needed to come back and exchange passports. They're hunting for a Jason Smith who disappeared but it's possible that passport is a forgery rather than one that just got 'liberated'. I'd like to take Mrs Gannon to Melbourne to make absolutely sure we've got the right man." Dennis couldn't see Carmen jumping at the offer. "And there's another thing. The man he's in for killing, someone just known as Antonio, might now be identified. Because there's a possibility he also had a connection to the Bonnano family."

"So—are they into dealing here—or were these bods sort of loose cannons?"

"We don't know yet. Or I don't know yet. There may be things we aren't getting told. But with luck we can send him back to America and save some money."

"And his son? Their son?"

"I'm sure he can be found, now that Victoria might be persuaded to look and not just depend on that PI the Woods hired. And then it depends on who wants him, I guess. He's old enough to support himself but it sounds like he's missed out on a lot of happy home life."

"Yeah. Poor sod."

"I don't see Mrs Gannon coming to the party. I got the impression she feels guilty about something. I wonder if she let her husband take the boy camping or something—and when they didn't come home she blamed herself."

"Could be. But she does have some responsibility for the lad."

Ashley didn't feel this was her responsibility. And as the grandparents had already said they were willing to take young John Fred she just wanted him found and his father identified beyond doubt.

"I'm sure all that can be sorted when he's found. But it all still seems pretty amazing. And I wonder if Carmen Gannon ever had the slightest inkling that her husband wasn't who he said he was? After all, she did live with him for four or five years."

"Well, it looks like that marriage could be null and void, seeing you can't marry a dead man. But they will probably say she married in good faith. I wonder who the real Millington was?"

"I'm sure we can find out."

\*

Carmen Gannon, predictably, refused point-blank to go to Victoria and confront her supposed husband. She said several times, “I never want to see him again.” And then she said she hadn’t seen him in twenty years and wouldn’t know him—

“Are you quite sure about that, Mrs Gannon? He still has the same features, the same voice, the same height ... and your son does need to be found and helped. He’s had a pretty rotten life, by the sound of it.”

Carmen fired up at that, saying it wasn’t her fault, that she’d tried to find him and failed, and the police hadn’t given her any help. Ashley had some sympathy. Police often weren’t very helpful when it was a spouse disappearing. It was easy to assume that there was someone else in the mix.

“Does your husband know about John Fred?”

“Sort of.”

“And would he be willing to have John Fred come and live with you?”

“No. He wouldn’t. Anyway, he can go to my parents if he wants.”

“Well, I would like you to take a couple of days off and come to Melbourne with me. I can square it with the library for you.”

It took a great deal more coaxing before Carmen finally and deeply reluctantly agreed to come. “But I don’t want to be stuck with you. I will ask Fiona to come with me.”

Ashley had no problem with this. Though she didn’t think she could fund an extra person’s travel. Still, that could be sorted out if and when Fiona agreed to play nursemaid to Carmen. And she privately felt she didn’t want to spend a great deal of time with Carmen. Fiona would take the edge off things.

\*

The decision to send both Greg and Diane Maxwell to Brisbane the day after Diane had been sentenced seemed to be a hurried response to the lack of long-term remand facilities in Winville. The court had said Diane could see her children in Buckton before she went to Brisbane so an equally hurried arrangement had been made for all the children to come into Buckton police station and have a brief time with their parents. Dennis had made the arrangements with school and temporary families but he wasn’t happy to have both parents there.

They came in the prison van from Winville with one police officer as driver, Constable Cripps, and a private security officer. In theory this should be sufficient to keep both Maxwells in order but Dennis wasn’t happy that neither of them was handcuffed. Someone had made the decision that it would be less traumatic for their children to see them without any restraint.

And having everyone crowded in to the small interview room was also not ideal. Diane said everyone could have a hug before she left for ever. But it was Greg who suddenly grabbed a child and yelled “I’m outa here and don’t you try to stop me!”

As Dennis moved towards him saying, “Oh no you don’t!” the security man came up behind Maxwell and grabbed him by both upper arms and jerked them back. Maxwell let go of the child, a girl of twelve or thirteen, who fell to the floor and began to cry. Maxwell gave a roar and lunged forward in the hope of head-butting Walsh. But Dennis moved aside as Maxwell with the security man still trying to hold on plunged off-balance and went down with the man on top of Maxwell.

Dennis yelled to Grant, “Bring the cuffs—other door!”

A minute later Maxwell’s hands had been secured behind his back but as he got up he had another go at Dennis Walsh. This time he caught him a glancing blow and landed with a thump on the interview room table. It was not a very strong table and as he straightened up again he hooked one foot around a leg and sent the table flying.

Both Diane and the children were now screaming and crying. Dennis said, “Get him back in to the van and I’ll get this lot calmed down.”

Grant and Cripps righted the table and Mrs Maxwell plonked herself back down on the nearest chair and said angrily, “How can I trust you to look after my kids when you’re so useless!”

“It isn’t up to me to look after your kids, Mrs Maxwell. Welfare will do that. Now, say good-bye to them and we’ll get you on your way.”

But she grabbed the two youngest to her and refused to let them go. In a way, this was harder to deal with than Maxwell’s naked aggression. The children could not be forcibly removed

from her embrace. Dennis just stood there, looking grim. Cripps began to look impatient. Grant waited to see what would happen next.

Finally, Dennis said, "The big kids can return to school and the school will arrange counseling. Grant will take the younger ones back when she gets tired of holding them."

Grant wondered if this would turn in to a stalemate but after a minute the kids got restless and fractious and their mother let them go, saying, "Okay, be like that!"

Cripps put a hand on her shoulder and said, "Come along now, Mrs Maxwell," and steered her out of the room.

Dennis looked at the children and felt real sympathy for them. Even if they were very far from being little angels (and he could well believe that several of them had a reputation as bullies) he felt they had been dealt a pretty useless hand. When everyone else had gone out he sat down to write up the morning's events. Then he rang all three schools to check on their arrangements for helping the children.

It was John Derry who said, "Will they be able to go back to the farm?"

"Not up to me. And I wouldn't want kids on that farm till it's given the All Clear. I guess the oldest boy will be able to take it over eventually. Not the oldest, the second oldest." He wondered if anyone had informed Johnny Maxwell what had happened to his parents. He wondered what the parents themselves had told him ... if anything ...

And would they stop over in Toowoomba to say goodbye to him?

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By the time Dennis got home he just wanted to put his feet up and relax. Maxwell had only caught him with his shoulder, not his bullet head, but it had settled down to a steady ache. Fiona had gone to a Council meeting, Rob had gone to a ballet lesson with the new bank manager and his daughter Madison. Fiona had left a casserole for him to share with Elise.

The phone rang and it was Carmen Gannon wanting Fiona.

"She's out at the moment. Can I take a message?"

"I want Fiona to come to Melbourne with me to see this man they say was my husband."

"She's pretty busy—"

"She's not *that* busy. And I don't want to go with that policewoman. It's all very stressful."

"It must be. So are you offering to pay Fiona's fares?"

"Of course not. Fiona has plenty of money, I know she has."

If there was one thing guaranteed to make Dennis Walsh see red it was this assumption that Fiona should spend her money on other people because they didn't want to dip into their own pockets. He stopped himself from saying something really sharp.

"Fiona has already done a lot to help you and I don't notice much gratitude coming from your end."

"She said she wanted to help." A slight whine had entered the woman's voice.

"To help you find your son so you could help the poor sod, not run around after the criminal bastard you married."

"That's not fair! I didn't know any of this."

"Okay, up to you, I'll tell Fiona you rang."

He hung up. He had felt a lot of sympathy for her when they'd first met but that had gradually dissipated and now he felt only irritation. He wasn't sure if it was her attitude of 'why shouldn't Fiona help me? She's got nothing to do and plenty of money' or if he couldn't make himself believe that she had lived for four years with Vito Bonnano and never once queried anything. After all, her parents had spent a couple of days with him and become suspicious. Or perhaps it was her unwillingness to share her other children with their grandparents ... He put it aside.

And Fiona *did* have a busy life. She had done meticulous research into every aspect of Buckton Shire Council's activities. The people it employed, its public works, its equipment, its response times, its budget and more. And the Council's letter to the State Government had said clearly that unless the Government could guarantee in writing that rates would not rise, that people would not be sacked in a small country town with few other employment options, and that response times would not lengthen—then amalgamation with Winville was not in the best interests of the

people of Buckton Shire. So far there had been no more talk of amalgamation. In an odd way, the sense of being under threat had brought people together in a sudden burst of pride in their council. This might not last. But for the moment it was very heartening.

Dennis heated up the casserole and brought it to the table. Elise was pleased to have him to herself and immediately shared her idea that Rob should have her pony Freddie as his legs were getting too long for Benbow.

“And what are you going to do to Benbow?”

“I thought Jess could have him for the girls to ride.”

“You don’t think they would fight over who wants to ride him?” The two little Russian girls Jess Brumby had adopted had been riding Twinkletoes but the old pony had now gone to his eternal rest and Harry Kuhl said he would look around for another quiet pony for them.

“I don’t think they fight. They always just sit together at school and don’t do things with anyone else.”

The two little girls had been so traumatised that they still clung together. Though they were a year apart in age the primary school had put them into the same class and they were managing fairly well as their English improved.

“And what does Rob think of your idea?”

“I haven’t told him yet. But he likes Freddie.”

“And what about you? What are you going to ride?”

“Lyn is going to find me a pony ... or maybe a galloway. I think a galloway might be best because I keep growing. Lynn has all these wild ponies she got from somewhere out west and she’s training them. She’s given me a couple of lessons on a horse she has there called Migloo.”

He knew Fiona had taken Elise out a couple of times to Lyn Harding’s farm. Fiona had been surprised that Elise had liked going there as ‘Lyn did nothing but criticise her’. For Fiona who had raised her children in a gentle nurturing way it seemed strange that Elise would want to keep coming to somewhere where she never got a word of praise.

But Elise had thrived under Julie McLaren at school, who mixed praise and criticism in equal measures, so perhaps Lyn Harding was only a more extreme version. And, perhaps, it was precisely because Fiona had brought the children up to have confidence in themselves that Elise could see that Lyn was constantly pushing her to improve, not be content with what she had already achieved.

“I don’t know why he’s called Migloo, it sounds like Igloo, doesn’t it, and she just said that was his name when she bought him.”

“And who is going to pay for the galloway Ms Harding is looking for?” This was probably a rhetorical question.

“I can use the money Granny gave me, can’t I?” Fiona’s mother might not approve of him but she was very generous where her grandchildren were concerned.

“We’ll see. And what about your languages? Have you lost interest in learning?”

“No-o-o,” Elise put down her fork and considered this, “it’s not exactly a lack of interest ... there’s lots to go on with ... but I’ve sort of proved to myself that I can do it ... and now I’m looking for something else to try. But the horses are different.”

She looked at him as though willing him to understand.

“Because they’re real? And they respond to you? Words just sit there?”

“Something like that. And the bantams and everything. But I think,” she dropped her voice, “Rob needs something else ... because Bungey is ... too old.”

It was true the old dog was on his way out. He had ceased wanting to go for walks, preferring to lie by the tankstand most of the time or in his bed in the toolshed. It would be hard for Rob to lose him, but a visit to the vet was indicated, so the excitement of a new pony would be good to take his mind off that little sorrow. It wasn’t that Rob was passionately fond of the old dog, not in the way he had loved his cat, but he had seen himself as Bungey’s protector and minder and the old dog had always responded. But in the last couple of weeks he had ceased to wag his tail and he didn’t seem very interested in anything any more.

“We can see if Mrs Burkett has a kitten no one wants. He needs something to cuddle.”

Elise agreed with this. It was not that her father was a sparkling conversationalist but she always wanted him to herself to talk things over with. Without knowing it she was probably responding more to the sense of him as her bulwark and rock. Nothing could be too terrible while she had him as a father. She could say anything, talk about anything, and he would probably understand.

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The call came in from Alan Brumby soon after Dennis had gone over to the station. "It's Wally Barron, sergeant," he said briskly. "That ruddy dog of his howled all night so I went over this morning to see if something was wrong. I found Wally dead in bed. He must've died in his sleep. I think you'd better come."

Dennis called the ambulance and Dr Long. It was probably a natural death but the old man had died alone so he would probably have to be autopsied. And there were animals on the farm to be checked. And the dog ... He told Grant to ring Charles Mather to see if Mr Barron had a will.

The farm seemed a place of perfect peace as he turned in the gate. The sun was drying the morning dew. A few Herefords grazed across the grassy slopes. The windmill beyond the tumbledown sheds turned lazily in the slight breeze.

He parked and went in the front door. Wally was in bed, his old workclothes tossed over a chair, some moth-eaten slippers by the bedside. It certainly looked as though Wally had gone to bed as usual or perhaps had felt unwell and decided to go to bed early. He took a couple of photographs of the old man lying there, his eyes closed, his mouth slightly open, then went out to wait for the doctor.

She came with Jim Phelps in the ambulance and came over briskly with her bag. The dog had started howling again. She looked over to the pen under the pepper trees then hurried in to the house.

A few minutes later she came out and said, "Probably heart, but as I have never seen him as a patient I don't know anything of his medical history."

Jim Phelps said simply, "Wouldn't think Wally would go to a doctor unless he was half-dead." Dennis nodded.

"Can't you do something about that dog?" Dr Long said suddenly. "He's spooking me."

Dennis went inside and found some chunks of meat in the fridge and put them on a plate. He let the dog out and it came charging over to the house. Dr Long stepped back hurriedly as it bounded inside and up to Wally in bed. It began to howl again.

Dennis took the plate of meat outside and put it down on the ground. "Come on, pooch, breakfast time!"

The dog hesitated and then came out again. Dennis had gone over to his car and taken the rifle from the back seat. He came back and stood watching the dog wolf down the meat on the plate. He swiped it with his tongue then looked up at Dennis who had stood with the rifle aimed at the dog's head. He pulled the trigger and the dog dropped.

Gillian Long looked very shocked. "You shouldn't have done that! Someone could take him."

"Would you take him?" Dennis said without emotion.

She looked down at the unprepossessing old dog and said "No".

"People don't want old pig dogs. I'll bury him and check on the cattle."

She went back inside to help Jim Phelps place the body on a stretcher and take it out to put in the back of the ambulance. A couple of minutes later they drove away.

Dennis looked around for a key but he doubted whether Wally had ever locked his house. And there wasn't much in it that was obviously saleable. The TV was black and white. There was a radio on a kitchen shelf. The house, though untidy, was reasonably clean. Probably a padlock on the front gate would be enough to deter the curious. And it was unlikely Wally had ever had trouble with intruders. His dog had a fierce reputation.

He found a spade and a mattock in a shed and dug a hole down past the netting run and kennel. It was hard work digging and he didn't try to do more than a shallow hole. He lifted the old dog in to it and said "Happy traveling, old fella". Then he piled some rocks over it to stop anything trying to dig there. He checked the troughs and thought the cattle would be fine until they found a

new owner for the farm. He took the empty plate back into the kitchen and washed it. Then he drove away.

Gillian Long said to Jim Phelps as they drove back to town, "He shouldn't have just shot that dog like that. He should've tried to find a home for it."

"People don't want pig dogs. And that one had a reputation as a sheep-killer."

"What's a pig dog?"

"A dog used for going after wild pigs. And that old fella was a one-man-dog. He and Wally had been together for yonks. I really don't think he'd ever settle down with anyone else." He turned to her and went on kindly, "It really is the best way, save the old fella from fretting after Wally."

He wasn't sure if he had convinced her but she went on to say she would check with Joanne at the surgery to see if Wally had ever been in.

"It's the thing with older men, they've never been to doctors, unless they have a bad accident. Wally'd probably see it as sissy to go to a doctor for a gastric upset or the flu, he'd just grit his teeth and sit it out. Older women have been to doctors for having babies and things so they don't have the same attitude. Wally'd just about have to chop his foot off before he'd go to a doctor."

He dropped her off in Buckton and set out on the drive to Winville. If she found any notes she could let Winville know. As he drove he thought it was probably a rough introduction to country life but then he pondered on the difficulty of getting the dog into the police vehicle, getting him to the vet, getting him put down and disposed of. This way seemed better. He wondered if she would come round to that way of looking at it.

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When Dennis got back to the station and put the gun away Constable Schroeder said, "Mr Mather wants you to go round to see him. It's about the will."

"Well, let's hope he hasn't made the sort of stupid will Paul Pickering made." He took a swig of water from their small fridge and went out again.

Both Jess Brumby and Charles Mather gave him curious looks as he came up the stairs and into Mather's office. He wondered if he smelled of blood and death or had dirt on his face.

"Sit down, sergeant," Mather waved him to a chair. This all seemed unexpectedly polite. Charles Mather sometimes went out of his way to make him wait. "Mr Barron did make a will and I've run off a copy for you." He handed the sheet over. "As you will see he made only two bequests."

Mather sat back in his chair and watched Sergeant Walsh's expression closely. He now had the practice up for sale. He had used all the right phrases, 'thriving country practice', 'experienced and capable secretary/receptionist', 'pleasant country town with amenities', 'loyal clientele' ... and he already had several people interested.

Finally Dennis Walsh looked up. Wally Barron had left the contents of the house, all his personal possessions, his vehicles, and his money in the bank to his half-brother Billy McCarthy, and the house and farm to Dennis Walsh 'for saving me from that dangerous panther'.

"Well, that's one in the eye," Dennis said. "Never knew the old bloke felt grateful, he just wanted the panther gone ..."

"And there is a slight problem with this will." Dennis half-hoped Mather would now say the will was invalid for some reason. But Mather went on his best legal manner: "Billy McCarthy died a couple of months ago. He was in the CWA home in Oakey."

"Did Wally know he'd died?"

"I would assume so. Neither of them had children so they were fairly close. It seems more likely that Mr Barron just had not seen changing his will as a priority. I will have to find out who Mr McCarthy named as his next-of-kin. I hope it wasn't his half-brother. I am getting rather tired of these wills that take up so much time to sort out. I hope you've made a nice clear will." He looked at Walsh rather sharply.

Dennis didn't respond to this, not seeing it as Mather's business, and anyway he only owned his nine-year-old ute, a share in a racehorse, two houses in Dinawadding which were virtually unsaleable, and some money in the bank.

"So what happens to the farm in the meantime? There's cattle on it."



“Can you mind it? Probate will be held up while we sort out the McCarthy end of it.”

“It would be best if Wally’s papers and anything valuable were moved out of the house. The place doesn’t seem to be lockable.”

“I’ll get Jess to go out and remove any papers he’s got. Her parents live next door so they might know if he ever mentioned any other relatives.”

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When Dennis got back to the station he thought he would ring Fiona rather than wait to see her later. As soon as she answered he said he had some surprising news. “Wally Barron’s just died and he’s left his house and farm to me.”

Fiona *was* surprised. She had not given Wally Barron a thought in years. “Why would he do that, do you think?”

“He said it was because I saved him from that dangerous panther.”

“Oh! Of course! I’d forgotten all about that. Well, that was very kind of him. But what will you do with it?”

“Won’t be for a while as the other beneficiary has died and Wally didn’t change his will. But I said I’d mind the farm until it’s all sorted out.”

“Can we see it?” She couldn’t really picture Wally Barron’s farm but she doubted whether it would all be in pristine condition. It *was* kind of the old man but she didn’t relish the possibility of having to scrub the whole house out. She hoped he might’ve been an exception and looked upon his home with house-proud eyes.

Dennis picked up Jess after lunch and took her out to the farm. He unlocked the gate and said, “D’you want to have a key or make some other arrangement?”

“A key will be fine.” She always felt a little awkward with Dennis Walsh and yet she felt extremely grateful to him for the help he had given her with her ‘orphans’.

Dennis left her to sort things in the house while he walked around and looked in the sheds. He wasn’t sure where the boundaries to Wally’s farm ran except for the fence between him and the Brumbys. But by his casual reckoning there were between sixty and seventy head of cattle on the property. Whether it would be best to sell them off and lease the land ...

He eventually came back to the house to see how Jess was getting along. She had packed some personal belongings into a box and had gone on to the various papers which were bundled into an old knapsack lying on a rather battered sideboard .

“Most of them are pretty straightforward, farm, car, cattle,” she said, “but there is something here that might be a problem.”

She picked up a couple of letters. “These are to Wally from Billy McCarthy and he’s saying that a man wrote to him and said he was his son, he said Billy had an affair with a woman when he was in the army and that this man is the result of that affair.”

“Possible, I s’pose. But it could be checked.”

“I know. But the thing is—it seems that Billy told his brother the man was just trying it on, that he was sure he had never met someone called Gwen Hinkle, and that it was all a load of poppycock. So I wonder if we need to sort this out before we apply for probate?”

“The other thing is—why did this man, this Mark Hinkle, wait so long? If Billy was eighty then this man must be nearly sixty. And did Billy have anything to leave?”

They had found Billy McCarthy’s lawyer in Oakey and been faxed a copy of his will. In it he left everything to his half-brother Walter Barron. He had sold his house and car before going into the Home so there was at least forty thousand dollars to come to Wally but that had not happened by the time Wally died.

“So there was a little nest egg to come to Wally?”

“Yes. And as Wally survived for twenty-eight days after Billy died the money will still come to Wally’s estate.”

“Mmmm “ He hoped this wouldn’t get around Buckton because there would be people saying he’d pressured Wally or, worse, that he’d had something to do with Wally’s death. “So you’d need to track down this Hinkle bloke and see if he’s genuine. My impression is that Wally was never interested in women and maybe Billy was the same ... but you never know, when young men are away from home ... ”

Charles Mather understandably reacted with dismay when Jess came back to the office with the papers and the news of this unknown man. “Not another! What is it about wills? And who is this man? Do we know where he lives?”

Jess said briskly she would get straight on to it. It wasn’t a very common name so he shouldn’t be hard to find. And Billy McCarthy’s personal papers were still with his lawyer in Oakey; there might be a letter and address in them.

Elise and Rob were delighted by the news they might be going to get a farm. “That’s what I would like most,” Elise immediately said. “A nice farm with lots of horses.”

Dennis privately thought life would be easier if he could just give up work and have ‘a nice farm with lots of horses’. But he warned them it might not happen, that there were still problems with the other person mentioned in Wally Barron’s will.

“He was the man with the panther, wasn’t he?” Elise said. “Like Mowgli.”

He was surprised that she should remember but he said that was the case.

Jess took the girls and went out to see her parents in the evening. She told them what had happened and about Wally leaving his farm to Dennis Walsh. Alan Brumby said, “Fair enough. He’ll look after it properly.”

But when Jess told them about the mystery man he said, “Ah, so that’s what Wally was rambling on about.”

“Wally told you about this man who claims to be Billy’s son?”

“He did. He said it was all a load of old cobblers. He said Billy would’ve told him because they were close when they were young.”

“They still kept in touch.”

“So what was this man asking for? Did he want money or help?”

“He just said he believed Billy was his father. He didn’t provide any evidence.”

“I wonder if he ever provided anything later—or did he visit Billy?”

“We don’t know. We’re trying to find him at the moment.”

“And even if Billy was a wild lad—which I don’t think he was—it doesn’t automatically mean this man becomes his beneficiary, does it?”

“No. And if his mother married and he was adopted by that man then that would make it harder for him to claim.”

“Well, I wonder if he’ll turn up and press his claim?”

“Charles is very cross—that he’s got more problems with a will. But someone is coming tomorrow to see the practice and everything so I hope they’re nice.”

“It isn’t as though Charlie Mather will be a really hard act to follow.”

Jess agreed, though a little hesitantly. “It’s a strange thing but ever since the girls came ... somehow he’s been different, sort of more helpful, more ... mellow.” At least towards her ...

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Wally Barron’s death was soon all around Buckton which was understandable but how everyone also knew that he had left his farm to Dennis Walsh was a puzzle, at least to Dennis. And sure as eggs there were people in the pub quite willing to say that Walsh had twisted the old man’s arm. “I’ll bet Walsh stood over him and said you give me everything or I’ll—” Craig Goodrick said to Pauline Scully.

“He’ll what?” she said without much interest. Wally had never been a regular and she barely knew him.

“Bash his head in.”

“That wouldn’t be much good. Then he’d get nothing.”

“You know what I mean.” Craig might be a good customer but she sometimes thought he was a pain, always complaining about something ...

“Anyway, how d’you know all this? I bet Dennis didn’t tell you.”

“Somebody did.”

“So it’s probably wrong. Anyway Wally had a brother, I know that, because I knew his next-door neighbour. It’s probably going to him.”

Craig just snorted and said, “You’ll see I’m right.”

Jess Brumby had a very busy morning. But a rewarding one. The lawyers in Oakey gave her an address for the unknown 'son' and she found him in the Brisbane phone book and left a message for him to call. And the potential buyer turned up in mid-morning and proved to be a married couple, the wife a solicitor and the husband a graphic artist. Jess privately wondered if he would be able to make a living in Buckton but they both seemed interested in the idea of living in a country town. They were in their mid-thirties so Jess wondered if there were children in the equation.

By lunchtime they had decided to buy the practice and go house-hunting. Jess asked if there were children to go to school here and the wife said, "Yes, two girls. What do you think of the primary school here?"

"My girls go to the primary school and I think you will find it a good school. Nelson L'Estrange is a good principal." She suggested they go and see John Goodrick about a house. "Or you could go and see John Benson, I know he's planning to sell his house," and she gave them directions. John Benson and Myrtle Grundy were both elderly and had been friends for quite some time. They had decided to get married, partly to stop gossip and partly because it made sense not to have to keep up two homes. Jess thought it was all rather sweet as they obviously were very fond of each other. And she secretly wished that Kieran felt like that about her, rather than just being kind and helpful ...

Just as she was preparing to pack up for the day she had a ring from someone who said he was Mark Hinkle. "You wanted me to get in touch?"

"Yes, Mr Hinkle. We found a letter from Billy McCarthy to his brother in which he mentioned you. Both men are now dead so we just wanted to check where you came in to things."

"Could I come and see you? It would be easier than trying to explain over the phone."

"If you can spare the time." She told him where to come and arranged a time.

Just before he rang off, Hinkle said, "Did he leave anything, Billy McCarthy?"

"A little. He left it to his brother."

"I see."

Jess shared this with her boss and told him the man would come up from Brisbane on Friday. Mather seemed to have lost interest in the day-to-day business and just nodded. But then he seemed to spark enough to say, "I wonder if we should get Dennis Walsh to come around. It might be that this fellow is out for anything he can get."

"Maybe. But if he genuinely is Billy's son I suppose it is right that he gets something. But I wonder how we can prove it one way or the other?"

"Dennis Walsh'll sort it out for you."

Dennis probably could. But she thought it was unfair the way people expected him to sort out non-police business. And she had been guilty of doing that too ... though perhaps the problems with her two little girls were potentially police business ...

## *Case No. 5: The Changing of the Guard*

Sergeant Walsh felt he had better things to do than go and do Mather's work for him. But if the unknown man was going to prove a problem he supposed it was better to know now. He came up the stairs to Mather's office with his heavy tread and Jess said rather breathlessly, "They're in there, I'll buzz Mr Mather—and the practice is sold, a nice young couple, the Lockwoods, she's the lawyer and he's an artist and they've got two young girls."

"Sounds okay." He privately felt he wouldn't mourn the retirement of Charles Mather.

"And she wants me to stay on."

"Good."

The man who had come to see Charles Mather was tall and fair with graying hair and bright blue eyes. Dennis, as he was introduced, thought, 'he doesn't look anything like Wally Barron'. Mr Hinkle said immediately, "I wouldn't have thought my search for my father was police business."

Mather was tactful enough to say, "Sergeant Walsh may be able to help you."

Dennis had no wish to help this man but he just nodded grimly and sat down.

“Now, the thing is, Walter Barron has just died,” Mather said briskly, “and he left part of his estate to his half-brother William McCarthy but William died more than a month ago leaving everything to Walter. While we were looking through their papers we found your name. So we need to know what your relationship, if any, is to William McCarthy.”

He sat back and waited. Mr Hinkle said, “It’s quite a long story. I always believed my mother when I was young that my father had been killed in the war. But as I got older I started to see that her stories didn’t add up and she always said her husband’s family didn’t want to have anything to do with us—which I started to wonder about. My mother was a WAAF and was a wireless operator in Townsville during the war so I could certainly believe she met someone there. I went overseas in my twenties and lived for quite a few years in Canada and married a girl there. We had two children. But when my mother started to go downhill I thought I should come home. My wife decided not to come.”

Both men listening just nodded.

“My mother was starting to get forgetful and vague and she started to ... well, she would get upset and say it was all Billy’s fault. For a long time I couldn’t get her to say who Billy was or why she was angry with him. And then it started to come out. She would get really wild and say ‘Billy raped me, Billy raped me’ over and over and her sister said she thought it was something which had happened a long time ago, that she had suppressed it, but as her dementia grew it all started coming out.”

“Possible,” Dennis said non-committally.

“The story I pieced together was that she had been seeing someone when she was in Townsville and that he had asked her to marry him and when she had refused he had raped her.”

“So Billy McCarthy was the man she was seeing?” Dennis said.

“I assume so. But she said that all the time he was raping her he was saying ‘Billy McCarthy!’ over and over. I had the horrible suspicion this Billy McCarthy might be my father. I wasn’t sure I wanted to find him but I finally hired an investigator who looked into military history and he found three McCarthys who had been in the war in Queensland. Two Williams and a Michael William. He found addresses and I wrote to them all. But I’ve never had a reply until I heard from you.”

Dennis put his fingers together slowly before saying, “That story doesn’t make sense. If she’d been going out with a Billy McCarthy then he would hardly be telling her his name while he was raping her. It sounds like a different man. And it’s doubtful he would give his real name in case she went to the police or her CO. It could be that he wanted to get a Billy McCarthy into trouble. But the real question is—do you believe your mother? Could she have got something mixed up?”

“I think it’s possible. But I would like to just know who my father was. Just to lay that question to rest.”

Mather nodded though without looking enthusiastic.

“Did your mother keep in touch with any of the girls she worked with, reunions, letters, Christmas cards?” Dennis could see that older women might be dead but most of the girls would have been in their twenties so it was possible some were still around.

“Not much. She was a bit apt to criticise them, to say they were man-mad, but I have heard her mention names.”

“It wouldn’t be hard to get a list of all the girls who were there with her. Their married names will slow things down but even one or two who had been close to her might know what had been going on. The same with any William McCarthys who were based there at the same time. When was she de-mobbed?”

“1946. She was back in Brisbane then and had me.”

“So is it possible there was a man in Townsville she fancied and another man back in Brisbane? You could check the date she returned to Brisbane. Your investigator should be able to get all that for you.”

Charles Mather, glad to sit back and let Dennis make the suggestions, nodded. “That sounds reasonable.” What sort of money this man had to play around with was anybody’s guess.

“But I would doubt that there’s any connection to this Billy McCarthy. His half-brother had brown eyes. We can check for Billy. Brown eyes are dominant.”

Hinkle said he had thought of looking for men with blue eyes who might have been friendly with his mother.

“And she never married—or re-married?”

“Yes, she did. While I was in Canada. But he died five years later.”

“And he had no connection to her in Townsville?”

“Not as far as I know.”

“Well, you’ve got some homework to do and Mr Mather can find out whether Billy McCarthy also had brown eyes. But neither Billy nor Wally had a family so a DNA test would be tricky.”

“What were they like?”

Dennis looked over to Mather. “Wally was a hermit. Don’t know about Billy but he probably was too.”

There didn’t seem to be anything more to do with Mr Hinkle. He thanked them and went out. Mather said to Dennis as he got up to go, “There’s still the problem of finding a next-of-kin. They must have some relatives.”

“Get Jess to ask her parents.”

“And if we can’t find anyone nearer than a second cousin you might end up getting the lot.” Mather looked gloomy. Finding relatives was going to delay his retirement unless ... yes, tracing relatives was normal legal work and there was no reason why he couldn’t pass it on to Mrs Lockwood. But he was a naturally tidy-minded man and thought he would like to have all this sorted out.

After Dennis had gone out he said to Jess, “Relatives for Billy McCarthy and Wally Barron—would your parents know of any?”

“I’ll give mum a ring. I have an idea that Wally had a cousin in Winville because he told mum and dad one time that his cousin didn’t appreciate getting a nice lump of pork. I just hope the cousin hasn’t died too.”

She picked up the phone book and looked for Barrons. There were some over near Aubigny and Biddeston but only one in Winville. She rang the number. It would be nice to get this all sorted out quickly. The voice which answered was female and rather quavery.

Jess said politely, was she talking to a relative of Wally Barron’s?

The voice said, “Well, I sort of am ... but it’s my husband you’d want and he’s not well.”

“I’m sorry to hear it but would he be able to speak with me. It’s about Wally Barron’s will.”

“Oh dear, that is serious ... well, if you’d wait ... I’ll see if he can talk with you.”

This didn’t sound very promising. And if he was a similar age to Wally he probably wouldn’t want the worry of a house full of things ...

An equally quavery voice answered the phone, “Who is it?”

Jess introduced herself and told her both Billy and Wally had died so they were looking for a next-of-kin.

“I s’pose that would be me,” Michael Barron said. “But I hadn’t heard that Wally was dead, poor old sod.”

“Yes, the funeral will be next Wednesday at 11 am. In Buckton. Would you be able to come and meet with Charles Mather here to discuss the will?”

Mr Barron said he hoped to be better by next week. “But if he’s left me his dog I don’t want him.”

“No. The dog died. But all Mr Barron’s belongings are still in the house.”

“I don’t know that the missus and me would be up to doing much. But if someone could help ...” Jess was reluctant to dob Dennis Walsh in and just said, “I’m sure we could find someone to help.”

She shared all this with her boss who said, “That was quick work. But ring him back and ask him to bring any documents to prove who he is and his relationship with Wally Barron. And we’d best advertise in case there’s any other relatives lurking.”

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Sonia and Darren Lockwood debated on whether to try old John Benson before going in to see John Goodrick. Darren said, "Why not? He can only say he's not ready to sell yet. And if we can get a private sale it'll save money."

Mr Benson had decided to marry Myrtle Grundy and move in to her neat little house. It was not so secluded, being on the main road, and he would miss his wild tangle of 'garden' but he felt it was the more practical way to do things. Myrtle's house was more modern and easy to keep up. She had a neat flower garden and vegie patch and hens, as well as her little dog. After the initial period of adjustment he thought he would be very happy there.

It was a surprise to have two strangers come to his door and say they'd heard he was planning to sell his house. They introduced themselves and he said vaguely, "So you're related to Mrs Applegarth and old Bea Lockwood?"

"Very distantly."

But it seemed to give him confidence. He couldn't imagine a relative of Bronwen Applegarth's trying to diddle him.

He said cautiously, "I am planning to sell and move but I haven't put a date on it. Would you like to see around?"

They would. And they liked what they saw. The pleasant front verandah with a couple of basket chairs, the fanlight over the front door, the restful atmosphere of the pleasant old house. It wasn't large but large enough. "The kitchen has the slow combustion but it's getting harder to get wood so I just use this little hot plate. There is hot water off the big stove but when I stopped using it I put in a couple of solar panels."

He took them through to the big dining room and living room which ran the length of the house and opened out in to some fruit trees at the back. "I've got all this nice furniture from when my mother died but I suppose you'd find it a bit old-fashioned? I can sell it with the house or send it to the auction place in Winville."

The more he saw of them the more he thought he would like to have them living here. And they immediately liked the good quality furniture. "That's a lovely sideboard," Mrs Lockwood said. It had little cabinets and mirrors and shelves above the sideboard part and she thought she would love to own it. Of course they had furniture in their Albion Park house but it was functional rather than distinctive.

They wandered through the trees and shrubs to look at the garage and unused chookhouse and kennel. Of course the yard was not very practical, not if they planned to grow their own food but they both thought it would be a pity to change it.

It was hard to believe there was a town all around them. "What are your neighbours like, Mr Benson?" she asked.

"I had a tartar next door, Lynnell Morton, but she's gone, thank goodness, and the Pipers are there now. They've got two little girls—"

"Oh, we've got two girls too. This would be a nice place for pets and we could have chooks."

A spasm came over the old man's face, remembering back to his own pets, but he just nodded.

The more they saw of it the more they liked it. So, "What are you asking for it, Mr Benson?"

It was a question he had been agonising over. He had a forty-five-year-old daughter and two grandchildren from his long ago marriage but they rarely came to visit him. Still, he would like to leave them something. "I'm asking forty thousand furnished, a little less if you don't want the furniture."

Both Lockwoods let out a silent breath. Once they had their Albion Park house sold they would have more than enough to do the necessary repairs on this old house and with luck would hardly have to borrow anything to buy the legal practice as well. Suddenly, moving to Buckton seemed to be the best idea they'd ever had rather than something to give them regular doubts as to whether they were doing a sensible thing.

"Do you know what the schools are like?"

“I’m not really the right person to ask but there’s the state school and there’s St Monica’s, so you could go and talk with them.”

They said they would like to talk it over and would let him know later in the afternoon. He said they could take their time. But inside he was delighted. He had wondered how long it would take to sell, Buckton not being every house-hunter’s dream, and whether he would have to drop the price.

But as they were going out the front gate a woman passing said, “So you want old Benson’s house, do you?”

They looked a little startled, more by her tone than her actual words. “We are thinking of it.”

“Well, you’d be mad to buy it.”

“Why?”

“It’ll fall down any time soon.”

“Why?”

“Full of white ants, that’s why.”

“How do you know that?” Sonia Lockwood from her first startled response had now begun to think like a lawyer.

“Used to live next door.”

“And did you go over to visit often?”

“Of course not! That old duffer.”

“So you don’t actually know anything about the condition of the house?”

“I hear things.”

“So do we.” Sonia Lockwood gave the other woman a long cool stare, while wondering if this was the tartar Mr Benson had mentioned.

“Well, don’t say I haven’t warned you.” The woman continued along the street.

The Lockwoods went back to their car. “Let’s get some lunch, I’m starving, and just see if we can get a bit of local gossip. What shall we try? Café? Pub?”

“Still, I wonder who that woman was? It sounded like she didn’t like him. I wonder why?”

They went into the café and ordered fish and chips and ice cream sundaes. Jess said, “Anything to drink?”

And while she put their chips in to fry Sonia said, “We’re buying Charles Mather’s practice and we’ve just been round to see John Benson about selling us his house.”

Jess said “How lovely.”

“Do you know anything about the house?” Darren said.

“I always think I’d like to live there,” Jess said cheerfully. “And it’s so nice that he and Mrytle are finally making it official. So it doesn’t matter how old you are you can still find romance.”

“A woman came along and said the house was full of white ants.” Darren wondered if he should spread this around but this woman probably knew ... things.

“I’m sure it isn’t. But you could ask Jon Dundas to do an inspection for you. He’s the council building inspector. I’m sure he wouldn’t mind.” She gave them his details.

When they’d finished they went school visiting and talked with the building inspector and told Mr Benson that, subject to the inspector’s report, they would buy the house and if he needed any help with moving just to let them know.

As they went round to the motel in the evening Darren said, “There’s one thing we haven’t talked about.”

“I know. Our safety.”

“Tomorrow we’ll ... ”

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Dennis Walsh didn’t like the idea of Fiona going to Melbourne with Carmen Gannon. He felt Carmen was taking advantage of Fiona. He consoled himself with the fact that Ashley Turner would be with them.

Fiona, too, was reluctant to go to Melbourne. To go with the family for a visit was one thing, to sit and wait outside a prison while Carmen and Ashley went inside another. “I’ll stay over

with mum on the way back and see my publisher and my tutor, so it won't be a completely wasted visit. And do you think I should visit that Mr Caulfield and try and find the son?"

He wasn't enthusiastic about this idea. Seeing that Mr Caulfield wasn't a probation officer and never had been it raised the question of just who he was and what his connection with young John Fred Millington might be.

"If you do, tell someone where you're going and just present yourself as a friend of the grandparents."

That had also occurred to her.

He would be at home over the weekend and they were going to the races in Winville on Saturday afternoon. Then Mrs Tripp would help out the next few days and if necessary Dorita from next door would pop in to see that everything was all right.

The financial thriller was nearly set to go. She had okayed the front cover and written a blurb for the back cover. She had decided to do just one unit of her university course rather than two. And after endless agonising, going from Mafia books to early Australian women writers, she had decided to specialise in 19<sup>th</sup> century Irish poets.

"William Greehan was a political prisoner rather than a criminal and I would rather like to look at what was being said and written at that time—and poetry is a way of expressing people's feelings and aspirations—but in a different way to manifestos and demands."

"Fair enough." He thought she would be good at whatever she chose and this was likely to be more interesting than anything she might discover about early Australian women writers like Catherine Helen Spence and Ada Cambridge.

Her reluctance to go to Melbourne didn't change along the way even with Ashley Turner's brisk summing up of their plans. She had set herself only two things to do: a visit to the accommodation where the young man was known to have stayed and the visit to Bill Caulfield. The manager of the accommodation said he was sorry but he hadn't seen the young man in months. Fiona left her card and said would he e-mail if the young man came back, that his grandparents were very worried about him, and he said he would keep it in mind.

Then she took a cab to Altona and knocked on the Caulfields' door.

A man opened it and she asked if he was Mr Caulfield. He said he was and simply stood there waiting.

She introduced herself and said, "I am looking for a young man called Andy White. His grandparents are very worried about him and I said I would just call on you and see if you had any ideas."

"His grandparents?"

"Yes, the Woods. They expected him to come to Queensland to stay with them but he never got on the plane here so they have no idea where he is or if he is okay."

Dennis talked with people anywhere so she felt it didn't matter if they simply stood here on the doorstep. But she had the vague intuition that he didn't want her inside his house. She could hear faint sounds suggestive of someone else in the house but as he apparently had a wife that wasn't surprising.

"I haven't seen him in quite a while."

"You don't know where he is likely to be staying?"

"I guess he's got his own friends."

"We know he goes to prison now and then to see his dad. But his dad will be extradicted back to the United States soon so it would be good for him to have support here when that happens."

She had seen the flicker in the man's expression then it settled down into a poker face, which seemed an odd response; surely interest or curiosity would be a more natural response ...

"And who told you that?"

"I believe the police in Brisbane are working on it. They found his real name was Vito Bonnano and that he is wanted for murder in New York but I'm afraid that's all I know. But it will be hard on his son to lose his dad."

"Sorry, can't help you, madam."

"You don't think he might get in touch with you again?"



“Wouldn’t think so. He’s a grown man now.”

“Well, thank you for your time.”

She turned and walked out to the footpath. Her taxi driver had said he was going for a coffee and for her to ring him when she was ready to be picked up again. She rang him and then turned and looked back at the house. Just an ordinary brick house with lawn and some rose bushes and a car port with a white Toyota Corolla in it. Not so different to the other houses on the street. But there was something she hadn’t expected. With a name like Caulfield she had half-expected a sandy-haired man in a trilby. Of course it was a silly assumption. But Mr Caulfield looked Mediterranean, possibly Italian ... and there was the faintest whisper of an American accent there. Just enough to suggest someone who had once spent a little while in the States.

She thought she saw a face at a window and it didn’t look like a woman’s face. She had no idea if the Caulfields had children but there was no reason why they shouldn’t ...

In less than five minutes her taxi drew up and she got in. But it had only just started off when she looked in her side view mirror and said, “Stop, can you stop? There’s someone running after us!”

Someone was running along the footpath waving his arms.

“You sure that’s safe?” The taxi driver too looked back and drew in to the curb.

It was a question Fiona couldn’t answer. The young man, puffing, came up alongside the taxi. Fiona put her window down.

“I’m—Andy White—you were—looking for me? Can I get in?”

“Sure.” And to the driver she said, “Thank you. Could you drop us somewhere in the city?”

Not knowing Melbourne made it hard for her to specify a place but she thought a coffee shop where she could talk with this young man would be best.

He had brown hair, brown eyes, and was not very tall. He wore jeans and a t-shirt.

The driver put them down in Bourke Street and said, “You sure you’ll be okay?”

“I hope so.” She paid him and added a generous tip.

She turned to the young man and said, “We’d best have a coffee and a sandwich.”

He nodded and walked meekly beside her till she found a place that looked quiet.

She ordered and sat down and said, “Now, do you want to come to Queensland to stay with your grandparents?”

“I can. But it’s not safe for me to go. How did you come here? Who is with you?”

“Your mother and someone from the Missing Persons Unit in Brisbane. They’ve been out to the prison to see your father, to identify him. His fingerprints have been sent to the USA, that’s how they identified him.”

She hoped it was all right for her to disclose this information.

“I’m not safe here. Can you help me get away?”

“Get away—where?”

“Give me some money and I’ll take a train.”

“Take a train to where?”

“Anywhere. So they can’t find me.”

“Well, have your coffee and I’ll take you to the train station.”

“The country trains go from Spencer Street.”

She wasn’t much the wiser but she accompanied him, gave him \$400 with some misgivings, and watched him walk away to the booking office. It was a temptation to follow and listen. But she felt she had to trust him to do what he’d said he would do. After he had disappeared she went and found another taxi to return to the suburban motel to which the others would return.

She could possibly take a bus or maybe a tram but she thought the Woods would reimburse her if she asked. And if Andy White was genuine about leaving Melbourne then it didn’t really matter where he went so long as he got away from the kind of milieu which was, in her estimation, so damaging to his life and future.

She didn’t know whether Mr Caulfield saw Andy leave, whether he had followed them, whether he had taken note of the taxi’s number ... but she devoutly hoped that once it was clear Andy had gone they would simply ‘cut him loose’.

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Carmen didn't see it that way. She was annoyed with Fiona. "You should have brought him here to us, Fiona. Ashley needs to talk with him and I need to see that he's okay."

"It was his choice. I could not forcibly restrain him, you know."

"But you could have *persuaded* him. You are good at persuading people."

"Well, he's gone and I assume he knows where you live. So now it's up to him whether he chooses to come to you."

"But he doesn't know my address—"

Fiona was slightly taken aback but there was nothing to be said about it. "He has my phone number so it's up to him now."

"But you should have *insisted*—we've come all this way—I could've found him somewhere—"

Fiona was tempted to remind Carmen that her one visit to see Andy White in prison had not been a success. Instead she turned to Ashley and said, "What happened at the prison?"

"They will follow up now. Photos, prints, and Carmen's identification are all in place. Now we will have to wait and see if the Americans want him back."

Later, when Ash and Fiona were alone for a moment, Ash said, "It wasn't exactly easy in there but he gave himself away when he saw her and she called him some choice names and then we met with the prison director. Carmen was in a bit of a state. And I've found one of the detectives who worked on the homicide which put him away, so we'll go and see him tomorrow."

"Then I think I can leave that to you and go home."

Ashley nodded. "I think it might be best. But you've done good work."

Fiona nodded. "Perhaps. And that Mr Caulfield he was staying with, he's a phoney. I'm sure he's an Italian-American, despite his name, and I have a vague hunch that he might be more important than he looks. I don't know if my hunches are any good." She ended on this deprecating note. Ashley smiled at that. "Don't worry, it'll soon be out of our hands."

With that kind of comfort Fiona said she would see if she could get a flight out today. Then she turned back to Ashley and said swiftly, "One other thing. Andy said that Antonio who was killed was Antonio Santorini. I have no idea if that's correct or not."

Ashley made a note and said, "Let's hope."

And by late evening Fiona was drawing up outside her mother's unit in Auchenflower and lifting out her travel bag.

Next morning she visited the chaotic little office of her publisher and then went to see her tutor, Alison Cordwell. By the time she set out for Toowoomba she felt she would like to have a complete day of doing nothing.

Alison asked her why she had made that choice, was it just that middle-aged desire to know more about her roots?

"William Greehan was actually a political prisoner. He lived in County Cavan but he had heard about the Young Irelanders and he and a couple of friends thought they would create their own group. Of course they didn't have that kind of education or political understanding. They called themselves Ireland's Independents and their idea was that wherever they went they would throw things, rocks, bricks, lumps of wood, through the windows of English-owned houses, businesses, government offices, and people would have to keep replacing the panes of glass to stop the rain coming in ... and eventually the English would get so fed up that they would go home."

Alison smiled at this.

"But he got caught throwing a stone through a window. They hadn't caught him previously so they thought it was an attempt at housebreaking so that's what they charged him with. But he kept yelling 'English dogs go home' and 'Long Live Ireland' and things like that. So they charged him with sedition as well."

"So he ended up in Moreton Bay?"

"He always said he wanted to go to Tasmania to meet the Young Irelanders there, like William Smith O'Brien, so he could share his ideas with them. He doesn't seem to have wanted to hear what they thought! Anyway, he eventually prospered here. He married and had four children and three survived into adulthood. Somewhere he said and I quote 'the Irish are like the poor

blackfellows only cleverer—always losing their land to the English’. But I don’t think this put him in the forefront of any liberation movement.”

“Still, he could obviously see the comparisons.”

They went on to talk about the research and writing Fiona had done so far. She had begun by looking at anonymous ballads and folk songs, then gone on to Oscar Wilde’s mother who wrote stirring poems as ‘Speranza’ ... Alison shared some thoughts on structure and doing footnotes and then asked her how hard it was to research and write in Buckton.

But as Fiona took the long road home she went back to pondering on Carmen’s son. Had she done the right thing? Should she have tried to *persuade* or *insist* ... or bribe or blackmail ... Should she have done more than give him her telephone number? Would it have helped or hindered to mention Dennis?

She had had the strong feeling when she was with Bill Caulfield that he wasn’t just an old pensioner in a suburban house, that there was more to him, but she had no feelings about whether Andy White would ever get in touch or not. But if he could simply take a train to Wodonga or Bendigo and start a new life, unhindered by the old ... then maybe that was good enough.

It was dark by the time she drew into the driveway and got out stiffly. Lights were on and the children came tumbling down the ramp to greet her. And as she went to meet them she felt a sudden swift pang of pity for Carmen ...

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The detective Ashley and Carmen had arranged to meet was a square-faced graying man in his fifties, Martin Macniel, who ordered three coffees and then sat down at a courtyard table and said, “I can tell you the basics. Alan Dunbar was in charge but he’s since retired.”

He told them a story of a house on a dead end road some twenty kilometres to the west of Williamstown. “Most of the time there didn’t seem to be anyone there, according to neighbours, though the nearest neighbour was about three hundred metres away.”

People occasionally came and went and a neighbour finally got suspicious that the place might be being used for storing stolen goods or something. When a local cop called round he found a dead man in the house and a supply of cocaine in small packets. No one knew who the dead man was so police put out a picture and a description and several people came forward to say they thought his name was Antonio but that was all they knew.

But the helpful neighbour could describe the car he’d last seen there, that he thought three or four men had been in it, and could even give part of the number plate because it contained the letters LOU which was what he called his wife. Police then checked local CCTV footage and got the car.

“The first puzzle was why it had needed three men to shoot this Antonio. Then we couldn’t find his prints on any of the drugs except one packet on the floor beside him. Then the man who had been renting the house for some time, one Nathan Potter, didn’t seem to exist so it was obviously an alias. Anyway, the owner of the car grassed up the others. He died later in prison and it probably wasn’t natural causes. So that’s how we got the man calling himself Jason Smith. He was part owner of a caryard and had investments, though he was living in a rented house. We didn’t know there was a son and he never mentioned having any family. He said he was an American here looking at investment opportunities.”

“Did you ever consider sending him back to the States?”

“No. He said he’d been here quite legally for ten years ... and we hoped he might tell us more about the drug ring. But he never did.”

He considered the two women before saying, “Your information about his real identity will change things.”

“And the man he shot was said to be an Antonio Santorini.”

“And how do you know that?”

“That’s what his son said.”

“Well, we can certainly check. It’s possible he also was an American. But his prints were only checked with the database here. And where is the son now?”

Ashley said they didn’t know but would let him know if they found him.

Of course Andy White might not have known for sure, he might only have overheard something, he might even be having them on, sending them off on a wild goose chase ...

“So I think you ladies should tell me how you came to be involved and everything you know.”

For Ashley this was a straightforward exercise—if she overlooked Macniel’s slightly dismissive tone. For Carmen it was much more difficult.

At the end of their recital Macniel said, “So this country copper got the ball rolling?”

“Dennis Walsh. Yes. Dennis seems to have a knack for getting difficult things done. And of course I had the resources to go looking.”

“So where is Buckton?”

“It’s a little town north-west of Toowoomba.”

He turned back to Carmen. “So you had no idea where your husband or son had gone?”

“No. I went to the police but they just seemed to think it was a custody thing and not their business. So I hired an investigator but he couldn’t find them. In the end I just had to accept they were gone and I wasn’t going to see my son again. But I’ve never been able to really let it go.”

Macniel nodded. “So how did you know this Dennis Walsh?”

“I went to school with his wife.”

If Ashley thought Carmen could’ve given more credit to Fiona she didn’t say so.

“And you don’t know where your son has gone now?”

“No. But he was staying with this man.” She handed over a slip with Bill Caulfield’s address. “It may be that he is also an Italian-American.”

Macniel nodded though without looking very enthusiastic. Possibly he thought the whole thing had been wrapped up, at least enough to satisfy the public, and he didn’t really want to unwrap it. “So why d’you think your husband came to Australia?”

Carmen didn’t know how to answer this. Ashley said briskly, “We have found that the real John Royden Millington was murdered. Though they never found who by. There was a belief he fancied a girl that someone in the Bonnano crime family saw as his ‘property’. Maybe Vito Bonnano was sent here as a hitman—in which case there might be other Antonios who have been killed ... or they got him out of the way while Millington’s death was being investigated ... or maybe they were hoping to extend their operations here. We can only guess at the moment.”

“And you think the son might know more?”

“He might. He said he wasn’t safe in Melbourne.”

“And you have no idea where he’s gone?”

“None.”

“You should’ve contacted us—”

“To tell you what?”

He considered this and finally said, “Yeah, that’s a tricky one.”

Ashley felt the meeting had gone fairly well. Carmen said, “What good was all that?”

“If he’s conscientious he’ll follow up.”

“But he won’t go looking for my son, will he?”

“I think, Carmen,” Ashley said coolly, “I think it might be a very good idea if the police *don’t* go looking for your son. For certain it would tip off someone who might get there first.”

“You mean—” Carmen’s eyes widened, “they might *kill* my son?”

“It’s a possibility—if they think he knows more than he should.”

Carmen gave a small gasp. “Surely not?” And then she seemed to look at it from a different angle. “I think I just want to go home.”

“Mmmm, I think we’ve done all we can. It’s now up to others and they have my details if there’s anything more. Yes, I think we can go home.”

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The children were only too ready to tell Fiona all about their adventures out at Wally Barron’s farm. They had gone out with their Dad on Sunday afternoon and they had found a wild cat there. Their father had managed to lure it with some more meat from the fridge and then he had put an old blanket over it and grabbed it.

“It hissed and scratched and yowled like anything,” Elise said. “I thought it would be happy to come home with us but it wasn’t. It had to be tied up.”

“And Dad told us you could tell it was a wild cat,” Rob joined in, “because it had blunt ears and a broad face. But it was going to have kittens, Leila said, and so she’s keeping it there till the kittens arrive.”

Later, Dennis said to Fiona that he hadn’t wanted to shoot the cat in front of the children “but it’ll have to be put down.”

“It couldn’t be tamed?”

“I’d say its parents, maybe grandparents, went feral. Probably some moron dumping a cat sometime. It’s not much of a life for a cat—and it’s hard on the wild life, they eat small birds and lizards and things.”

“And it wouldn’t quieten down after a while?”

“If it was a young cat it might but I’d say this one’s too old. But if it was over there with one of the Brumbys’ toms the kittens might be okay.”

She was tired and it was a relief to just sit back and give him the bare bones of her adventures in Melbourne. “And whether I did the right thing by sending Andy off on a train ... I still can’t decide.”

“It doesn’t matter. With any luck he’ll go out now and job hunt somewhere and never come back to Melbourne.”

Perhaps not to Melbourne. But two days later Fiona had a ring. Andy White said without any lead-in. “I’m in Toowoomba. What do I do now?”

“I can come and get you. Where are you?”

“I’m at the Greyhound depôt.”

“Okay. Go and get yourself something to eat then come back there. I’ll be a bit over an hour.”

She called in to the station to tell Dennis. He didn’t look happy about it but accepted that she had already met the young man and probably had some insight in to him. “Take care.” Andy White had apparently not used violence when he stole cars but there was always a first time.

He watched her leave, still frowning a little, but there was work waiting.

He had gone to Wally Barron’s funeral on the Wednesday. So had a couple of old men, several of Wally’s neighbours, Godfrey Waddell, and Charles Mather with two unknown people, an elderly man and woman. Father Meagher took the funeral although Wally had not been seen inside a church in living memory.

Michael Meagher described the old man as one of the meek of the earth. A man who had lived his life with quiet dignity, asking for nothing, taking little of the earth’s resources, just an old man and his dog. “But even if he rarely entered into other lives the world is a poorer place for his loss.”

Dennis Walsh thought it was nice of Meagher to make Wally sound like the salt of the earth. But after the coffin had been lowered the unknown couple came over to Dennis and the man said, “Well, Wally did ask something, didn’t he? He wanted you to save him from that panther. Even poor old Skipper wouldn’t face it and that dog could face up to a fully-grown wild boar without fear.”

“True. And you are?”

“Michael Barron, Wally’s cousin.” Dennis thought both he and his wife were probably older than Wally.

“So d’you know of any more relatives for Wally?”

“I have two sisters but I’m sure they wouldn’t want Wally’s junk. One’s in Brisbane, one in Tamworth. But I can give ’em a buzz and see if they want to have a look.”

“They’ll have to be contacted. There’s money to come from Wally’s estate.”

“I wouldn’t think Wally was ever flush with the stuff.”

Dennis didn’t see it as his business to go into that side of things. “And you knew Billy McCarthy?”

“Not well. He was a good bit older than Wally.”

“Do you know if he had brown eyes?”

Michael Barron looked surprised at the question. Then he seemed to go in to suspended animation before saying cautiously, “Yeah, I think he did. I think their mum had a bit of Abo in her, come from out West somewhere.”

Dennis hoped the half-forgotten mother had had a happy life with her two husbands.

“She was a looker, I seem to remember. Tall, long black curly hair, big brown eyes.”

Perhaps half-forgotten wasn’t the right description. The woman had obviously left an impression on the young Michael.

Charles Mather came over and said in a low voice to Dennis, “I have no wish to go to the Coolibah for a drink. I’m very busy—”

“That’s okay,” Dennis said. “I’ve fixed with George for everyone to get a couple of rounds. Least I could do for the old sod. But I think you’ll have to organise some help for the old couple to sort out Wally’s stuff. They don’t look up to much.” And were the sisters older or younger?

Mather had already assessed Michael and Mary Barron as too decrepit to do much heavy lifting.

“Who should I suggest?”

“Noel might do it. Or Jess’s dad might be willing to go over with his truck. Otherwise I can do it, but it might be best if I don’t have anything to do with Wally’s personal effects.”

Mather had only heard the faintest whisper of the rumours that Dennis Walsh had put the hard word on old Wally but he had lived in Buckton long enough to know that people like Craig Goodrick were only too happy to do Dennis down. And Jess had told him that she had seen Lynnell Morton round town the other day.

“I think the sooner Wally’s stuff can be moved the better. I don’t absolutely trust ... certain people.”

Dennis gave that a bit of a grin. “I’m sure Jess can get straight on to it.”

George Hickman had come in just as the graveside service was ending and now he said to Dennis, “So you’re going to become a Man on the Land after all?”

“Looks like it. And if you want a story about the Mafia I can give you one.”

“A funny story, you mean?” George looked puzzled.

“No, a very serious one. But not today. Fiona will tell you all about it when she gets home.”

Fiona on the long drive to Toowoomba wondered what she should do about the young man. Should she try to find him work round Buckton? Should she send him on to his grandparents? Should she suggest he change his name again? And when it came to jobs—what sort of things could the young man actually do? Car-stealing round Buckton obviously wasn’t on. But she assumed it meant he could drive ...

He had nothing with him and she felt rather sorry for him, seeing him standing waiting, a slim dark man with clothes that had obviously been slept in and a tired face. But she knew she should not let her pity guide her. He had been given a dangerous and irresponsible father but that didn’t mean he hadn’t picked up his father’s ideas and attitudes and ways of living life.

She asked him a bit about his journey on the road home and then she said, “Would you like to look for work out here?”

“If you think so.”

“What sort of things can you do?”

He shrugged. “Nothing much.”

“But you can drive?”

“Yeah. Sure.”

“Do you have a licence?”

“No. I haven’t got a name to get one with.”

She hadn’t thought of that and said only, “I see.”

After several minutes of silence she asked him if he would like to change his name again.

He gave this long thought and finally said, “I am still officially John Fred Millington. Can I change that?”

“I assume you can change it by deed poll.”

He considered this in silence. Fiona said, “Maybe just use another name for a while until we see what happens about your dad. What name would you like to choose?”

"I went to school for a little while. There was only one teacher there I liked. His name was Darryl Reeves. Maybe that would be okay."

"Darryl. Yes, why not. But you don't have to decide right this minute. And the next thing is to get you some clothes—"

"I've still got sixty dollars from what you gave me."

"Keep it. You might need it. Now, we'll also need somewhere for you to stay. I don't know if you'd like to try doing some farm work. That could provide you with some accommodation."

"I've never been on a farm."

"Would you like to try?"

"I know more about cars."

"So would you mind living at the pub until we can find you something more permanent?"

"If it's not expensive."

"Don't worry, we'll look after you till you get settled."

"Are you going to tell my mum where I am?"

"Not just yet."

He seemed to find that response comforting. Fiona thought that Carmen and her parents would be the first places for anyone to look. But would they bother to try and find him or simply wash their hands of him? She wished she knew.

"That man, that Bill Caulfield, did you often stay there?"

"That wasn't his real name. But he's been here for, dunno, maybe twelve years."

"Do you know his real name?"

"For sure. He was William Bonnano."

Fiona's spirits went down and yet it was a kind of vindication of her hunch, her intuition. "So he is a relative of your dad's?"

"I guess so."

She had thought that the young man would be safe in Buckton. It seemed such a long way away from Melbourne. But now she rethought that. Wherever this young man went he might be seen as a walking 'time bomb'.

"Then I think that, as well as a new name, you probably need to change your appearance. We'll have to give that some deep thought."

The young man had some stubble but his hair was short. She considered what might make the most difference as Buckton showed up on the horizon.

"You could grow your hair, grow a beard maybe. And I will introduce you as Darryl ..."

A few minutes later she drew into the lane behind the Coolibah, gave him a couple of notes and said, "Go and book in as Darryl Reeves. Tomorrow, go along to the Combined Churches Op-Shop and get some clothes. The chemist is just here if you want to get soap and toothpaste."

"And then what?"

"Then we have to get serious about a job for you."

It was odd that he seemed more relaxed while she had grown more tense.

"Okay." He got out and went in the back door of the pub. She couldn't guess at his thoughts. And if he did decide to do a runner there was nothing she could do about it. He was a free agent.

And work ... where he could find work here ... and would it be better to get him away from Buckton because it would not be hard to link her to Carmen ...

She said to Dennis and Grant at the station, "He's at the Coolibah. He's using the name Darryl Reeves. But I think we probably need to get him away from Buckton. They might make the link. He's just told me that that Bill Caulfield is actually William Bonnano."

Dennis immediately saw the ramifications. "Okay. We'll send him to Winville. Jake can find him a safe house."

"When?"

"Now. Grant, go round to the pub with Fiona and get him and take him to Winville. I'll ring Jake Moss and tell him you're on your way."

Fiona had hoped her part in the saga was done but she could see that this was better than having him wandering round Buckton.

Young Darryl was startled to find a police constable with Fiona when he opened his bedroom door. “It’s okay, Darryl,” Fiona said quickly. “This is Constable Schroeder. He will take you to Winville where they’ll arrange a safe place for you, a kind of Protected Witness thing. You needn’t tell anyone anything, just stay as Darryl.”

He looked hesitant but Fiona said, “It will keep you safe.”

Grant said, “I can tell you more about it on the way.”

Fiona wasn’t sure if it was talk of safety or whether he just thought Grant didn’t look either frightening or duplicitous but he came meekly downstairs and got in Fiona’s car with Grant and a minute later they drove away. Fiona walked home, glad her part in the saga seemed to be over. It was a temptation to ring the grandparents to say their grandson was safe but she resisted it.

Where the young man had been either sullen or hesitant with most adults he relaxed with Grant and when Grant told him about how the Broncos had approached him last year they were suddenly talking sport as though nothing else mattered. Darryl might prefer AFL but he knew enough about rugby to enjoy talking it with Grant.

Jake Moss came along to the front desk as soon as they arrived and said, “Okay, Grant, I’ll fix Darryl up. Tell Dennis it’s all in hand.”

Grant might be bursting with curiosity when he got back to Buckton but Dennis just said, “Never mention the business again.” Grant nodded but ceasing to be curious was another matter altogether.

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George Hickman who put out the little community newspaper, the *Buckton Bugle*, caught up with Dennis a couple of days later and said, “When do I get my story?”

“Not yet.”

George looked resigned but said, “Well, I’ve got a story for you.”

“Good, I hope.”

“Not bad. I asked an old mate in Brissie to go round to RSL headquarters there and try and find a Cedric Hickey for me. And sure as eggs, there he was. Joined up in 1939, was in Singapore when the Japs arrived, spent several years in Changi as a POW and died from some sort of fever in March, 1945. I’ve got no idea what he was like as a bloke but I felt that seeing he’d done his bit—then why not rename that little road Cedric Hickey Lane? Do you think Fiona would come at it?”

Dennis liked the idea. He thought Fiona might. And there was a good chance the Council would come at it. Buckton did not have so many ‘heroes’ that it could afford to dismiss those it had.

“Good work, George.”

“And don’t forget—I want that Mafia story before I retire.”

“Best call it something else for the time beng, George. Don’t want people getting curious.”

“Such as?”

“The pizza story?”

George Hickman gave that a chuckle before going on along the footpath with his little dog Billy trotting beside him.

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# Book Sixty-Six

## Case No. 1: A Long Time Coming

Spring in the little Darling Downs town of Buckton had finished its bloom of fruit trees and the old oak trees in the little park were in full leaf. “Looks like it might come up a storm later,” Noel Barnard at the service station said to Sergeant Dennis Walsh as he filled the police Ford.

“Could do.”

Life went on. Weather warmed and stormed. Crops grew. People did silly annoying things like burning rubber round the night streets. But Dennis Walsh mainly thought of having to go to Towner’s trial in two weeks. Doug Towner had been in charge of nearby Wiville’s CIB section years ago. Towner had been charged with killing Sandra Hoysted, a death he had sent another man to jail for.

Dennis had been to court many times but this was different to telling a magistrate that the perp had blown .08 on the breathyliser. He felt he would never forgive himself if he did or said or forgot to say something and Doug Towner walked free. He went over and over his notes and files about Towner, all those cases where Towner had leapt to a wrong conclusion and stuck doggedly to his beliefs until they finally became untenable.

But would the court give him the chance to present this Doug? This incompetent lazy man. And the corrupt Doug? Could that be brought in? And could those events like Doug getting his cut from a marijuana crop be brought in? Because someone who was incompetent or corrupt in one instance became that bit easier to believe in as incompetent or corrupt in another instance.

All this was going round in his head while ordinary work went on and Grant, bursting with curiosity, still wanted to know more about ‘the Mafia case’. Dennis said it would have to wait but that did nothing to dampen Grant’s curiosity.

Grant, though, was out one Saturday when DI Carlton Payne walked in to the station to find Dennis poring over some old files.

“Doing your homework, Dennis?” he said mildly.

“Best to be prepared, seeing I don’t know what they’ll want to ask me.”

Payne went on into the interview room and sat down and accepted the offer of a coffee. He took several papers out of his briefcase.

“It looks like we’ll get Justice Brewer. He just sits there like someone in suspended animation, hardly ever asks questions, hardly ever makes a comment, but he rarely upholds objections. He seems to prefer to put it all into his summing-up and remind the jurors that anything not backed up by hard evidence needs to be treated with caution. I’ve heard it makes for quite a lot of argument in the jury room over what constitutes evidence and what doesn’t. And Doug’s got Peter Stainforth to strut his stuff. Peter usually goes in hard, tries to fluster and frighten people right at the beginning in the hope they’ll get inhibited. It sometimes works.”

Dennis wondered if Stainforth had any connection to that Inspector Stone. It had struck him as a clumsy attempt to inhibit as well as dig for information. And Stone’s report, if he had done one, had never surfaced.

“I’ll keep that in mind. So what will they want from me?”

“What I’ve persuaded the prosecution to do is put you on first and let you rip in to Doug, why you became suspicious of him. If they’ll let you go over your history with Doug and why you started to believe the Sam Hoysted conviction was not safe—that’ll virtually wrap up the case for us. The forensics and Greg Sullivan’s investigation will be the icing on the cake. And I’ve got a couple of extra witnesses lined up. So don’t feel it’s all up to you.”

“Sam Hoysted?”

“No.”

Dennis could see that Sam might be of mixed help. “And who has Doug got lined up?”

“Some character witnesses—including Arthur Leslie. I heard on the grapevine that Doug wanted Frank De Jong but he got knocked back.”

This didn't really surprise Dennis. The De Jongs might have done a lot to support Doug, to keep the Plowman family out of any police nets, even to turn to dirty tricks to get honest police to resign. But they were unlikely to want to be seen in public with Doug Towner.

“Frank's got his eye on Assistant Commissioner ... he's going to want to look squeaky clean. But I've put a quiet spoke in that wheel.”

Dennis looked curious.

Payne nodded. “Lester Moody. But that's between us.”

“And did Lester finally get chucked out?”

“No. Sadly not. He's taken early retirement, got a nice little place on the coast.”

“So back to Doug. When will Greg and me come up?”

“I'll want you down on the Sunday to go over any last minute changes. So go over everything to do with Doug before then. Monday morning will be jury selection, then information on Sandra's death and finding the body, then the arrest of Doug. You'll probably come up in the afternoon or possibly Tuesday morning. Then information on the Trust, Doug's role, and two witnesses as to Sandra's concerns. Then Greg Sullivan.”

“So what about the civil case? Where's that at?”

“Doug and Michael Hull have been referred to the ATO. Those charities are being investigated. Old Solomon accepted that Doug had stolen from the Trust but he's sent it all to an independent auditor because he said he believed there was a possibility that other public bodies might have been defrauded. So it is all in limbo while this case is on. And it can't be referred to. But that's not your problem.”

“And the Hoysteds know exactly where his money is stashed and how much.”

“I'm sure they do. But that's not my business. And by the time Doug has a moment to check on his stash I'll guarantee the Hoysteds will have found a way to make it start leaking out of Doug's account and into theirs.”

Dennis gave this a slight grin. There might be some justice in this. But he didn't want to know anything about it. The Hoysted boys were hardly Robin Hood. And he probably wouldn't understand if someone *did* tell him what was going on.

“And they seem to know that Doug's phone was being tapped.” For all Dennis knew the boys might have found a way to do their own tapping. He wouldn't put it past them.

Payne just said non-committally, “Do they now.”

“And the Plowmans?”

“Don't worry. We'll look into the death of Ruby Jackson when Doug is out of our hair.”

“Good. I don't want the poor old biddy to be forgotten. And is there any chance Doug will change his plea?”

“No sign, so far. Doug still seems to believe that someone more senior will step in and put the kybosh on the whole thing so as not to bring us all into disrepute.”

“Could that happen?”

Payne did not answer immediately. “It has been known. And if Doug was still a serving officer they just might have a go. But Doug is yesterday's man. They can link him back to some of the bad eggs from the past. After all, Frank Bischoff was in charge when Doug joined. They can make it look like Doug was one of the ones Fitzgerald missed. A sort of low profile bad egg.”

Payne considered Dennis in silence for a moment then he said more seriously, “And you might like to keep a low profile yourself. I don't imagine you're a pin-up boy with Doug's rellies and we still haven't got a line on them all. So just do your best to stay out of the limelight, no mention in newspapers, nothing up on the Internet.”

Dennis thought of Wally Barron's farm waiting and himself mentally wandering the paddocks to look at cattle, grass, soils, possibilities ... And he saw Doug Towner's trial as something merely to be got through. The really important things were things that someone like Doug Towner could never understand.

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Charles Mather had almost finished tidying up his work, letting long-time clients know that Sonia Lockwood would be taking over the practice and their business would be in safe hands. He had dithered over whether to say this. After all, he barely knew the woman and the possibility that she was leaving Brisbane because she had made a mistake, because she couldn't get clients there, because there had been unfortunate rumours about her probity, could not be completely dismissed. He could, of course, do some investigation of his own but he didn't want the extra work. And Jess had said, when he showed her a draft letter to send out, that 'safe hands' simply implied that Mrs Lockwood would be here and available. If his clients were not satisfied in any way with her work they could of course look for a different lawyer.

Jess had tweaked the letter slightly. Warm thoughtful letters were not her boss's forte and she felt that people who had been with the practice for many years deserved something more than a brief letter to say he was retiring and Sonia Lockwood taking over. She ended the letter with a word of appreciation for his loyal clientele. And she privately thought that her boss wasn't really a hard act to follow. He might be conscientious and careful but he had hardly ever been willing to put himself out for anybody. When anyone came in with anything difficult he had told them to find a lawyer in Winville. Her own intuition was that Sonia Lockwood *would* put herself out, that she genuinely saw the practice as a way to help people. And it would be interesting to take on a wider variety of cases. Shuffling documents had its place but it was hardly exciting.

The Lockwoods had contacted Jon Dundas to check the house, and he had given it a clean bill of health, just a couple of minor repairs needed, and they had asked Kaylee Williams to come and look at the garden and make suggestions. They wanted to keep a sense of wildness but add in a little colour and find room for a small vegetable patch. And, privately, they both felt they would feel safe here. They had faced three break-ins in as many months in Brisbane and no one charged. They might merely be very unlucky but the feeling remained: that they were being targeted. Buckton would surely leave behind this person or persons ...

"And I don't suppose we'll ever hear another word from that odd bod that came looking for a father, that Mark Hinkle," Charles Mather said as he packed away his nice ink stand and blotter. He removed the last picture from his wall and added it to his small pile of personal possessions to be taken home.

"No, I don't suppose we will," Jess said thoughtfully. "But we did our best for him."

In this, though, they were both wrong. A long letter turned up. Mr Hinkle, it seemed, had been very busy.

Mather read it through a couple of times then handed it to Jess. It said:

'Dear Mr Mather,

Thank you for your suggestions. I have been able to contact several of my mother's friends from her time in the WAAAF and they told me she had dated a man called Rodney Ford who was killed in an air crash towards the end of the war. He was best mates with a man called Billy McCarthy who was also killed. Most of the girls were wild about Billy as he was apparently a heart throb. I told my mother I knew about Rodney and was he my father and she said, no, Billy was. I told her I could find out because I had started looking for Rodney's relatives, or my investigator had, and Rodney has a younger brother who lives in Caboolture.

She got very upset and said she hated me for what I was doing. But I insisted she tell me why she had claimed that Billy McCarthy had raped her. She said it was because of her father, that he was so angry with her for coming home pregnant, so she had to say she had been raped. He wanted to know if she had been to the police and she told him she had told her CO and it was being investigated. Then he insisted she have the baby adopted but her mother objected, saying they wouldn't know who might get the baby.

She went to stay with an aunt in Toowoomba and had me in the Mothers there. She always told me I was born in Brisbane but as I had only needed to get a birth extract to get a passport I had never checked this. I went back to see her friend June and told her this and she said she thought mum was angry with Billy for not being interested in her when she fancied him.

It makes Rodney sound like second-best but June remembered him as a nice man. She also thought that my mother might've have wanted to get pregnant so she would have an excuse to get

away from Townsville. But when Rodney and Billy were killed she was then left with having to try to explain things to her father with no potential husband by her side.

I am going to see Rodney's brother Jimmy on Saturday and I am looking forward to it. But whatever happens I would just like to thank you and your police sergeant for your help.'

Charles Mather said drily, "Your sergeant, eh? Sounds like I've got Walsh in my pocket."

Jess found this very funny. Dennis wasn't the sort of man to play second fiddle to anyone. Though she had the secret belief that Dennis would knuckle under if Fiona really insisted on something. It probably wasn't proveable. At least, not for someone who wasn't close to them both.

She just said, "Well, it's good to have that out of the way ... and no rumours hanging round Billy and Wally. And I've been in touch with Michael Barron's two sisters and they were pleased to think they were going to get a bit of money though I don't think they thought either Billy or Wally was likely to have much. But now, should I do a copy of that letter for Sergeant Walsh?"

"If you like. And those sisters will get at least \$15,000 each. That's not to be sniffed at."

Jess agreed. It was very unlikely that either of the women had been in the habit of visiting either Wally Barron or Billy McCarthy ...

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Fiona rarely entered into her husband's work. If he asked for advice or ran stories past her for her thoughts, or had specific questions of a factual nature (such as 'do you know where Slovenia is?') she was always glad to help if she could but she left it to him to initiate such conversations unless she heard something round town she thought he should know about.

But Doug Towner's trial was a different matter. If she said she would like to come he would say 'if you like' or something similar. The trouble with this was that she would then be a distraction. Not a major distraction but they would discuss where to stay and whether to try and fit in any other activity. And she knew that being a witness at Doug's trial was something very important to him and that he didn't need distractions. It was better for him to be with Greg Sullivan. They both knew the case inside out. They both had the agonising knowledge that justice would also make the police look bad ... She could understand all this but she had not lived it in the way Dennis and, to a similar extent, Greg had.

So what if she went down after Dennis had gone and went to court to hear him, sort of incognito? If she just sat quietly at the back of the courtroom (she could not guess what sort of publicity and therefore media and public interest it would generate) and left when his part in the trial was over?

If Dennis didn't know she was there he would not be distracted or inhibited. It seemed a bit sneaky in the sense that she wasn't in the habit of keeping things from him. But she thought she would be justified. After all, she had had to live with Doug Towner as a kind of unpleasant presence throughout her married life too.

After thinking through the people she might ask to mind the children she decided to ask Kieran Dobbs. He knew quite a lot about the case and would understand in a way that someone like Mrs Tripp wouldn't. She rang him at work and asked whether he could find the time to come round for ten minutes or so.

He assumed Fiona wanted to talk about something to do with the house, seeing that they were joint owners, and now that Dennis was going to inherit Wally Barron's farm Fiona and Dennis might be thinking of ... making changes perhaps ... "Sure. And I must drop in to bring Dennis up to date on what's happening with the Maxwell farm. So I'll see you about 11."

She had put the Maxwell farm out of her mind once both the Maxwells had been sent to Brisbane but she could see it was still an issue very much exercising Kieran's mind.

And Dennis was glad of an update. "Still no sign of where all the stuff came from?"

"We never got anything out of Maxwell, not even when he realised it had dropped the value of his farm down to next to nothing. So we're coming at it from the other end. The power companies are supposed to keep records so someone is scouring those. At the moment I am doing soil tests all over the farm. It's a big job but I think we'll be able to narrow down the contaminated part and do some rehabilitation. But there is a problem. All that rubbish was stored on a slope so—"

"Run-off?"

“fraid so. So I’ll also need to test along the roadside ditches. I’m hoping all this work can be billed to Maxwell but that’s not up to me.”

And to Fiona, Kieran said, “Is it about the house?”

“No. It’s about the trial of Doug Towner” and she went on to tell him what was on her mind.

“And you don’t think he’ll recognise you?” Kieran said with a grin.

“He won’t be expecting me to be there. And I’m going to wear a blonde wig and glasses. And if I sit up the back ... I’m hoping, if he notices, he’ll just take me to be a member of the public.”

“So you want me to babysit?”

“If you could stay a couple of nights. They know how to get ready for school and they’re pretty good about doing their homework. They can drop into the station on their way home from school—”

“No. Send them up to me. I’ll make sure I’m back soon after three and if by any chance I’m held up they can go in the library and browse.” The library was in the Council building just down the corridor from Kieran’s DPI office.

“I’m sure they would enjoy that. I’ll leave a casserole in the fridge. Anyway I can tell you all that as soon as Dennis has gone.”

And then there was her mother to inform. “Just you, darling,” Mrs Greehan immediately said.

“Just me. It’ll probably be Sunday and Monday nights.”

“And any plans while you’re here? We could take a little trip somewhere.”

She felt a little mean saying she would be in court and not available. They didn’t see much of each other. But she couldn’t take advantage of Kieran’s kindness and anyway Dennis was likely to be home by Tuesday night. And underneath this feeling was that faint resentment which had never completely gone away. She didn’t ask that her mother love Dennis, he would be the first to say he wasn’t a loveable person, but she did want her mother to accept him. To accept her marriage. To stop hoping Dennis and Buckton would somehow disappear in a puff of smoke.

And the next thing to do was to tee up her disguise. She could shop for a wig in Winville but she thought it might be safer to do it in Toowoomba and arrange to get some plain glass spectacles there. There was always the possibility of running into someone she knew in Winville whereas Toowoomba was pretty safe. And she would buy something to wear there too. Dennis wasn’t terribly noticing of what she wore but he had his moments so it was better not to risk him thinking ‘I know that dress’ ...

And shopping there was fun. She bought most of her clothes in the little shop in Buckton which Cassie Brumby and Karen Dalton owned but it was nice to have more variety and to know that no one would say ‘so Fiona bought that green dress you had in the window’ ... She ended up with two outfits, shoes, and a little brown beret. She did not normally buy brown but she thought it would go nicely with her blonde wig and gold rims.

‘And if Dennis recognises me ... well, I’ll never dare to try and hide my identity from him again ... because I don’t really recognise myself any more ... ’

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Of course, Buckton did not stay calm and peaceful in the days leading up to Doug Towner’s trial. He found himself ploughing through a burry paddock because a farmer said he had had two poddy calves stolen and he thought the thief or thieves had ‘gone thataway’. Dennis told him in no uncertain terms that he’d better do something about his Scotch thistles but dutifully ploughed his way through last season’s dried-out thistle crop and out on to the road. A vehicle had certainly stood here, there was a little puddle of oil and the mark of boots on the gravel.

Dennis looked down gloomily. Of course one tiny puddle of oil was much like another but he had seen similar marks outside the Coolibah where Dan Goodrick had parked his old pick-up. ‘First port-o’-call,’ he thought, ‘and with luck the old bugger hasn’t turned them into veal yet.’

Dan Goodrick’s small place just outside of Buckton had never been a place to go to admire its garden, its neat gates and fences, its spick-and-span sheds. But now Dennis was shocked at the state of the place as he drove in and parked.

He got out and walked around and, sure enough, there were two calves, little Jersey bulls, of about a month old. They were not yet branded but he felt certain these were Russell Sealey's calves. The Sealeys were a bit casual, a bit careless, hence their thistles, but he didn't doubt that they cared about their animals. They reared their bull calves to a reasonable age before getting Dave Barry to kill and dress them for the family freezer. The kids probably gave the calves lots of attention when they took the buckets of milk over to the calf pen. According to their father they always gave the calves names.

Now Dennis said, "Okay, Tig, okay Tom, we're going home now."

He had accepted Russell Sealey's statement that the calves were 'real pets' but he hadn't expected both calves to come trotting over to the fence to look up at him, expectantly.

"Okay, little fellas, let's ring your dad." He punched in the Sealeys' number and waited. Just as he said, "You'd best get round to Dan Goodrick's place. He's got your calves in a pen. Bring your truck," Dan Goodrick came shambling round the corner of the shed. He might look decrepit but he seemed to come to life the minute he set eyes on Sergeant Walsh.

"Here! Get off my farm!" He couldn't say 'Or I'll call the police' but he looked angry enough to call up a bigger relative.

"Won't wash, Dan. These calves'll have to go back to the Sealeys. So bad luck about your bit of veal."

"Oh, no, you don't, you bastard! I bought them calves at the last sale—"

"Got the paperwork there, Dan?"

"Since when did I need to keep a lot of rubbish round the place?"

"We can check."

"Check all you like. None of 'em's branded so you can't prove nothing."

Dennis considered the old man in silence. Then he said calmly, "Just as well they're both still alive. So we'll just wait here a while till Russell Sealey turns up."

Dan gave him a nasty look but didn't respond.

"And when are you going to move into the Annexe, Dan? Soon you'll have to pay someone to take this pigsty off your hands."

"Can't move."

"What? No spare rooms in the Annexe?"

He thought the old man wasn't going to respond but he finally said grumpily, "No one'll share."

Dennis nodded. The Annexe had a few single rooms for elderly people but a lot of the rooms were shared. This made it cheaper to live there and some older people liked having company. But it was hard to see anyone wanting to share with Dan unless they were completely senile. It would not be safe to put a wallet down. A new tie would probably disappear. A box of birthday chocolates would somehow just melt away ...

That was the problem with a reputation for light fingers. It didn't go away just because you got old.

Dennis was getting impatient to be gone by the time Russell Sealey came chugging up Dan's lane in his old truck. But the wait was worth it to see the man's face light up.

"I really thought I'd never see them again." He lifted each calf and placed it in the back of the truck. "The kids'll be pleased."

"D'you want Dan Goodrick charged?"

Sealey looked at the old man and around the farm. His own was hardly a miracle of tidiness but this place spoke of age and helplessness. That Dan could afford to have the place cleaned and tidied didn't occur to him.

"I guess it's okay. I've got the little beggars back. So that's the main thing."

Dennis watched him drive away then went over to his own vehicle. "Don't push your luck, Dan."

And he thought Sealey might've said 'thanks, mate.'

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Dennis had hoped he would have more time to go over the things he wanted to say in court—if they would let him—but the day stayed busy. And on Saturday morning he and Grant were called out to a smash at the Burleigh turn-off.

For some reason people often seemed to take the corner too fast. It didn't matter, if the Burleigh road was clear, they could just straighten up again, but in this case they had run straight in to the McLarens. Mona and Ken were obviously taking some vegetables and eggs to their son or daughter-in-law because the car looked like a giant omelette. Both were getting on in years and were obviously shaken up. The young people in the other car had hit the McLarens a glancing blow then headed across the road and into a tree with a fair bang. Neither had been wearing a seatbelt and Dennis got straight on to the ambulance in Buckton.

“Two people injured at the Burleigh turn-off.”

And he told Grant to ring Sam Hassan in Winville to come out and investigate the accident. It was pretty clear what had happened but he wanted Constable Hassan to take over. And he wanted these young people charged with dangerous driving. The young man said he was in pain but it was the young woman who was giving the police more worry. She had obviously hit the windscreen with a hard whack. There was some blood on her forehead and she had knocked herself unconscious.

“Your licence, mate.” Dennis was accustomed to young people behaving stupidly and he didn't think any claims about pain were enough to let anything go.

“I can't get it. It's in me pocket.”

“Okay, we'll wait for the ambulance. Shouldn't be long.” He didn't feel like manhandling the driver in case anything was broken. “And we'll get your car towed to the garage in Buckton. You can tell them if you want it fixed here or sent—where're you from?”

The young man looked a bit cagey and Dennis wondered if the car was stolen. “Pittsworth.”

“And where were you heading?”

“We missed the Winville turn-off back there ... ” The young man closed his eyes and gave a bit of a groan.

The ambulance, its siren blaring, appeared in the distance.

Ten minutes later the two young people were in the ambulance, the young man sitting up, the girl still unconscious. “They'll both need to make statements as soon as she's awake. But let's get them checked first.”

Jim Phelps looked at the smashed car and said, “Yeah, nasty.”

He had only just headed through Burleigh when Sam Hassan passed him coming from Winville. There was a time when Sam had approached each accident with trepidation. He still remembered vividly his first accident call-out when he'd just arrived in Buckton. But now he'd seen so many accidents that he automatically took in the position of the vehicles, the damage, the likely course of events.

He spoke to the McLarens, asked if their car was still driveable, and gave them permission to head on into Buckton despite the smashed headlight. He hoped they had someone there to help them clean up the mess. “You'll need to do a statement,” he said to them, “but just when you feel up to it.”

“He was going like a bat out of hell,” Ken McLaren said angrily. “I hope he loses his licence.”

Sam nodded. Speed was indicated. But it was also possible the car's occupants had been drinking or had simply been distracted.

Sam came over to Dennis and Grant. “I can take over here now if you need to be on your way.”

Dennis nodded. “I've rung Noel. He'll come with the tow-truck. Shouldn't be too long. But I can leave Grant here. He can come back with Noel.”

The two elderly people drove slowly out on to the main road and a minute later Dennis followed them, content to keep to their pace on the drive back to Buckton. They seemed all right but there might be some delayed shock. He was supposed to be at a wedding but he didn't mind if he turned up late. John Benson and Myrtle Grundy had invited him. When he'd said he might be

busy they'd both said "Come if you can" with the rider "You've always been a good friend to us in our little troubles."

Dennis liked it that two elderly people could be happy about getting married. So many young people seemed to think romance must be a thing of the past once you got over sixty. So he parked and raced into the station for a quick tidy-up and then around to the church.

Sam Hassan rang him in the evening to say that the young woman passenger still had not recovered consciousness but that the car belonged to her father and he wasn't likely to be very happy when he heard it was in a big mess. Dennis was glad it was all in Sam's capable hands.

He wanted to finish packing a few things and have a last run through of his notes.

Greg Sullivan had said, "I should be in Buckton a bit after ten, so be ready."

Of course 'a bit after ten' could mean five past or half past or even 10.45, it was anybody's guess. But it didn't seem to matter. Either way they should be in Brisbane by two at the latest.

\*

Kieran Dobbs came round on Sunday afternoon about 3 pm and said, "All ready to go?"

"I've told the kids it's a secret." But if a secret meant having Kieran with his little dog there both Elise and Rob were more than happy to be part of a secret. Fiona had made up a bed and left a list of food and where to find things.

"The only thing is—Dennis just might ring tomorrow night to tell me how things are going. If he rings on the landline perhaps you could say I was just out and could you take a message or would he like me to ring him back. I'm sure you can handle it."

"And when are you going to tell him you were there?" Kieran found the whole thing rather amusing but he had sufficient belief in Dennis's sharp eyes to wonder if even Fiona disguised would fool him.

"When he's home again."

She finished putting her own things in the car and said goodbye to the children who seemed to think that she had made this special plan just so they could tell Kieran all about their animals and poultry.

It was a long drive to Brisbane, even with music playing, but her mother had dinner ready when she drew up in front of the new unit.

"And who is minding the children," her mother wanted to know. "They're surely not old enough to look after themselves."

Fiona privately thought that Elise could probably manage better than quite a few mothers. She cooked well, she was responsible with things like baths and homework, and she could go to their neighbours for help.

"I've got Kieran looking after them for two nights. They'll be fine."

"A man?" Mary Greehan immediately looked worried. "You shouldn't have left a man with them. You know the sort of things which happen."

"They've known Kieran all their lives. They'll be completely safe with him."

"You don't know that. Men may look perfectly nice and respectable outside—but inside—no, there aren't many men I would trust."

Fiona wondered if something had happened to her mother or if she had just been reading or hearing about something. "We've got good neighbours—and they'll be at school tomorrow."

"And court. With more revolting men. I really don't think you need to be there."

"I would like to see Doug Towner sent to jail. He was the man who used to ring us up and abuse us, even Elise. He was that sort of man."

"I'm sure they can send him to jail without you being there, darling."

"Of course they can. But I would still like to be there."

"And I suppose you want me to come."

"No, Mum, I don't. I will tell you all about it tomorrow night. You just go and do the things you usually do on a Monday."

A strange look came over her mother's face. "No, I've given up croquet. I thought it was going to be rather fun ... but it wasn't."

"Or there was someone not very nice there?"



Somewhere, there was probably a man who hadn't given her mother the attention and deference she probably felt she was entitled to. Or perhaps it was worse than that ...

Her mother gave her a considering look and said, "That was another thing. I don't have a garden any more but I am going to go with Winifred Barbour to see some Open Gardens."

"That sounds nice."

If her mother really wanted to tell her about the man who had disappointed her she was quite ready to listen but she rather hoped she wouldn't. "I think I'll take a taxi to court tomorrow. It's not worth trying to get a park."

But when she finally got in to bed it was to have awful visions of Doug Towner somehow finding someone to declare he couldn't have done anything because he wasn't Doug Towner after all but a man called ... but there the dream seemed to wander away into men yelling at each other and someone calling someone else a 'jumped-up little typist'. It was a relief to wake up into a pleasant spring day and put on her clothes and the blonde wig and glasses. Her mother looked at her in astonishment.

"Is it really going to be that bad?"

It didn't seem to be the moment to say 'I don't want Dennis to recognise me' and instead she said "I don't want Doug Towner to recognise me."

As she said it, she realised it was true. She didn't want him to know she was there. Because Doug still had ... mates ... and he was the sort of man who would take out his spleen on women and children ... And even if he went to jail he would still be able to make phonecalls ...

Her mother only said, "Then take care. And we'll go out tonight and have something nice."

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Fiona found a seat at the back. The court was not full, possibly there was a more exciting trial going on elsewhere full of sex and exotic locations and strange methods of killing someone. But there were several media people in their area with Neumann and Randall Hoysted sitting just behind them. Then a scattering of middle-aged people who might or might not have some connection to the case. And sitting just in front of her was a neatly-dressed woman in her sixties, her hair nicely set, and wearing a grey suit with black accessories. Fiona could only guess but she wondered if the woman might be Sandra Hoysted's mother.

As jury selection went on she wondered why the two barristers were objecting to one potential juror and accepting another who didn't look terribly different but it gradually occurred to her that Doug's barrister didn't want women on the jury. But he ended up with four, all of them probably well over forty. She didn't know if this was what he preferred or he had run out of challenges. He might think they were more old-fashioned and might not like the image of a woman looking at other men ... if Doug's barrister was going to try and suggest that Sandra had been seeing someone else.

That was the trouble. Sandra was not there to defend herself. She was dependent on these men to make sure she got justice. And to make sure her name and reputation was not dragged through the mud ...

Doug Towner had come in in his wheelchair and sat calmly watching. He had put on weight now that he was less active and it did nothing to make him look more attractive. The judge was a small rather withered-looking man who seemed to almost disappear beneath his wig. The Prosecutor opened the case against Douglas William Towner in a monotone. The Crown intended to show that the defendant had caused the death of Sandra Clare Hoysted, aged 32, in or around Winville. The fact that another man, Samuel John Hoysted, was doing time for her murder should not influence anyone to believe that Douglas William Towner was not guilty as charged.

The judge had several times looked at his Prosecutor in a slightly puzzled way. Fiona did not know it but Mr Bergman could often be quite theatrical. This monotone was put on today to convince everyone this was going to be a boring trial and hardly worth attending. He did not want crooked police to go unpunished but neither did he want this trial to be front page on the *Courier-Mail* tomorrow.

The Crown, he went on unemphatically, would seek to show that the defendant had the means, the opportunity, and a motive for bringing about the death of Sandra Hoysted.

It grew marginally more interesting as the forensic details, the post mortem, the coroner's report and the identification of the body were covered; Mr Bergman saying that the Crown did not wish to dispute any of the details about the death brought forward at the trial of Samuel Hoysted. His voice rose a little as he said the unfortunate woman had had to be identified by her clothes, her hair, her wedding ring and her teeth as she had been dead for more than two weeks and her body had been exposed to the degradations of rodents and crows. The woman sitting in front of Fiona raised a handkerchief to her eyes.

DI Payne was then called.

He gave a clear calm account of the decision to arrest Doug Towner and charge him with murder. He played the tape of the interview with Doug just after his arrest. He said nothing of the difficulty of getting Doug and his chair into an interview room.

And if Doug had hoped he would now come across as an innocent accused his manner and his words did him no favours. He said several times they knew perfectly well that Sam Hoysted had killed his wife so why were they hassling him. He said in tones of contempt "Why would I bother to kill that tiresome little jumped-up typist. She could nag Sam all she liked, it was nothing to do with me, but if he'd asked me I would've told him to ignore her, not whack her."

To which Carlton Payne said, "Her concerns were very specific. She believed that you as a trustee for her stepsons' trust fund were abusing your position as a trustee. Were you aware of that?"

Towner looked like someone about to roar back with more criticism who then suddenly realised there was a chasm in front of him. A step back might be advisable.

"Of course I wasn't. She never spoke to me."

"Are you saying you never spoke with Sandra Hoysted at all?"

"Of course I didn't. Why should I?"

"Not even hullo and goodbye every time you came to her house and she provided drinks and nibbles?"

"Well, that of course. But that's not talking with her."

"Her husband never passed on her worries to you?"

"Of course not. He knew what she was like, not happy unless she was doing someone down."

The woman in the back of the court looked distressed and even a bit angry.

"You knew she had been a company secretary in Sydney, a qualified accountant, and knowledgeable about finance?"

"Like I said, a jumped-up little typist pretending to be clever."

Carlton Payne said to the court that the rest of the interview dealt with specific evidence and could be shown later in the trial.

Doug's barrister then questioned the relevance of the interview, "given that my client was trying to recover from a very serious medical event which had put him in hospital for months. He couldn't be expected to remember back nearly ten years. He had serious surgery, strong pain-killing medication, months of physiotherapy. All of this affects a person's ability to remember and collate information."

"It does. But it is more than a year since Mr Towner was shot."

The jury seemed to collectively come to attention. A medical event, and they could be forgiven for assuming a stroke or somesuch, was very different to being shot.

"At the very least you should have had medical care available when you interviewed Mr Towner, and a solicitor. Why were such people not made available?"

"Because Mr Towner said he was innocent of any wrongdoing and didn't need and I quote 'other useless people butting in'. He would certainly have been provided with medical and legal support if he had asked for it."

What Payne didn't say was that Doug Towner had got away with so much over such a long period of time that he simply didn't believe he had finally come up against a large Stop sign. He remained supremely confident that he could walk away, or if not walk then drive away, this time.

Payne went on to say that Towner then said, "It was that bloody fucking Walsh, wasn't it, put you up to all this rigmarole. You're a fool if you listen to that stupid oaf rabbiting on, can't do his own work but has to stick his big nose into everyone else's. That's it, isn't it?"

Payne said calmly, "I do not take directions, let alone orders, from a station sergeant."

Doug then disputed this. Payne was sorry this had come before the taped interview. It might have made more impact on videotape. "Don't know how he does it, but the old bastard seems to get the bigwigs dancing to his tune."

"You mean, Mr Towner, that he had concerns about your actions and your behaviour before anyone else, except Sandra Hoysted, did. In that, you are correct. But he had nothing to do with your arrest nor did he charge you with murder. I did."

Carl Payne looked a scholarly precise person, perhaps more at home in a library than a police station, but almost everyone in the court was aware that there was steel behind those calm words.

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Justice Brewer broke for lunch, saying the court would reconvene at 2.15. Neither Sullivan nor Walsh had heard what was going on in court and both Fiona and Sandra's mother had left the court by the time Payne had brought them up to speed. "You'll be on first thing this arve, Dennis," Payne said. "And Doug has set the scene nicely, with all his criticisms of you, called you a stupid oaf and worse things."

Dennis wasn't sure if this was meant to be taken literally or whether Payne was saying it ironically. "Well, I'll do my best. What sort of jury have we got?"

"Mostly men. The youngest twenty-seven, the oldest fifty-nine. All attentive. If there's going to be a problem with any of them I think it's that they are all city people. So if you need to talk about country things keep it simple and clear."

Dennis nodded.

"Oh, and another thing, don't forget to call him DI Towner or Mr Towner each time you refer to him. Don't call him Doug. We don't want it sounding like all pals together." He turned to Greg as he said this. It had been made clear to the jury that there was no love lost between Walsh and Towner but Greg Sullivan had had a much closer working relationship and a good barrister might be able to make something of it.

So far Peter Stainforth had been muted, possibly because hoeing into DI Payne could end up looking like desperation rather than conviction of his client's innocence.

The three men went out to lunch, then Payne said he had to get back to the office for half-an-hour. He could send Jay Barron round to watch the afternoon's events but he thought he would like to see how Dennis Walsh handled it.

Fiona too wanted to see Dennis in action. But she was far more nervous than Carl Payne. He had been in and out of courts for thirty years. She had only been there for her own case with Artie Kees and when Dennis had been giving evidence in the Angela Schmidt case.

But both she and Payne had a lot of faith in him. Whether he knew that and whether he would find it encouraging—

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The jury had heard Sergeant Walsh called a stupid oaf so they had a certain curiosity. But it was Peter Stainforth who had the greater concern. Doug Towner had consistently told his solicitor that Walsh was 'useless', 'stupid', 'lazy', constantly got the wrong end of the stick, stuck his nose into things that didn't concern him, was a hulking great oaf, and other derogatory terms. The solicitor, Craig Somers, had passed all this on but said Doug's private feud with Dennis Walsh was better ignored. Stainforth had asked why there was a private feud. "I haven't been into it," Somers had responded to which Stainforth said, "Then I think you'd better look into it."

The trouble with this was that investigation would probably make Doug look worse. He said discreetly that "it seems to go back to when Dennis Walsh tried to arrest Doug for corruption. No one backed him up and Doug took early retirement. But his deputy was Greg Sullivan and he was investigated. It may not have made him very fond of Walsh."

Stainforth gave that a thin smile.

And now he had Dennis Walsh stepping in to the witness box, laying his cap down beside him, taking the oath, and acknowledging that he was Dennis McKay Walsh and station sergeant at Buckton. Most of the jury had no idea where Buckton was, which underlined its lack of importance, but they did see a large man in his fifties. More importantly he brought a sense of energy and dynamism into the court room. It made Daniel Bergman with his monotone and Justice Brewer hunched under his wig seem negligible. And Doug in his wheelchair suddenly had the look of a shrunken David facing a warrior Goliath. And no one in the courtroom doubted that these two men had no time for each other.

Mr Bergman asked when Walsh had first met Douglas Towner and why he had concerns about Douglas Towner. He had made the question suitably broad because Carl Payne had told him “Dennis Walsh can win this case for you—if you give him enough rope.”

Dennis gave the date and said, “I knew then he was an incompetent detective. A young woman had been found dead in the Environment Park near Burleigh. He said she had been murdered. In fact she had been gored by a bull. He said in another case the young bank teller found dead had been killed by her boyfriend when in fact she had been killed by two relatives trying to get her to give them some money. He claimed that two people found dead in a deserted farmhouse were part of a love triangle when in fact they had been shot in a dispute over a racehorse.

“I also knew he was lazy. When an old woman was found dead in a rubbish tip he told me to handle it, even though I was not a detective. He said, without seeing her or the scene, that it was an accident, when in fact she had been killed by her son-in-law.

“I also became aware—”

“Objection!” Stainforth had got to his feet. “It is normal practice for detectives to float possible scenarios. So why is it suddenly a sign of incompetence?”

“It is when the detective refuses to investigate other possibilities. It is when the detective ignores evidence which points in a different direction.”

Justice Brewer was seen to nod infinitesimally. Possibly he had seen evidence of police ‘tunnel vision’ in other cases.

“And I also learned that DI Towner was corrupt when we went in to the cattle feed lots near Dinawadding and found they were growing acres of cannabis—”

“Objection.” Peter Stainforth had been gripped by this catalogue of wrongdoing but he was being paid to do a job. “Since when is *finding* drugs a sign of corruption? *Not* finding them is usually a sign of corruption, wouldn’t you say?”

“If you would let me finish. We burnt all the stored crop and had the growing plants sprayed with weedkiller, when I say ‘we’ I mean DS Sullivan and several uniformed men from Winville. The operation had been kept secret from DI Towner.”

Towner’s face was seen to grow tight.

“We kept two bales of cannabis to go to Winville as exhibits for the court. DI Towner told the court that hemp seeds had accidentally got in with lucerne seeds—even though hemp was not being trialled in Queensland at that time. And when the bales were brought to court they had miraculously turned into bales of lucerne. The bales of cannabis had been tied with fawn-coloured baling twine. The bales of lucerne were tied with green baling twine. Someone had swapped them over. There were only three people in the CIB section at that time and with access to the evidence room, Towner, Sullivan, and a young Aboriginal detective, Constable Alison Deane. The case against the feed lots owner, Sam Hoysted, fell over with the magistrate simply telling him to be more careful when buying seed and that someone would come out and check those paddocks. Sam Hoysted has since told me that he was paying DI Towner ten percent of what he was selling each crop for in return for him keeping quiet about it.”

Stainforth again roared into action to point out that this was hearsay.

“It is,” Dennis said mildly and before the judge had a chance to respond. “But we can have Sam Hoysted brought from Wacol to tell you in person, if you like.”

“And you think a convicted murderer and drug dealer will carry more weight than a respected DI, do you?” His contempt was obvious.

“Depends who is doing the respecting.”

A faint titter ran round the court.

Mr Bergman had been happy to have Dennis Walsh virtually running the case but he could see the danger of it straying off into irrelevant areas. He said firmly, "Sergeant Walsh, will you tell us why you believed the conviction of Samuel Hoysted for his wife's murder might be unsafe?"

"It was the trust fund for Sam Hoysted's two boys which first attracted my attention. Their mother was a wealthy South African woman and when she was dying of cancer she wanted the money that would come to them when they turned twenty-one to be a trust. The trust had four trustees, a magistrate Michael Hull, a lawyer Gavin Whittaker, a clergyman Eric Kramer and DI Towner. Sam Hoysted's second wife, Sandra James, had worked in finance and was knowledgeable about the responsibilities of trustees.

"Now when Sam Hoysted went to trial for the alleged murder of his wife, his lawyer was Gavin Whittaker, the magistrate who committed him to trial was Michael Hull, and the investigating officer was DI Towner. All these people were trustees for Sam Hoysted's sons, all of them were friends and associates of Sam Hoysted. They all had a conflict of interest and should have stood aside."

"A conflict of interest has to be more specific than that, Sergeant Walsh. You have to show that there was some form of gain for them surely?"

The judge raised his eyebrows but said nothing.

"Of course there was a gain." Dennis Walsh had been speaking fairly quietly but now he seemed to come to avenging life. "With Sandra Hoysted dead, Sam Hoysted in jail, and two young boys away at a boarding school in Brisbane they now had free rein to do what they liked with a trust fund worth anything up to fifty million dollars."

"But where is your evidence that they ever did take advantage? You can't make wild allegations."

"Sandra Hoysted's mother, Andrea James, came to see me. All of Mrs Hoysted's documents had been removed from her home by DI Towner, and not returned, but he had missed her diary. It was in a drawer under her jewellery collection. Mrs James let me take a photocopy of the diary and I showed it to my wife who had been a bank manager. There were two interesting things about it. Sandra Hoysted had been caustic about some of the share-trading she had overheard the trustees agreeing to. But when Gavin Whittaker handed over all the trust documents to a different lawyer at the request of Neumann Hoysted it was found that some of those share trades were not on the official list. This suggested that some of the trustees had been using the trust to do some share-trading on their own behalf. And on the second last day of her life Sandra Hoysted had written in her diary, 'I am going to have to complain, I just can't let them go on like this, even though I know it will make me very unpopular.' At the time I wasn't sure if there was anything else going on in her life, such as a dispute with her neighbours, but she said 'them' so it couldn't refer to her husband. It just might refer to her stepsons but that was unlikely to make her unpopular in Winville as people there hardly knew the boys and it couldn't refer to Brisbane as she had never lived there and knew few people there. It seemed most likely that she planned to make a complaint about the trustees."

Stainforth objected to this as 'guesswork'. Justice Brewer let it pass, reminding the jury that evidence and speculation were two different things.

Bergman then asked Walsh if he had any more specific reasons for becoming suspicious.

"I went out with DC Deane to see the culvert where the body of Sandra Hoysted had been found. The whole thing didn't make sense. The court had been told that Sam Hoysted killed her at the aerodrome, put her body in a bin, and locked it inside the hangar which he shared with a man who was currently away in the United States. He returned from Sydney sixteen days later, and according to DI Towner he then moved the body of his wife to that culvert. Now, have any of you ever tried to get a seriously decomposing body up out of a bin, into a vehicle, and then down into a culvert? Not only would there be a trail of body fluids but the smell would cling to everyone and everything involved. And body parts by then would be likely to drop, including hair, so I simply could not accept the train of events put to the court by DI Towner. The body must have been moved to that culvert while Sam Hoysted was still in Sydney."

"More suppositions, Sergeant Walsh?" Stainforth, against his own inclinations, thought any halfway decent lawyer would have made sure the original case never went to trial.

“I have been asked why I became suspicious. I have told you.”

“Suspicious aren’t evidence, Sergeant. You will need more than suppositions, won’t you?”

“Sam Hoysted owed DI Towner. Towner had made sure the drug charge had been dropped down to some carelessness. And when DI Towner hired Sam Hoysted and his plane to take a dead body packed into a crate to a property north of Meandara for burial he paid Hoysted with a port full of banknotes. Hoysted gave a few of these notes to his sons who were far less trusting. They noted down the serial numbers of those new notes. Several of these notes were later found to come from a payroll robbery in Mt Isa where DI Towner had been one of the investigating officers.”

Some of the serial numbers listed had been found but the complete list had never surfaced. Dennis wondered if there might be other ways of finding out. But he lacked the time and resources to widen his enquiries.

“Objection! This man seems to be determined to bring in every sort of wild and unfounded allegation and link it to my client. I would ask that he be kept solely to the question of Sandra Hoysted’s death.”

Fiona, listening intently, thought the jury was possibly a bit confused but it would surely take some wonderful character witnesses and more to start making Doug Towner look good.

The judge nodded slightly.

Dennis could understand that there were so many things boiling round inside him and not the time or opportunity to bring them out that keeping focused was hard. “Sam Hoysted first pleaded Not Guilty and then changed his plea. He has told me that DI Towner reminded him that he owed him for getting that cannabis charge dropped and that he had taken and spent money from that payroll robbery. Hoysted says he told DI Towner that neither of those issues could be used without implicating Towner and that Towner had then reminded him that his two sons had been home alone with Sandra Hoysted after he left for Sydney and that there had probably been an argument.”

“More hearsay, Sergeant Walsh?”

“Sam Hoysted changed his plea. DI Towner read a confession into the records but this confession was never brought forward as an exhibit so it could not be checked for authenticity.”

“That was hardly DI Towner’s fault surely?”

“I have yet to see a case where a confession, either taped or written, by a defendant was not tendered as evidence.”

Stainforth had read the transcript of Sam Hoysted’s trial and thought it was probably better left. The more Sam Hoysted was mentioned the more curious the jury would become. And the last thing he wanted was Sam Hoysted in the witness box.

He objected to this statement as ‘a glib generalisation’. “That is something for legal historians to discuss. But it does not suggest that my client has ever been violent or abusive towards any woman and certainly not Sandra Hoysted. Nor has anything you have said ever raised the question of him using violence—”

Certainly Doug in his wheelchair did not suggest violence. But as Stainforth spoke Dennis whipped a small battery-powered tape-recorder out of his pocket, switched it on, and left it to play. Doug Towner’s voice came through clearly saying: “Go and get your fucking useless dad and be quick about it.”

Then Elise saying, “You should not speak in that nasty way.”

And Doug saying, “Go on, just go and get the bloody bastard, you stupid girl.”

Dennis clicked it off again. All the court seemed to be staring at him. Doug Towner had turned red with anger.

“That is DI Towner talking to a five-year-old girl. Do you really think he would not abuse an adult woman who was threatening to have that trust fund properly audited and investigated?”

Stainforth said loudly that they had not been told any tape-recordings were to be entered as exhibits and that this one therefore needed to be struck from the record.

Bergman looked upset. It certainly wasn’t enough to abort the trial but he wished Walsh had warned him what he intended to do. He could’ve simply asked Walsh to tell the court about the conversation. The tape made it that much more powerful but he could not see Stainforth agreeing to have it played. The judge after a long silence said yes, the use of the tape-recorder was not to go in

the record. The trouble with telling any jury to forget what they had just heard was easier said than done. It might not appear in the transcript but it was firmly lodged in their minds.

Both Stainforth and Bergman now simply wanted Dennis Walsh gone; Stainforth because he was nervous of any more such unexpected revelations; Bergman because he thought Walsh had done what he wanted and to have it dribble on with arguments over the recording of exhibits would not help.

He asked if Stainforth wanted to cross-examine. When the answer was no, he said, "You may step down now, Sergeant Walsh."

The judge asked about the next witness but when he heard that DSS Sullivan would need an hour or more he decided to end the day early. He warned the jury not to discuss the case with anyone outside the court and the court rose for the day. Stainforth was deeply unhappy that it had ended with that tape-recording still ringing in people's ears. Doug said angrily, "I warned you what he was like, the useless bastard." Peter Stainforth thought that 'useless' was the one thing Dennis Walsh wasn't.

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Dennis had already gone out when the court rose, and along to meet up with Greg Sullivan. People were streaming out of court as they both walked back. Fiona had come out just behind Mrs James and as she walked away Greg thought there was something familiar about the figure. He said to Dennis, "I s'pose Fiona is as keen as you are to see Doug convicted?"

"I'd say so."

"I wonder what she thought of today?"

"I'll give her a ring tonight."

Greg saw the woman with blonde hair and a brown beret, wearing a brown skirt and cream blouse, catch up to Mrs James, say something, then the two women walked away together. Perhaps he was mistaken; after all, Dennis would surely know whether his wife was coming to court. But the suspicion lingered.

And Dennis ringing home did not completely dispel it.

He got Kieran Dobbs who said Fiona had just popped out and could he take a message or get Fiona to ring back. "No, it's okay, I'll be home tomorrow. Are the kids okay?"

"Rob's in the bath and Ellie's doing some homework."

But when Dennis thought about this he said to Greg, "That's a bit odd, her going out and leaving Rob in the bath."

"Probably just popped out for some milk."

"Maybe."

Dennis didn't sound completely convinced. And Greg went back to thinking that maybe 'out' was more significant than Dennis realised.

## Case No. 2: A Babe in the Wood

Greg Sullivan had got Petra, Brent, Jenny and a computer-skilled person Constable Bridges to help him put together a good set of stills. He thought the jury would understand much better with pictures in front of them. He also thought he might feel a little more confident with the pictures to focus on when he was called in.

Dennis had come in with the Hoysted boys and was sitting near them. Word had obviously got around because today the court was packed. The blonde woman was still at the back, today wearing a plain brown dress with a broad white belt and white shoes. Mrs James had someone with her, possibly a relative or support person.

Greg said a number of things had thrown doubt on the first trial and he thought the jury would find it easier to understand with a map and stills in front of them. As no one on the jury had ever been to Winville there was a sense of relief in the jury box. Yesterday had focused on Doug Towner, today might make it easier to understand the *milieu*.

On the map Greg had marked the Hoysted address, Doug Towner's house, Michael Hull's and Gavin Whittaker's homes, the route to the aerodrome, the little park near the old Egg Board warehouse where Sandra often let the dog off the lead to have a run. It was a scruffy little place with a couple of seats. The Council had considered tarding it up but nothing had happened.

"Most afternoons Sandra took their dog, a Dalmatian, out for a walk unless she had some function on. The afternoon she disappeared she walked along Mercer Street and spoke to two people. Mrs Best was in her garden and said Hullo. Peter Andrews had just driven in to his driveway as she came along and spoke to her as he came to check his mailbox after getting out of the car. They both said she walked along the street, going south. She normally turned right into Dobson Street which would take her past DI Towner's house and then to that small park."

It was John Duarte who had done all this work and Greg was acutely conscious that Winville CIB should have done it and hadn't.

"No one has come forward to say they saw her after she turned into Dobson Street. The dog was found outside the Hoysteds' gate at about five o'clock, it was distressed and whining. DI Towner said that Sandra must have met up with her husband on his way to the airport, abandoned the dog, and gone out to the aerodrome with him. Now, we have found several people to say how fond Sandra was of the dog. And as you can see the route to the aerodrome is in the opposite direction to the route Sandra is known to have taken."

He showed a picture of the dog then a picture of the Hoysted home then he moved on to the aerodrome. "Now, we know that Sam Hoysted left for the aerodrome at between ten to and five to four that afternoon. Sandra was last seen at about 3.30 pm. We drove the route from the Hoysted house to the aerodrome and at normal speed it takes five minutes."

He brought up several pictures of the airfield, the hangars, and an old picture of Sam Hoysted's plane out the front of his hangar. "He had to park the car about a two-minute walk from his hangar, take out his luggage and bring it over to stow in the plane. Then he had to go over his checklist, check the weather, check fuel, and so on. He then had to taxi round past the other hangars and out on to the single runway. He took off at 4.35 p.m. Now, DI Towner claims that in that time he had also met up with his wife, persuaded her to abandon the dog and come out to the airfield with him and while he was there he had a major row with his wife, killed her, and put her in a bin and locked the hangar."

He showed pictures of the hangar with the bin outside and a picture of it with the doors closed and no sign of the bin. He then showed several pictures of the aerodrome, saying, "These were taken on an ordinary working day. As you can see there were usually half-a-dozen people around and sometimes more. None of the regulars saw Sandra Hoysted or heard any arguing."

This too was courtesy of John Duarte. Greg couldn't help thinking that even Blind Freddy could see they hadn't done a proper investigation.

"There are two things to note. Unless Sam Hoysted rushed around at top speed he could not possibly have made his normal preparations in that time *and* killed and disposed of his wife's body. And secondly, the builder who did those very expensive doors to the hangar said he had provided four keys, one to Sam Hoysted, one to Charles Ritchie, the other owner of the hangar, one to Winville Security and one to DI Towner."

Stainforth put in an objection saying there never was a fourth key and the builder had simply forgotten the number of keys.

Greg had been coached on this and simply said, "As you wish. We will come back to the keys later."

He then went on to show the cabinet with Sandra sitting on the desk beside it, the drawer found in Doug's old shed, the paper found stuck to the bottom, and the cabinet without the drawer found in Tom Miller's shed. He then went on to the digging up of the shed on what had been Doug Towner's property. Predictably this was challenged. Anything could have been carried in, blown in, caught on someone's shoe ...

"As you wish," Greg said mildly, "but don't forget this was a pubic hair, not a hair from Mrs Hoysted's head or arms." The women on the jury seemed to find this a telling point.

"When the Ortons bought the house they found a large laundry-type basket in the shed which at first they thought they might find a use for but Mr Orton said it smelled so revolting that



they took it to the tip. He has made a statement about the basket, the cabinet drawer, and the floor of his shed. I tender copies for the jury to have.”

When this was done, he said, “The documents which were in that drawer have never been seen since. They included such things as Sandra Hoysted’s car registration and related papers, her bank papers, and some letters and cards as well as her wedding and birth certificates. We do not know what happened to these papers after DI Towner took that drawer. They were neither returned to Sam Hoysted nor brought in to Winville station to be logged in.”

Stainforth objected to this statement, saying there were other options, or such papers might not have been in the drawer at all. They only had the husband’s word for it and he was hardly trustworthy.

Greg stayed calm. “Are you suggesting that DI Towner took an empty drawer around to his house? And that isn’t tenable because a bank letter addressed to Mrs Hoysted was found stuck to the bottom of the drawer.”

“Anyone could have removed those papers. You have no proof that DI Towner removed them.”

Greg again said, “As you wish.” Several of the jury members wondered if he had been told to say this whenever a tricky question was thrown at him. But Greg radiated care and sincerity. He might um and ah in the witness box but he came over as honest and conscientious.

Then he said, “DI Towner was in charge of the investigation in to Sandra Hoysted’s death. He set the tasks for DC Deane and me. Now, I can see that the investigation was seriously inept and I am sorry that Sandra Hoysted did not receive the best investigation possible rather than this slipshod and deeply flawed investigation.”

Neither Stainforth nor Bergman particularly wanted Greg Sullivan to wander off into some mawkish mea culpa. He was allowed to stand down.

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Both Dennis and Greg, not to say Doug Towner, were astonished when Stephanie Pohl was called. Greg hadn’t known that Stephanie was going to be a witness. He wondered if it had been kept secret so that he couldn’t be accused of telling her what to do or say about Winville’s record-keeping.

Doug Towner had regularly referred to her as a ‘nincompoop’ and a ‘bimbo’. To be confronted with this calm capable woman who oozed experience and professionalism struck him harder than anyone else there.

Her name and position was read out to the court and she said she had worked for Winville Police for twelve years. She had brought several ledgers with her and had photocopied several pages. Bergman asked her to tell the court in her own words what entries in her books were relevant to the case.

“The first one is in regard to the key which Charles Ritchie brought in to the station. He owned the hangar in which Sam Hoysted kept his plane. I noted for 11.15 a.m. ‘Charles Ritchie said he had brought in a key to give to Doug’ that is, Mr Towner, ‘I said DT was in the CIB room and he could go on in.’ And then I have written that Charles Ritchie returned in ten minutes. ‘I asked if he had found DT and he said yes, he had given him a key to his hangar.’”

Stainforth objected. There could be other people called Doug or with the initials DT.

“No, there weren’t.”

She said it crisply and authoritively. Greg sometimes believed Stephanie could run the station better than anyone. She knew everyone. She listened to gossip. She knew a lot of the people who came into the station with problems.

Bergman said, “You have other entries which are relevant?”

“I have. I began noting down the days on which Mr Towner left early. Normally I did not record the comings and goings of officers as they kept their own section records. But Mr Towner was gone by about 2 p.m. at least three days a week.”

“Objection. That is irrelevant. He probably came in early or worked late or was merely going out on a case?”

The judge over-ruled this and told Stephanie to continue.

“No. He didn’t. Some days he went to play golf. He was usually the last in in the morning and he had never returned when I left at about ten past five. He left the station at 2.10 p.m. on the afternoon on which Sandra Hoysted disappeared.”

“Objection! This surely doesn’t prove anything.”

Justice Brewer simply let it stand. It wasn’t proof of anything except that Douglas Towner was a very lazy detective. And that he didn’t seem to have an alibi.

Stephanie turned to another page and read out a date. “I have recorded at 1.15 p.m.: ‘Sam Hoysted came in to say he wanted to lodge a missing person report and who should he speak with.’ I knew he was a friend of Mr Towner and asked if he wanted to see him. He said ‘he might as well.’ DT came out of the CIB room and Mr Hoysted said his wife had disappeared. Mr Towner called him a stupid fool and that he had warned him not to let her stir him up. Mr Hoysted said he had been gone for more than two weeks and his wife had been safe and well when he left. They then went in to one of the interview rooms and closed the door. That same afternoon the body of Mrs Hoysted was found. She was partly inside a culvert on Dryfields Road.”

None of this put Doug Towner in the picture but it did strike several of the more thoughtful jurors as very pat timing. One of them later shared his thoughts with the jury room. “What if the body had been pushed right inside the culvert before it was really decomposed—and then someone only had to pull it out enough so that it would be found?”

Several of them nodded. After listening to Dennis Walsh they had given more thought to the mechanics of moving a seriously decomposed body.

Bergman asked Ms Pohl if she had any more entries to share with the court.

She said, yes, there were two more things. She had an entry for Annie Best who had come into the station three days after Sandra Hoysted was supposed to have flown to Sydney with her husband. She said Sandra had been wearing white slacks, a blue-flowered blouse, and a big white floppy hat when she last saw her. She said she had been speaking with her aunt who lived on Dobson Street. She had found what she thought was Sandra’s hat lying on the footpath and the dog had sat by it for a little while and then gone on along the street trailing its lead. She wasn’t sure if there had been an accident. But the aunt had given her the hat and she had gone to the Hoysted’s home but no one answered the door. So she had brought the hat into the station just to ask someone if Sandra Hoysted had had an accident.

Stephanie said she knew Doug Towner lived on Dobson Street so she buzzed him to see if he could talk with Mrs Best. He had taken her into an interview room and when she came out again she told Stephanie he had said he would check with the hospital and he had taken Sandra Hoysted’s hat.

It didn’t prove anything. Mr Bergman asked, “What happened to the hat?”

Stephanie said she had asked Greg Sullivan about it after Sandra’s body was found and he said he had never seen Sandra’s hat.

“The other puzzle,” Ms Pohl said briskly, “is what wasn’t logged in. Sam Hoysted came in and said he needed to get his wife’s documents back. I called Mr Towner who came out and told Mr Hoysted he didn’t have any documents. Mr Hoysted said, yes, he did, because he had taken a whole drawer of documents out to his car. Mr Towner said it was nothing to do with him. Mr Hoysted went away, saying he would have to call Gavin to get the stuff back and the police were totally useless.”

“Do you know what happened?”

“No. But Gavin Whittaker was Mr Hoysted’s lawyer so I assume he handled it.”

Mr Stainforth was in two minds whether to cross-examine Stephanie Pohl. Her lengthy entries told their own story. But there were assumptions in there. Was it worth trying to challenge them? In the end he let her go. But all the lawyers heard Doug hiss at his barrister “You should’ve torn her apart, the little bimbo”.

Peter Stainforth nodded but merely sat down and waited. He wondered what Doug had done with that hat but he couldn’t see Doug saying anything useful. He was more likely to say, ‘Her hat! For crying out loud, Peter, how do you expect me to remember some dame’s hat!’

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The court then adjourned for lunch and Fiona, after wishing Mrs James the best outcome, slipped away. Dennis was probably rearing to leave but as he had come with Greg he couldn't leave till Greg was ready and Greg would probably want to finish out the day. But she couldn't count on that. She took a taxi back to her mother's unit and to her mother's plea that they had hardly had any time together she promised to come back soon and they could relax a little and share news. She knew this meant her mother sharing her news rather than Fiona talking about Buckton but it didn't really matter.

Ten minutes later she was on the road home. It would have been interesting to hear more but she couldn't impose on Kieran and, anyway, she would hear more about it eventually. And she wondered if any of her own thoughts and intuitions about the case might have any value. She had noticed that Doug's barrister regularly put in objections but they had a curiously inauthentic aspect. She wondered if the man was earning his money but no longer believed in Doug. And he had not taken the opportunity to really grill any of the witnesses. Was he afraid they would only make Doug Towner look worse?

Greg and Dennis as they came out of the court room saw Stephanie standing waiting for them. Greg said warmly, "You were brilliant. He won't get out of any of that too easily, even if he does manage to cook up an alibi."

"I always knew he called me names behind my back so it gave me extra pleasure to see him get all hot and bothered. I'm glad we never sent him a Get Well card when he got shot." This had been discussed around the station but in the end nothing had happened, Stephanie saying to the few people still there who remembered Towner, "Perhaps he got shot because he was as nasty to other people as he always was to me."

After that, it would have taken a dedicated friend or well-wisher to get a card and pass it around for people to sign.

Greg had a brief moment of regret. He should've done more to support Stephanie in the face of Doug's rude put-downs. After all, it was supposed to be a safe environment for young women to work in, not one where they had to grin and bear the slurs and rubbish from people like Doug Towner. And what had happened to Sandra's hat ... and her handbag ...

When the court re-convened the first witness called was Thomas Miller. Both Greg and Dennis had thought it was very likely one of the Millers would be called. They had been the unobtrusive but constant presence in the Hoysted household. And when Carl Payne took them both to Brisbane it suggested he wanted to keep them safe until they could testify.

Mr Miller had never been in a court before and he looked round in a panicky way. The room was packed with strangers. Mysterious people in wigs and gowns stared at him. Then his frightened eyes rested on Greg Sullivan and Dennis Walsh sitting next to the young Hoysteds. Greg gave him a discreet thumbs-up.

He acknowledged his name and that he had been employed by Sam Hoysted until the house was sold in a rather quavery voice. Mr Bergman knew he was an important witness in the case and tried to get him to relax a little. Mr Miller said he was a caretaker when the family was away, looking after the dog, doing maintenance, and that his wife looked after the house and cooked when necessary. He said they lived in a small flat behind the garage but that he was usually out and about in the yard. Bergman asked him about the dog.

Having Doug Towner staring at him with gimlet eyes did not make it any easier but he said it was a very nice dog, that Mrs Hoysted had never had a dog before and loved taking him out for walks. "I liked him too. He was a well-behaved friendly dog."

"Did you ever hear Mr and Mrs Hoysted arguing over anything?"

He obviously would have liked to go on singing the dog's praises rather than deal with this fraught subject. "Sometimes he would say that she didn't understand that living in Winville was different to living in Sydney. And he didn't like her saying anything about his friends or his way of doing business. I don't know what she had said, because she had a soft voice, but I heard him yelling at her that his friends knew more about money than she ever would. She said something I didn't hear and he said very loudly that she wasn't to say a word against Doug or Gavin. And then he said something about Doug looking after him. They moved away then and I didn't hear any more. But another time she said to both me and my wife that if she had known that she would have

to put up with people like Doug Towner coming to her house and treating her like dirt she might have thought more carefully about marrying Sam. My wife said she was sure things would get better and Sandra said, no, she thought they were getting worse, that she knew Doug Towner was a crook and she was afraid of him.”

“Objection! This too is hearsay. What your wife did or said is hearsay.”

Mr Miller seemed to shrink back.

Justice Brewer seemed to peer out from under his wig while he considered this point. “Strictly speaking it is. But as you and your wife were both present I think it can be accepted.”

Mr Bergman said, “Thank you, Your Honour,” and asked Mr Miller if he had ever repeated this conversation to anyone else.

“No, sir. We knew she was afraid of something but it wasn’t our business to do or say anything.”

“Were you interviewed after Sandra Hoysted went missing?”

“No.”

“Never?”

“Never.”

“So going back to the day when Sam Hoysted flew to Sydney and Sandra Hoysted disappeared—can you tell us what you remember of that day?”

It was something that both the Millers had gone over and over, hoping to remember something ‘important’.

“It was quite a warm day and I was painting the side gate because I thought it would soon dry. Sandra, Mrs Hoysted, came out to where her husband was putting his luggage into his four-wheel-drive. She called up the dog and put his lead on. She said ‘you will take care, won’t you?’ and he said ‘Don’t worry, I’ll ring you when I arrive’ and then he said ‘and try to get those boys outside for some exercise’. They liked to sit inside because they had just got a computer and a printer. She said something about how as soon as they were back at school they would have to do sport and he said, well, make sure they get to the bus on time and she said she would. He gave her a kiss and she walked out the gate with the dog and he went inside to get something. He drove out and I shut the gate and when I got inside for a cup of tea I saw it was five to four. I think Sandra had been gone for nearly an hour when he left.” There were various hesitations in this but it came over as the sort of things people did say before one of them left.

“At about five o’clock I heard the dog at the gate and went out and let him in. He kept looking back up the road and sort of whining and we wondered if Mrs Hoysted had had an accident. When there was still no sign of her by half-past-five I went out to look for her and my wife went over to cook some dinner for the boys. I went along the route I thought she usually took and asked several people if they had seen her and they said they hadn’t. So I came home and hoped she would return. I know now I should have taken the dog with me as he might have given some sign of where she had left him. He was a very intelligent dog.”

“What happened then?”

“Nothing. We wondered if she might’ve met up with someone and gone into their house for a cup of tea and the dog had come untied. When she hadn’t returned the next morning we wondered about going to the police but we first had to make sure the boys were ready to go back to school and I drove them to the bus station. Then I drove out to the aerodrome and asked several people there if they had seen Mrs Hoysted but no one had. I could see the car parked there and the hangar was shut and locked. I came home again. We didn’t really know what to do. Mr Hoysted probably rang from Sydney but we weren’t in the house to hear so we couldn’t ask him for advice. The following morning I rang the police station and talked to a man called Midgely and asked him about putting in a missing person thing and he went away and got Mr Towner who said she had changed her mind at the last minute and gone to Sydney with Mr Hoysted. I asked him how he knew that and he said he had seen her getting in the car with her husband. I asked him about the dog and he said he hadn’t seen a dog. Perhaps we should have done more but we didn’t. Mrs Hoysted was always very good to us, polite and kind, and we ... well, we ... I still don’t know if we could have done more.”

“Did you tell Randall and Neumann that their stepmother had disappeared?”

“No.”

“Did you do anything more?”

“We looked after the dog. And we cleaned the house right through.”

“Nothing else?”

There was a long silence then the old man said hesitantly, “I did take the dog out for a walk. I went the route I thought Mrs Hoysted usually took. He didn’t want to go along Dobson Street. He started barking and pulling away when I tried to take him along the footpath there.”

“Was that a usual way for him to behave?”

“No. It was very strange. I didn’t know what to think. I always took him in a different direction after that.” He seemed to be mulling over something because he suddenly added, “I saw Mrs Hoysted put a letter in her handbag when she came out to get the dog. She sometimes came home past the post office if she had a letter to post. I don’t think they ever found her handbag.”

He sat there looking rather miserable.

Stainforth let him go. It ran the risk of looking like badgering an old man. And Bergman allowed him to step down. It was all vague enough for different interpretations to be put on to it. But the fact that he had never been interviewed after Sandra’s body was found suddenly stood out as a glaring omission.

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The court then called Mr John Francis Tenniel. Neither Greg nor Dennis knew who he was but they trusted DI Payne to find someone useful to the case. The man in his sixties said he had been Mrs Andrea James’s lawyer for the last fourteen years. He agreed that he had his office at 38 Fairway Gardens, Southport. He looked rather awkward in the witness box and Greg thought he probably didn’t do much court work.

He said that after his client’s daughter had been found murdered Mrs James had brought in her daughter’s diary and twenty-five letters her daughter had written to her and asked him to go through them to see if there were any clues to her daughter’s murder in them. But then they heard that Sam Hoysted had been arrested.

“I returned them to her but then she heard, I didn’t ask her how, that maybe that conviction was not safe. She took the diary and some of the letters to show someone and she said she had let them have copies. I asked her who she had shown them to and she said Mr and Mrs Walsh. She asked me to take everything and when I had time to go through them again in case someone else was indicated.”

Dennis remembered her bringing some letters but certainly not twenty-five. He suspected she had only brought those letters in which Sandra had said something not very complimentary about Sam. And he had been under the impression that she was going to give the diary, or a copy, to the Attorney-General but now he wondered if she had said something like ‘my attorney Tenniel’ and he had either misheard or assumed she had said attorney-general.

Mr Bergman asked Tenniel to read out the letters which he thought were relevant. Tenniel had also done copies for the prosecution and the defence. Though he had obviously come prepared he continued to look rather awkward and apprehensive. But he had clearly given Sandra Hoysted a lot of thought.

“I have chosen the ones I thought indicated her concerns but I am willing to let the court see all the letters if they wish. Mrs Hoysted wrote, and I quote, ‘The trustees come to our house every fortnight. At least Hull and Whittaker are polite which is more than Doug Towner is. And Eric Kramer hardly ever comes. I asked him why he didn’t come when I saw him one day and he said that Gavin often rings him to say he didn’t need to come as they had nothing important to discuss. I said they did a lot of talk about buying shares when he wasn’t there and I thought that was important.’

“She comes back to the share trading several times. Here she says ‘It is like a kind of madness, the volume of shares they are apparently trading, and most of them not worth buying. I said to Sam if they want to invest the boys’ money in shares why not buy blue chip stocks instead of these small mining companies that mostly don’t even pay dividends, and he said they knew what they were doing and when I said trustees do have the responsibility to invest trust monies wisely he said they knew more about trusts than I did. It didn’t seem worth arguing with Sam because his

attitude to money and business is pretty shambolic'. And she comes back to this in her next letter. She wrote 'Doug always refers to the boys as 'little pests' and when I said to him that he should not talk like that he yelled at me and told me to keep my stupid nose out of trust business and he would call them anything he liked.'" He handed more pages to the court official who then handed them to the lawyers.

Mr Bergman said, "Did Mrs Hoysted ever say anything more specific about Mr Towner?"

"Yes. She said she was keeping lists of all the companies they were buying shares in and also writing down the quantities when they were mentioned. She writes 'I asked Sam why they were spending so much of the boys' trust money on worthless stocks and he said Doug knew what he was doing and I said why did he think that, Doug was a copper and a corrupt one at that, not a stockbroker, and Sam said I shouldn't criticise Doug because Doug had looked after him when he made a mess over at the feed lots and Walsh had caught him out. Then he said Doug had the right idea about Walsh and he was going to make sure he was transferred to somewhere far away.' She goes on to say 'I don't think I can take much more of this whole sleazy corrupt way of doing business and I am thinking of leaving Sam. If only I could wean him away from people like Doug Towner and if only he would run his businesses properly I would enjoy being here with him, but I know that nothing I say will make any difference.' And in her next letter she wrote, 'I overheard Doug saying something about routing money through the PBF Fund and I wondered what this was. So I did some research myself and I found it was a fund to help the families of injured or killed police and I said to Sam, why should his boys' money be going into a fund to help injured police families and how was that appropriate for the trust funds to be used in that way, and he said, it seems a bit odd but I guess they know what they're doing. I said I didn't think they should be giving charitable donations to such things without consulting with the boys. He said the boys were too young to be consulted and I said they were very bright boys and I couldn't believe they would want to give money to something run by a friend of Doug Towner's. I am certain Doug is stealing from the trust and when he says he is routing money through something it sounds like a form of money laundering to me. But Sam again said that Doug knew what he was doing. I said then why does he live in that little weatherboard house which could do with a coat of paint if he really is this financial whiz that you think he is. He told me to leave it. That is the whole trouble. He won't engage with anything that doesn't suit him.'

"And in the last letter her mother received from her she says she is planning to come down to stay for a few days with her mother when the boys were back at school, she thought she would come on the 9<sup>th</sup> or the 10<sup>th</sup> and she would ring. She wrote and I quote 'I think I need a few days away from Winville. There are some very nice women here and we are fortunate to have the Millers who look after everything so well but I don't want crooks coming in to my own home. Sam is flying to Sydney for a couple of weeks to see his racehorses and talk business with his cousin. He has been very secretive about money lately and I saw him climbing up into the loft one day. I didn't think there was anything stored up there but after he'd gone out I climbed up and had a look and there was a little suitcase full of brand new notes. I didn't know what to think. I'm sure he hasn't taken up robbing banks but a babe in arms could see that there is something iffy about it. I think I would like to spend some time away from it all. And I would like to live somewhere where I never need to be in the presence of Doug Towner. I know it sounds melodramatic but he makes my skin crawl. I am sure he is an evil man'—"

Mr Stainforth objected strongly, saying such statements were prejudicial to his client.

Justice Brewer after sitting in silence for an agonisingly long moment agreed. "Confine yourself to matters of fact rather than supposition, Mr Tenniel."

But this placed the solicitor in an untenable situation. He said rather nervously, "Do you mean I should not read any more from her letters, Your Honour?"

"I mean," Brewer suddenly sounded testy; possibly because he could see the problem he had just created, "that you may read out things she planned to do but not her views of the defendant."

Mr Tenniel went back to puzzling over the pages in his hands. At last he said, "She also writes that she plans to put in an official complaint about the way the trust is being run. She says it won't make her popular with the trustees but she writes, 'I owe it to Sam's boys to see that their

trust is run with integrity and honesty'. Then she says it will be lovely to be able to spend a few quiet days with her mother and just sit in the sun and go for early morning walks along the beach. Those were her last words to her mother."

To Greg's surprise there were tears in Neumann Hoysted's eyes. He had always thought of the boys as not caring much for anyone except themselves and certainly not for their stepmother.

Stainforth in cross-examination queried the authenticity of the letters.

Mr Tenniel might come across as someone who could never mix with the 'big boys' but now he said calmly, "I had the letters checked with a hand-writing expert when I heard I was being called as a witness. I have here the copy of his report. He said he was certain the letters had all been written by Sandra Hoysted."

Stainforth pointed out that Sandra Hoysted was a city girl suddenly transported to a distant country town where she had difficulty fitting in and making friends and it was natural for her to blame her husband's friends for her problems. "The world is full of women who don't like their husband's 'mates' and blame them for any troubles they might be having. Wouldn't you agree, Mr Tenniel?"

John Tenniel considered this before saying slowly, "It depends on the so-called mates, wouldn't you agree?"

"When Sandra Hoysted moved to Winville she knew no one and obviously had difficulty making friends. Wouldn't you agree that she was blaming her husband's friends rather than looking at her own personality?"

"No. She several times mentions nice women she had met. She liked the Millers. She had joined several organisations and went to church. Her worries about her husband's friends were very specific. She did not believe that they were looking after her stepsons' trust fund properly."

Possibly Stainforth had not taken the elderly solicitor sufficiently seriously. An old family lawyer who had never been called upon to act in a serious criminal case ... And now he was proving to be a very large mouse, possibly even a rat ...

"None of her concerns are backed up by evidence. She is making claims which simply don't stack up, wouldn't you agree?"

"She has made it clear that she wanted the trust fund to be independently investigated and audited. Her death was very convenient for the trustees. The trust was not independently investigated. And Doug Towner retired to a mansion on the Gold Coast."

Stainforth objected to this and Brewer agreed that the statement about Doug Towner should be struck from the record. Peter Stainforth could see that this was not the moment to end his examination but equally Sandra's words in her letters to her mother could not be gainsaid.

"Things written in letters are not the same as things said under oath. You will agree that things said in letters may be a means of letting off steam and that with time and reflection might be seen as over-emotional or even quite wrong?"

"Sandra Hoysted was a well-regarded employee when she worked for a large company in Sydney. She clearly held to certain standards in all her work. For her to be upset by the lack of care she saw in Winville is understandable. In one of her earlier letters she writes, 'They don't even keep minutes. I have never heard of a trust being run in such a cavalier fashion.' She had been trained to believe that certain standards were required in all financial dealings, that the boys' trust fund should not be run like the crooks running the Nugan Hand bank," then he seemed to realise that the younger members of the jury would not understand this reference and added, "or any other financial scandal."

"That is a quite unfair comparison, Mr Tenniel. The four trustees were all respected members of the local community. Wouldn't you agree?"

No one had told John Tenniel not to mention the shootings. DI Payne may not have been aware that Mr Tenniel had done his own research, not trusting any police to tell him everything he needed to know. "Mr Towner was shot in the spine, Mr Whittaker was shot dead, Mr Hull was shot in the elbow. Clearly someone did not respect those trustees."

This created uproar. Mr Stainforth sprang to his feet and objected in no uncertain terms. Justice Brewer jerked his head upwards. Mr Bergman looked shocked. Several members of the public gasped.

Justice Brewer agreed that that statement should also be struck from the record and told Mr Tenniel to confine himself to the subject.

Mr Tenniel was not in the habit of being censured by judges but neither did he believe he had said anything wrong. “Your Honour, I was asked if those trustees were respected. I said why I didn’t believe that to be totally true.”

Mr Bergman was told to keep his witness ‘under control’.

Justice Brewer said to the jury, “You will ignore what you have just heard. No one has ever been arrested for those shootings so their motive or motives remain unknown.”

Stainforth said he thought the witness was taking them out into the realms of fantasy and that he had no more questions.

Tenniel stood down with secret relief and walked to the back of court where he sat down beside Mrs James. She touched his hand lightly and smiled at him. Whatever anyone else in the court thought she was clearly grateful to him.

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When court rose Dennis waited till the media had gone out then he turned to Neumann Hoysted and said “Why did you send a message about phone taps to my wife’s web-site?”

Neumann looked surprised and said, “What phone taps?”

“You said you were sending information about phone taps to Peter Stainforth. Why did you do that?”

Neumann said he hadn’t and why did Dennis think he had. Dennis took out his notebook and showed Neumann the address which had sent the message. Neumann looked at it carefully then said, “That isn’t ours, it’s close but not the same. I think someone’s been too smart for their own good.”

And then he said, “What phone taps?”

“How would I know? And what about your case against Doug?”

“Old Solomon saw Doug for what he is—but he decided it was all too complicated for him so he’s sent everything for an independent audit. Doug won’t wriggle out of that in a hurry.”

And on that calm statement they all went out of the court. The media had tried to get Greg or Dennis to say something the previous day but Dennis had only said, “We can’t comment on a trial in progress.”

Today they had tried to grab Mr Tenniel but he just wanted to have a brief chat with DI Payne and then go home to his nice peaceful office. He didn’t know whether he had done his best for Sandra Hoysted or whether he might now be seen as a maverick. After a lifetime of rectitude and care he wondered if he had been briefly possessed in there. He rarely drank but he thought a good strong drink was in order when he got home. Carlton Payne said, “Don’t worry about anything. Doug will probably shoot himself in the foot tomorrow so the jury will have something else to think about. But I didn’t know you knew about Whittaker and Hull?”

“The boys told Mrs James and she told me.”

It was not the first time Payne was reminded that anyone who left Randall and Neumann Hoysted out of the equation did so at their own peril. But he was surprised to hear that they had any contact with Sandra’s mother. Family feeling was not their obvious characteristic.

As Dennis and Greg got on the road Dennis said, “What happened to that dog?”

“I heard Sam or the boys had given it to Gavin Whittaker.”

“Well, he didn’t take it to France so where did it go?”

“Don’t know.” Greg couldn’t decide whether the dog might still have something to ‘tell’ them but Dennis had made him a little curious.

Dennis, though, had a different thought in mind. “You know when Gavin got shot—I wonder who told old Henry Neumann where to find Gavin in France?”

“The boys, I guess. They probably knew all Gavin’s plans, where he’d booked in.”

“Yeah, but that would make them accessories to murder.”

Greg considered this. After all, he wasn’t going to be asked to investigate so he could give it some thought without feeling put on the spot. “Maybe. If it really was Henry. But it might’ve been a random thing. I’m sure there’s plenty of French drug crazies too.”

“Maybe. But it’s a bit pat. Doug in the spine, Gavin dead. Hull caught in the elbow.”



“So why was Gavin killed? Or was that just a bad shot?”

“Always thought it was Gavin who was the mastermind, all those share trades, Gavin Douglas, all of that. Doug was there to damp down any questions, make sure nothing ever got investigated. Doug started believing he was a financial whiz but he wasn’t. That’s why he had to be doing Sandra down all the time. She knew what was what and he was only Gavin’s stooge.”

“So I wonder who Stainforth’s got to tell the court what a wonderful guy Doug really is?”

“Yeah, it must’ve got hard to find people willing to stick their neck out for him.”

Dennis was glad to be dropped off in Buckton in the crisp spring evening at around 7.30. There were lights on in his house and lights on in Grant’s flat. He went in to find Fiona and the children just finishing their dinner. Rob had been happy to miss ballet for the one evening. Fiona had not felt up to another long drive. To his father’s surprise he had remained passionate about ballet but he had also been hoping that Kieran would stay on a while longer to tell him about all sorts of things about plants and animals and insects. Kieran as he went out after bringing the kids home from school and giving them a snack and seeing Fiona drive in said, “You’ll have to come over to see the museum again soon. I’ve found some interesting new things to put in it.”

With his dinner warmed up and placed in front of him Dennis felt he could relax and forget all about Doug Towner. What happened next in that court room was not his business and in the unlikely event of Doug being found Not Guilty by the jury he would still have to spend the rest of his life in that wheelchair.

When Fiona later asked him what he thought of the case so far he brought her up-to-date. But when she said, “I thought you were very good” he looked at her in astonishment. “How could you know that? Did Greg tell you?”

“I was there.” She couldn’t help laughing at his expression. “I came in disguise because I didn’t want Doug to recognise me and I didn’t want to distract or inhibit you. But I wanted to see what you would do to Doug.”

Dennis sat back and gave that a chuckle. “So that was what Greg was on about. I couldn’t work out why he would think you knew all about it.”

“You mean Greg recognised me?”

“Looks like it. The old coot! Fancy him knowing it was you and me being blind. So were you the woman with the brown beret?”

“Yes.”

“So how did Greg know? Did you smile at him?”

“No. I was careful never to look at either of you when you came out.”

“Well, I’m not going to tell him he’s more observant than me. He’ll think I’m an idiot.”

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Inspector Jake Moss had not been wild about being suddenly saddled with the young man now calling himself Darryl Reeves. It might be a feather in the cap of police here but it also threw up a number of problems including whether he should trust anything the young man did or said and what to do about a documented identity for him. He could put him up in a local hotel but in the end he took him home with him and gave him a bed and dinner and a few toiletries and a track suit to see him through.

“You don’t have to tell me anything. You’ve done your time for stealing cars, but sooner or later you might feel safer if other people know everything you know about those Mafia bods.”

For the first time, young Darryl gave a slight smile. From looking like a surly young crim he suddenly looked like a perfectly normal young man. “Why d’you call them that?”

“Well, it’s true, isn’t it? Anyway, we need to think what’s best for you. You’ll need a job. What d’you want to do?”

“I haven’t got a licence but I’d like to do something with cars, a mechanic, a driver, run a taxi, drive a truck, sell them maybe.”

“And you need documents to get a licence? Hmmm ... ” Jake considered this problem. “And d’you want to stay as Darryl Reeves?”

“I think Darren would be easier. Darren Reeves.”

“Well, the first name is no problem, you can call yourself anything you want. But do you want to change Millington by deed poll to Reeves?”

“Can I? And will anyone know?”

“You can. I can get that fixed. But think about it carefully before we do anything.”

The next morning he took half-an-hour out of work to take Darren round to Jacksons. “They’re good people so let’s hope they can take you on.”

He told Colin Jackson they needed to talk in private. Mr Jackson at first said he didn’t think they could make a job but when they’d sat down in his small office and he’d been told Darren was a Protected Witness but would like to work with cars, Mr Jackson was at first surprised then thoughtful then he said, “Well, I guess I can make a job if he’s prepared to make it worth our while. It would be cleaning vehicles, running errands, serving petrol, serving in the shop. Would that be okay? Can he deal with the public?”

“Can you keep him behind the scenes for the first week while he grows a beard? And that will give me time to get his documents sorted out. Treat him like a Work Experience student and don’t ask any questions. Would that be okay?”

Colin Jackson said it would. “No pay for the first week but we’ll feed him and find him a couple of pairs of overalls.”

Jake was pleased they had got over that hurdle so easily. He wouldn’t say so to Darren but he knew Colin Jackson still felt grateful to police here for finding his kidnapped grandson. Moss couldn’t claim any of that credit. In fact, he thought that if it hadn’t been for Dennis Walsh the boy might not have survived ...

“Now, you can stay a few days with me but we’d best start looking for something more permanent. A little flat maybe. But no girls, mind, and keep a low profile.”

This didn’t seem to bother Darren. Girls did not seem to have played any part in his life.

“And don’t try to find out what’s going on in Victoria—and don’t try to make contact with your mother or your grandparents.”

That, too, didn’t seem to faze the young man.

“Okay, next thing is a few clothes for you. But I can’t take you shopping. So I’ll give you some money and you can take yourself downtown. There’s a good op-shop next to Neave’s butchery. Get yourself some shirts and trousers.”

He gave Darren a key to his house, though not without some misgivings; the young man might’ve had a hard time but that didn’t mean he was grateful enough to change his ways.

He couldn’t know that being, apparently, trusted by a cop gave the young man an odd feeling. He couldn’t know that in Darren’s world there were only two kinds of cops: ‘bastards out to get you’ and ‘our cops’, the ones willing to take a bribe or who were thoroughly compromised or corrupted.

Jake and Dennis Walsh didn’t seem to fit this mould. He thought it was probably something to do with them being ‘country cops’.

And how would he go surrounded by dozens of vehicles? Would there come a moment when he felt an urge to help himself to one of them and drive out—

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Greg Sullivan was not usually driven by curiosity. He was quite willing to believe the world was full of things that he didn’t understand and never would—and the thought didn’t bother him. But Dennis *had* made him curious. What had happened to Sandra Hoysted’s dog? Of course it might be dead by now. It had not been a puppy when she got it.

But no harm in asking. He went round to see the woman who had been Gavin Whittaker’s secretary. She now worked for James Westrupp. She had never been questioned about anything but Greg thought she probably knew quite a lot about Gavin’s and Doug’s secret dealings. It was easy for people like Doug Towner to overlook or disparage women who worked in such positions but Greg didn’t doubt that they often knew a lot of what went on behind the scenes.

He said simply, “I won’t take up your time but I wondered what had happened to the Dalmation which Sam Hoysted gave to Gavin. What happened to it when Gavin left?”

“Oh, I’ve got him.” After her first surprise she treated it like a perfectly normal query. “I’m not really a dog person but my next-door neighbour likes taking him for walks. He’s a nice well-behaved dog.”

“Uh huh. I guess this will sound a bit strange but I wondered if I could take him for a walk? He was mentioned at Doug’s trial.”

She leaned forward and said earnestly, “And how is Doug? Is he all right?”

“Healthwise, he seems pretty good. He’ll be on the witness stand tomorrow.”

“I see.” She seemed to lose interest. “Anyway you can take him out for a walk if you really want. I can’t come home to get his lead for you but Mr Rutter next door has one.”

“Don’t worry. I’ve got one back at the station. Thanks for letting me take him out.”

“Don’t forget to shut the gate carefully after you.”

The dog looked at Greg with curiosity rather than suspicion but allowed himself to be taken out for a walk. Sullivan didn’t do much walking round the town, preferring his car to his two legs, but he took the dog a big loop around so that he would take Sandra’s usual route. And Mrs Best saw him from her front windows and came out to say in a puzzled way, “Isn’t that Mrs Hoysted’s dog? She called him Hugo.” At the sound of his old name the dog looked up. The Whittakers had called him Spot.

“Hugo, yep, he remembers that.”

“Are you taking him?”

“No. Just borrowing him.”

“That Margaret,” she said rather tartly, “I don’t know why she has him when it’s old Jeff Rutter who gives him his walks.”

“I guess he reminds her of Gavin and his family.”

She didn’t look convinced. “Y’know, I saw her with that crooked cop, the one they’ve got on trial in Brisbane. I reckon the two of them were cooking something up.”

“That’s interesting. You don’t think she fancied him, do you?”

“It wasn’t like that. Gavin always thought he was the clever clogs around here but I don’t think Margaret had all that much time for him.”

“You think she might’ve been passing information on to Doug Towner?”

This was maybe too blunt because Mrs Best seemed to withdraw. “I really couldn’t say. Anyway, enjoy your walk.”

But she had given Greg an odd idea. Might Doug have been paying Margaret to pass on information from Gavin’s office? Might Margaret have been the source for Gavin’s address in France? Dennis was convinced that a friend of Fiona’s had been passing information to Doug in return, probably, for money, including things Fiona had told her in confidence.

The dog trotted happily along beside him while he wrestled with this puzzle. Maybe it wasn’t good to trust anyone. Maybe anyone would put friendship or loyalty aside if someone came round with wads of cash. And then he wondered if she might’ve been given more of those suss notes ... And then he wondered about his own wife. He couldn’t imagine Narelle accepting money from Doug Towner. But then Gavin Whittaker could probably not picture his long-time secretary passing things on to Doug Towner in return for money ... except that he knew Narelle in a way that Gavin had never known Margaret ...

He turned into Dobson Street, trying to keep his mind occupied with other things so that the dog would not pick up any apprehension from him. They came to the gate of the house where Doug Towner had lived. The dog looked up at him then back at the gate and gave an odd little noise between a whine and a woof. “I wonder if the Ortons would mind us going in.” There was no sign of anyone around so Greg opened the gate and went in. He undid the leash and said to the dog, “D’you remember anything?”

The dog went up the path to the front door then turned round and looked at him. He gave a small bark and sat down as though to wait. “She’s not there, old fella,” Greg said mildly and moved to go round the house to the carport and toolshed. The dog followed him.

Greg thought it was probably too long ago for the slightest smell of Sandra Hoysted to remain. The dog ran around looking inside the toolshed and the carport and then he went round the back and started to scabble in under the rosella bushes by the back fence. Greg went over to see what had interested him. “What is it, old fella?”

The dog looked up at him then began scabbling again with both front paws. Greg simply stood there and watched him. The Ortons might bury the remains of their Sunday roast but this area

didn't look as though it got much attention. The Ortons had put in a nice front garden with petunias and daisies and a couple of rose bushes as well as some shrubs along the front fence and there was a thriving vegie patch out near the hoist in the back yard. But they had left these bushes alone so far. Or possibly Mrs Orton made rosella jam each year.

The dog kept on at his self-appointed task and Greg wondered what he might eventually turn up. He could go over and take the digging fork standing upright near the trellis of peas but he thought he might as well leave the dog to continue his digging.

A car drove in and Mrs Orton got out with a couple of bags of groceries. She came round the path to the back door and saw man and dog. "What on earth are you doing? Oh, it's you, Mr Sullivan!"

He said, "Sorry about this. But I think the dog has found something." Although it was a bit embarrassing to be caught digging up someone else's garden, Greg was glad to have a witness. And no one now could say he had gone in without a warrant—if what the dog was trying to dig up was significant.

"Could you drop your groceries in and join me. I think the dog might've found something else Doug Towner left behind."

She hesitated then did what he'd suggested. The screen door clanged and she disappeared for five minutes. By the time she returned the dog was tugging at something that looked like brown leather under its layer of dirt. Greg went over, took out a handkerchief, and caught it. A strong tug and the mysterious object rose out of the earth.

Mrs Orton stared at it. "Why it's a handbag, isn't it? It certainly isn't mine—and I can't imagine Doug Towner having a handbag—"

"No, I'm sure it isn't Doug's." He wanted to laugh at the idea, at the picture suddenly conjured up, but he said carefully, "I think it might belong to Sandra Hoysted. Her handbag was never found."

"Oh! Oh dear, oh, that's awful. Oh, that poor woman."

Greg got the catch undone with some difficulty but the bag appeared to be empty. He tipped it upside down, tapped it, shook it, and a lot of dirt fell out. Then he carefully slid his fingers into every small pocket and down under the lining.

Mrs Orton had come over to stand by him and watch with popping eyes. Then she said, "There's a pocket within a pocket. I had a bag a bit similar a few years ago."

Greg obediently looked inside each pocket and a minute later said, "I think you're right." The outer pocket had a stud to shut it but the inner pocket was the size of a card. He slipped a hand in and drew out a very discoloured card.

They both stared at it. Then Greg said, "I think it's a card for an appointment with Mr Bingham." He turned it over. Something had been written in biro. Geoff Bingham was a local dentist. "I'm not sure but I think it might say 11.30."

"Will this be evidence, d'you think?"

"I'll get the bag fingerprinted and I'll check with Mr Bingham. Let's hope he keeps his old appointment books."

He clipped the lead back on the dog. "You're a clever fella, that's for sure." He gave the dog a pat. To Mrs Orton he said, "I wonder if I could get a plastic bag from you, stick this in."

A couple of minutes later Greg and the dog went out again, leaving Mrs Orton with a dramatic story to tell everyone.

Mr Rutter came out when he saw Greg and the dog and said, "He's a lovely dog, isn't he?"

"He's also a very clever dog. It looks like he's found Sandra Hoysted's handbag for us. It'll have to be checked, of course, but I'm pretty confident."

"Where did you find it?"

"In what used to be Doug Towner's yard. But don't tell Margaret for the time being."

"Well, I hope that's the final nail in his coffin."

"You knew Doug Towner?"

"Sort of. He was very rude to my wife one time. I expect better from the police."

Being rude was not a hanging offence. But Greg could see that people had all sorts of reasons for disliking Doug Towner. It was one thing to be tough like Dennis Walsh and quite

another to be gratuitously nasty like Doug Towner. But it wasn't just Doug, it was family, corrupted officers, people who had received Doug's largesse; the ripples spread out and in the end Doug was probably only one bad egg in a basket of iffy eggs ...

Mr Bingham shared a receptionist and said he was sure they would be able to find the relevant book. He looked at the filthy stained card and said he thought it was one of his. "I don't usually give patients a card, only if they're new patients."

"Let us know when you've had a chance to check."

And Reid Strohling looked at the disaster of a handbag and said only, "Lucky it was buried in a fairly dry place." The Ortons probably watered their rosella bushes occasionally but not to the extent that their petunias benefited.

Mr Bingham might or might not be hurrying to find old appointment books but Reid was aware that this could be evidence which Doug's trial should have access to. Within an hour he was back to say, "Yep, got Doug's prints everywhere. Poor quality. But good enough for a match. So who is going to take the bag to Brisbane?"

Greg hadn't thought this far ahead. He groaned at the thought of another long drive. But he could see it was his responsibility. He couldn't shove it on to Petra or Brent.

"Me. I guess." He rang back to the dental surgery and said, "Any luck with the books?"

Mr Bingham, perhaps also aware that Doug's trial was in progress, had sent the receptionist post-haste to the back storeroom. With the approximate date it hadn't been hard to find. He thought of his partners saying, 'do we really need all these old records?' and his own thoughts that they were probably right. Now he felt a cold shiver. What if they had all got rid of things older than five years?

"Kate is on her way round to you with the book now."

Bergman would still be in court so Greg rang John Duarte's office and was thankful to get him. He said simply, "We've found Sandra Hoysted's handbag. It was buried in Doug Towner's garden. We've got his fingerprints. Do you want it?"

John Duarte could be pardoned for thinking that Winville might've thought of looking there sooner but he said, "Yes, everything you've got."

Greg said a weary "Okay" and "I'll come down tonight."

Then he rang Dennis and got Grant and told him what had happened. Grant couldn't control his excitement and unlike John Duarte just saw it as clever policing. Greg privately thought that having someone in the office like Grant must at times be a great morale-booster.

### *Case No. 3: With Friends Like These*

While DSS Sullivan was helping a dog dig up a handbag Doug Towner's defence witnesses were not quite delivering the character-boost they had promised and the defence had banked on.

First up was retired Superintendent Arthur Leslie who said he had been in charge of Winville when DI Towner arrived to head the CIB section. He looked his age and occasionally seemed to have trouble hearing, cupping a hand round an ear. He said how much he had appreciated DI Towner's offer to help by going round the smaller stations to check on everything.

Stainforth asked him to expand on this.

"Normally I would send one of my officers or even go myself." There was no one there to treat this with faint derision. It was a very long time since Leslie had stirred himself to visit any of the smaller stations. "But Doug Towner had a great deal of experience and I knew he would pick up on any problems."

Stainforth pointed out that Towner was a detective and not usually required to do such work. Leslie nodded and said, "I would not have asked him but as he offered I thought it was an excellent chance to have a very experienced officer looking at things."

"So what would he have done when he visited the smaller stations?"

“Ask about problems, check their current cases, make suggestions.”

“Would he have looked at the day-to-day running of the stations? Whether everything was tidy, their records up to date, treatment of the public, that sort of thing?”

“Anything that was needed.”

“And did he report back to you?”

“Normally.”

“Were these written reports or oral reports?”

“Both.” He didn’t say that written reports were the exception.

“And what about DI Towner’s work in Winville? Did that suffer because he was out a lot?”

Stainforth thought that sounding like a devil’s advocate now would make Doug look better in the long run.

“He would’ve gone out, say, once a fortnight. I’m sure it would not have affected his work in Winville.”

“So did you have any responsibility for his work in Winville?”

“No. Or only minimally.”

“Were there ever any complaints made to you?”

“Not personally, no.”

The jury remained unaware that it was very difficult to complain to Arthur Leslie because he was rarely available to talk with members of the public or even his own staff.

“So what was your general impression of DI Towner both as an officer and in terms of his work?”

“I thought he was a hard-working clever officer.”

Arthur Leslie sounded completely sincere in this. Stainforth handed him over to Bergman to see if he wanted to cross-examine.

“How long would DI Towner have spent in each smaller station?”

Leslie pondered on this before guessing an hour, probably.

“And what did he do about any complaints made to him?”

“I don’t remember there being any complaints.”

Bergman looked sceptical. More importantly, he had done his homework. Or John Duarte had done it for him. “Were any complaints sent to Winville from members of the public?”

“I don’t remember any.”

“Now, at least three complaints were received by Winville from two elderly women, Ellen and Faye Parsons. They complained that Sergeant Bosch in Buckton station had refused to do anything about a serious complaint they had brought to him. They said they had seen a local farmer Paul Pickering bashing his young son’s head against a car window. They were very distressed about this and wanted it investigated. As nothing was done in Buckton, what action did DI Towner take in Winville?”

“I have no memory of him mentioning it.”

“When the complaints were made to Winville someone wrote on them ‘No Action to be Taken’. Was that you?”

“Of course not.”

“It appears to be in DI Towner’s handwriting. Is that likely?”

“I’m sure it isn’t.”

“So as you had a sergeant in Buckton station who was clearly not doing his job what action did DI Towner recommend?”

Arthur Leslie had been told that giving a bit of a puff for Doug Towner would be a doddle, a mere formality, and now he felt he had been conned. But at heart he was a decent man, just a completely ineffectual one.

“DI Towner said he was satisfied with Sergeant Bosch. But I was not so sure. I urged Bosch to take early retirement and I looked for an energetic officer to put in to the station. I arranged for Sergeant Walsh to be transferred to Buckton.”

“Did DI Towner have any say in this choice?”

“No. I did not discuss it with him.”

He had no intention of saying that Towner had been furious when he heard that Bosch was being put out to grass. Several of the jury members intuited that Leslie would like to say more but had refrained.

Bergman felt that was a good place to stop. He thanked Arthur Leslie and allowed him to step down.

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John Daly had once regarded himself as a close friend of Doug Towner but that belief had slowly been eroding. He was no longer sure what he thought of Towner but he had no reason to complain about their relationship in the time Towner had spent in Winville. He agreed that he was John Gresham Daly and that he had been editor and part owner of the *Winville Courier* for the last fifteen years. Although the Gatehouse family owned the newspaper he had a small share in it.

When he was asked about his friendship with Douglas Towner he said warmly that it had been a mutually beneficial relationship. "He gave me an insight into current cases and I was able to use the paper to enlist public help when needed."

"Did he ever ask you to keep something under wraps?"

"Only if it was something where discretion was indicated. But that was very seldom. People tend to hear what is going on in a place the size of Winville so discretion is rarely indicated."

"Did he ever ask you to print a retraction or an apology?"

"No."

"Do you think he ever made mistakes?"

"Of course. Everyone makes mistakes."

"Do you think he ever made serious mistakes?"

"I can't think of any."

"Were you aware of the way he investigated his cases?"

"To some extent. He would share details where appropriate."

"Did you ever consult with other detectives to get different views?"

"No." He thought of explaining that Greg Sullivan did what Doug asked so he wasn't going to contradict his boss. That Sullivan was now seriously critical of his former boss did not change this original perception.

"And what about uniformed officers like Dennis Walsh? Did you ever seek their views?"

"I had very little to do with Dennis Walsh. I consulted uniformed officers in Winville if it was something like a traffic accident."

And even if he had wanted to hear things from Dennis Walsh he had thoroughly queered that by a gratuitous sneer at Walsh's wife. He suspected Walsh had never forgiven him for that.

"And when DI Towner shared information with you did you think he was investigating 'by the book'?"

"I never had any reason to believe he was not following procedure."

"So you think that DI Towner was a good detective?"

"I do." He thought of adding 'with occasional reservations' but the moment had passed and Stainforth was saying "No further questions".

Bergman, though, hopped straight in to the day when Sam Hoysted returned from Sydney and Sandra Hoysted's body was found.

"Now, we have a timeline that says Sam Hoysted arrived at the aerodrome at around 11.30 a.m. and that he eventually went home and was told by the Millers that his wife had been missing since the day he left for Sydney. At 1.15 p.m. he went in to Winville Station to report his wife missing. He spoke with DI Towner. At 3.20 p.m. a man, Jasper Schultz, came in to Winville Station to say there seemed to be a body of a person near a culvert on Dryfields Road. He had seen a lot of crows attacking something and had gone over to have a look. At 3.40 p.m. DI Towner arrived at the culvert and saw what appeared to be a human body. He rang Dr Fred Wittenbach at Winville District Hospital and he rang DS Sullivan back at the station. Dr Wittenbach arrived at the culvert at around 4.15 p.m. and said the body was human, more likely to be a woman than a man, but he couldn't say any more than that until he could do a proper investigation.

“He took some time to make sure all parts of the body were safely on a plastic sheet. The body was seriously decomposed and had been eaten by rodents, insects, and birds. He was there until nearly 5.30 p.m. when the morgue van removed the body to the mortuary at the hospital.”

This blunt statement obviously distressed Sandra’s mother because she buried her face in her hands as though to blot everything out.

Bergman looked up from his notes and considered Mr Daly who had been listening intently. “Do you agree with what I have said so far, Mr Daly?”

“Yes, that seems about right.”

“Now, the *Winville Courier* is a weekly and comes out every Saturday. This was a Friday afternoon. So what time would the paper go to the presses on a Friday?”

“Normally between 7 p.m. and 7.30 p.m. We might hold it a little later if there was some breaking news.”

“Was it held back that day?”

“Not that I remember.”

“What time did you or a reporter from your paper hear about a body being found?”

“DI Towner rang me at about 4 p.m. and said he had a story for me and to come out to Dryfields Road. I got there just before half past four.”

“Now when your paper came out on Saturday morning you stated on the front page that the body of Sandra Hoysted had been found. Who told you the body was Sandra Hoysted?”

“DI Towner.”

“What exactly did he say?”

“I don’t remember exactly. Just that they had found Sandra Hoysted’s body and that it was looking very bad for her husband. Then he said ‘but don’t say anything about Sam, just ask for public help from anyone driving along Dryfields Road, whether they saw anything’. So that’s what I put in the paper.”

“Were you aware that Dr Wittenbach had said it was human and possibly female but everything else would have to wait on the investigation?”

“Not then. I went back to the paper and hunted out a picture of Sandra Hoysted at a function which we could crop and put on the front page. And I wrote a short article to go with it.”

“In that you stated that the body was that of Sandra Hoysted?”

“Yes.”

“You then received a complaint from Dr Wittenbach. What did he say to you?”

Daly tried to throw his mind back to that day. He hadn’t responded to Wittenbach’s complaint. After all, Wittenbach was unlikely to take it further. And the paper and Doug Towner had been proven correct in their identification.

“He said we had been premature. He had not yet carried out the post mortem nor had a formal identification been made.”

“What reply did you send him?”

“I didn’t.”

“His letter of complaint was actually much stronger than you have just suggested.” Bergman entered two sheets of paper into evidence. He was unaware that he also had to thank John Duarte for this copy of the original. “I will read it to you.”

Fred Wittenbach had written that he strongly objected to the *Winville Courier* naming the body before:

- a) a post mortem had been conducted,
- b) a cause of death had been determined,
- c) clothes, jewellery, hair, and teeth had been examined to make an identification possible.

“He goes on to say that such premature identifications before even age or sex had been determined were prejudicial. They could

- a) waste police time in looking in the wrong direction,
- b) give unnecessary distress to family and relatives where a wrong identification is made public,
- c) show contempt for the office of the government pathologist whose job it was to investigate everything before an identification was made public.



And then he asks a very pertinent question.

As you undoubtedly got this identification from Doug Towner you need to ask him some very tough questions including:

- a) why did he come alone to check out the report of a body?
- b) how did he know it was Sandra Hoysted when the body was too severely damaged to be identified by sight?
- c) how did he know the body of Sandra Hoysted had been placed in a culvert on Dryfields Road?

These are all serious questions so I would like to know why you didn't respond to Dr Wittenbach's concerns."

Bergman laid the sheets down and repeated, "Those were serious questions and surely deserved the courtesy of an answer. So why were you so sure DI Towner was right when Dr Wittenbach was unprepared to commit himself at that stage?"

"DI Towner was a good detective and I trusted him."

"Do you still trust him now that he has been charged with the murder of Sandra Hoysted?"

If John Daly wished the floor would open up and swallow him nothing showed on his face. "At no time in all the years I have known Doug Towner have I ever seen him use violence or advocate violence."

"Have you ever seen Sam Hoysted use or advocate violence?"

"No." Sam could say plenty of nasty things about people but then so could Doug ...

"But the *Winville Courier* put out huge headlines to say 'HUSBAND GUILTY'. Did that conviction seem unlikely to you?"

"No."

"Why not?"

In for a penny, in for a pound, Daly thought grimly. "Because DI Towner had shared all the details of the investigation with me and I came to understand why Sam Hoysted might've lost the plot and hit his wife."

"Which details convinced you?"

Stainforth objected to this, saying they were getting away from the focus on DI Towner's investigation and into John Daly's personal feelings.

The judge failed to back him up and Bergman stood waiting for an answer.

"Because he knew she was having an affair with a man over at the feed lots owned by Sam Hoysted."

"Do you have a name for this man?"

"Yes. It was Frank Obidini."

"And how did DI Towner know about this alleged affair?"

"He said he saw them together."

"Where did he see them together?"

"He didn't tell me."

"Did he say what they were doing?"

"He said they looked very lovey-dovey."

"Did you investigate this claim?"

"No. Obidini shot himself and Sandra was dead. So it seemed best to let the whole thing lie."

"So you believed Doug Towner even though Sam Hoysted has said that Sandra met Obidini briefly when he went out to the feed lots one day and took her with him."

"Well, he would downplay it, wouldn't he?"

"So you believed Douglas Towner but you didn't believe Sam Hoysted?"

"That is correct."

"Did you query anything DI Towner told you?"

"No."

"Did you query anything later on when questions were raised about the safety of Sam Hoysted's conviction?"

"No."

“Why not?”

“Because ... because I trusted Doug Towner.” That John Daly looked supremely uncomfortable when he said this was more expressive than his actual words. Bergman allowed him to stand down.

Stainforth was asked how long the defence’s third witness was likely to take. Doug’s solicitor had not been happy about calling Laurie Thompson or not after Doug had said to him “Laurie owes me one”. Laurie might no longer feel any obligation towards Doug Towner in his wheelchair.

Stainforth said coolly, “Around an hour, Your Honour.”

They had broken for an early lunch between Arthur Leslie and John Daly. Now Justice Brewer thought he would like to get this third witness out of the way. He had found the first two secretly embarrassing. Anyone who has given uncritical support or loyalty or trust to someone who has abused it or was not worthy of it always raised a faint sense of pity in him. These two men would have to live out the rest of their lives in the knowledge that Doug Towner had used them.

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Laurie Thompson still looked rather like a decrepit teddy bear. Peter Stainforth hoped this in itself would encourage the jury to put away their critical faculties. And Thompson beaming round the courtroom in a cheerful hail-fellow-well-met fashion suggested he was delighted to be here for Doug and that he regarded everyone in court as a potential pal. Stainforth knew Thompson had been investigated and transferred but he could understand why it had taken so long for people to see the real man behind this cheery exterior.

Thompson said he had decided to retire at the end of last year for health reasons. He agreed that he had been in charge of the Police Benefits Fund for five years. “But I stepped down when they decided to restructure it. It is now run by a board. They decided it was too much work for one person.”

“And how did you come to know DI Towner?”

“I met Doug when he came to a seminar in Brisbane ... must be twelve years ago, maybe more ... and we’ve been friends ever since.”

“Was that purely social or was it also a professional relationship?”

“Well, mainly social. But Doug did some fundraising for the Fund and I was very glad of his help. So of course we sometimes talked about what the fund did in the way of helping the families of police officers who had been killed or hurt in the course of duty.”

“Did he tell you how he raised funds?”

“I must admit I never asked. But it is a tax-deductible charity so it has always appealed to people who know that police officers frequently put their lives on the line.”

“Did he ever say something like ‘I passed the hat around’ or ‘I mentioned it at Rotary’, anything like that?”

“Well, now that does jog a memory. I’m pretty sure Doug was a member of Rotary so that could be where some of the money came from. He was very public-minded and he had many opportunities to spruik for the fund.”

“The amounts provided were quite substantial. Do you remember any figures?”

“Not off the top of my head.”

“Would he have raised a thousand? Ten thousand? More than ten thousand?”

“It came in in dribs and drabs so I can’t say exactly but ten thousand all up rings a bit of a bell.”

“Did he ever mention anyone helping him or was it all just his work?”

“He did say one time that some of the businessmen around Winville had been very supportive.”

“Did he name names?”

“Not that I can remember.”

“So you were very grateful to Doug Towner?”

“I was. I only wish there were more police officers like him willing to go all out to raise money in a good cause.”

Anyone looking at Laurie Thompson would be hard put to disbelieve this. But Stainforth was nervous. Anyone who had done any digging would know that Laurie Thompson was as crooked as a dog's hind leg but with luck the prosecution had not seen him as important enough to want to plough through reports and go back over old documents.

But then DI Carlton Payne treated old ledgers, old reports, things badly archived as meat and drink.

Mr Bergman was a little reluctant to hoe into Laurie Thompson. It would help the case to show up Thompson for the man he really was but it would also remind people that Inspector Laurie Thompson had been a supposedly respected police officer doing a supposedly good job on behalf of widows and orphans.

"Mr Thompson, all the paperwork from your five years with the PBF has been thoroughly scoured and every recipient contacted. The problem with your accounting was not that there was too much work for one person but that you were giving money to non-existent people. You might like to tell the court why you were doing that."

"That's complete nonsense!" Thompson looked around at all the people in front of him and his expression of injured innocence was beautifully done. Several of the jury members found it hard to believe that this man could have been stealing from the fund.

Bergman said coolly, "Mrs Patricia Campbell of 13 Aberdeen Drive, Emerald, lost her husband in a traffic accident.. Her husband Leonard was on his way to work at the local police station. She received \$100,000 from the fund. The only trouble with this was that there was no such person, the address didn't exist, and there was no Leonard Campbell at the police station there. A second case concerns a Richard Prentiss who was badly hurt when he was shot in the lower back. The fund provided him with \$50,000 for a wheelchair and helped to set up his home to suit a disabled man. He was said to be a Senior Constable at Cloncurry. But there was no such person there. A third case deals with a Constable Paul Ridout at Cunnamulla who was bashed during the course of his duties and left a vegetable. His family was provided with \$150,000 in three instalments to care for him. But Constable Ridout also did not exist."

The jury might be listening with their collective mouths dropped open. But Thompson said firmly, "They didn't look properly."

"Now, we are up to over a quarter of a million dollars in payouts so where did that money go or was it phantom money as well as phantom recipients? Perhaps you would like to explain, Mr Thompson."

"As I said, you didn't look properly."

"Now, the other side of the equation is the money DI Towner put into the PBF. This also was in your books but disguised. Sometimes it was down as DT, sometimes as Doug Plowman, sometimes as Doug Massey, sometimes as Doug Harris, sometimes as Doug Ferguson and sometimes as Doug Hoysted. But when all these different donations were checked out they all proved to come from the one person and they added up to a total of \$240,000. As an ordinary police officer, even a senior one, was not earning anything like that money, it begs the question of where DI Towner was getting this money. Did you ask him?" Thompson had told Dennis Walsh that large donations had come in from the Newman Charitable Bequest, sending him down a dead-end road in search of a fake charity.

"He said he fundraised."

"And he made \$240,000 for the PBF in a country town?"

"That's what he said."

"And when the money was apparently sent to non-existent people how much of that made its way back to DI Towner?"

"You're off with the fairies. I have never in my life sent any money to Doug Towner."

"Are you suggesting that *you* pocketed the money sent to non-existent people, Mr Thompson?"

"Of course not!"

"Then who received those large amounts of money?"

"How would I know?"

“You were in charge of the PBF. You had a responsibility to know where its money was going.”

Thompson had ceased looking like a bear who was capable of giving cuddles, particularly to pretty girls, and now was red in the face with anger.

“They chucked me out so ask them where the money went because I don’t bloody well know.”

“I will ask you once more, Mr Thompson. Did any of that money go to Douglas Towner?”

There was a long silence then Thompson looked at Towner and his look was not friendly. Bergman looked as though he had all day to wait but Laurie Thompson just wanted this farce over and done with.

“Of course it did! Why else was he feeding me money if he couldn’t get it back again? And if he sends someone round to shoot me tonight it’ll be your fault. So never forget that, you mob of bastards!”

Mr Bergman thanked him and said he could step down unless Mr Stainforth had any more questions.

Stainforth just wanted him gone. And if Thompson had ever owed a favour to Towner it didn’t seem likely it would ever get paid now.

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While Greg Sullivan was making the long drive to Brisbane and stopping every so often for coffee, Peter Stainforth, his junior Aaron Perrot, Doug, and Doug’s solicitor Craig Somers, were having a crisis meeting in Stainforth’s office. Somers had taken over from Greaves. Doug claimed to have sacked Greaves but Greaves had spread it round the fraternity that he declined to continue working for Doug Towner. Normally it would be a matter of going over the day’s events, looking at strengths and weaknesses, discussing the jury’s likely responses, planning for the following day. But this meeting was more about how to prevent a total disaster.

“You can change your plea, Doug,” Stainforth said calmly.

“Don’t be stupid, Peter. You put me on the stand tomorrow and I’ll cut them to bits.”

Stainforth privately thought Towner was more likely to cut himself to bits. But he said only, “Well, you’re paying me. So let’s go over the questions I need to ask you tomorrow.”

Craig Somers said tentatively, “No actual proof that you killed Sandra Hoysted has been brought forward. It is all circumstantial. But I think that over-confidence is not a good idea.”

“And what do you mean by that?”

Somers looked at Stainforth and back at Doug. “Some empathy might be a good start. Sandra Hoysted is dead and even if her husband didn’t love her, her mother and her friends did. You don’t want to sound like someone who hated her.”

Doug seemed to be about to argue with this but then he sat back and nodded slightly.

“And you need to look as weak and decrepit as possible,” Perrot said. “Even if the jury doesn’t believe you, you want them to feel sorry for you.”

Stainforth nodded. “Now you don’t have unimpeachable alibis for either the day Sandra disappeared or the day she was found. So we need to strengthen those. When you left the station early on the first day where did you go?”

“I probably went to play golf.”

“Can you prove that?”

“They didn’t keep records at the club so they don’t know if I was there or not.”

“So were you at the golf club?”

“Probably. It’s a long time ago.”

Doug might sound confident but Stainforth thought it was very likely *someone*, perhaps several people, would have checked that. He knew Sam Hoysted had a good solicitor who had done a lot of checking and digging.

“It’ll have to be more than ‘probably’. You need to be able to describe your afternoon. Where you played, how many holes, who else was there. It has to sound convincing. And the day Sandra was found, where were you?”

“At work.”

“Did you take a lunch break?”

“Of course I took a lunch break.”

“So where did you go and for how long?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Did you have a canteen at the station or did you bring sandwiches or go to a café?”

“There is a canteen but I didn’t usually bother with it. I usually went to the café over beyond the court house.”

“Does it have a name?”

“The Court House Café.”

Stainforth made a note. “And how long were you away from the station for?”

“I usually took an hour.”

“So did you sit in the café for that hour or go and do something else?”

“I probably walked round the block and came in the back way.”

“Would anyone have seen you?”

“Of course. The place is pretty busy through the day.”

“Where did you normally park your car?”

“Sometimes I walked to work, sometimes I parked it in the station car park at the back.”

“What did you do that day?”

“How would I know?”

“You got back late to the station, after being out at that culvert after the body was reported, so did you then walk home?”

Doug seemed to consider this. “No, I think I drove in that day.”

“Would your neighbours have noticed you coming or going?”

Doug seemed about to say something uncomplimentary about his neighbours. “Wouldn’t think so. I didn’t make a racket coming or going.”

“They were young, middle-aged, elderly?”

“An old couple on one side. Don’t remember the others, think they had a son about twenty.”

“So what did you do when you got back to the station?”

“Wrote a report. Told Sullivan we’d need to interview Sam Hoysted. I tried to ring him at home but didn’t get an answer so I told Sullivan we’d pull Sam in the next morning. Then I went home.”

“Now, we’ll need to go over your relationship with Sandra Hoysted so think of some nice things to say about her. And we’ll need to ask you about her relationship with Frank Obidini—”

“Who?”

“The man you said was having an affair with Sandra.”

“Oh, him.”

“So where did you see them together?”

“Don’t remember.”

“You went out to the feed lots?”

“Not usually. Not unless there was a major problem there.”

“So you saw her in Winville?”

“Must of.”

“Don’t forget that Sandra kept a diary—”

“Doesn’t mean she’d put down things she wouldn’t want Sam to know about.”

“True.”

“There’s another thing you can use. I know Internal Investigations has just sent a man to Winville to investigate Greg Sullivan and his team for incompetence. So don’t go seeing Greg as some sort of oracle.”

“Can we subpoena this officer?”

“If you want.”

“Pity you didn’t tell us sooner.”

“Inspector Stone. Can’t remember his first name.”

Stainforth asked Perrot to check that out then said Doug better get a good night’s rest. After Somers had gone out with Doug to walk alongside his chair the two blocks to his hotel, Stainforth looked at Perrot and shook his head slowly.

Perrot nodded. "He's like someone with a giant inferiority complex who's always made himself feel good by putting down other people."

Stainforth looked round his pleasant work space and up to the framed picture of himself graduating in cap and gown. "A lot of older police are like that. They aren't educated so they like to think they make up for it by being canny and streetwise."

He shuffled his pages of potential questions into order and said, "We can only do our best but I doubt if it'll be good enough."

Perrot stood up too. But just before he went out he said curiously, "What did you think of Dennis Walsh?"

"I think he put forward the key point. How do you move a seriously decomposed body. You could see the jury all suddenly pondering on that. Him and that lawyer Sam Hoysted got who's been digging round for years. Whereas Doug's managed to wing it for so long he thinks he's invincible."

And on that both men went out into the late evening.

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When Greg Sullivan put the dog back in his enclosure behind Margaret Ashton's house he had said "good boy" and given him a last pat. Greg's thoughts had already turned to getting the handbag checked and calling in to the surgery to see Mr Bingham. But the dog whined and refused to settle. He several times went up to the gate and gave a little bark, then did several turns round his enclosure before coming back to the gate.

When Margaret came home she put out his dish of food and checked his water but he only sniffed at his bowl before returning to his anxious pacing. She was annoyed. What had Sullivan done to upset her dog? She asked old Jeff Rutter if he would mind taking the dog out for a quiet stroll. All Mr Rutter's walks were gentle shuffles which never bothered the dog. He had long left an energetic puppyhood behind and was content to potter too.

Mr Rutter took the dog for several blocks before bringing him home but the dog showed no sign of wanting to go back to his yard but stayed close beside the old man. "Well, come on in, old fella," the old man said and let the dog into his kitchen. It didn't seem to matter if he kept the dog overnight. It wasn't as though Margaret ever let him into her house. It was a fairly lonely life for a friendly dog.

The dog remained unsettled, going from room to room, but when the old man was seated in front of his TV the dog came and settled down near his feet. And in a little while he was snoozing. Mr Rutter had no idea what had unsettled the dog but he was glad to see him finally settle. He eventually toddled off to bed leaving the dog lying on the rug by his armchair.

In the dark reaches of the night the dog suddenly came to noisy life, waking the old man with a fusillade of barks. "What is it," the old man mumbled as he struggled out of bed and into some slippers. The dog was at the back door barking and the old man went into the kitchen and looked out. There was the sudden sound of gunfire then two dark figures running up past Margaret's house. Her lights came on.

Mr Rutter also put lights on and fumbled round trying to find a number for the local police. Other neighbours had obviously got there before him because he was told that someone was already on their way to the scene. He went back to the kitchen window. Margaret in a dressing gown had come out her back door and was standing there. The dog had stopped barking and now came in to stand beside the old man who gave him a tickle behind the ears and said, rather quaveringly, "I think it's okay, old fella."

A couple of minutes later someone came up the lane beside Margaret's house and she came out to join the figure. They both went through the gate in to the dog's enclosure and over to the kennel. The young constable played his torch over the wooden kennel and looked inside and said, "The dog's not here. But why would anybody be trying to shoot him?"

He wasn't sure if the dog was lying dead among the bushes in the yard or whether someone had managed to steal the dog or whether he had managed to jump out.

"You'd better ask Greg Sullivan. He came round and took him out." She was going to say "today" but it was after midnight.

"So where is the dog now?"

“I think he’s gone next door.”

“And you didn’t actually see anyone?”

“Someone ran up the lane, I heard him running, and I heard the shots, and I got up.”

Constable Bridges said, “Do you think you’ll be all right? I’ll come back in the morning and see if I can dig out the bullets. We might be able to link it to someone.”

“And the dog?”

“Will he be okay next door?”

“I guess so.”

“Well, ring in again if you hear anything more.” He felt there wasn’t much more he could do by the light of a torch. And if the perp thought he had shot the dog there didn’t seem any reason for him to come back. But he kept coming back to the question: why shoot a dog? They had never had any calls saying it was being a nuisance, barking, wandering, annoying neighbours.

But he couldn’t very well ask Greg Sullivan because Greg Sullivan had gone to Brisbane. And then the penny dropped. This must be the dog which had dug up the handbag which all the station had been talking about when he had come in for his stint of night duty.

In which case was it safe to leave the dog with the old man next door?

Rather than getting back in his car he went next door and knocked. When the old man came to answer it he looked very shaky. The young constable said who he was and would the old man like him to take the dog and keep him somewhere safe?

Jeff Rutter was not a coward but the night’s events had shaken him up. He said, “I can go somewhere else and take the dog, if you like.”

“Have you got someone to look after you both?”

“I could go to my sister.”

Constable Bridges had no idea what level of danger there might still be. If they, he, she, whoever, thought the dog was dead they wouldn’t come back. But when might they discover they had failed? “Look, just grab some clothes and toiletries and I’ll take you and the dog into the station. There’s a bed there for you. You’ll feel safe there.”

The old man nodded and shuffled away. While he was gone, the young man wondered whether he should also offer safety to the woman next door. He thought he would get the old man and the dog into the station then contact the boss for advice.

Ten minutes later he had man and dog in the car and eventually into the small bunk at the back, there for occasional medical calls. He put a rug down beside the bed and the dog settled down beside the old man. Then, nervously, he went and rang Jake Moss. He could ring Brad Merrill but he had not been long at the station before realising that Merrill would always take the easy way out. Merrill would probably say ‘heck, don’t worry, it’s only a storm in a teacup’; something like that. He thought he would rather have Jake’s advice. Jake sounded half-asleep when he answered his phone. But he seemed to spring awake when the young man said that someone had tried to shoot the dog which Greg Sullivan had used to dig up Sandra Hoysted’s handbag.

“Holy heck! That’s quick! And it can’t be Doug. He must have a mate here. Anyway, hang in there and I’ll come round.”

Constable Bridges was profoundly grateful for this. He should be able to deal with some idiot out trying to shoot a dog but he thought, in this case, there were ramifications he didn’t fully understand.

Jake when he came in still yawning and looking tousled nevertheless sat down and said briskly, “Tell me just what happened.”

It didn’t take long. But there was one discrepancy. The old man said he was sure there were two people and Margaret had said she had heard a person. Should they be looking for one or two people?

“Doesn’t matter at this stage. Thank God the dog was in with the old man or he would’ve been a goner. First thing in the morning we’ll get the bullets, do a house-to-house for a car or people running, and we’d better let Greg know. The other thing is keeping the old man and the dog safe”

“He says he has a sister.”

“Could be the first place they’ll look I wonder if we could dye his coat. Dalmations are pretty distinctive. I’ll see if Dave Gurney could dye his coat black.”

“But—do you think they want to shoot him before he digs up something else?”

“I wondered. But the thing is—who knew he had found the handbag?”

“Well, just about everyone here, the dentist, the people who own that house now, probably neighbours, maybe the dog’s owner, it wouldn’t take long for the news to get around.” Bridges was a city boy and it never ceased to amaze him just how fast news could get around a country town. In Brisbane he hadn’t even known most of his neighbours. Here ...

“And what about the lady who owns the dog?” Constable Bridges didn’t want her coming in to the station and demanding the return of her dog.

“She’s James Westrupp’s secretary. She was Gavin Whittaker’s secretary before that. He gave her the dog. Before that the dog belonged to Sandra Hoysted. The Millers looked after it after she was killed.”

“It’s a pity the dog can’t talk.”

“No. But he’s obviously got a good memory. That’s obviously worrying someone.”

Before he gave up and went home again he rang Margaret and asked if she would like to move from her house for the night. He could arrange alternative accommodation for her. She considered the offer but finally said, no, she thought she would be fine. The person had obviously gone and wasn’t likely to come back. He left it at that and went home for a few more hours sleep.

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It was around 9 p.m. when Greg Sullivan arrived in Brisbane. He booked himself into a hotel in South Brisbane and rang John Duarte to see if he should try to get on to Carl Payne this late. Dennis Walsh might take Payne in his stride but he felt in slight awe of the man. He didn’t want to appear to him as a credulous fool. Maybe the handbag at this late stage would be seen not as a clincher but as totally irrelevant.

John Duarte in his pleasant way said “Leave it to me. So where will we find you?”

Greg gave him the address and hung up. He put his toiletries out then sat in contemplation of the plastic bag containing Sandra Hoysted’s sad relic of a handbag.

It was half an hour before Duarte and Payne turned up. Greg had found an extra chair on the landing and commandeered it. But as he waited he wondered if they would treat the handbag with the same sense of amazement he still felt every time he thought on it.

Both men looked through the clear plastic and considered it in silence. Then Payne said “Good work.”

John Duarte nodded. “The trouble,” Payne went on thoughtfully, “is that they can say we have no proof it actually is Sandra Hoysted’s bag.”

“It has Doug fingerprints on it.” He gave them copies of Reid Strohling’s report.

“But not Sandra’s?”

“The trouble is we don’t have Sandra’s prints. Because she was identified by her teeth and her wedding ring prints were not tried for. And the body was in one heck of a mess.”

“It might be possible to get her prints from something like her diary but without prints which are definitely hers that could be challenged.”

Payne sat there considering the handbag. It was an important find. But he wasn’t sure how it could be used.

“We found a dental appointment card inside it. It must have been missed when everything else was taken out.” He had the card in a separate bag. “Mr Bingham looked up his old ledgers and found Sandra booked in for an appointment for the day after she disappeared. When she didn’t turn up he simply had a coffee then waited for his next patient. He didn’t try to contact her.”

“There again we cannot prove that it was Sandra who put it in the bag and its presence doesn’t prove that the bag is hers.”

Greg looked disappointed.

Carl Payne did not see his mission in life as cheering people up but he felt the bag was too important not to be used. The question was: how?

“We’ve just heard that Doug’s team is going to subpoena a last minute witness or maybe just call him if he’s on side with Doug, a last minute desperate move. A man called Stone.”



Greg's spirits went down further. They had never heard anything more about that 'investigation' but he didn't doubt that someone somewhere had received a report, and probably not a complimentary one.

"Dennis Walsh believes Doug or one of his pals got Stone sent out to Winville. He accused Stone of being a stooge of the De Jongs. You should've seen Stone's face when Dennis said that. He obviously hadn't expected to be rumbled by some country plod."

"Interesting. If he goes on first thing tomorrow we haven't got much time but I'll get Bergman to ask some sharp questions. Now back to the handbag. I'd like to be able to show it to Doug just before he takes the stand. The bag and the report on the prints. It just might rattle him. He probably thought leather would rot down."

And put in a damp patch that would have happened. But the rosella patch was an easy place to dig and not overlooked by the neighbours or passers-by. It was also the driest part of the yard.

Greg wasn't in the habit of querying more senior men. That had been part of his trouble with Doug Towner. But now he said to Carl Payne. "But ... just a moment ... surely Stone is irrelevant to Doug's case? He told us he didn't know Doug and had never met him. So if he's only going to be brought on to make me look a fool ... "

Carl Payne's private view of Sullivan went up a notch. "We can ask to have him dismissed as a witness as not being relevant to the case—unless he is willing to admit he does know Doug Towner ... "

Duarte nodded and said, "I wonder who sent him."

"He told Inspector Moss that whoever put in the complaint remains confidential. I wonder if there ever was a complaint in the first place."

"Well, if they do manage to get him on to the stand I'd say Bergman can have some fun with him." Carl Payne jotted a couple of questions down then said they would let Greg get some shut-eye and told him they'd see him first thing in the morning.

By the time Greg Sullivan got into his hotel bed he felt it had been a very long day.

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Inspector Moss would not normally take the lead on such a case but would designate a couple of juniors to go round. But Jake loved dogs and he knew there was just a chance there was a connection to the case going on in Brisbane. He had had relatively little to do with Doug Towner but he didn't doubt that Towner was corrupt.

He took Jenny Forman with him and went round to catch Margaret Ashton before she went to work. She re-affirmed what she had told Constable Bridges. And she agreed that, yes, the dog had belonged to Sandra Hoysted many years ago.

"Did you know that the dog dug up Sandra Hoysted's handbag yesterday?"

"No, I didn't know that."

"You're sure Greg Sullivan didn't tell you that?"

"No. I came home to find the dog back in the yard but there was no sign of Mr Sullivan. I could see that the dog was upset but I didn't know what had happened. I asked Mr Rutter if he would mind taking the dog for a bit of a walk. I didn't realise till later that he had taken the dog home with him. But I didn't mind. He finds the dog good company."

"And Mr Rutter didn't say anything about the dog finding the handbag?"

"No. I'm sure he didn't. But where did he find the handbag?"

"It was in what used to be Doug Towner's yard, the house on Dobson Street."

"In Doug's yard?" she said in astonishment.

"That surprises you?"

"I always thought he was a good man. Someone else must've put it there."

"Who d'you think that might have been?"

"Well, maybe Greg Sullivan. How did he know it would be there if he didn't put it there?"

"It was the dog that found it."

"Even so."

He wondered what sort of relationship she had had with Doug Towner. "Were you fond of Doug Towner?"

She put on a mulish expression and said only, "I met him occasionally when he came in to see my boss. That's all."

But Moss was an experienced officer and he suspected there was more to it than that. People said she had a thing for her boss but that didn't mean ... he wasn't sure what it might mean for her thoughts about Doug ...

"So you don't have any idea how someone could have found out about the dog finding the handbag?"

"No. So now, when am I going to get my dog back?"

"Are you very fond of him?"

"He's okay."

Jake Moss couldn't imagine himself saying that about his own dog. He's okay. No.

"Mr Rutter's obviously very fond of him. Have you ever thought of giving the dog to him. He would find him great company."

"He's old. He might die."

"But the dog isn't young either. You might like to consider it. Dogs deserve to be loved."

She didn't respond to this. And she said there had been no more disturbances in the night.

"Well, if you wouldn't mind, we'd just like to keep the dog safe until Doug Towner's trial is over. That should be this Friday or possibly early next week."

She agreed, though not enthusiastically, with the request. "And you think Doug will get off?"

"Hard to say. I've only heard bits about the trial so far."

She seemed satisfied with that.

Jake went up and down the street, knocking on doors in the hope of catching people at breakfast. Margaret's neighbour on the other side said she was sure she had heard running footsteps and a car starting up. She thought the sound of shooting must've woken her up but she was a bit fuddled about the time and the sequence.

"The car starting, do you have any idea. Was it anything powerful, a truck, a motorbike, a VW, anything distinctive?"

She had obviously not thought that it might be possible to distinguish vehicles. "I think it might've been something fairly powerful. It was a fair bit of noise, though of course everything else was quiet at that time of night."

He got another neighbour further down the street who thought he had heard something in the night. "I didn't hear shots but I did think it was one of those stupid kids out doing burn-outs. It was that sort of noise."

"Do you have any idea which way it was going?"

The man who taught at the high school gave this careful thought before saying "I'm sure it was going away ... going south out of town."

Jake thanked him and asked him if he'd heard about Sandra Hoysted's handbag being found. He had only been at the school this year and said, no, and who was Sandra Hoysted—

Jake as he went back to where his juniors had dug several bullets out of the wooden kennel had the germ of an idea. Could the shooters have come from Japana? Of course there were big noisy vehicles here but ... he was still mulling on this when he came back to the station. The vet, Dave Gurney, had come round and taken Mr Rutter and the dog in his van round to his surgery where he had given the dog a thorough examination before looking at the possibility of dying his coat. He had been sworn to secrecy so he quietly considered his options after taking the dog over to his house and asking his wife to look after Mr Rutter and his dog for a little while. Then he went back to the question of a suitable dye. Jeff Rutter after his upset night had begun to feel that he was in the middle of a very strange adventure. He hoped he would be able to share it one day. After all, it was no good having adventures if you couldn't talk about them ...

Dave Gurney finally decided that he would rather find a safe home for the dog than try to change his coat. When Jake came round to see what was happening he said, taking Jake well aware from the hearing of his assistant, "I can send him and Mr Rutter out to my cousin's place. They'd be safe there. I can do that now if you like, I'm not busy this morning."

“Okay. A week should do it. I’m pretty sure it’s linked to Doug Towner’s trial in Brisbane. Now, we’ll just need to check with Mr Rutter if he needs anything from home.”

But Mr Rutter said only, “If I give you my house key will you go in and check my fridge.” And then he said, “Where are you taking us?”

“Sorry. Can’t tell you that, mate, but it’ll only be for a few days.”

And Jeff Rutter who had driven for Gresham’s many years ago soon knew exactly where he was when Gurney’s van turned right and headed towards Bell. But he wasn’t going to do or say anything to put the dog in jeopardy. He assured Dave Gurney he would be fine and the dog would enjoy having some space to run around in.

Reid Strohling said the bullets came from a revolver but he was sorry he couldn’t be more specific yet. “How many shots were heard?”

“Possibly six.”

“Okay, I’ll keep working on it.”

Dave Gurney hadn’t seen anyone following him but he made a detour to Dalby and had lunch there and did some shopping and hoped that if someone really was taking some notice of him they would think Dalby had been his intended destination all along.

Jake Moss had an odd call in mid-afternoon. A muffled voice said, “Don’t worry, we’ll get him—”

“Who is speaking?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know!”

“And who is him?”

“The dog, of course.”

Jake had the odd intuition that the person at the other end was enjoying the conversation.

“It won’t help Doug, you know.”

“This isn’t about help. This is payback.”

And the phone was hung up.

Jake ducked out of his office to ask Stephanie if she knew where the call had come from.

“I’m sure it was from a phone box.”

“Thanks.” Jake immediately sent two constables out to go round every phone box in Winville, “See if anyone saw anyone going in and try for prints on the handset and the button, also the door handle. Quick as you can.”

It was only a small chance. The phone box could be anywhere. But somewhere round Winville seemed most likely. And although the voice had been muffled he was certain it was an ocker voice.

Jake’s quick response seemed to pay off. No one had been noticed using any boxes except one. The box along from the Criterion Hotel. A man had been seen exiting. And he had been noticed because he did an odd thing. He wiped the door handle as he came out.

This was confirmed by the young constable who had got this information. The handle, the phone, the button to press had all been wiped clean. The description wasn’t brilliantly informative. A man of medium height, probably forty to fifty, dark hair, wearing glasses, wearing a dark suit. That would fit quite a few people. But he had been seen to walk away and go into the newsagency. And the newsagent had seen a man answering that description. He had bought a copy of the *Courier-Mail*, said thanks, and gone out.

“You didn’t recognise him?”

“No.”

“And did you see which way he went?”

“Out the door and turned left.”

He got several more sightings, none of them adding anything more until he came to the end of the street where two old men had been standing chatting about the weather. They had seen a man answering that description walk past them and get into a dark-green Holden ute. They naturally hadn’t noticed the vehicle’s number but they both agreed that the vehicle was dusty and dirty and that one tail light was done for.

“Thanks, that’s great.” He took down their names and said they had been very helpful. And a broken tail light made a good reason to stop the vehicle. But where had it gone next? He got back

to the station as fast as he could and said could they put out an alert for a dark-green Holden ute, dusty with a bung tail light?

It was a lot of work to put into a failed shooting but the whole station seemed to be imbued with Moss's sense of enthusiasm and urgency. Only Senior Sergeant Merrill seemed to think it was 'a lot of hooley'.

The ute was caught on the road south of town near the Norwilla turn-off and the man brought in for questioning. Jake didn't expect to get anything from him but he hoped fingerprints from the vehicle might reveal something. Unfortunately the vehicle disclosed nothing in the way of a weapon. But if Mr Rutter was right and there were two perps the other one and the weapon might be hundreds of miles away by now. This man might be the diversion.

His licence showed the name of Dean Rounds. This meant nothing to Jake but he conscientiously checked both the licence and the man's record, if any. Except for the fact that the man's home address was Rockhampton which made Winville a strange destination, no record came up for the man. But his prints linked, puzzlingly, to a man named Terence Fulcher. The man had tried to say they had no right to take his prints merely for a broken tail light. Moss would have preferred to go at the shooting more carefully but faced with possible obstruction and the threat of a lawyer he had linked the man to the shooting. He hoped he was not being premature.

"So which is it? Rounds or Fulcher?"

"Rounds of course. Never met a Fulcher."

"Then I think we need a mug shot to share with police in Rocky. So in the meantime I think we'd best hold you on suspicion of using a false licence."

It was Jenny Forman who said, "He is probably a Plowman. Why else would he want to pay back anything? They're all related to Doug Towner."

Jake Moss thought she could be right. But he would prefer to get confirmation from Rockhampton to tell them whether they could charge him with anything more than failing to get a tail light fixed. "Would you like me to ring Dennis Walsh, sir," DC Forman went on. "He knows more about the Plowmans."

It sounded like a leap in the dark but then he had just made his own leap ... "Okay, see if the name rings a bell."

And Dennis Walsh immediately said, "Hang on to him! Terence Fulcher is probably that Paul Dawkins I want for cruelty to a dog. Talk to Reid, he's got the prints we think belong to Dawkins." Jake Moss might have contested this assumption but the mention of cruelty to a dog seemed to change the whole direction of the investigation. "I'll let you know what's going on later today."

He turned to Forman and said, "Quick, duck down to see Reid and see if he has any prints for Paul Dawkins."

## *Case No. 4: Never Say Die*

DSS Sullivan didn't know what discussions might have gone on behind the scenes. He had said, rather tentatively, that Stone might see him as incompetent but then he wasn't the one on trial and he had heard Stone say very clearly that he didn't know Doug Towner. They might decide not to call him as a witness but Greg thought he would rather like to see Kerrin Stone put on the spot. He had given them a lot of worry and all for what Greg saw as a spurious reason. How could the Maxwell investigation be 'incompetent' if they had an arrest and a committal? But he was honest enough to acknowledge privately that if it hadn't been for Dennis Maxwell would still be at large.

He was in court promptly for the 10 a.m. start to proceedings. He sat down at the back and looked at Towner as he came in in his chair. It might be his imagination but he thought Towner had aged overnight. It didn't occur to him that this was a deliberate ploy.

The jury members came in and took their places. The court rose for the judge. Then Bergman rose to say that the Defence would like to call a further witness, Inspector Kerrin Stone. He said he had no objection to the inspector taking the stand. There was something about the way

he said it which intrigued Greg Sullivan. He thought he might be reading things into it which weren't there but there was something about Bergman's stance and tone which suggested 'bring him on—I can't wait to make mincemeat of him'.

It didn't take long for Greg to see that the Defence wanted Kerrin Stone to paint himself and the CIB section as a whole as increasingly poorly run. Stone said he had been sent by Internal Investigations to look into the conduct of the investigation of the death of a Paul Pickering and the arrest of a Greg Maxwell but he had also been asked to look at the overall conduct of the branch and to look back over old files to see if the standard of investigations was slipping. He did not know who had put in the complaint which had led to his investigation and had not seen the complaint itself but his superior had told him what to look for. When asked he said his superior was Inspector George Dawkins. Greg had no idea who this might be although he felt Dawkins rang a faint bell ... but then it wasn't a particularly uncommon name.

Stone said he was still working on his report of his investigation but he had been somewhat concerned that Winville had been ready to dismiss a homicide as an accident. He admitted that murder could sometimes appear as an accident but it could also be a sign of lazy slipshod policing, the 'anything for a quiet life' syndrome.

Stone admitted he only knew Doug Towner by reputation (Greg wished they would ask what this meant) but that he had looked through a number of the cases which DI Towner had been in charge of and had been satisfied with them.

Stainforth queried 'satisfied' and thought that was only 'faint praise'. Stone said rather tartly, "I am not in the habit of praising. My job is to look for problems."

"But you had no problems with the cases DI Towner had investigated?"

Stone agreed though he did not look very happy about the words wrung from him.

Bergman when he took Stone in hand went over the question of the original complaint and asked if there was any reason why he should not have been shown the complaint. "I guess—so I could keep an open mind."

"And did you keep an open mind?"

"Of course."

"You, at first, refused to visit the place where the homicide took place and the farm where the arrest took place. Is that keeping an open mind?"

"Of course. I was there to look at the conduct of the investigation not go over old ground."

"So how long did you spend on the Pickering case in the two weeks you spent in Winville?"

"I couldn't tell you off-hand but at least three to four days."

Greg Sullivan wished he could give that a loud snort.

"And the rest of that two weeks was spent looking into back files?"

"Yes."

Carl Payne had done copies of the Sandra Hoysted file for both Defence and Prosecution. Bergman turned to his junior who handed over the file. He removed the index of its contents and began to read it out. Sandra Hoysted listed missing. A letter from her mother to ask if she had had an accident when she did not arrive on the coast. An interview with Sam Hoysted. Clippings from the local newspaper. Record of the body's discovery. DC Deane's investigation of what Sam Hoysted had done in Sydney. DS Sullivan's search for Sandra's supposed boyfriend. The post mortem report. The coroner's report. Photographs of the body, of the Hoysted home, of Sam Hoysted, of his aeroplane.

"Would you regard that as an adequate investigation, Inspector?"

"It achieved a conviction so, yes, I would."

"So where are the interviews with the couple who looked after the Hoysted home? Where are the interviews with Sam Hoysted's sons? Where is Sam Hoysted's supposed confession? Where is the list of Sandra Hoysted's documents which were removed from the Hoysted home? Why is there no mention of a search for her handbag or her hat? Why was the bin where her cardigan was found at the aerodrome not fingerprinted? Why was her husband's car not checked? Why—"

The judge intervened to say mildly, "That is rather a lot of questions, Mr Bergman, or do you mean them in a rhetorical sense?"

Several people on the jury benches smiled.

“I simply wanted to show, Your Honour, that there are rather a lot of things missing which I would expect to find if a thorough investigation had in fact been conducted.”

“Very well. You may reply, Inspector.”

Inspector Stone looked as though he would rather walk barefoot up Mt Cootha than answer. “I didn’t ask if they had another file there which I hadn’t seen.”

“It would surely be noted if this was one file from a set of files?”

“Not necessarily. It is ten years ago. Things do get put aside and more so once a successful conviction has been achieved.”

“So using your criteria you still think that Winville’s investigation of the death of Paul Pickering and the arrest and committal of Gregory Maxwell in the space of less than a month was a sign of incompetence?”

But before Stone could answer the judge intervened, saying he would like to talk to both barristers and he would ask for the jury to temporarily go back to their room. For a moment, Greg Sullivan was puzzled as he watched the jury members file out and the lawyers go up to the bench. Then he realised that Justice Brewer must be concerned that these proceedings could impact on Greg Maxwell’s trial. The way he had been spoken of suggested a foregone conclusion that he was guilty and would be found guilty at his trial.

For most of the trial no expression had shown on Brewer’s face but now he looked distinctly upset. Greg Sullivan wondered how he would roll back the tide.

Finally the jury was allowed to return to court and Justice Brewer told everyone that they were not to mention anything said about Paul Pickering and Greg Maxwell, that they were irrelevant to the case against Douglas Towner and that Gregory Maxwell was deemed innocent. “Any files on him are irrelevant to this trial and I would ask everyone to put that case completely out of their minds.” He then turned to Peter Stainforth and reminded him that no other case being investigated by Winville CIB should have been brought into this case. He then said that the files on Winville’s investigation of Sandra Hoysted’s murder were already in the hands of both the Defence and the Prosecution and did not need Inspector Stone’s presence to be entered into evidence. It was a reminder, if one was needed, that Justice Brewer’s apparently negligible presence was ignored at the lawyers’ peril. Sullivan couldn’t see either Bergman’s or Stainforth’s expressions as they were facing the bench but he suspected they were both a little chastened. The effort to get Doug branded efficient and the rest of them as incompetent had backfired.

Bergman hesitated then said, “You were satisfied with what you had seen of the investigation in to Sandra Hoysted’s death?”

Stone didn’t rush into a reply. It was a matter of weighing up his career and money in the bank. He finally said rather hesitantly, “Yes, I was satisfied.”

“And when will your report be available?”

“I don’t know.”

Bergman said he had no further questions and gave him back to Stainforth who said, “How long would you normally take over a report?”

“Usually no more than a week but because there is another trial ... ” He caught the judge’s frown and wound down.

Stainforth thought that Stone, despite his experience, hadn’t been much use. But it was Justice Brewer who had a question. “Perhaps you would tell the court, Inspector, whether it is normal to do this kind of investigation after a committal hearing but before a trial?”

“Not normal, Your Honour, not unless there is concern over ... well, over some aspect of an investigation.”

“So was a complaint put to Internal Investigations about any aspect of the committal and trial of Sam Hoysted?”

Stone was afraid that if he said no then Bergman, or worse still Justice Brewer, would immediately manage to whip something out because it was a question he had never asked. “Not as far as I know.”

“You checked?”

“No.”

“Any more questions, Mr Stainforth?”

“No. No more questions.” Peter Stainforth deeply regretted agreeing to call Stone at such short notice. And if he had done anything to undermine or abort the trial of Greg Maxwell he wouldn’t be very popular. His quick research suggested that Greg Maxwell was a nasty piece of work who had beaten a neighbour to death with a barbed-wire cosh.

Stone as he left the court came past Greg Sullivan. The look he gave Sullivan was not the sort friends and colleagues share. But Greg felt a sense of satisfaction. He knew now for certain that Stone’s real agenda had been to help Doug but the question was—how?

‘George Dawkins,’ he thought vaguely. ‘Who is he?’ Doug’s mother’s first husband had been a Dawkins. This man would not be old enough to be a son of that first marriage but might he be a grandson? One son, Paul, had died. The daughter had married Charlie de Jong.

He didn’t think there had been another child but he wasn’t sure. And maybe that first husband had been a Plowman crony, maybe all the Dawkins family were in some way connected ...

The court broke for lunch and he stood outside the court wondering if he should pass this question on to someone. Should he stay to see Doug on the stand this afternoon? Should he simply hit the road? He wished he was good at quick and decisive decision-making. People streamed out of court and he continued to stand there trying to decide.

A youngish man came over to him and asked if he was Greg Sullivan. When he said he was, the man introduced himself as Jay Barron and said he was there as a watching brief for Carl Payne. “Have you got time for lunch, a coffee, something?”

Greg said he had and that there was something he thought he should mention.

They found a café and Greg agreed to a drink and a roll. Barron asked him what he thought of it all so far. “I wasn’t sorry to see Stone looking a fool. But I just hope that it doesn’t do anything to abort the Maxwell trial.”

Barron agreed with this. He thought Brewer had been rather slow off the mark but then he didn’t know just what Brewer knew about the Maxwell trial, if anything. “And what did you think of Doug?”

“I still find it hard to believe that I sat two metres away from him for years and didn’t pick up on anything more than that he was a lazy sod. It was Dennis Walsh who saw through him. It was only after we found all that cannabis Sam Hoysted was growing that I started to get more critical of Doug. But there was one thing I wanted to mention. They said a George Dawkins was Stone’s superior and I wondered if he might connect to the Dawkins family that was Doug’s mother’s first husband.”

“I wondered that too. His mum married a Wilfrid Dawkins and there seemed no reason to investigate him as he was dead. But did Doug’s mum marry into a family which was already associated with the Plowmans’ criminal enterprises? It’s a possibility. George is a fair bit younger than Doug ... but there could be something there. In which case ... Stone might be their patsy ... but equally he might be in on something.”

“It’s usually money.” Greg thought he had grown cynical over the years. But money *was* the motivator in most cases.

When he got on the road he felt he had done all he could and it was all now in more capable hands than his. If the jury believed Doug, if they felt sorry for him, if for whatever reason they acquitted him, he thought he could live with that and not let it rankle ...

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Reid Strohling didn’t like being hustled and Jake Moss had been in Winville long enough to know that Reid would do a meticulous job but that it was no good asking for anything in a hurry.

Instead it was Dennis Walsh who after speaking so confidently about Paul Dawkins was suddenly assailed by doubts and thought of getting on to Reid in the hope he could resolve those doubts.

They had taken items from the house Paul Dawkins rented from John Binnie and got prints off them. He had said they belonged to Paul Dawkins, and maybe they did, but Dawkins had had a partner of some sort. Fifi. He still didn’t know if Fifi really was a woman or was a man masquerading as a woman. There had been a Fifi with Leo Ford when he was in Winville. Whether she had been there all the time ... and was she the same person out with Dawkins and was she with him all the time ...

He felt he was back on the treadmill and only making himself feel more confused.

Instead he went on to the other thing Jake had mentioned. The dark-green Holden utility. A dark-green ute wandered through various stories. The man who had shot Edwin Morton came in a dark-green ute, according to Billy the Lad, and a dark-green ute had been reported to Brent Kelly. And then there was the dark-green ute used by Doug Towner when he dropped Willy Jackson's body off at the property near Meandara. It must've been a vehicle belonging to the farm because Doug had no way to take it there before he flew out with Sam Hoysted. It had apparently been seen in Doug's possession in Winville and had then disappeared supposedly to a wrecker in Toowoomba even though it appeared to be a perfectly good ute. It had been assumed Doug sold it but equally he could have found a way to return it to the property and send some old bomb to the wreckers.

But was the green ute of Dean Rounds the same ute—or did the Plowmans all like green utes?

'One day my poor bloody head will probably explode and that'll be the end of that.'

But he put these thoughts into an e-mail for Winville and mentioned that Kelly had been given part of a ute's rego. PTE. Then, as he was about to go home for dinner he suddenly had another thought and rang John Binnie.

John and Dora were sitting down to their own dinner and John at first had trouble remembering back to that meeting with Dawkins and Fifi..But he finally admitted that, yes, he had met Dawkins and his wife when they came to see the house, and, no, Dora had not been with him.

Walsh thought this was a pity as Dora would probably have noticed more.

"D'you think you would recognise either of them again?"

John Binnie waffled over this for more than a minute before saying, "Why d'you want to know?"

"I'd like to get 'em on animal cruelty charges but they might be part of something bigger. Would you be able to come with me to Winville tomorrow just to have a look at someone?"

John Binnie didn't leap at the idea of an outing. "I'm pretty busy."

"It could be a help to us."

The old farmer finally agreed reluctantly and said he would be in Buckton by nine tomorrow. Then he said with slightly more warmth, "There was something a bit odd about that dame, I just happened to notice, something about her hands. It might come back to me."

Dennis hung up and went home. They might be able to work out something going by people's probable ages. Paul Dawkins was probably old enough to be one of the seven Plowman brothers but Kieran had thought Fifi was late forties, maybe fifty. Though of course blonde curls poking out from a scarf might make anyone look younger ...

And what age were those Fulchers in Rockhampton? He didn't think anyone had ever said.

Jake Moss when he went home was fired with the hope that something would come out of all this. His house-guest, young John Fred, had moved out and into a little granny flat over near the Wheat Board silos. He had been taken on by Jacksons' as Darren Millington but kept out the back in their workshops. Colin Jackson said he was keen to learn and it would be better for him to actually go and do a TAFE course and get qualified rather than just picking up bits as he went along. When this was put to Darren as he was now calling himself he said he didn't mind but he didn't want to go to Brisbane. Jake said to this, assuming it had something to do with the young man not wanting to see his mother, "Could be that you could study in Toowoomba. We can check if they've got the course you want and book you in for next year."

Perhaps some of the enthusiasm Colin Jackson still brought to his work had rubbed off, perhaps the young man thought it would finally give him some safety and security, Jake didn't know. He just felt he had done his best by the young man and wouldn't be sorry to see him move on.

Dennis Walsh when he reached Winville with John Binnie said quietly, "Make sure your bloke puts his hands out the front of him."

Jake said, "His hands?"

"Yeah. His hands."

Jake had sometimes criticised Dennis Walsh for spending time over picky little cases. He had even been heard to say 'hasn't the bugger got anything better to do?' but he had gradually



changed his views. Now he thought that if Dennis Walsh said some small aspect, some apparently small case mattered, then it probably did.

John Binnie came in with Dennis and Jake and Constable Bridges and looked at the man sitting at a table with his hands spread out on it. The old man looked like someone taking his last steps up to the guillotine and he couldn't honestly say, looking at Dean Rounds' face that it sparked any recognition.

But all the men who had come in with him were certain that Rounds recognised John Binnie. Something about the way his eyes had widened or the elaborately non-committal look he had given the old man ...

Binnie looked down at the man's hands and his own expression changed. He said in surprise, "Fifi!"

Rounds said angrily, "Who're you calling a dog!"

Binnie turned to Dennis and said "Can I go out now?"

Dennis turned too and escorted him out. Jake followed after telling Bridges to keep a good eye on Rounds.

"So what d'you mean by Fifi?" Moss said curiously.

"When they came to see the house I was looking to rent there was two of them. The fella said, I'm Paul Dawkins and this's my wife Fifi. She was wearing a scarf and seemed to have blonde hair. She had some nice rings on her left hand but I noticed she had part of a finger missing on the other hand. See, in the old days sometimes a farmer would get careless with the old cream separators and I know Owen Binnie lost part of a finger that way. And I just thought it was a bit odd this woman being like that. But I didn't say anything. It wasn't my business. Dawkins said he'd worked with cattle but I didn't ask him what sort of cattle. Maybe I should of. But I just wanted them to pay the rent and look after the place."

Jake Moss said again, "Fifi?" And he could see that pretending to be a woman at times might help. People would not be surprised at seeing an older woman wearing gloves ... and something in one finger to fill out the glove ...

"I thought it must be short for something. My wife said maybe she was Delfine or something. Or it was a nickname."

"So who the bloody heck is Fifi?" Dennis Walsh said.

No one could answer the question. Then Dennis tried to answer his own question. "I reckon he's Terry Bloody Fulcher. I reckon he goes off round the country playing his part and his brother says he's off buying cattle for their business. But then who the heck are the bloody Fulchers?" And a butcher, too, could wear gloves while working ...

Nobody could answer this either. And Mr Binnie just wanted to go home.

But Jake said to Dennis, "How did he know about the dog finding the handbag? I don't reckon he could've driven from Rockhampton in time to try and shoot the dog."

"He was somewhere closer? And maybe you've got a leak here?"

\*

Walsh had old Mr Binnie home in time for lunch. He went into the station to see if Grant had had any visitors. "It's been pretty quiet. Just two phone calls And Damien Curtis came in to see about getting his Learner's."

"Okay, go and get the mail and get yourself some lunch. And Mr Binnie thinks that bloke that tried to shoot the dog was Fifi." Grant didn't really understand how a Fifi came in to things but he said, "And he did something to that little dog you gave to the Sealey kids?"

"If they can pin it down I want him charged. But it's up to Winville to do the hard yards now."

Dennis gave a fleeting thought to Doug Towner taking the stand in Brisbane and wondered if Greg Sullivan had been able to find a way to get that handbag entered into evidence ...

The warm still afternoon stayed quiet.

Or it did till about half-past-two. Two elderly ladies walking along saw a car pull up and an unknown man get out and go into the station. He took no notice of them but they were curious about him.

Dennis was trying to decide how best to write up his excursion with John Binnie. Grant was in the storeroom. The door tinkled. A stranger erupted through it and said loudly, "Are you Walsh?"

Dennis stood up and said, "I am. Why?"

The man moved back and peered into the interview room. Dennis, wondering if the man was a bit nutty, stepped out from behind the counter. The man whipped around and Dennis could see the revolver pointing at his chest. He said loudly, "What the heck's going on!" Grant came out to the counter and Dennis inclined his head slightly. Grant still unsure what was going on went into the interview room.

The unknown man said "You're dead meat, you bloody interfering bastard!" As he fingered the trigger the door tinkled again. The man turned to see who had come in behind him. Mrs Grundy and Miss Hopgood, seeing the gun now pointing at them, both screamed.

But in that moment of distraction Dennis launched himself at the man, grabbing at both upper arms. His weight bore the man forward and down. The gun went off and a bullet buried itself in the station floor. Miss Hopgood screamed again. Dennis yelled, "Cuffs!"

The man struggled. Grant, flustered, finally managed to find a pair of cuffs. Dennis, puffing, got the man secured and told Grant to open the cell door. They relieved the stranger of a wallet, dirty handkerchief, a packet of Tic-Tacs, a set of keys, and a pen. "Make a list, Grant. What's your name, mate?" he said to the stranger. The man merely scowled. Dennis picked up the gun with his own hanky and put it on the counter. A minute later they had the man pushed into the cell and the door closed.

Dennis turned to the two old ladies and said, "What can we do for you?"

Vera Hopgood had gone pale and seated herself abruptly in the waiting area. Grant had the presence of mind to bring out two glasses of water. Mrs Grundy, made of sterner stuff, said, "Who is he?"

It was the question which had been exercising Dennis, along with the why, but he felt pretty certain he had never seen the man before. The first why to come to him was that it had something to do with Doug's trial, that while Doug was wowing the court this afternoon with a string of lies, this man had been sent to wreak vengeance in Buckton; perhaps in the way that someone had wanted to revenge themselves on that unfortunate dog.

"We'll see what his wallet can tell us." He told Grant to put on gloves and remove everything from the wallet. He thought he needed a glass of water himself. Mrytle Grundy and Vera Hopgood might have twenty years on him but he felt his own reflexes hadn't been the best. He hated the moments when he felt his age. And it was luck rather than good policing which had seen the man constrained before he could wreak havoc. Grant spread everything out on the counter and said, "Paul Christian Bertoli. Do we know him?"

"Is there an address?"

Both old ladies, after their major fright, were now listening avidly.

Grant said in some puzzlement, "It's a Melbourne address."

"Strewth! So he's nothing to do with Doug?" If anything this made the situation more serious. Had this man been sent to find young John Fred Millington? But then—why shoot a copper along the way? There would be a hue and cry after him if he did—so his chances of finding young John Fred would be small. Or did revenge come first in Mafia thinking? He couldn't guess.

"List everything carefully, then get on to Winville to tell them what's happened. They can have him." Then he turned back to Mrs Grundy and said, "Sorry about all this. So what's your problem?"

Someone had been taking clothes from Miss Hopgood's washing line. She said this was the third time something had gone.

"So it's only one or two things at a time?"

"That's right. At first I thought I was just getting forgetful but I couldn't be forgetful every week, could I?"

It didn't seem very likely.

"Just let us get this bod processed and off to Winville and then I'll come round. Don't touch anything. Are you feeling okay to go home? You've had a big shock."

Mrs Grundy said she would stay with Vera “till you come”. Then the two old ladies went out again. The story would be all around town within the hour but he thought that was all to the good. Someone might’ve seen or heard something.

He got Grant to dig the bullet out of the floor and bag it up. He charged the man with attempted murder. Then he took Grant back into the storeroom and said quietly, “What did Winville say?”

“Just to bring him into the watch house when you’d charged him.”

“You didn’t mention any connection to that Mafia business in Melbourne?”

“No. I just said he was a stranger and I said the revolver was a Colt.”

“Okay, fine. Now, you’ll have to take him. I think we might tie his legs and take his belt. He looks pretty fit to me.”

Grant would not have liked to suggest more restraint but now he felt grateful to Dennis. Carting strange gunmen round the countryside was a potentially dangerous pastime.

“Make sure you give everything to Jake Moss first. He can then get Reid and Kim to go over everything. Don’t say anything to the guy but if he wants to talk, let him.” It didn’t seem very likely but Grant was the sort of young man who was easy to talk to ...

It was a tussle to get the man out of the cell again, give him a receipt for his belongings, get him into the Ford, tie his legs, and put his bag of belongings on the front seat. Dennis went over to the man’s car and said, “Yep. Victorian plates.” The car was locked. Dennis peered in but could see nothing sitting on the seats. If necessary, Winville could go over it for further evidence.

When Grant had gone Dennis sighed and picked up his kit to go round and investigate Vera Hopgood’s back yard.

\*

Peter Stainforth had treated Doug Towner with kid gloves, friendly kid gloves, and although some of the jury, hearing Doug’s career set out, thought that Winville CIB was hardly the pinnacle of a glorious career, were willing to accept the image of a clever and successful officer. The image of him as lazy and incompetent might be merely police infighting and grudges.

Stainforth had been in two minds as to whether to just let Doug talk in a pleasantly informative way or keep him on a tight rein. He had finally decided to let Doug ramble on when they were in more general areas and to keep him to the point when they got to such fraught things as alibis. He thought he had convinced Doug that sounding off about anyone, even Dennis Walsh, would not help his case.

And he was quite ready to play the disability card if it looked like his client was not taking the whole situation seriously enough. Doug, too, was more than ready to present himself as frail and decrepit. He, several times, had to be asked to speak up and some of the jury members were obviously straining to hear him. Stainforth thought this was all to the good.

But juries who have trouble hearing tend to think the worst rather than the best ...

Stainforth took Doug through several big cases he had been involved in investigating. He made no mention of a payroll robbery in Mt Isa but he did get Doug to talk at length about finding cannabis growing at the feed lots. He made no mention of the substitution but managed to get in a good whack at Sam Hoysted as a sleazy greedy businessman.

Bergman considered objecting, Sam Hoysted was not here to defend himself, but he thought that letting Towner run on unimpeded might be more valuable. Doug, confident and complacent that he was being accepted at his own valuation, might run off at the mouth.

Doug set the scene quite skillfully. He was the only officer in Winville with the experience necessary to get things done. The rest of the station had largely stagnated under Arthur Leslie. Cases had been allowed to grow cold. He was the new broom and under him the station’s clear-up rate had improved. He didn’t say it but it was cleverly implied that it was his energy, experience, and talent which had got the station back up to scratch.

Several jury members noticed that the defendant forgot to be frail and decrepit when he was presenting this new image of a dynamic DI turning a fossilised group in to a good team.

It was late afternoon by the time Stainforth got on to the relationship between Towner and the other three trustees. He reminded the court that it was Sam Hoysted who had invited him to become a trustee of the boys’ trust fund.

Stainforth could see a question dangling. “So you accepted this request from a man you knew to be a drug dealer? Did that give you any concern?”

“No. The drugs were found later.”

“Did you know where the profits from this drug operation were going? Were they, for instance, going into the trust fund?”

Doug hesitated. He had never investigated the money trail, just dealt himself into it. “The money was going into some of Hoysted’s less profitable businesses.”

“Was this checked by, for instance, a forensic accountant?”

“No. Mr Hoysted admitted quite freely that that was why he had decided to make some extra money on the side.”

“And was the Drug Squad involved in following up on buyers, users, dealers?”

“My job was to stop the supply end. I don’t remember what happened once we had done our end of the job.”

Stainforth went back to the meetings of the trustees, their decision-making processes, the evenings at the Hoysted home. Doug, coached on the need to sound friendly, said Sam and Sandra had always been hospitable, Sandra setting out drinks and sandwiches and nibbles for them. “She was a nice woman and I thought that Sam was lucky to have found a stepmother for his boys. But she had nothing to do with our discussions. So far as I can remember she never showed any interest in what we were doing.”

Stainforth went back to the first wife and asked if Doug had known her. “I didn’t know her well. She got sick soon after I’d come to Winville. And then she died. It was hard on Sam and he knew he wasn’t the best person to look after his son’s inheritance so he was happy to leave us as the trustees to mind everything.”

“Why did he believe he wasn’t the best person?”

“He liked owning businesses but he wasn’t good at weeding out the non-performers. He understood that people who were not personally involved would make better decisions.”

By the time the court rose in the afternoon the jury had an image of Sam Hoysted which was of someone totally incompetent as a businessman who saw every reason to cut corners and step over boundaries in his chaotic search for profits. This image might have helped make Towner look better, it might have been acknowledged by Sam’s sons as close to the truth, but it skated cleverly over the simple fact that Sandra Hoysted was neither incompetent nor criminally greedy.

Stainforth and his team were reasonably happy with the way things were going. They had not met any accusations head-on but Doug had come over as calm and reasonable and he hoped this image would help the jury to see the more serious issues through this prism.

“With luck we’ve undone some of the damage done by your colleagues.”

“You can’t call that bastard Walsh a colleague but I s’pose Sullivan was.”

“And what about Constable Deane?”

“One of those things, affirmative action I think they called it, didn’t have to have the skills, just had to be black and female.” He had been tempted to say something ruder but changed it at the last minute.

“She wasn’t a good officer?”

“Of course not.”

“Well, keep that opinion to yourself.”

\*

Dennis Walsh when he got home and went into the kitchen where lovely savoury smells were filling the air said simply, “Bloke threatened to shoot me today.”

Fiona was used to his blunt way of presenting news. But this was worse than most of his comments about his day. She looked shocked and asked who had wanted to kill him.

“He had a gun pointing at me and old Vera with Myrtle came in and he turned to see who was there and I grabbed him. Sent him to Winville with Grant.”

“But—why?”

“Thought at first it might have something to do with Doug’s trial—seeing I didn’t recognise the bod, y’know, another Plowman or something. But it turned out he was up from Melbourne.”

Fiona paled at this. “You mean, Carmen’s boy, someone looking for him?”

"I guess so but I can't see how shooting me would help. Maybe he wanted me to tell him where John Fred is but it didn't sound like that." As he said that he wondered if the aim might be to distract police and so make it easier to find John Fred ... if they believed it was police who were hiding him ... but how would they know that? A lucky guess? But then if the Hoysted boys could hack into things ... maybe the Mafia also had skills in that area ...

He had wondered if Jake had a leak in the station. Now the thought came back to him. And yet ... Melbourne and Winville were two different worlds ... The familiar feeling of not understanding flowed over him ...

"I took John Binnie to Winville this morning to see if he recognised a man they caught. One of the people who left that little dog to die, the one we gave to the Sealey kids. The funny thing was, I'd say he recognised John, he wasn't quick enough to hide his surprise. But I'm blown if I know how we're going to prove he abandoned that pup."

"You'll go and give him the third degree?"

"I wish. But it's Jake's case."

He went on to tell her that someone had been climbing over Ms Hopgood's back fence. "I'd say it's kids for a dare. They couldn't possibly want her tea towels and nightgowns."

"But it is a nasty thing to do to an old lady."

It was. But he didn't think the few smudged prints he'd been able to get would yield any clues, other than that the perp or perps were probably quite young.

Over a roast dinner Elise asked him when they'd be going out to the farm again and he thought they might go for a while on Sunday. Mr Barron from Winville had gone out and taken a couple of pieces of furniture and a few things from the shed but he had said plainly that it wasn't worth paying to have most of the stuff carted to the auction rooms in Winville. Dennis could use them or turn them into firewood.

That was the easy part. Getting the house sorted out, looking after the cattle there, minding the water, carting away a bit of rubbish, all of that was straightforward. The much harder part was trying to decide what to do with the property.

Several times the enticing image of him looking after his animals, enjoying the space and the quiet, rose up to tempt him. Retire early, leave the police behind, leave tiresome people who stole washing and drove badly and made a nuisance of themselves in the pub far behind. And each time he said 'not yet' ...

Fiona dropped in to the op-shop the next afternoon thinking to have a word with Mrs Grundy. She was there with Margaret Seymour and she immediately agreed that it had been the shock of her life. "I am not used to having strange men point guns at me," she said firmly. "And poor Vera was shaking like a leaf when I took her home."

Fiona was all sympathy. It wasn't what elderly ladies should have to face.

Mrs Grundy though went on, "And as for your husband, I suppose you're always worrying about him. He somehow seems to attract problems. I'm sure we never had anything like this before he came."

"No. I wonder what Joe Bosch would have done if a strange gunman came in the door?"

"Hide under the counter probably," Mrs Grundy said tartly. "I'm not blaming your husband for what happened. But we've been speculating on why that man came all the way from Melbourne to Buckton. It seems very strange."

"I think it might link to a missing person case. Dennis didn't really have anything to do with it but they might not realise that."

"It's not those nasty men from Japana?"

"I don't think so. But I guess we'll eventually hear just what was going on. At first he thought it might have something to do with a trial in Brisbane. I don't know if you ever heard of Doug Towner when he was in Winville."

"There was something in the *Courier* I think, something about him being wrongly accused." So John Daly had tried to pre-empt something?

"Dennis thinks he's guilty. But it's up to the court."

"And courts can get it wrong."

Fiona agreed to this but afterwards she wondered if Mrs Grundy was guided by something she had read or was it a more personal experience? And her own wish was that the court and the jury in Brisbane would see Doug Towner for the man he really was and not be blinded by sympathy or lost in the confusions of events outside their own experience.

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Greg Sullivan had got home tired the previous evening and a little bit disappointed. It all seemed a long journey for very little. They weren't going to try and use the handbag. He thought the main result from its discovery was to strengthen his own belief in Doug's guilt.

But like Dennis he wondered how Doug would deal with the tougher business of presenting water-tight reasons for why he couldn't have been out killing Sandra Hoysted nor could he have dumped her body. The problem, he felt, was that they had not done enough to try and find witnesses to Doug's removal of the body from his shed to that culvert. Somebody must have seen or heard something but by the time it had become incumbent on them to ask a few questions too much time had passed, Doug's neighbours had moved, one had died, the whole thing seemed hopeless. Not for the first time he secretly berated himself for being so trusting.

Towner was not fazed by a full court room and his barrister had to remind him that he was 'a frail old man'. Stainforth could see how his client's apparent confidence had seduced people into believing he really did know what he was doing and that it was all being done well. But he didn't want Doug to appear over-confident in court. "You can have the confidence of an innocent man but we are dealing with something sad, the death of an innocent woman, so don't forget that."

Stainforth felt he was doing his best by his client but he no longer believed in that client's innocence. Yet he felt no sense of dilemma in his position. If he got Doug off the man wasn't going to be a threat to anyone. If he didn't get Doug off he would probably never hear the last of it from his client but he would feel comfortable with himself.

And Doug was very clear that Sandra had never said anything to him about the trust fund to suggest that she wasn't happy about what they were doing. "I barely saw her, just hullo and goodbye and thanks for the snacks. If she wanted to say anything she was free to do so. We would've listened and taken it on board if she had anything constructive to offer. But there was never a peep out of her. I don't know if she ever said anything to her husband and he failed to pass it on. I can't speculate."

He said he had gone to play golf on the afternoon Sam flew out of Winville on the first leg of his flight to Sydney. He wasn't sure why Sam had left it so late but presumably he had wanted to spend the last day of the holidays with his sons. He hadn't seen Mrs Hoysted and hadn't given her a thought. He said he hadn't been told about the letter received from Mrs James but as it was likely that Sandra had decided at the last minute to go with her husband to Sydney he wouldn't have done anything anyway. He knew Sam would be back and could answer any questions his mother-in-law might have.

He said he didn't remember speaking with anyone at the Golf Club but he might have done so. It was just a normal afternoon. He didn't think he had played with anyone and he didn't use a caddy. He couldn't say for sure but he'd probably played eight holes, that was what he usually did when he was there on his own. He couldn't remember if anyone else was on the course. There was nothing to mark out the day as worthy of remembrance.

He couldn't be sure "but I think I got home between half-past-four and five o'clock."

The day that Sam Hoysted arrived back in Winville was a normal working day. He had gone out to get himself some lunch but he had been in the station when Mr Schultz came in to say he had found a body.

"How far is that culvert from your office?"

"A ten to fifteen minute drive."

"And you took an hour for lunch?"

"I usually did. If we were extra busy I would take less and be back in the station."

Greg Sullivan was not there to give that a snort. Nor to remind anyone that it had taken them eight minutes from the station to the culvert.

"And did you ever take longer than an hour?"

“Occasionally someone would come up to me with a problem and I would stay and talk to them. Sometimes I went on from lunch to somewhere we were investigating, rather than going back to the office. But normally it was an hour.”

The jury, calculating up to half-an-hour of driving, didn't think that lunch and doing things with a body could be fitted in. Only one of them considered the possibility that Doug might not have bothered with lunch. And if the body had been placed on a sheet of plastic inside the culvert then he, or someone, would only need to pull the plastic out, bringing the body with it, then remove the plastic, roll it up and dump it in a bin somewhere. He wondered if this was being too complex for a country crime. But then he thought Doug Towner was quite capable of being devious.

Stainforth had no intention of going into aspects of the investigation. If it was impossible for Doug Towner to have killed Sandra Hoysted then how he conducted the investigation into her death was a matter for the police and the courts to look into.

He went back and back over those two key days, trying to elicit from Doug any corroborating details. The weather. What he had been working on. Who was around. What he had had for lunch. Who he had seen in the café. Who was in the office when Sam Hoysted came in to lodge a missing person complaint.

Several times he asked whether a person mentioned would corroborate a detail to which Doug Towner had his stock answer. “It was ten years ago. It is asking a bit much for someone to remember what they did and saw on a day that far back.” This, with variations, was something to be brought out regularly. When Stainforth said, “If you don't expect other people to remember back that far is it realistic to take your account as correct?”

Doug was ready for this and pointed out that he had good reason to remember these details because they had swung into action with a full-scale investigation as soon as the body was found. “It isn't like a member of the public suddenly being asked, years later, what they were doing on a certain day.”

Peter Stainforth had agonised over whether to ask his client if he still believed that Sam Hoysted was guilty of murdering his wife. If Doug was found guilty then Sam was likely to be given a free pardon. If Sam got stropky and said he wanted his name cleared then he just might get a new trial. But there was another reason for wanting to paint Sam Hoysted as a crook. An innocent man wrongly accused could expect to be compensated. Making Sam Hoysted look criminal might make it harder for him to get compensation. And the more compensation Sam could worm out of the justice system the more the taxpaying public would place their opprobrium on to Doug Towner for costing them so much money.

As he ended up he said, “Do you still believe Sam Hoysted was guilty of the murder of his wife and therefore rightly convicted.”

Doug said calmly, “I do.”

Bergman had offered no indication of his thoughts throughout Towner's examination. No objections might mean he was saving everything up. Or it might mean that he felt he couldn't bang dents into the defendant's testimony. Stainforth was inclined to believe it was the first and he hoped Doug wasn't relaxing too soon.

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Inspector Moss, faced with a mystery man calling himself Dean Rounds and a mystery man apparently called Paul Christian Bertoli, had no time to be wondering on how Doug Towner was getting along in Brisbane. But it gnawed away at Greg Sullivan all day. There were other things he could have done and hadn't. But he had always been constrained by the simple fact that he had believed Sam Hoysted to be guilty. Every thing he did to investigate Towner's possible guilt was like a slap in the face. The knowledge that he had helped send an innocent man to jail undermined his ability to put that behind him and begin re-investigating from scratch.

It had been easy to believe that if there really was anything to find then John Duarte would find it and pass it on to the Attorney-General. And that too had in some way constrained him. He had done what he had to keep Dennis Walsh off his back but he couldn't pretend he had done a proper new investigation.

Jake Moss called Greg in to help him question Bertoli but the man sat silent, refusing even to acknowledge his name. Finally Jake said, “Well, we've got the gun and we've got four witnesses

so I s'pose it doesn't matter if this stupid nong talks or not. He's been charged. So he can go to the watch house for the moment and we can get an out-of-hours sitting."

After Bertoli had been taken away Greg said, "So where are you at with this bod that's calling himself Dean Rounds?"

"He's been linked to Terry Fulcher and now to the bod calling himself Fifi. But I'm blown if I know how it all fits together. I've asked Rocky to go round and see if Terry Fulcher's at his butcher's shop. That old bloke Dennis brought from Buckton says he's the person calling himself Fifi when he and Paul Dawkins rented a farmhouse from him. Dennis wants me to charge him with cruelty to an animal because when the two of them left the house and disappeared they abandoned their dog to starve."

"Well, go for that. Get Dennis in to ask him some tough questions."

"Trouble is—all he keeps on saying is that we're mad and he is Dean Rounds."

"And if some other bod in Rocky claims to be Terry Fulcher—" Greg wasn't sure where this was going.

"There's another problem. Dennis reckons the Fulchers are suspects for blowing up a yacht off the coast two years ago. There's some idea that Milward Dutton was on board." Greg gave that a bit of a groan. "So we don't want to get into someone else's investigation but we haven't been told who is actually investigating because it's all still hush hush. If you can sort this lot out, Greg, you're a heck of a lot cleverer than me."

"Well, keep him banged up till Doug's trial is over. Then maybe whoever sent him will lose interest, maybe get careless."

"Two men were seen by that Margaret Ashton. We've only got one."

"No prints?"

"There are, but Bridges went round, opened both gates. Reid's done his best but nothing we can run with."

Jake had gone home when Rockhampton rang. Greg had stayed on to catch up with things and the call was routed through to him. Rocky police had gone round to the shop and been told Terry Fulcher was away buying cattle. When asked when he would be back Ross Fulcher had said, "Sometime next week."

Greg asked if they were the ones investigating the explosion on board the yacht off Meara Bight. No, nothing to do with Rockhampton. They thought Bundaberg had passed it to Brisbane.

Greg sat on, staring into space. They couldn't keep Dean Rounds, not unless they could pin something down. So he would go home. Then it came back to him. 'I'm a useless idiot!' He rang Rockhampton straight back and said, "Looks like Terry Fulcher has part of a finger missing. When he turns up again can you check for that."

It was the best he could do. He finally packed up and went home.

## *Case No. 5: Some Like It Hot*

Daniel Bergman liked to win his cases but he still gave lip service to the concept of justice. He enjoyed the adversarial system but he could see that two lawyers fighting it out could merely confuse the jury rather than lead it to the truth.

After going over and over the ways in which he might wring important admissions from DI Towner without bringing other police into disrepute he had decided to keep it as simple as possible. There were times when he didn't mind to wind a jury up into impenetrable confusions but this was not the time. What was said now would remain in the jury's mind even if they had forgotten what had been said on the first day.

"Mr Towner, you have gone out of your way to say nice things about the women in this case but you are on record as calling Stephanie Pohl a 'nincompoop'. You have said that DC Deane 'had the brains of a chook'. You have called Sandra Hoysted a number of times 'a jumped-up little typist'." He paused to let the jury, and particularly its female members, take in these put-downs. "Now, in your file on the investigation into Sandra Hoysted's death I have here the report done by



DC Deane in her investigation into what Sam Hoysted did in Sydney and whether his wife was with him. She contacted his trainer, people at the stable, the person Sam Hoysted stayed with, his family members, the company Sandra Hoysted used to work for and three of her friends from her time there. Not one of them had seen or heard from Sandra Hoysted. She also contacted the airport in Armidale where he had stayed overnight and checked every hotel and motel there to see if he had booked in with anyone. The place where he stayed overnight said he had been on his own. Yet at her husband's trial you stated on oath that it was likely that Sandra Hoysted had decided at the last minute to accompany her husband to Sydney. Why did you say this when all the evidence pointed to the fact that she had *not* accompanied him to Sydney?"

"Because ... when I checked Deane's work I found that she had got her dates muddled up. Clearly the people she spoke to had not been informed of the correct dates."

"Mr Hoysted was in Sydney for two weeks. Is that correct?"

"About that."

"So why would it matter if he arrived on a Monday or Tuesday when she had two weeks in which to be seen or heard from?"

"Because sloppy work in one area usually indicates sloppy work in other areas."

"So this is why you said she had the 'brains of a chook'?"

"In a moment of annoyance I might've said this."

"You said it to DI Lenane when he visited your mansion on the Gold Coast. Why were you annoyed with DC Deane five years after you had left Winville?"

"Remembering back, I suppose."

"Now going back to the day on which Sandra Hoysted apparently abandoned her dog and left for Sydney without as much as a toothbrush or a lipstick," he put a lot of weight on to 'apparently', "and on which you apparently skipped work to go and play golf I would like to ask you about that game of golf. You left work at 2.10 p.m. according to station records. Now did you drive straight out to the golf course?"

"I would think so."

"How long would that have taken you?"

"Five to ten minutes, depending whether I stopped to talk with anyone as I left the station or in the carpark."

"We'll say you got there by half-past-two. Now what did you do when you got there?"

"I kept my clubs there so I would've gone in to get them."

"Were people there at the clubhouse?"

"I think I saw the manager and someone else."

"You said hullo?"

"I might've."

"Then what?"

"I would've gone out and teed off."

"So that would be at what time?"

"I couldn't tell you but probably twenty-five to, maybe twenty to."

"And you were out on the course for how long?"

"I don't remember. Perhaps an hour. A bit longer."

"So what happened when you got back to the clubhouse?"

"I would've gone in, left my bag there, driven home."

"How did you get into the clubhouse?"

Doug seemed to think this was a trick question. He hesitated then said, "Through the side door, of course."

"Did you have a key?"

"No. Why should I need a key?"

"It was the day of Mr Martin Short's funeral. He was a founder and life member of the club. The manager and his assistant locked up at a quarter to three and went to the 3 o'clock funeral."

"That is nonsense! You've got the wrong day!"

"No, Mr Towner, I have got the right day. The funeral notice and an obituary were given in the *Winville Courier* for Mr Short's large funeral. I'm surprised you weren't there."

“I still say you’ve got the wrong day.”

“As you weren’t at the club and you weren’t at the funeral—where were you?”

“Of course I was at the club! Maybe I was out on the course for longer than I thought and they’d returned by then.”

“After the funeral service they drove to the cemetery then there was a supper at the RSL hall as Mr Short had also been a life member there.”

“I still say you’ve got the wrong day.”

“No, Mr Towner, you’ve got the wrong day. So the court would like to know what you were doing when you pretended to be playing golf. So were you out murdering Sandra Hoysted, putting her body in your shed, burying her handbag in your yard under the rosella bushes, and telling her dog to go home?”

Towner stared at Bergman then shook his head slowly. “Of course I wasn’t. I was a senior detective, not a murderer.” He asked to have a moment to talk with his lawyer. Stainforth knew he had been remiss but that Doug had apparently not known about such a high-profile funeral ... with warning they might have been able to deal with this crushing blow to his client’s alibi ...

The desire to tell Doug he was a lazy fool was very strong but Stainforth crushed it. And it mightn’t be enough but Stainforth said to his client, “You said you didn’t have a key but you’re getting muddled up with your keys. In fact you did have a key to the clubhouse because you sometimes came after work and played late.”

Doug gave his forehead a slight bang and said, “Strewth, you got me muddled there. It’s true, I did have a key.”

“What happened to that key?” Bergman had no belief in this key.

“How would I know?”

“You seem to be very careless with your keys, Mr Towner. You didn’t remember that Charles Ritchie gave you a key to his hangar. You didn’t remember that the golf club’s manager gave you a key and you don’t remember what you did with that key. We could, of course, ring the clubhouse and see whether they gave you a key and whether you returned it when you left Winville.”

“They probably wouldn’t remember.”

“Well, let’s hope the burglars of Winville are not listening in.” There was a titter round the court. Then Bergman said, “Moving on to your relationship with Sandra Hoysted. Why did you call her a ‘jumped-up little typist’?”

“That’s the way she behaved.”

“In what way?”

“Saying we weren’t looking after her stepsons’ trust properly.”

“But you have already told the court that you barely spoke to her and I quote ‘hullo and goodbye and thanks for the snacks’ and that there was ‘never a peep’ out of her. So when did she say to you that you weren’t looking after her stepsons’ trust properly?”

It was Stainforth who felt like smiting his forehead.

“It maybe wasn’t her, it might have been Sam passing on her complaint.”

“And how did you respond?”

“I would’ve told him we were doing our best for his sons.”

“Given what we heard your friend Mr Laurence Thompson tell the court do you still believe you were doing the best for two motherless boys?”

“Of course we were. We spent a lot of time discussing what was the best way to increase their trust fund.”

“Sandra Hoysted is on record as saying that investing in a long-term fund would have made three times as much for the boys as all your hundreds of share trades. Did she say that to you?”

“Of course not.”

“She shared her concerns with at least one of the trustees, a Mr Eric Kramer, and he has said he told you. Do you remember that?”

“No, I don’t. And it’s only hearsay what he’s saying now.”

“True. But you have just said that you were aware of Sandra Hoysted saying you were not looking after her stepsons’ trust properly.”

“As I said, it was probably Sam Hoysted saying something to us.”

“You will need to be more specific.”

“I can’t remember.”

“This was a serious allegation. He was accusing you of either incompetence or theft. You must remember such a serious complaint.”

“Well, I don’t.”

“Then how do you know he said anything?”

“I might have it wrong. Someone else might have passed on something.”

“But you knew that Sandra Hoysted was not happy with the way you were running her stepsons’ trust fund?”

Doug didn’t seem to realise that this came back to the motive for the murder which the prosecution had put forward. Stainforth saw it only too clearly and hurriedly put in an objection. Brewer saw it as an important question and dismissed the objection. Bergman said politely he would repeat the question as DI Towner might have forgotten it. A slight sense of amusement went round the court. Then he stood and waited.

“Well, she could say anything she liked. It’s a free country. But it was not her money and if Sam was happy with us as trustees that was all that mattered.”

“You were aware then that she was not happy?”

“Not my business.”

“I am simply asking you whether you were aware that she was not happy.”

“It didn’t matter if she was happy or not.”

“I will take that as a ‘yes’ then.”

Doug turned to his lawyer and said something no one else heard. Stainforth said quietly, “You can try.” Doug looked over at Bergman and said, “I don’t remember what I knew or I didn’t know. It wasn’t relevant.”

Bergman hesitated then said calmly, “Sandra Hoysted has no voice here. But she obviously cared about her stepsons and wanted their inheritance carefully looked after for them. When she raised questions about the ways in which the trustees were doing things it seems she signed—”

Brewer intervened to say he could save his grandstanding for his summing-up and asked Stainforth if he would like to re-examine. Stainforth said something to his client, the court assumed he was asking Doug if he would like to say anything more or perhaps reminding Doug that he needed to be more careful, then he straightened up and said, “No, Your Honour, my client isn’t feeling well and would like to end for the day.”

Brewer said that wasn’t what he had asked. “Do you wish to re-examine either today or on Monday morning?”

Stainforth couldn’t see any advantage in dragging it on. But with luck the jury would forget Doug’s infelicities over the weekend. He said, no, he didn’t wish to re-examine.

Justice Brewer said both barristers would give their closing remarks on Monday morning, then he would sum up. He reminded the jury not to share anything with anybody and the court rose.

As Randall and Neumann Hoysted came out of the court they passed a man they thought they knew. They went over to him and said, “Mr Hull, isn’t it?”

Michael Hull had come out of curiosity and perhaps to know if anything broader was going to be said about the trustees. He didn’t look pleased to see the two young men. He said a cool ‘hello’.

“How do you feel now, Mr Hull?” Neumann said blandly.

“I don’t have anything to say to either of you.”

“Did you know that Doug had killed Sandra Hoysted?”

“Of course not.”

“So what did he say at the next meeting of the trustees?”

“I don’t remember him saying anything.”

“You aren’t a very good ... dissembler, Mr Hull. He said something like ‘That’s the end of that pest of a woman interfering in our business’, something like that, didn’t he?”

Hull’s colour had risen. That was almost word for word what Doug *had* said. But he was never going to say so. “I don’t remember. It’s a long time ago.”

“You sent our father to trial so you must have known what was going on.”

Hull had begun to want to get away with a secret desperation. “The evidence pointed that way.”

“And now the evidence points very clearly to Doug Towner. Would you have sent him to trial if you had known about the golf club and Sandra’s handbag and all the rest of it?”

“Maybe. I can’t say.”

Michael Hull turned and hurried away. He had been at Martin Short’s funeral. He had not noticed Towner but just assumed he was at work. His head had begun to ache and the thought of heading south through Brisbane’s traffic bothered him. But he just wanted to get home, bury his head in a book, down a straight whisky, and forget he ever knew Doug Towner. Because he was going to have to live the rest of his life in the knowledge that he was a failure and not just a failure but a greedy incompetent naïve stupid one. The thought of ending it all flitted through his mind but he firmly pushed the thought aside.

\*

Monday morning found Dennis Walsh in Winville for his regular stint. But as soon as he arrived Jake Moss called him into his office and closed the door. “Melbourne’s got nothing on Bertoli so they don’t want him back.”

“You sure about that? Did you talk with the detective who sent John Fred’s dad to trial?”

“No, just asked in a general way. So what do we do with the bugger? Mrs Vohland has said we can keep him in the watch house while further enquiries are made.”

“Okay, let me ring Ash Turner and see if she can put us on to that bloke. Bertoli just might connect up in some way.”

Dennis had spent a pleasant Sunday afternoon out at his farm, looking at what needed to be done to make it either a pleasant place to live or more saleable. He had arranged with Tony Thomas to come out one day and advise him on what trees to plant. He had asked Kaylee Williams to go around with Fiona and make suggestions for a garden. One lemon tree and a passion vine didn’t qualify. Now it was a wrench to get his mind back to dealing with low-lives and hitmen.

Ash Turner was brisk after she’d got over her first moment of shock. “Hold on a tick and I’ll get you a phone number. It was a DI Martin Macniel but don’t tell him where the son is, it’s just possible he’s got a leak, someone’s passing things on—”

“I don’t know where the son is so they can threaten me till kingdom come—”

“They might do more than threaten, Dennis. Anyway, just ask him if he knows a Bertoli. And good luck.”

Dennis passed his scribble over to Jake and said, “Try him but no hint on where John Fred is.”

“I do know what I’m doing, Dennis,” Jake said with some asperity.

“I know, but when there’s money floating round—it’s best not to trust anyone.”

Jake was tempted to come back with another sharp comment but time was passing. “Okay, you can go over and talk to Rounds, take Merrill with you, see if there’s any chance they’ve ever met.”

So that was the way Jake’s suspicions were running?

Dennis nodded. And if there was a leak, rather than someone listening in or someone in the community keeping a close eye, then Merrill seemed the likeliest. He was a recent addition. His contacts elsewhere weren’t known. He was lazy and careless. It might add up to something.

Dennis got up heavily and said, “What about the dark-green ute?”

“It’s out the back.”

“Did you check the rego?”

“Not so far.”

Jake came with Dennis, calling Merrill to join them along the way, and went out the back. The station had several lock-up garages but the dark-green ute was parked in the space behind the station in between the cars of station staff. Dennis looked at it and was tempted to smite his forehead. Instead he said under his breath, “Get Brent Kelly out here to look at it.”

He went on over to the watch house with Merrill and asked Brett Landy to set up a tape because he wanted a chat with Dean Rounds. "He's not talking so I'll talk to him. But best have it on record."

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Dean Rounds came in and sat down and Dennis said, "Mr Rounds, this's Senior Sergeant Merrill. Pull up a chair, Brad."

He couldn't see any sign that the two men had met. But then information could be exchanged without meeting face-to-face. He sat down and simply looked at Rounds while he decided where to start.

At last he said, "You're an interesting man, Mr Rounds, and you seem to get around."

Dean Rounds looked surprised but said nothing.

"Now, there was a bloke in Winville, called himself Leo Ford and he messed around with a hire business for a while, didn't look like he was doing much business so he obviously had money elsewhere. And sometimes he had a dame with him he called Fifi. People reckoned she was a man pretending to be a woman but I don't reckon they really knew. So there was this bloke called Eddie Morton and a bloke in a dark-green ute went to see him and shot him dead. His neighbour witnessed the shooting. Next thing the rifle used turns up on top of the neighbour's cupboard. I wondered why this bloke'd use a rifle to shoot someone at close quarters like that but of course he had to. The neighbour was to be framed and the neighbour would have no use for a revolver around the farm."

Dean Rounds looked away and continued to look away.

Dennis went on in as chatty a way as he could manage. "Now this bloke was in a bright red-and-black plaid shirt. Funny thing to wear when you go out to top a bloke. But he removed it afterwards. And off he went and a service station some distance away saw him come in for petrol and a bloke there noticed the dark-green ute with a cover on the back and a number plate with the letters PTE on it. Stayed in his mind. Leo Ford drove round in a grey Peugeot which was registered to a false address. But it didn't matter because he got lucky and Adrian Schmidt sold him his hotel at Meara Bight at a knockdown price." Dennis sat back and waited for Rounds to stop looking away but the man simply sat staring out the small window. "It was a funny business because Ford paid for the hotel with cash even though he hadn't made any money in Winville, if anything he had lost money."

He paused a moment to think back over the Meara Bight business. "There were several men at the hotel, we never really got them sorted out. A Tony and Allan Fletcher that owned what looked like a nice yacht moored there, the 'Foo Fighter', and a Ross and Terry Fulcher who have a butchery in Rocky. Now one night four people got on a dinghy and went out to this yacht and next thing it blew up. But the dinghy had been untied, not blown apart. And this apparently nice yacht wasn't even insured so it was probably an old bomb fit for the wrecker's yard and someone had slapped a coat of paint on. And the whole point of this was not to claim some insurance but to get rid of a snooty nosy bastard called Milward Dutton."

It was Brad Merrill who turned and looked at Dennis in astonishment. "You're kidding?"

"Nope. Dutton had taken a bribe to let two suspects go in Charters Towers. They'd killed an old prospector. They were calling themselves Richard and Simon Massey. But the funny thing was Dutton had used his credit card to pay for petrol at the garage in Meara Bight and he'd told the man there he was going to stay at the hotel for a few days. And two weeks later his nice car was taken into a yard in Bundy and sold." Although he hadn't used his credit card after that someone had apparently paid some money on it.

Dennis wondered how long before Rounds was tempted to look around.

"Now something had been planned at the hotel but it had to be put back a day because a nosy copper had dropped in to stay a night. So the day after Dutton was taken out and blown away. It was maybe no loss but he had a wife and children. Anyway, next thing a man calling himself Paul Dawkins and with a woman called Fifi rented a house out near Burleigh from John Binnie. Apparently they wanted to do some checking of the farm over near Prickly Creek, place called Wilcannia which had been owned by two blokes called Simon and Richard Ferguson. And while they were there they had killed an old woman called Ruby Jackson and buried her there. But the

farm was being sold to Long Hitch Pastoral Company so they needed to be sure there was no sign of the grave being disturbed. And maybe they wanted to look for some buried money. But Eddie Morton had found it and moved it to his property and it, or some of it, came from a payroll robbery in Mt Isa where Doug Towner had banged up the wrong man so the Fergusons could buzz off.”

Dean Rounds might be immune to the fascination of this story but Brad Merrill was sitting there looking at Dennis with his mouth half open.

“Can’t say anyone noticed how often Fifi was actually there. And no one seems to know if she was the woman calling herself Freda over at Garra when Paul Dawkins bought an old house there. But a bloke calling himself Richard Ferguson went over to Pittsworth and bought himself a nice pedigree pup. Hard to know why he bothered seeing that he, as Paul Dawkins, abandoned the pup in a pit and left it to die horribly of hunger and thirst. The breeder has seen this poor pup after it was removed from the pit and recognised it as the one she sold to Ferguson. So I went round that house and got some very nice clear fingerprints. And the funny thing is—those prints match up with you, Mr Rounds, and they also match up with Terry Fulcher in Rocky, the bloke who is always off buying cattle whenever anyone asks. He must’ve bought enough cattle to feed Rocky ten times over.”

Dennis sat back and considered the back of Rounds’ head for several minutes. Finally Merrill broke the silence by saying, “This sounds bizarre. You surely can’t prove any of it?”

“You’re suggesting those prints are telling lies?”

“Well, no, but maybe they got mixed up?”

“Dean Rounds,” Dennis said calmly, “I am charging you with cruelty to an animal.” He went carefully on detailing the offence, the time and place, and said, “With luck we can get you on to the court lists for today, if not it’ll be tomorrow morning.”

Dennis sat there a minute longer then he slipped the tape out of the machine and said to Landy, “You can have him. I’ll process the charge.” He got up and went out, leaving Merrill with Rounds. He beckoned Landy away from the door and said under his breath, “Keep an eye on how they interact.”

Landy nodded. He was here to mind anyone on remand but he didn’t mind doing a bit of sleuthing himself.

Dennis went back to see Jake Moss and said simply, “You’ve got Eddie Morton’s killer there. Go over that ute with a fine tooth comb. And who is the vehicle registered to?”

“Doesn’t make a lot of sense,” Jake felt he was getting out of his depth, “but it’s an Alvin Massey. Who’s he?”

“Alvin Massey ran a property north of Meandara which was owned, I think, by the Nebo Agricultural Company, and that’s where Doug Towner and Sam Hoysted took Willy Jackson’s body and buried it. Alvin Massey claims he knew nothing of what was going on, that he was sitting talking to Sam, not looking to see what Doug was up to. Then he lent Doug his dark-green ute to get back home.”

“You mean—this ute’s the one Doug had?”

“Either the same one—or they got a replacement just the same and transferred the plates over.” He considered this. “And I think maybe Alvin Massey’s got some explaining to do. Or ... just maybe ... Dean Rounds *is* Alvin Massey. Massey said his father was Richard Massey which probably means he was Richard Ferguson.”

Jake shook his head slowly. “None of this makes sense.”

Walsh was tempted to say, ‘join the club’ but he said instead, “They’re all Plowmans in one way or another and they don’t act like normal people. So stop trying to get it to make sense and just deal with the evidence you’ve got. And I wonder if Billy the Lad might recognise the ute and maybe the man.”

Pearl Braidwood had identified the man who had died near Winville as the same Richard Ferguson who stole her father-in-law’s gemstones. Dean Rounds was younger but he was similar in colouring and features. So who else might’ve got a good look at the man and the ute? “Jake, get Brent Kelly on to it. He spoke with people who spoke with the man in the green ute after Eddie Morton was shot.”

Jake wasn't averse to dumping the whole thing on to CIB and Kelly. "Can do. But Kelly's asked if he can work part time. Suggested to Greg that we get Ali Deane, Ali Hassan, back part time."

"Up to you and Greg. But Brent's a sharp cookie when he puts his mind to it."

Dennis was tired when he got on the road home. Mrs Vohland had accepted the evidence and said that rather than fining Rounds she would give him a week in the cooler. Dennis wondered if the other 'brother', if they were brothers, might whisk someone else into the shop in Rocky when this man did not return. But as he drove his mind drifted back to Brisbane and Doug Towner. It would be too soon for the jury to have made their decision but he would've liked to hear whether old Brewer was sympathetic or scathing of Doug in his summing-up. Or rigorously impartial. And there was the Willy Jackson case. Could they get Doug on that? It might not be worth the effort, given that there was no one left to clamour for justice. But Willy's mother Ruby deserved something, some form of belated justice ...

Or ... someone could offer Doug a reduced sentence in return for spilling the beans about the Plowman family ... But he couldn't see this working. Doug would be given a degree of comfort in prison. His age. His disability. He might've accepted that the Gold Coast mansion was gone.

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Both Bergman and Stainforth gave strong summings-up. The difference, though it was not noticeable to anyone but the most closely observant, was that Bergman believed absolutely in what he was saying whereas Stainforth had deep reservations. Nevertheless he hammered home the simple point that there was no evidence to show that Douglas Towner had ever harmed Sandra Hoysted.

Some of the jury were convinced on general grounds that Doug deserved to be in jail. Others were troubled by the leap of faith required to see Doug as a killer. He might've been at the Golf Club and just forgotten aspects. He might've gone shopping or to see someone. There was no sighting of Doug and Sandra together that afternoon. No one had seen Doug on the road the day Sandra was found. Or if they had they hadn't come forward. Or possibly people who had seen him earlier on the road later heard the news and just assumed he was going out to have a look ...

Perhaps it was asking too much to have a good eye-witness ready to hand. Not many murders were done with people looking on. And the motive? Was it strong enough?

Justice Brewer went over both sides of the case then he reminded the jury that nothing about Towner's cases or his competence was relevant. Nothing about the disposal of the body was to be considered; "the illegal disposal of a body is a crime but nothing to do with this case". And he said very firmly that although they had heard Sam Hoysted mentioned they were to put all aspects of the investigation, charging, trial, and imprisonment out of their minds. "The only thing you are here to consider is whether or not Douglas Towner took the life of Sandra Hoysted." He went on to tell them to take their time and consider all the evidence presented. "If you are sure beyond reasonable doubt that the defendant killed Sandra Hoysted then you must bring in a verdict of Guilty. If you have doubts that you think are reasonable doubts then you can bring in a verdict of Not Guilty."

He told them that if they had any queries, anything they would like to go back over, then they only needed to ask. By then it was 3 p.m. and it didn't seem very likely they would reach a verdict this afternoon.

The door closed on the jury members and Justice Brewer retreated to his chambers. Most of the people who had come to watch and hear decided it was not worth sitting, waiting, and left the court. Bergman's junior tidied their papers and rose. Stainforth said, "I need a coffee."

Mr Solomon had come to listen. He had referred everything to a court-appointed auditor and he wondered how the verdict would impinge on the civil case. It was due back in court in November.

Also there were Michael Hull and his wife. He had felt impelled to come. He thought Doug had a fair chance of getting off and if he did then he would not have to berate himself with questions about what he had known, what he had guessed, what he had vaguely worried over. And if Doug went down then in a real sense he would take him with him.

He remembered Dennis Walsh asking him to come and see him all those years ago. He didn't think Walsh had really understood what he was dealing with. But there had been a moment there where he could've changed course. And he had chosen to stay with Doug ...

The jury were bound over to continue their deliberations on Tuesday. The Hoysted boys gave Towner a long considering stare and then went out. Jay Barron went back to the office and Carl Payne said, "I just had a call from Winville. They've got the man there they think killed Eddie Morton."

"Another Plowman?"

"Most definitely. He's got three or four other aliases. For all I know he's got ten of them. And he just might connect up to the Milward Dutton case."

"Good work. But can they actually prove it?"

"I can't say I actually long to see Winville in the spring but a visit might be in order. I don't want them bumbling round not knowing what they're doing."

Jay gave that a grin. "And I've found that George Dawkins was the son of Wilfrid Dawkins' little brother. The brother died in an accident and the Towner family took young George in and looked after him. There were five kids and they were farmed out to various families. And it gets better. When young George came to Brisbane it was Charlie De Jong who took him under his wing."

"Then I think Internal Investigations might not be the best place to park our George."

The jury members took up their deliberations next morning. They drank large numbers of coffees. They circled round the two main issues that they had narrowed it down to. The problem of where Towner was and what was he doing on those crucial days. And the impossibility of moving a seriously decomposed body. Not only decomposed but attacked by rats and crows and flies ... and all that damage surely could not have been done between about midday and about 3 p.m. on that fateful day. And one juror said that there was no point in Sam carting the body out there unless he intended to hide it right inside the culvert. Justice Brewer's request that they put Sam Hoysted aside had not been adhered to.

The fact that no one had begun looking at Doug Towner until years later made it impossible to know what people might have found in the immediate aftermath of the death and discovery of Sandra's body. Discussion wound on all day. 'Beyond reasonable doubt' came up again and again. And the other unacknowledged sticking-point was the simple fact that sending a DI to prison for murder seemed a more serious step than sending some miserable drug dealer ...

Greg Sullivan rang Dennis in the late afternoon and said, "Is the suspense killing you?"

"Don't reckon he'll get off but if he does those kids are still going to clean him out. So what's happening with Dean Rounds?"

"Carl Payne is going to come and visit him. And that detective in Melbourne says there's nothing on Bertoli so it'll just be the attack on you. With luck he'll get six months."

It was better than nothing. Except that Bertoli *had* to be connected to Jason Smith and Bill Caulfield. No one would drive thousands of kilometres just for the fun of visiting Buckton.

Wednesday came and still the jury deliberated but finally at mid-morning they said they had a verdict. Few of the spectators had come back but Randall and Neumann Hoysted were there in their usual seat and John Duarte had come, Mrs James sat quietly at the back with another woman, Michael Hull had again brought his wife.

The jury filed in and the judge asked if they found Douglas William Towner Guilty or Not Guilty. The jury foreman looked over at Doug then up at the judge and said calmly, "Guilty, Your Honour."

Randall and Neumann turned to each other with wide grins. Mrs James wiped away tears. Michael Hull sat stony-faced. Stainforth turned to Doug and said, "We can appeal."

Doug said, "Course we will. I'm not going down for some jumped-up little typist."

The judge called for silence and said he would pronounce sentence on Thursday morning. Jay Barron sent e-mails to both Winville and Buckton.

Grant said, "Wow! That's pretty good, isn't it?"

Of the people in the CIB room in Winville it was Jenny Forman who felt the most straightforward satisfaction.



\*

Mason Watling and Leila Burkett had got into the habit of having lunch once a week, usually in Winville. They were both busy people and it occasionally had to be altered at the last minute. But they both looked forward to their times together.

Mason said he had informed the Board that he could get both Dr Sorenson and Maryann Dillon to come to Winville to tell them what Dr Davis had told them. But the Board had refused the offer saying it was time to move forward. "Now, we've got trouble between Dr Murphy and Leslie Davis. Murphy came to me and said the treatment Dr Davis was giving a patient and which he had been told to continue wasn't right and what should he do about it. He couldn't tell a more senior doctor that he had got it wrong. I had a look and here was a patient, asthmatic and with severe allergies and that useless Davis was treating her with a drug which is not recommended for anyone with those allergies. I told him to read the fine print on every medication he prescribed and he just smirked and said she was getting better so he had nothing to say to me. It gets me down."

"So what did you tell Dr Murphy?"

"I went with him to see the patient to see if she was having any side effects. She was covered in a nasty rash. She said she just wanted to go home because hospital was making her worse instead of better. I told her she could ask to be treated by a different doctor and she said, 'So what are you waiting for?' and I had to take it up with Davis again. He said the rash would disappear as soon as she was well again. I said no, I wanted the treatment changed now. He made a big production but finally agreed."

"Well, I don't know if this might be an answer. Susan Denby from Buckton Hospital has applied for the position of Assistant Director of Nursing in Winville. She and Jake Moss are an item. But the thing is—she had a brief affair with Leslie Davis when he was in Buckton and then she discovered what sort of man he is. If she gets the job then he might not want to have to work with her every day."

"Do you think she's good enough—for the position, I mean?"

"I would think so. She's a very capable woman and people are pleased with the way she has run our hospital."

"Good." He thought he could possibly drop a hint. "We'll hope for something." It would not solve the problem of Dr Davis simply moving on and wreaking havoc somewhere else. But Davis certainly could not expect a recommendation if he did move.

"And on to something nicer. I am planning to go to a pathology conference in London next year. I don't know if I'll learn a lot but it will be so nice to be away for a month. And I wondered if you would like to come with me—if you can find a good locum?"

Yes, the finding of a good locum would not be easy but she suddenly thought that being away from Buckton would be worth the search. It was not so much the thought of going 'home' but rather the chance to just relax and enjoy doing the things that couldn't be done in Buckton. And she would enjoy his company.

"That's a lovely idea. I would very much like to come with you."

They smiled at each other, already picturing themselves far away from irritations and problems here, far away from dust and petty issues, far away from prying eyes, far away from night time call-outs and sudden emergencies, just relaxing together ...

\*

Dennis had promised the children riding lessons with Lyn Harding on the Saturday afternoon. He also wanted to see if Elise had an eye on a pony there, or perhaps her favoured 'galloway', before anything was said to Lyn. He would need to return to Brisbane for Greg Maxwell's trial but he had no intention of spoiling the weekend by thinking about the Maxwells.

When they drove up and parked they could see two people over in the jumping arena. Lyn was gradually turning the farm into an attractive equitation centre. The day was fine with big billows of cumulus sailing slowly overhead. The farm was browning but Lyn had put down a special tan bark surface so the horses would not be jumping on iron-hard ground.

The children went away to ask Lyn if they could look at the ponies. Dennis and Fiona stood by the fence and watched. It was Brent Kelly riding Lady Luck. Some of the jumps looked highly

professional. Others were still scratched up, old timber, lines of drums, but overall it looked an interesting course.

The children stood beside Lyn while Brent cantered round the ring then headed for the first jump. It was an impressive spectacle, watching him ride the beautiful mare. Dennis said to Fiona, "Amazing. And this's the kid didn't know one end of a horse from the other."

"It shows what passion and dedication can do. And ... do you think he's having an affair with Lyn?"

"Not my business if he is."

That wasn't exactly her question. "Well, I think he might good for Lyn and Lyn good for him. She seems more relaxed. Maybe it's not having to compete with Brent the way she competed with Freda."

"Could be." They both watched Brent finish his round and ride over to the gate.

"And I think ... that maybe," Fiona said this slowly, "this is why Ellie's losing her passion for learning. She thinks if Brent can showjump so can she."

"Well, let's go and see this horse she's got her eye on."

Fiona wondered as they walked round to Lyn and the children whether Dennis had any idea how nervous the thought of her daughter showjumping made her. But she felt she could not do anything to undermine the children's pleasure in riding.

And it was Lyn as she took them over to the yards where a grey horse of just over 14 hands was tied up who said, "Don't be nervous about her riding Phantom, he's a very safe and steady horse, and it will be quite a while before she's facing big jumps."

"I thought the horse was called Migloo," Dennis said.

"No, that's Migloo over there. I thought Rob might like to try him." She pointed. "And I hear you're going to go and live on Wally Barron's farm?"

"Don't know about live but I'll get the place tidied up and then decide."

Lyn nodded and then said unexpectedly, "Well, you deserve it if anyone does."

He didn't feel this needed a response.

\*

Greg Sullivan was an unexpected customer in Winville's big florist and gift shop. He had roses at home but he hadn't done anything about the aphids and the blooms weren't the best. He bought a bunch of crimson and white roses and went out and down the street.

He was seen by his next-door neighbour who later told his wife Narelle that she had seen Greg with a big bunch of roses so that would be something to look forward to.

Narelle said, "Greg?" in surprise. She couldn't remember Greg bringing her flowers since ... she couldn't remember the 'since' ... and it wasn't her birthday till next week. Perhaps he had got his dates muddled and thought her birthday was this week.

"It was definitely Greg. Lucky you."

"Well, that *is* something to look forward to."

But when Greg got home there was no sign of any roses. She consoled herself with the thought that he might've been buying them for someone at the station. Perhaps they had all chipped in to get Petra or Jenny or Stephanie a bunch of roses for some anniversary.

He didn't mention anything happening at the station and she hesitated to bring the subject up. But curiosity finally got the better of her. "Rosemary saw you carrying a bunch of roses this afternoon." She said it with a slightly interrogatory note.

"Did she? I went out to the cemetery and put them on Sandra Hoysted's grave."

The grave had nothing but her name and dates. He didn't know whose choice that had been. And it obviously wasn't visited. It had the look of a forgotten place. A little oblong where no one ever came.

He had stood there for several minutes after placing the flowers and he had said aloud, "I am so sorry that we didn't do better for you, that we couldn't keep you safe, but I hope wherever you are now, you are happy." He believed vaguely in life after death but he had never thought beyond that simple belief and he couldn't picture Sandra in another life. But his own regrets had overwhelmed him. His own blindness, his own unthinking trust, his own failures as a detective.

He had lingered there looking down at the roses and her name above them and feeling again his own deep sense of secret sadness and regret.

As he explained something of his pilgrimage, Narelle understood why he would want to do this and said quietly, "I'll go sometimes too."

**THE END**