

DARK HORSE

Three Bob Creighton Novellas

By

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**‘No Foot, No ’Oss’
Ghost Riders
Doublebank**

The characters and events in these stories are fictitious.

‘No Foot, No ’Oss’

- i -

Another night in Toowoomba. I thought, after my visit to see Cecily Holmes, I would stay another night in Bev Caldicott’s boarding house and go home in the morning when I was fresh and the long drive wouldn’t seem so tiring. No such luck. When I got back to the house it was bursting with people and noise and carrying-on. They had all come in to hear the extraordinary story that Bev and her boarders were sharing with all and sundry: how they had, without knowing, lived cheek-by-jowl with a murderer. How he might’ve topped one of them if they had unwittingly found out what he was planning. You can imagine the sort of lurid stuff that was flying around, helped along by what had started out as a sherry apiece and had now been augmented by several six-packs, a brace of bottles, and a large plate of chips and peanuts.

I could see it was going to be a long night.

Somewhere in the middle of all this hubbub and when I was in the middle of a long yawn Sid weaved over and introduced me to a mate of his he called Paddy Prendergast. Paddy was a wiry sort of bloke with a grip like steel. I wondered if he smashed bricks with his bare hands for light entertainment.

“Paddy’s a farrier,” Sid said, only slightly slurred. “He’s got a problem for you. I said you were the besht in the business.”

“Thanks, Sid,” I said drily. “I was thinking of bed.”

“Bed!” Sid opened his eyes wide. “The night is shtill young, Bob.”

On the contrary, it felt very old to me.

“Not now,” Paddy said hastily. He seemed embarrassed by Sid’s introduction. “Could I give you a cup of tea before you leave tomorrow?”

I couldn’t think of very many things I would fancy less but I might feel differently in the morning. I said, “Okay, but no dead bodies.”

Paddy chortled slightly. “Course not. It’s only about a horse.” He seemed to think this would comfort and cheer me up. If anything my spirits dropped lower. But I let him write his address down for me. Then I slipped out quietly. Bev saw me and came out too.

“I’m sorry about that, Bob. But it just seemed to take on a life of its own. You must be very tired.” I said I was. Strange, but it never seemed to occur to my ex-wife Barbara how draining a case can be, even a so-called ‘successful’ case. Nor did it occur to Deborah Marrow but I had made various allowances for her. She had her own troubles. But it suddenly occurred to me that there are allowances and

allowances. I didn't want Deborah to do or say anything, just be able to see that I find working and driving tiring at times.

"I hope those men realise how lucky they are," I said.

"Silly old sods," she said lightly. "And I am *not* going to help them into bed. They can sleep there and be uncomfortable."

I wanted to laugh suddenly. Really let go. Instead I bent forward and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "It could not have come to some sort of conclusion if you weren't such a good person. I really mean that."

She laughed, a bit embarrassed, then she said she would see me in the morning and returned to her room full of people. I assume she knew who they all were.

I was too tired to speculate on why one Paddy Prendergast might want my advice. But I lay for a while going back over things. The Browns, brother and sister, might so easily have got away with their crime. If anyone had asked Angie could say she and her father had realised it just wasn't working and he had headed back to Warwick. Jim could've said it was ages since he'd seen his dad, they'd had a bit of a falling out, and didn't keep in touch. Old Mr Brown would simply have fallen through the cracks. If the body did get identified then it would simply be seen as the old man heading home. Or trying to.

How many people are similarly left to drift in the system like that? No one really asks hard questions. People making assumptions. When they tell us so-and-so is Australia's oldest person they are dealing with a definite person but somewhere in the computer systems are these ghosts floating around. People who might still be around ... and might not.

— ii —

It was a bright dry blowing day. I sat at an empty breakfast table. Young David had eaten and gone but all the others were nursing hangovers, even Eric who had struck me as the sort of man who would not miss a day's work except under compulsion from those wild horses ...

Bev came in with toast and milk and some bananas. "How are you feeling this morning?"

I said I was pretty much as usual.

"Good. Sid told me Paddy had talked you into going for a visit to him. You'll need to be on your toes."

"How so?"

She smiled, and I did like her dimples, and said, "He sometimes comes down to play board games or poker with Sid and Les. And I can tell you, Bob, they never beat him. But I don't quite trust him. Though I wouldn't say so to them. He's probably got some little fiddle that's come unstuck. I think you would be wise to just listen and nod and tell Paddy it's an interesting problem. But don't get too involved. I know that's a silly thing to say to you. You can probably sum people up much better than I can. And if you hadn't got involved in all this ... "

"So you think Paddy is just a bit of a scallywag—not major stuff?"

“That’s about it. The sort of person who always knows someone who’s got something that fell off the back of a truck and they’re letting it go cheap—or a surefire winner and you’d be mad not to put a bit on him.”

I nodded. I had some experience of the type.

As Sid wasn’t around to tell me how to get to Paddy’s establishment I asked Bev for directions. She got out a big map and told me which was the best way to head out and get on to Hursley Road. She suggested I come back and have lunch here but I finally said, “Only if Paddy’s problem is a five-star one. I don’t want to get to be the sort of old sod who never goes home.”

She smiled at that. “Well, Paddy is a good talker. You’ll probably find him entertaining.”

— iii —

As I drew into an old weatherboard house with some sheds and ramshackle outbuildings and a couple of yards and what looked like a small forge I wasn’t really sure I was in the mood for sitting back and being entertained. It wasn’t that I had people waiting breathlessly for me to come home and yet I seemed to need, these days, the sort of relaxation and peace that came with being on my own in the place I had set out to suit my kinks. I didn’t mind being in Bev’s place too much because it wasn’t the same as private hospitality. But I still didn’t want to stay on another night. All that having to be sociable ...

But this was ‘working hours’. As I parked and came round into the open space behind the house I could see Paddy was busy with a horse. I cannot honestly say I can give a technical description of what he was doing—not even when he looked up and said, “Come on over, Bob, and take a pew. Won’t be much longer here.”

There was an old stump near him and I sat down on it and watched him.

The horse was a big chestnut mare with a lot of white on her. “Silly dilly ran into a barb wire fence,” he said. “Made a mess of her front feet. Don’t think I can get her back to what she was before but she’ll still be rideable.”

He went on, giving me a sort of running commentary as he worked with a large rasp. The horse seemed not to mind the operation going on down below because she turned to me and pricked her ears, then bent to try and pick Paddy up by his britches; or so it looked like.

“Stop that, you old biddy or I’ll bop you one.” But he said it without heat. Bev might be right about Paddy as a person but I got the impression that he genuinely liked horses despite the likelihood that messing round with their feet is very hard on the back, and not all that pleasant a job at the best of times. I don’t know what sort of money a farrier makes.

After about ten minutes he straightened up, put his tools back into a square container with a handle, and took off his leather apron. “I’ll just whack her in the yard and we’ll go in for a cuppa.”

The house was the sort of place a lot of men on their own have; not very smart, tidy, or dusted. But he nipped round and put the kettle on, a couple of mugs out, and came up with some assorted creams.

“Make yourself comfortable, Bob.” He showed no sign of asking me questions about myself. I got the impression he was trying to decide how to broach his problem. I thought I might as well give him a nudge. “I don’t know much about horses, mate, but if I can give you any help—fire away. I’ll do my best.”

“Yeah. I appreciate that. But it’s a bit tricky. I could be that I’m going blind, going ga-ga, losing the plot ... but it’s like this. I go out to people’s farms and stables—as well as going to the races to whack their racing plates on and off. It’s a pretty busy life, and it’s bloody hard on the old back, but I’ve always enjoyed getting round, meeting people. I get to know pretty well all the people with horses ... and I get to know all the horses.”

I said I could see that.

“Yeah, well ... one of the blokes I do a fair bit of work for is a trainer called Ted Dean. He’s got about twenty horses, no champions, but some of ’em are quite good earners. Now, I was out there not quite a week ago. He’s got a good horse called Cliff Face. A grey gelding. He’s had him for years. He’s quite a solid horse over a mile. But I reckon he’s getting a bit past it. He’ll still go on winning bits around the place, pay the bills maybe, but I don’t reckon there’s any more sizable wins in him.”

I don’t know if all this was essential to understanding the problem or whether Paddy just thought I’d like to have all this detail. I nodded. With luck he’d get to the crux in a minute or two.

“Now Ted’s got a foreman there, a bloke called Barry Owen. Knows his job but I’ve never thought he’s really good with the horses. Doesn’t make enough allowance for their individuality. He said Cliff Face had pulled a shoe half off in his box and could I come and fix him up. I didn’t think it would be much of a job. Happens all the time. When I got there Cliff Face was still in his box but he’s a quiet horse so I went straight in and said, “Okay, let’s have a look at you, mate.” It wasn’t a big job. Took me maybe five minutes. Then I came out. Barry was standing outside with two men. I didn’t recognise them, though I’ve seen one of them hanging round Clifford Park now and then. I don’t know his name. I wouldn’t want to meet him on a dark night. He’s this great big hulking bloke, looks like a heavyweight boxer ... and I don’t reckon he gets in much practice smiling. Just something pretty tough and unpleasant.”

“He doesn’t ever work there?”

“Don’t reckon so. Anyway, I said to Barry, “I think we’ve got a mix-up here, Barry, that’s not Cliff Face. What’s going on? See, I knew it wasn’t Cliff Face because he’s got these pinky-grey hooves. Bit of a nuisance to look after. He prefers soft tracks. But this grey gelding had much harder black hooves. I s’pose I’m a bit like a dentist. I get to know horses by their hooves. And I was absolutely sure that

wasn't Cliff Face. It was a big open loose box with rails along one side, I couldn't say it'd been too dark to see. If it had been I would've brought him straight out the way I mostly do. But I knew he was a quiet sensible horse and he just stood there and went on with a bit of hay. But Barry just gave me a sort of surprised look and said, "What's got into you today, Paddy, of course that's Cliff Face." I was going to argue. I knew I was right. But these two other blokes sort of came mooching over towards me with scowling faces. For a minute there I thought they were going to hoe into me. But Barry just gave a bit of a smile and said, "C'mon, Paddy, I know you're getting on but your eyes aren't that bad, surely?" and the other blokes realised this was supposed to be some sort of joke. Well! I don't know about them but I didn't feel much like laughing, I can tell you.

"But I really didn't know just what to say. I could keep on insisting it wasn't Cliff Face and I'd like to know what horse it was. Or I could just leave it. If they wanted to insist it was the old fella, well, it was no skin off my nose. And I didn't feel much like getting into an argument. I didn't trust those blokes. They looked too much like standover men. So I just sort of laughed and said, "Call him what you like. It's no skin off my nose." Then I went out to my van and came home."

"And you still feel sure that it wasn't Cliff Face?"

"Abso-bloody-lutely, Bob. It was a grey gelding. It was about his size and shape. But I would swear on a stack of Bibles that it wasn't him."

"So what do you think was going on?"

"Well, first off, I thought one of the young strappers must've got the horses muddled. Wouldn't put it past them. Some of them wouldn't know a donkey from a moose. But unless those two big hulks had moved in to do a bit of stable work for Ted he hadn't put on any new people, s'far as I knew. So I came on home and I was sitting here thinking about it. And I just got to thinking ... maybe I'm missing something here."

"Such as?"

"I won't say Ted's a saint because he isn't. And I reckon Barry wouldn't object to a fiddle here and there if he thought he could get away with it. But I kept thinking ... maybe there's something funny going on."

"You think they might've swapped Cliff Face for another horse and didn't think you'd notice?"

"Well ... it did occur to me. People have this idea I work with that many horses and I'm usually going flat out, specially on race days, that every hoof looks pretty much the same to me. But then I thought—nah, I'm jumping to conclusions. I've known Ted and Barry for years. They're not going to be trying on a scam like that. It probably is just a mix-up. Maybe they just got in another grey and put him in there without thinking. Most places keep the same horse in the same box all the time—but there's a few places that move 'em around just to give the horses a bit o' variety. I don't remember them ever doing that. But no reason why they shouldn't. Maybe Barry realised later it wasn't Cliff Face and swapped them back."

“Would a swap be worthwhile, do you think?”

“Well, that’s the thing, Bob. It might be. Cliff Face is a good reliable old stager but he’s past his best. There’s people that’ll still put a bit each way on him. But if you could get a similar enough grey to take his place, maybe a year or two younger, you just might get away with it.”

“Don’t the stewards check the horses?”

“They’re s’posed to. Yeah. But it’s like everything. You get busy. You get to know a horse—or think you know him. You see a grey and you think ‘yeah, that’s him,’ and you’ve seen him go around a dozen times before and you don’t think twice. I reckon you could get away with it if you don’t get greedy. But you’d have to choose carefully. There’s quite a few punters might pick you up if you didn’t get a grey that was pretty much the same.”

“But it wouldn’t work surely if you came out and won by a street with an old horse that’s on the way down.”

“Exactly. You’d have to ease him in, make it look like Cliff Face is enjoying a second burst. You could put out some story. Some new supplement, say, or you’d found that the old fellow was mildly allergic to something you’d always given him. Or some mild intestinal trouble. A bloke who knows what’s what would soon come up with a plausible story.”

Paddy poured himself another cup of tea. “So what do you reckon I should do, Bob? Just let it go and keep a sharp eye out?”

“Do you shoe all their horses?”

“Usually. But they sometimes get Pete Skinner. I’ve been cutting back a bit. I’m happy for Pete to pick up the slack. So if Cliff Face turns up it doesn’t absolutely mean I’d be the one to whack his racing plates on ... but I’d swear black and blue that wasn’t him. Simple as that.”

“Would it be worth dropping a line to the stewards and just asking them to have an extra close look at the horse. They’d have—what? Brands? Descriptions? Papers?”

“Oh, they could check the brands no trouble. They’ve got details of every horse. But it’s the fallout if I’ve got things wrong, that’s what’s been worrying me. I could say goodbye to any more work from Ted if I dobbed him in.”

“Would that matter?”

I had the impression of an easygoing old sod, one who would take things pretty much in his stride ... and one who was definite about retiring soon. But now he turned and stared at me. “Of course it would matter! I’ve got to live here. Last thing I want is to be blackballed for going sneaking behind someone’s back. It’d be all over town in ten minutes. Blokes wouldn’t want to know me.”

“And the alternative doesn’t bother you? Fraud. Cheating. Abusing the trust of punters. That sort of thing.”

He gave me a long considering look. “Not as much as the other. These people have been my mates for forty years. I’m not going to dob them in.”

Up to a point I felt a certain sympathy. What is police culture if it isn't standing by your mates, right or wrong? But if he didn't want to take my advice then why had he bothered to ask me to come out and hear his story?

"So where do I come into it?"

"Well, I thought maybe you could drop a line to someone ... no, that wouldn't work. No one's ever heard of you. Thing is, Bob, I really just wanted to run it past someone and see what they thought ... and it's no good asking Sid. He'd just think it was some sort of joke, that I was pulling his leg."

Yes, Sid might think that. He didn't seem to take very much in life very seriously. Death maybe. But I doubt if he worried about taxes.

"Thing is, Bob ... I thought maybe you might like to come out for a quick call in there. I can make up a story. Maybe you're interested in buying a horse. Or I left something there. Doesn't matter. And you can come with me for a quick look at the horse. Maybe I really am going a bit ga-ga ... That's got me worried, thinking I don't know one horse from another any more."

I didn't want to. And if someone asked me what sort of horse I was hoping to buy and race, saying I was thinking of something with four fast legs would hardly impress them. But I finally said, okay, I'd come out for a quick tour. If it would set his mind to rest then what was another half hour? I didn't want to think on what would happen if he found Cliff Face still wasn't Cliff Face.

Paddy backed an old van out of the shed. It had painted on it in black: P. Prendergast. Farrier. And his phone number. I got in after he'd scrimmaged round to make some room for my legs. The whole thing smelt of horse and the back was set up with rows of pigeonholes of horseshoes and packets of shoenails and all the rest of his paraphernalia.

We got to the racing stables in about ten minutes. A long drive in. A long line of stables opening on to a big open space and another line parallel behind it. It looked in need of a slap of paint but otherwise was in good nick and the boxes were big and airy and most of them had horses' heads looking out over the half doors. We drove in and parked. The place seemed deserted. We got out and stood there for a couple of minutes. Then Paddy said, "Well, here goes," and I followed him over. A big grey horse stood in one of the boxes.

"I don't usually like to shoe horses in their boxes. I'm always scared of leaving a nail or something in the bedding. But Barry had him tied up in there and as he'd already pulled the shoe off they'd hauled out the bedding in case he'd lost it in there."

We looked in. The horse was standing in deep wood shavings. I didn't know if this was the usual bedding for horses or Ted Dean's particular choice.

Paddy rubbed the horse on his nose. Then he turned to me and said quietly, "This is Cliff Face. Definitely." He unlatched the door and went in. I watched while he lifted a foot and inspected it. I saw him shake his head slowly.

Then he came out again. "I think I'm going barmy. That's definitely him. But I didn't put that shoe on him."

"Can you tell?"

"Yeah. For sure. Pete always nicks them higher up the front."

I didn't have a clue what he was talking about. But I was quite willing to believe that one farrier can tell his own work from someone else's.

We stood a minute looking at the horse. Then we turned and walked back down to the van parked just off the lane. We were nearly there when a screen door somewhere opened and a big fluffy dog came prancing out, closely followed by a man in his forties with his black hair brushed straight back and a rather sour expression.

He came straight on over to us. He seemed to think we were horse dopers or something because his uncompromising expression didn't change. Not until he was almost on us.

"Oh hi, Paddy. What's going on?"

"Hi, Barry. Sorry to bother you. I've been looking all over for one of my hammers. I just wondered if I left it here. But couldn't see it around. You didn't happen to pick it up, did you? Oh, by the way, this is my old mate, Bob. I'm trying to talk him into buying into a neddy, liven up his retirement. You don't happen to know of anything, do you?"

I held out a hand and Barry shook it. He had the proverbial grip of steel.

"Haven't seen any of your gear, mate. Don't know about a suitable horse. There's that mare of Rodney Bishop's. What sort of dough are we looking at?"

This was a facer. What should I suggest. Enough to make Barry like me?

"I told Bob he might buy into something reliable without getting a top horse for around twenty thou. What d'you reckon?" I was glad Paddy was on the ball. But now I had the worry that before you could shake a stick they'd be rushing me off to look at twenty thou worth of horseflesh, whatever that might turn out to be. The rear end maybe.

"Could do." Barry stood there nodding slowly. "D'you want me to see if she's still on the market?"

"No harm in asking," Paddy said.

I could see quite a lot of harm but I just stood there and tried to look like a man who's always wanted to buy 'into' a horse.

"Come on in."

I suppose this charade was worth it—because it brought me face-to-face with one of the terrifying hulks. Barry introduced him as Fred and said he was putting up a new shed for their vehicles. Fred was at least a head taller than me and broad to boot. He had greasy black hair and hadn't shaved for several days. He had what they used to call 'beetling brows' and a heavy jaw and his large teeth reminded me vaguely of a police dog at a riot. I don't think I'd want to meet him down a dark

alley either. And yet he was probably a perfectly pleasant bloke once you got past the obvious ...

It was Barry who worried me.

— v —

He got straight on to the phone. But it was my lucky day. The mare had just sold. Barry looked around the untidy place as though wondering whether to offer us something, then he shrugged. “Do you want me to keep an eye out for you?”

“Look, I’ve got to get on back to the Coast today. But I might be up again in a few weeks. What say I give you a ring then, just see if anything else has come up.”

It didn’t seem to worry him one way or the other and we got back in the van and drove away.

I couldn’t decide what it was about Barry Owen that bothered me. But I was certain that he was crooked. It might just be little fiddles with client’s bills. A bit of padding. It might be cutting corners with feed and equipment. It might be nothing to do with the business. At first I was inclined to think it had something to do with Fred’s presence, he did look like hired muscle, but I gradually came round to seeing it from the other side. Fred seemed scary because he was in Barry’s presence; not the other way around. But I couldn’t narrow it down further. Something cold and assessing about the way Barry had looked me over. Was I a bunny to be skinned? Could he get away with an inflated price. Was I green enough? That kind of gaze.

But Paddy just drove me back, slowly shaking his head as he drove. “I s’pose you think I’m an idiot, Bob, getting you out on some sort of wild goose chase?”

“I don’t honestly know what to think. You’re quite sure that was Cliff Face there now?”

“Definitely. I’d know the old fella anywhere.”

“So it was most likely a mix-up, or someone wasn’t familiar with him ... something that isn’t worth worrying about?”

“I’m not saying that, Bob. No, I still think there’s something a bit suss about Barry insisting that was Cliff Face and telling me I was going senile. What sort of foreman doesn’t know his own horses?”

He sounded quite testy. Was it the implied criticism of his memory?

“Well, maybe people who’ve got a hundred horses don’t know. I’ve never asked.”

“Rubbish. I’ll bet you Gai Waterhouse or Bart Cummings knows every horse and everything about them. You don’t get to the top by having to go and look on your computer.”

“So Barry would have a computer?”

“Sure to have. All of those younger bods are getting them in.”

Paddy drove into his yard, parked, and got out.

“I still think it would come better from you, Bob, just a note to ask them to have a close look at Cliff Face. They’ll take notice of you. They know you just solved a major crime—”

“The stewards do?”

“I’d reckon so. People soon hear what’s going on.”

“Look, Paddy, I’m not being difficult for the sake of being difficult. I’m quite willing to believe that Barry Owen’s not Mother Teresa. But it is your take on the situation. I’m not saying you got it wrong. But you’re the expert on horseflesh, racehorses, horse’s feet. I’m not. If you say it wasn’t the right horse they’re going to believe you. If I say you said—that might be okay—but if you don’t want your name used then we’ve got a problem. Why should they take any notice of me if I say I heard a rumour going round or something. I wouldn’t take that seriously myself, just another crank call, I’d think.”

“I hear what you’re saying, Bob.” It’d be fairly hard not to. Most cops learn not to speak in whispers somewhere along the career track. “But I nudded out a letter last night when I got home. It might do the trick. And it’s not committing you or them to anything, just a little nudge. Know what I mean? If they check up, fine, if they don’t—well, it’s no skin off our noses.” That seemed to be his favourite statement.

Put like that I could only say, “Okay, well, show me what you’ve written.”

We went inside and Paddy said, “Fancy a sandwich? Wouldn’t take me long to rouse up something.”

“No. I’d better get on my way pretty soon. I hate coming into the traffic right in the middle of the rush. I’d like to get home before then.”

I had the vague feeling that he was disappointed in me. I wondered what Sid had told him. Probably that I had seen a problem where no one else had seen anything worse than a bit of an odd turn-up. And so—the feeling was probably—why wasn’t I seeing the seriousness of what Paddy was telling me? Why was I wanting to push it back on to him and get on the road. Maybe I wasn’t the Great Detective after all and couldn’t see what had just been plonked right in front of my nose ... Something along those lines.

It wasn’t a bad letter. It was polite and diplomatic and I didn’t really object to putting my name to it. The thing that was worrying me was not Cliff Face or his supposed doppelganger but Paddy Prendergast. There was something about him that just seemed that little bit too insistent.

I didn’t know him well enough to know whether he was like this about everything, that the cheery he’s-a-good-fellow façade was only part of the story, that underneath Paddy had a habit of getting his own way in everything he set out to do, a kind of strong-minded will, a sense of determination that brooked no cavilling by old sods like me ...

I liked Paddy, what I had seen of him, but I didn’t totally trust him.

Bev might only be repeating hearsay but I was vaguely inclined to think she was right; that Paddy wasn’t totally on the up-and-up. Not in the same league as Barry Owen who had left me with a bad taste in the mouth—but not quite squeaky-clean either.

“Have you got a copy?”

“Yeah. Somewhere here.” He scrabbled round among some papers on the bench in the kitchen. “I tidied it up over breakfast. Here it is.” Both of them were handwritten, about three paragraphs, but the one I was holding was addressed to the Chief Stipendiary Steward. It was, as they say, post-ready.

“Well, what say I take this one with me and post it from the Gold Coast. When’s Cliff Face likely to be racing next?”

“Saturday week.”

“Okay. Well, I’ll give it a bit more thought. And I can type it up on my computer—just in case they know your handwriting. But if you change your mind, I don’t see why you shouldn’t drop them a line too. They might take it more seriously that way.”

He seemed to take this on board. I folded the sheet and put it in my pocket.

“Well, thanks for taking me seriously, mate. I’ve been worrying a bit. It just seemed a bit suss to me. But I’ll relax now. We’ve done what we can and now it’s up to them.”

About five minutes later I drove out of his yard and turned east. I still didn’t really know what to think.

— vi —

A couple of hours later I drew into my carport at Quest Court and got out wearily. I don’t mind meeting people, hearing some wild and woolly tales, but it’s the driving that gets to me. I went stiffly upstairs and unlocked my door and threw my bag in the bedroom and put the kettle on and had a look in my frig. I’d left a loaf of bread in the freezer. I’ve got caught getting home late before now. So I sliced some cheese and onion over it and whacked it in the oven and got down a can of soup. The day was pleasant but not hot.

I was about half way through my meal when Russ Taylor, my next-door-neighbour, came banging on my door.

“Just the person I want,” I said. Because I still felt there was something about the whole story I was missing; maybe because I go a bit blank when it means getting back into an unfamiliar subject ... and the feet of racehorses certainly qualifies as an unfamiliar subject.

I made him a cup of coffee too and we went out on to the balcony.

“You know more about the gee-gees than I do, Russ. So you might see something I’m missing.”

It’s not that Russ has any great expertise. He’s just a weekend punter. But he knows names and knows the jargon. That’s a start. So I got stuck into the story. He seemed to find it interesting. Or maybe he’d been finding life a bit quiet this last week, since coming back from his uncle’s place near Texas.

At the end of it I took out the letter Paddy had given me and passed it across for him to read. At the end he handed it back. “So what’s your take on the whole business, Bob?”

“That’s a tricky one. But taken overall ... I’d say yes, someone is planning a bit of skullduggery. Have you ever heard of Ted Dean or Barry Owen?”

“Dean occasionally brings horses to Brisbane. I’d say he’d be getting on though. Seventies maybe. I’m only guessing. This Owen bloke is probably hoping to take over the stables and string. You didn’t meet Ted Dean?”

“No. Only Barry and some big lug he introduced as Fred.”

“Yeah. It could be. If Dean isn’t keeping a close eye on things he might be in for a nasty shock. But the thing is—I don’t see them trying to do a ring-in with a grey horse. It just wouldn’t work.”

“Why?” I tried to think of some remarkable quality grey horses might have and came up blank. “Is it harder to get a good match?”

“No. I wouldn’t think so. But every mug punter likes grey horses. He can always pick them out of the crowd. It’s psychological, Bob. It makes him feel good. Oh yeah, there’s so-and-so, he says to his mates. Makes it sound like he knows all the neddies. So he looks closer at the grey horse. Maybe he notices if it’s got a pink nose or an extra long tail or maybe it’s a bit dappled ... whatever ... and so I’ll bet you anything you like there’s a lot of people out there that would also recognise this Cliff Face. They might not make a fuss, not if he’s no great shakes of a horse, the sort of old plodder that tries but is never going to mow ’em all down.”

“That’s another thing that’s been puzzling me. Surely there wouldn’t be enough money in it, just some small race in Toowoomba—I just can’t see that netting them enough to be worth going to all this bother.”

“Don’t you believe it. It’s not the prize money. It’s what you bet. Say Cliff Face starts out at thirteen to two or even longer odds, say eight to one, even ten to one ... and by start time he’s firmed to, say, two to one or a bit more. You don’t want it to look suspicious, not odds on for an old reliable, but even so that could net you, say ten thousand, maybe more, for a few hours work. The thing is not to get greedy.”

“Okay, fair enough. We’ll say they’re just trying it out, maybe a trial run, or they just want to make enough to pay off the new shed, nothing big time ... but if you want the scam to succeed then why go for a horse that people may well recognise? Even if they don’t look at his feet ... someone might pick up on something else.”

“I’m only guessing, Bob, but it’s the way you felt you were being pushed to get serious about Cliff Face ... It’s like playing cards and you want someone to pick up the card you want to get rid of ... See what I mean.”

As soon as Russ said that it all suddenly seemed to make sense. It wasn’t Cliff Face they planned to swap. There would be another horse, maybe in the same race, the same afternoon, or soon ... The stewards would check Cliff Face. They would see he was exactly what he was supposed to be. They would assume the letter was a hoax or maybe someone trying to make trouble for Ted Dean. And this other horse

would be a nondescript brown. Maybe. Just the sort of horse that comes in look-alike dozens.

The stewards would apologise. “Sorry about that Ted, just a tip-off we had to check out, didn’t think it would be anything serious.” After all, Ted had been round the traps for forty years. And if those forty years had been blameless?

And then ...

The ‘then’ wasn’t my business.

“You’re right, Russ. That would make sense of it all.”

But it didn’t answer that small question: was Paddy in on it or were they using him cleverly, sowing doubt, knowing he was the sort of bloke who would do something about it. If I hadn’t hoveled in sight he might’ve sent an anonymous letter. Maybe. I wasn’t sure. I’m not sure I really wanted to know. He wouldn’t dob anyone in, no, but I had been aware of his professional pride simmering somewhere there underneath. He didn’t like someone saying he didn’t know a horse when he did.

“So what are you going to do?”

“Well, first off, I think I will write to this bloke,” I flicked the letter Paddy had given me, “and tell him to keep a quiet eye on *all* Ted Dean’s team. But I think I might drop the cops there a copy as well. There is always the small chance that Barry Owen plans to get away with something because he knows he’s got a couple of stewards in his pocket, best mates, drinks with them ... maybe even went to school with them. Who knows? And if Fred and the other hulk have a reputation for twisting arms there just might be another aspect to it.”

“Well, it can happen, I s’pose. You hear stories now and again ... ”

I don’t. But then Russ has got his ear closer to this particular piece of ground.

— vii —

In the end I wrote three letters, one for the stewards, one for the local police, and one to go to the ‘racing correspondent’ of *The Chronicle*. I didn’t know if Toowoomba actually ran to one but they would know who covered Clifford Park and other Downs’ race meetings.

Then I put it out of my mind. It might’ve all been some kind of weird payback Paddy Prendergast had cooked up because Barry Owen was slow to pay his bills. Who could say?

But Russ came round a week or so later to say, “Yep. He’s in the fields for Toowoomba today. Do you want to listen in, Bob, and see if the old codger wins?”

I hadn’t heard back from anyone. So it would be interesting to see what happened to Cliff Face. “Okay. Might as well. But chances are—nothing will happen and they will put it down to some crank.”

“Never mind. You can listen in to your favourite race caller. It’s sure to be Corinne Blake.”

I had quite forgotten about Corinne calling the afternoon’s card; not forgotten maybe, but gone off to New Zealand or somewhere ...

We caught Race Two and it was nice to listen to her—even if none of the names meant anything to me. Then she came on to give the rundown for Race Three. “This is it, Bob,” Russ said in my ear, as though *we* were the co-conspirators, the gang, the criminal masterminds ... another lot of crooks stepped out of the pages of Dick Francis ...

And then ...

I got a ‘then’ after all. She suddenly said in a surprised voice, not her businesslike voice, “The stewards appear to be checking Noble Minton ... I’m not sure why but they seem to be looking particularly at his brand and his markings. It seems premature but I wonder if there’s a suspicion he’s a ring-in?” She gave a brief rundown of the horse’s career. Then she broke off in the middle of this to say, “It looks as though he is going to be removed from the line-up. This will be a blow to punters who have backed him in solidly from eight to one earlier in the day to start at three to two. I’m not sure what the problem with him is but they’ve given the go-ahead for the other runners to go down to the starting gates. So we’ll bring you more information as soon as we can.” She then seemed to put Noble Minton out of her mind and concentrate on the ten other runners.

“We-ell! That’s a turn-up for the books, hey Bob?” Russ said cheerfully. I think he’s getting addicted to these small excitements. Next thing he’ll be wanting to come on ‘cases’ ... Though with luck this might be my swansong ...

He got up and whipped the tops off two more stubbies and brought out a packet of crackers. We listened to Corinne’s call of the race. Cliff Face came in third. I didn’t really want to spend my whole afternoon listening in but Russ kept hoping some more information would be offered.

It wasn’t till things were about to be wrapped up that the stewards in Toowoomba released a statement to the effect that the horse entered as Noble Minton, by trainer Edward Dean was in fact a horse called Bolly Bay. An enquiry would be conducted into how the mix-up had occurred.

“There you are, Bob!” Russ gave me a thumbs-up. “Foiled their dastardly plot. I wonder if they will contact you? It must’ve been your letter that did it.”

“Or their stewards are more on the ball than we’ve given them credit for.”

Russ, as an occasional punter, was now in a bind. He wanted to believe all stewards are on the ball before he plonks his hard-earned dough down at the nearest tote—but he also liked the thought that he and I had been the x-factor in this saga, that without us the stewards would have let the ring-in through without batting a collective eyelid ...

He was on a high all evening and I didn’t say anything to spoil it for him. But when I finally got into bed I wondered why I couldn’t share his pleasure in what seemed like a successful outcome. I just lay there letting it all roll to and fro—and it gradually came to me.

It wasn’t that I believed Barry Owen had been clever enough to use me in his deep game, after all he’d only just met me for those few minutes, but I had been

right in seeing there was a cold calculating ruthless intelligence at work. It wasn't about winning a race with the wrong horse, with landing some decent bets ... No, Barry Owen had bigger fish to fry.

It was Ted Dean as trainer who would probably be disqualified. He was maybe thinking about retirement already. Now it would mean ending his career in humiliation and disgrace. Naturally his foreman would have a slick excuse, maybe he had even worked a similar sort of sleight-of-hand with Ted as he had worked with Paddy. It didn't really matter who saw what; he had organised it in such a way that he couldn't lose. If Noble Minton got through unscathed there would be a nice little win to pick up. If he didn't it would be Ted who'd find his head on the chopping-block ...

And Fred and the other hulk? Were they merely builders? Or were they on the property for a quite different reason?

To intimidate an old man ...

Into handing over control ...

Into not asking the right questions ...

Into signing something ...

I hadn't met Ted and I couldn't unravel the dynamics of the possible relationship between Ted and Barry. But at last I felt I was a bit closer to understanding that sense of unease I had felt when I met Barry. I had gained the sense that he regarded Paddy with contempt. Just an old bumbler trying to say one horse was another horse when he'd clearly got himself completely mixed up ...

But now I thought the contempt was something bone-deep. Barry was a man playing for much bigger stakes. Ted. Paddy. Any other old sod who tried to say black was white but didn't really know what he was trying to say ... Barry would either frighten them off or deride them off. Had Ted raised the same sorts of questions about Noble Minton ... only to find to his surprise, next morning, that Noble Minton was Noble Minton and it must be his memory or his eyesight that was playing him false?

But what were the stakes? The most obvious thing seemed to be the farm, the house, and the stables. What would they be worth? I didn't know how much land was involved. Nor did I know if Ted had any family. But chances were there was no one waiting in the wings.

But this could also be a dress-rehearsal for something much bigger. All of Ted's horses would now get a much closer inspection—if he retained his licence. But it didn't mean other horses in other names in other stables would get the same close scrutiny.

Or it might be to do with something else. Not money. I could well believe that Barry would not forgive some old slight or damage he believed Ted had done him. Was it finally payback time?

I couldn't guess. I only had my gut instinct to go by. And it sometimes lets me down. Nor could I decide on any likely course of action. I would just have to put my faith in those stewards and their enquiry.

— viii —

Next morning I had a change of heart and rang Paddy Prendergast. I only got his answering-machine. It seems that farriers don't even get Sunday rest. Unless he was a dedicated churchgoer.

My message was simple. Go in and tell the stewards about what happened with Cliff Face. Otherwise Ted may lose more than his licence. I couldn't be more specific. The card had been forced on Paddy and without realising it he had shifted it on to me. Your card now, mate. Maybe.

I heard nothing back. Till about a week later.

Russ came in with a cutting his cousin in Toowoomba had sent him. It simply said that the stewards investigating the Noble Minton substitution had widened their enquiry to take in all the staff and contractors at Ted Dean's stables, as well as the owners of all horses currently stabled there. Russ asked me what I made of it. It was probably one of those moments to say something profound like: The mills of God grind slow something-something-something but they also grind exceedingly small. I forget the exact words.

Instead I said, "Good. I'd say that place would repay a thorough investigation."

Whether Ted Dean would come through it safely, whether Ted Dean was a party ... it was no longer my worry but I sincerely hoped they would be more than a match for Barry Owen.

And I think there's another quote that might fit but I've forgotten it too. Something about Augean stables ...

- end -

GHOST RIDERS

- i -

It was quite a long time since I had seen my sister Kaye. She lives in Auckland and only comes this way occasionally, preferring her side of the 'pond'. We have always got on well—probably because there was/there are six years between us.

So I was surprised to get a ring from her to say she was coming my way, planning to stay a couple of weeks with an old friend near Killarney. I asked her if

she would have the time to come and stay on her way through. That wasn't what she had in mind. Would I like to come with her? Liz-Anne was now a widow and would love to have us both.

There was a slight problem with the timing of it all. I had said I would be happy for Deborah, Aidan, and her two girls, to come to Surfers for the school holidays. I didn't know how I was going to cope with this—but there seemed to be only one way to find out.

But Kaye had an immediate answer. "Why not bring them all? We can hire a caravan or a tent. Liz-Anne has the ponies. I'd like to meet your ... friends."

"Uh-uh. But I don't know how Liz-Anne would take such an invasion." And I didn't know Deb or her kids well enough to know how they would respond.

I had only a very vague memory of Liz-Anne. She and Kaye had been best friends at school. And thinking back to two small giggling girls when I was a cynical teenager wasn't exactly a memory of Liz-Anne as a person. But I knew from Kaye's occasional mentions in her letters that Liz-Anne had married, moved from Sydney to a farm near Killarney, and eventually she had started a small Welsh Mountain Pony stud. So far as I knew I had never seen a Welsh Mountain Pony. I pictured something small and shaggy and usually ridden by a small sadist in a hard hat.

Kaye went to New Zealand as a young teacher on a working holiday, married there, lived an uneventful if pleasant life with her husband and two sons, now grown up, and then something strange happened. A friend of theirs had written a children's book. He knew Kaye loved sketching and painting and he asked her to do a couple of illustrations to go with his book. He couldn't promise that publication would result. But Kaye enjoyed doing it for free. And the book was snapped up. So was Kaye. Suddenly she had other requests to illustrate books, posters, and leaflets. She loved it. She retired from teaching. (Her husband Bill ran a pathology lab in Auckland.) She made a modest name for herself. I got rather a buzz out of having her books on my shelves. Reflected glory you might say. Not that there was anyone to impress apart from my old neighbour Russ and I don't inflict kids' books on him.

I wasn't sure that I really wanted to go to Killarney but Deborah and the girls, after saying they couldn't impose on a stranger, well, the kids didn't say that, all seemed to think it would be quite nice to see the ponies.

I wasn't sure I could even say that.

- ii -

We were a bit like one of those American sit-coms rolling into town. I hoped we wouldn't have to yell goodnight to each other for half-an-hour every evening.

But it was a nice farm, lovely trees, a big sprawling old house, a pleasant old-fashioned garden with a summer-house in it. And everywhere were ponies, cattle, cats, guinea pigs, spaniels, bantams, a nanny goat with two small kids ... and Liz-Anne was a woman not unlike Kaye, one of those women who just make you feel

cheerful and positive and that life really isn't too bad. Kaye takes after our parents, both optimists; I don't know who Liz-Anne takes after.

Kaye and I drove up, settled our stuff in, then I went into Warwick to pick up Deb and her family off the bus. (I hadn't suggested buying Deb a car but it might make life easier for her.) I was half-expecting the kids to be ratty, the baby to be crying, and Deb fed-up and cranky. But, amazingly, they all seemed to think they were setting out on some great adventure. They reminded me of those kids in Enid Blyton stories all setting out on their bikes all ready to be shut up in the covers of another mystery. I wasn't expecting any mysteries, just a rather tiring few days.

Liz had prepared a room opening on to the back verandah for Deb and the baby and she'd set up her small caravan for the two girls. They seemed to be thrilled at the idea. As for me—I only got a bunk bed on the verandah. “Sorry, Bob, but it's really very comfortable,” Liz said, not sounding sorry at all.

It wouldn't have bothered me particularly if I hadn't been surrounded by noise. Every minute of the first evening and the second morning there seemed to be chooks clucking and dogs woofing and kids yelling and the baby crying and Kaye and Liz clacking away nineteen-to-the-dozen, not to mention the TV on and the phone ringing. I was sorry I'd said I'd come ...

I crept away into the big sitting-room, settled myself down in the most comfortable armchair I could find, closed my eyes, tried to close my ears to the sounds of people galloping up and down outside, and sank into a reverie.

The whole idea of coming here was to do with getting to know Deborah better, even getting to know my son better ... except the little tyke had given everyone else a toothless smile but only looked at me as if to say ‘call yourself a father, eh? Well, I've got news for you, mate’ ... And I knew the thought was quite right. I couldn't picture any sort of relationship between myself and Deb, just a vague and tepid friendship. But now as I sat there in the cool dim room, hoping no one would burst in wanting to play the old upright piano in the corner or, worse, drag me out to ‘join in’ ... whatever, I knew the real problem was that it would not have mattered who Deb was, how beautiful, how nice, how sympathetic and witty and kind, how few problems instead of how many she had in her life. I already had the only woman my life could cope with in it. Petra. She annoys me. She organises me. She expects me to drop everything for other people. She makes rude remarks about police in general and the NSW police in particular.

But she also makes me feel life is worth living, life zings and hums and has a lot more going for it than I usually allow ... I don't mind in the least if most people in my life are ‘ships passing’ but I would hate to lose Petra. Simple as that. The one good thing about Deborah was that she seemed to understand and sympathise with this. I didn't have to justify anything ... let alone try to explain ...

But it didn't stop me feeling vaguely guilty when I thought about little Aidan. He hadn't asked for my kind of serious disinterest. He deserved to have a decent caring on-the-spot dad. I didn't know where I could find him one. I must've dozed

off in the middle of what seemed like a hopeless quest because Kaye came in and tapped me on the shoulder. “Honestly, Bob, anyone’d think you worked a sixty-hour week! Every time I see you you’re plonked in an armchair snoring.”

“I wasn’t snoring.”

“I won’t argue. Everyone deserves to believe the best about themselves.” She put on a wry sort of grin. “But we’ve got visitors coming over for a barbecue lunch so you might like to put in an appearance. You might even like to come and turn the snags for me.”

I got up with a silent groan, smoothed my sparse hair down and creaked out to the back yard where a portable barbecue had been set up and several pie-dishes of uncooked meats, rissoles, steaks, and sausages, were standing ready along with a heap of onion rings.

The girls, who had taken to calling me Uncle Bob, were still out with Liz in the paddocks with some of her pretty little grey ponies. You could see that they were already wondering how they might smuggle a couple home in their luggage. Kaye was busy buttering rolls. Deb was somewhere with the baby. A pick-up turned into the lane and parked a few moments later by the big mulberry tree that overhung the tractor shed.

There was no doubt about it. This farm was a friendly easy-going sort of place. So why was Liz not quite in tune with the feeling the farm gave off? She must still be missing her husband. I couldn’t really pull up much of a memory of him. I think I met him once, many years ago in Sydney, and he was something foreign, Yugoslav I think, which also made this farm a surprising place. I tend to think of anyone from that part of the world as being ‘volatile’. And why would he want to come here?

The visitors were Liz’s next-door-neighbours: the father Julian and his two sons Mark and Aaron who looked to be a year or two older than Alison and Harriet. There were general hulloes and introductions all round. They seemed like nice people. The boys didn’t glower at the girls or sneer or say critical things under their breath. Julian appeared to be a cheerful friendly sort of person. Liz came in from letting the ponies go and gossiped with him for several minutes before coming over and asking me if I’d like a hand. I shrugged and said, “If you like.” It was actually if Julian would like, Liz believing that all men naturally prefer the company of other men. They mostly do but I had the sneaking suspicion that Julian was the sporty outdoor type who would take his boys hiking and camping of a weekend. He would probably see through my brisk veneer to the slob underneath.

Deborah came along the verandah, having presumably got the baby to sleep, and down the steps to join us. Julian turned to meet her. And you could hear his audible gasp. Obviously Killarney whatever its other attractions didn’t offer up women as attractive as Deborah. He looked at me, he looked back to Deb. He seemed to be under a misapprehension because he told me I was a lucky devil. It took me a minute to twig.

“Oh Deb’s not my wife. Just a friend.”

“Is she married?”

“She is—or she was—but as her husband was an A-One bastard she is in the process of trying to get free. And you?”

For a moment his face seemed to go blank. It obviously wasn’t a subject he liked to share with strangers. “My wife rolled the car and died two years ago. It’s just the boys and me.”

“I’m sorry. That must’ve been a blow.”

“It was. She was drunk at the time.” His face remained curiously immobile. He turned back to the sizzling meat. “Do you reckon there’s any ready to serve up?”

I beckoned to the girls to bring over some of the bread rolls and we slapped sausages and onions into several. “I’m sure you’re hungry after your busy morning. How about the boys? Are they ready to eat?”

Everyone stood or sat around eating things dripping with tomato sauce and mustard and adding salad and Liz kept going to the kitchen for more bottles of her homemade ginger beer. It was all very chatty and pleasant and somewhere in the middle of it Julian invited everyone to come over to his farm later and see around.

Liz told me his boys were very good riders and she had several times let them take her ponies to shows to ride in pony hack classes and novelty events. I made an immediate mental resolution to avoid joining the cavalcade. Possibly I could offer to look after the baby ...

I am not sure that I can say the boys and the girls immediately forged a bond. They traded questions but kept a slight distance. But it was Julian and Deb who intrigued me. I’ve never seen anyone so immediately smitten as Julian. Deb was harder to read. She seemed to think he was pleasant and quite easy to chat with. But I couldn’t read more than that into it.

As I was carting plates into the kitchen later Liz said to me, “I said we would wash up and for the others to go on over to Julian’s. I hope you don’t mind. But I didn’t think you were really fussed on going.”

True. I cannot honestly say I was fussed on washing up either but it seemed the lesser of two evils. We also got landed with the baby but as he was a cheerful gurgly sort of baby I thought we could probably cope. Liz, not having had children herself, wasn’t motherly in that way but as she had been a nurse many years ago I thought we would survive.

As we watched the pick-up depart and Kaye drive away with Deb and the girls in my car Liz turned and said to me, “I really wanted to get you to myself for a little while, Bob. I would appreciate your advice on a very strange thing that happened after Stephen died.”

— iii —

She washed. I dried. Then she made a pot of coffee and got out some walnut slices and took everything into the sitting-room. As she poured she said, “It isn’t that I need anything done, don’t look so worried. But I have been worrying. And you are a practical down-to-earth sort of person. I would be glad of your advice.”

“Okay. Shoot.”

I sat back, wondering what kind of worries Liz might have in her life.

“It was well after Stephen had died, after the funeral and probate and everything, that I got a bill for rates on a property in New South Wales. It was in Stephen’s name but I had absolutely no knowledge of him owning any land over the border.”

“What kind of property?”

“Well, it is rural land, ninety-seven hectares, with a house on it. That was according to the bill. I rang the council there, thinking it must be a mistake, or someone of the same name or something. But they said no, it was a property which appeared to have been in that name for many years. I said Stephen had died. They said I would still need to pay up unless I wanted to forfeit the land. Bob, I really didn’t know what to think. It just didn’t make sense. Stephen hadn’t been in very good health for quite a while before he died. He was a diabetic. I couldn’t imagine him wanting *more* land. The only thing I could think of was the possibility that he had bought the land for someone else, a friend or relative. He was a generous man. Even though he lived up here all those years he still gave a little bit of financial support to a Sydney soccer club, little things like that. He had a distant cousin in Sydney but no other family here and we didn’t have children so I think he felt he was sort of helping in lieu of spending money on his own children.”

“So you paid up?”

“I did. But first I decided the only thing to do was to go and actually *see* the land for myself. I thought there might be some clue there. So I drove down one weekend and found it. It’s in the hills there near Woodenbong. Quite heavily timbered.” She shook her head slowly. “It didn’t make sense, Bob. There was a house on it. A bit of old furniture in it, a few tins on the shelves. But no sign that anyone had been actually living in it. And the only value of the place that I could see was that the timber would be worth something if it was sold to a sawmill. You could clear the place and maybe run a few cattle. But it was pretty stony and steep. It would never make good cattle country. I wondered if Stephen had bought it as an investment so if anything ever went wrong here I could sell it to help fund my retirement. But there was something about the place ... I don’t think I’m particularly sensitive or anything ... and it may just be the house and the trees sort of crowding in ... but I felt really depressed there. It wasn’t a nice place.”

I nodded slowly. “Or it wasn’t the sort of place you could imagine Stephen buying and keeping for you?”

“I suppose so.”

Where Kaye is much like me, one of those medium sort of people, medium tall, medium colouring, medium looks, Liz-Anne is rather more solidly built, her blue eyes are large, her mouth is large, her style is extroverted, large-hearted, cheerful. But I felt she had been stewing over this and letting it get her down.

“But you could just sell and put it behind you?”

“In theory I could ... but I can’t. Bob, there was absolutely no mention of it in Stephen’s will. I can’t understand that. I couldn’t help wondering whether he had got tired of keeping it as an investment and might’ve been negotiating with someone else to buy it ... so he assumed it would be gone by the time he died. He could simply leave the money. But then something else happened. Because the people who knew Stephen here were a quite different group to the ones he’d known in Sydney from when he first arrived I thought it would be best to simply have a funeral here with our friends and neighbours. But I sent several In Memoriam notices to Sydney newspapers just so that anyone who remembered him there would know he had died. I didn’t hear from anyone till months and months later, after I’d got the bill for the farm, and it was a card.”

She got up and went over to a small corner cupboard with nice china in the glassed part and took a card from the drawer below. She handed it to me. “What do you think?”

It said simply: Don sell the land or you will be sorry.

“You think it refers to the property?”

“It must. I don’t know anyone in Sydney, apart from my family, who would be interested in this farm. But I really don’t know what to think.”

“And no one has approached you about buying that land from you?”

“No. Nothing. But the most upsetting thing about it all, Bob, is that I thought I knew my husband. After being married to someone for thirty-five years ... I know his life before he came here was in a sense a closed book. He didn’t really like talking about the war. But I would still have said I knew what he thought and felt and all the rest. I thought we were very close. And now I have the dreadful feeling that I was married to a stranger all those years.”

I nodded. I could understand that. “Why did you decide to come up here?”

“It was partly that my family were country people. They moved to Sydney because my brother had a serious health problem. I don’t know if you remember Russell.”

“Vaguely.”

“And it was Stephen too. He had grown up in the countryside. He never really liked the rush and bustle. He always said he would rather be surrounded by cows than people. So we used to spend all our holidays driving. We wanted to find a farm we could afford but also a place, a community, where we thought we would like living. We first saw Killarney in a really good year, everything was green and good. I sort of felt this is the nearest I am ever going to get to Ireland. And we both liked it. That was so important. There was an old couple living here. They had been thinking of retiring and they said they would give us first offer. They were very good. They let us make a deposit in three installments. I think they had really loved this place and were prepared to be flexible to get people who would also love it. I always thought we were very lucky.”

“Have you spoken to your lawyer about that property? Can you prove that you own it?”

“I haven’t. Not yet. The thing is, although Stephen specified this property and left me everything he owned, there is no mention of any other real estate. Everything he owned would include it if I can prove he did actually own it ... but I haven’t done anything yet. It’s partly that I feel uncomfortable admitting to anyone that I was in complete ignorance ... and I really don’t know what to make of that card.”

She waved her hand towards the card I was still holding. It had a view of the Sydney Harbour Bridge on the front.

“And you are certain that he left you absolutely everything? No small bequests to old friends or relatives?”

“No. He thought it would be simpler. He asked me to send a couple of things to a distant cousin of his in what was Yugoslavia before it self-destructed. Which I did. I didn’t hear anything back ... but of course the relative may have had a stroke or anything ... or just might not be a letter-writer. I don’t know what the parcels were. He’d done them up ready for posting. About the size and shape of a book maybe.”

“Mmmm. Well, I think the first thing you need to do is to get the title deed for the property. If it is definitely in Stephen’s name then I think you would have no difficulty in selling it. You might need some legal advice on probate and so on as you didn’t take it into consideration the first time around. If you don’t feel comfortable doing it through your lawyer here I’m sure we can find a lawyer in Sydney to do it all for you. If the property isn’t in Stephen’s name and he was simply paying the rates and taxes on it to help someone, a fellow countryman, or an old mate he knew in Sydney, then there is absolutely no reason why you should be saddled with that expense. They can either sell it or forfeit it. That would be their choice.”

“That does sound simple. Thank you.” She pushed the plate of slices in my direction again.

“There is still this card.” I couldn’t be sure of the postmark. And I suppose it would qualify as sending threatening material through the post. But as there was no return address a prosecution would be extremely difficult and busy employees probably would have difficulty regarding a simple postcard as threatening. “You’ve never seen this writing on letters sent to your husband?”

“Not that I can remember. Maybe if they’d written more something might occur to me.”

“Well, I think we can assume there’s a good chance it came from someone who spoke English but didn’t write it with great comfort.”

Liz nodded. “Yes, that’s what I thought. Actually my nephew in Sydney is a lawyer. I wonder if he would be willing to go to the Land Titles’ Office for me.”

“No harm in asking. Liz, I don’t actually know if it would be the slightest use me going down and looking at your land ... but I s’pose there’s always the

possibility I might see something you didn't. Did Stephen ever go away without you?"

"Oh yes, now and then. I would take my ponies to shows sometimes without him ... and he would occasionally go to Sydney without me. Occasionally we would go together to Noosa or Burleigh Heads and I would ask Julian and the boys to mind the cattle and horses and everything. They're very good about helping out."

In the distance I heard a car turn into the lane. Life and noise was about to return. But little Aidan had slept through most of the afternoon so I couldn't complain on that score.

Liz gathered our cups and plates. "Bob, I would really appreciate that. I still don't know what to think about that land. But I definitely don't want it. I will be very glad to sell it as soon as I can." I think she knew I was using the land as an excuse to avoid more of this jolly all-in-together-isn't-this-marvellous stuff ... but I had the impression that Liz-Anne would never put me on the spot. Maybe that was the problem. Her husband knew that too. Had known.

- iv -

I'm not sure that anyone even noticed I was missing next morning. Certainly no one greeted me when I got back with "Bob! Where've you been?" Liz-Anne gave me detailed instructions on how to find the property. She also gave me a key to the chain and padlock she had put on the gate. This turned out to have been a waste of time and money on her part.

Killarney though pleasant and even quite attractive in its old buildings is not a place to remember but the countryside round there, though dry, seemed friendlier than the timbered hills over the border. This was once timber-milling country but the small mills everywhere are failing. What the timber here is worth I have no idea. But Stephen's property still contained its trees. That was something to be pleased about I suppose. But the gate chain had been cut through and removed. It strengthened my belief that the sooner Liz-Anne could sell this place and be rid of it the better.

The track, winding in through the timber, was faint. Vehicles obviously used it. But none had done so lately ... or it had rained recently. I followed it in until I came to the house. There was something odd about the house. It was a weatherboard building, painted a muddy-green, though not recently, and with a small verandah at the front where you could stand and look down the long rough valley between two hills. It was a gloomy place to put a house. And the building itself suggested someone had dug in some stumps, then carried an old house in on the back of a truck and dumped it on top. There was a tank. There was some scratched-up mismatching furniture. There were shelves of tinned food in the kitchen, baked beans, soup, camp pie, that type of stuff. Survival food. And some scratched together tin plates, a bit of cutlery. It reminded me of the sort of building people might put on land they visited occasionally to check on a herd of store bullocks. Just a place to camp for a night or two.

There was nothing about it which suggested a home, that people came here for the pleasure of coming. So the question had to be—why had Stephen bought this place, kept it on, presumably visited it occasionally ... and kept it a secret from his wife?

The house didn't come with any papers to suggest the age of it, how long it had sat here unnoticed in the thick timber. In fact there was no sign of any paper at all. Nor did it have the power connected. Nor the phone. There was an old wood-burning stove in the kitchen. Its sparseness might be the result of thieves and vandals. But I couldn't picture it ever having been a home.

I went outside again. I wanted to find something, anything at all, which might give a clue to its use. I didn't want to return empty-handed. So I mooched round the non-existent yard, then took the long walk down into the valley to the boundary fence. Had Stephen bought it because it abutted the property of a friend? Because it might save the area from a plan to clear-fell? Because of a feud? Anything was possible. But nothing gripped me. I could well understand why Liz-Anne found the place depressing.

The southern boundary was a four-strand barb-wire fence, far from new. The posts were lichened, the wire rusty. But there was something of interest further down the valley: what looked like a well-used track. Not a vehicle track—unless I was looking at mountain bikes, quad bikes, that kind of thing. It might be used by orienteering people. But I was inclined to think it was a horse-riding trail. Somewhere in the distance, very faint, was what might be water running.

I felt a deep reluctance to turn round and return to the uncommunicative house.

Why would anyone even think of threatening Liz? I'm sure if they asked nicely she would *give* the place to them, lock, stock, and barrel. Or sell it for peanuts.

Did Stephen have relatives who felt they should inherit it—rather than Liz?

But I was yet to meet a Yugoslav who really wanted to come and live in the back of beyond. Still, the thought set me wondering. Yugoslavia was no longer relevant. Maybe it had never been relevant. Many of those who'd come to Australia as refugees or migrants did not see themselves as Yugoslavs. If anything they were running away from that all-in-togetherness ...

Stephen's surname was Dollans. But that offered no clues. I was pretty sure he had changed his name to make life easier for lazy Australian officials somewhere back in the fifties. Dobromovesich? C'mon, mate, give us a break! How about Doman or something simple like that?

I was musing on the little I remembered of Stephen in the flesh and Kaye's occasional mentions of him and Liz when the distant sound began to take on a more discernible suggestion of hoofbeats. I climbed through the fence and made my way down the steep stony slope towards the trail.

- v -

Lone women in bushland are probably wise not to stop when strange men leap out of said bushland in front of them. I wasn't sure whether to step out and hope that

I would not get ridden over, round, down ... or just to stand there looking like someone in distress. As the animal came closer I could see it was a large glossy mule moving at a brisk smooth trot and ridden by a young woman in hard hat, t-shirt and jeans. She looked to be someone who would take sudden mysterious appearances in her stride. There was something very firm and definite about her chin.

She slowed to a walk, then stopped before she got to me. "Is anything wrong?"

"No, not wrong exactly. I just wondered if you might know anything about that property back there—" I waved a hand back towards the nearly hidden farmhouse, "if you ride past here regularly."

She didn't seem fully reassured. "Why do you want to know?"

I took out my wallet and said, "I'm quite safe. I'm just doing a quiet investigation."

She came up closer and put a hand out for the wallet. I gave the mule's soft muzzle a tentative pat. It showed no sign of wanting to bite me.

She handed the wallet back. "I'm not the right person to ask. I've only heard gossip. I've never actually seen anyone there. Anyway, what's going on? Is it a crime scene?"

"Not as far as I know. But there seems to be some doubt over who actually owns the land."

She nodded. "You could ask the Campbells, I guess. They might know. They live further back that way."

"And when you say gossip? What sort of gossip?"

She put her head on one side and gave me a wry look. "Lots of shooting. Rifles. Boom boom. Then it all goes quiet again for months."

"Would they be shooting *at* something? I don't know what. Wild cattle? Brumbies?"

"People reckon it's some city yobs that come up here in their holidays and pretend to be ... you know, wild men, commandos, guerrillas, that sort of stupid stuff. But as I say I've never seen or heard anyone here myself. But I don't like people mis-using the place."

I had thought she was only about twenty but her very serious censorious tone suggested she might be older; not that the young can't be censorious.

"From a conservation angle you mean ... or because of danger to passers-by?"

"Every endurance rider is a natural conservationist. We see the rubbish people think they're dumping out of sight. We see mess hidden in places that are supposed to be pristine parks. It makes me wild that people think just because Australia is big it doesn't matter how they treat the land. And you have to have a screw loose to waste thousands of litres of petrol just driving out to some distant property to take pot-shots at trees and targets."

"Oh, I agree. You ride as a hobby or as a serious competitor?"

“I’m working towards next year’s Tom Quilty but we’ll work up towards it in small stages.”

“Well, good luck.” I had no idea what Tom Quilty might refer to, who or what, but assumed it was most likely to be the name of a competition. I took out a spare card and jotted my mobile number on the back. “If you happen to think of anything else I’d be glad to hear from you.”

She didn’t look excited at the prospect of getting further involved. She held the card a moment as though it was a dangerous insect then slipped it into a saddlebag. Then she gathered up her reins again, said a rather curt “Okay,” and moved on. I don’t think she really believed me. Or else she still hadn’t stopped thinking that she was a woman alone in remote bushland with a strange and possibly dangerous man. I didn’t really blame her. Nor did I have any strong hopes of future contact.

I turned and trudged back up the hill, climbed through the fence, and went on up towards the house. As I came closer I noticed something that hadn’t been obvious from the back: a pile of rubbish heaped under the front verandah.

— vi —

I wasn’t fussed on the idea of raking through someone else’s rubbish. So I went back to my car, took out the Thermos and lunchbox Liz had given me and sat down on a nearby log and poured myself a cup of black tea and worked my way through some cheese and pickle sandwiches and a Red Delicious.

Sitting there quietly, with nothing more than an occasional bird call and the scrape of something in a tree, a goanna maybe, it was quiet and peaceful. Maybe I was reading something into this land that had more to do with Liz-Anne’s stresses and strains and unexpected worries than it really warranted.

And even if some morons had driven all the way up here to carry out target practice or take potshots at birds ... was that a crime?

Yet someone, I had no idea who, did not want Liz-Anne to sell the property. Why?

It suggested there was something here they needed to remove, to find, to ...

And yet one postcard was hardly a major threat.

Someone wanted the status quo to remain unchanged ... and yet they didn’t want to hurt Liz-Anne? I didn’t think I could put any great trust in this assumption. The stakes might rise if Liz-Anne put the property on the open market.

But how closely was anyone using, watching, monitoring the property?

I finally gave up musing and got a long branch and raked out some of the rubbish. It was mostly old rusty cans. I didn’t want to read a lot into their rustiness. Cans don’t take long to rust. Their labels were almost unreadable but it didn’t seem to matter. They were just common brands. I kept hoping to find something else, something more personal, but it wasn’t my lucky day. No papers, no broken bottles, no unusual labels, no pieces of clothing, nothing which gave a clue to anyone’s identity.

I finally gave up on the rubbish pile. There didn't seem to be anything for it but to criss-cross the land itself and hope that I might come across something dumped or shot out or somehow left like a signature tune ...

I didn't relish the prospect. But it was quiet and cool in the timber so I couldn't plead heat, dust, weariness. I can't say what most of the trees were but they struck me as rather dark and sombre, blackbutts maybe, but I'm only guessing. I spent the next three hours working across that steep thickly-timbered land. And I began to think that the woman on the mule was not too far off the facts. Except that the signs still didn't give any clue to identities. Did Stephen come down here occasionally and work off some secret aggression? Did he invite friends? Or did he simply allow other people to use his land?

I finally gathered up a couple of bags of this contentious rubbish, put everything back in the car, and set out back to Killarney.

— vii —

The others had eaten when I got back. I was tired. I just wanted to sit back and close my eyes and think.

Deborah and the children had borrowed Liz's car, I had never seen Deb drive and the car wasn't set up for babies, but they were only going next door. Kaye and Liz came and sat down while I tucked into the bowl of dumpling soup and then a plate of goulash with rice they had kept for me.

They had two things on their minds: what I might or might not have found ... and Deb's visit to Julian. I could see they were both longing to know just where Deb came into my life and whether I should now be getting worried.

I said I could see, anyone could see, Julian was smitten by Deb.

It was Kaye who bit on that bullet. "I think it might be mutual, Bob. Julian is an attractive young man. Fairly young. And he had a hard time with Marietta. Deb might be able to feel sorry for him."

"What did Marietta do?"

"She drank. She was coming home when she flipped the car and crushed herself and bled to death. Very sad. And it's been pretty hard for Julian and the boys to come to terms with it all. He sort of feels guilty that he didn't try harder to get her to get help."

I thought but didn't say that putting two damaged people together isn't always a recipe for happiness. "Well, it's not my business. And Deb is always going to put the interests of her children first ... "

I could almost feel their eyes boring into me. Oh yes, I could feel them thinking, not your business ... and where does young Aidan come into it all, pray tell? But they didn't say it. I felt they were humouring an old duffer they probably saw as making a last lunge at the fountain of youth. A bit embarrassing really and better discreetly passed over.

"So we are dying to know what you found, Bob," Liz said briskly. "If anything."

"A great many tins of baked beans. Are you sure Stephen wasn't a secret Western fanatic?"

"Not that he ever said. I suppose lots of people like baked beans."

"Mmmm. Tell me, Liz, do you remember what soccer team Stephen supported?"

"Oh, Sydney United, I think."

"So he definitely was Croatian?"

"Well, he grew up there. But I always felt he wasn't very comfortable in the times when he was invited to the club or was expected to support things the Croatian community was doing. I felt it was to get away from that close sense of community that we came up here. Do you think it's relevant—to the land I mean?"

"I'm sure it is. I'm just not sure how. Did you have any luck with your nephew?"

"Yes, I rang him at the office this morning and he said he would go round to the Lands office in his lunchbreak ... or ask someone in the office to go ... and he rang me back at about four to say, yes, the land was in Stephen's name and he'd owned it since 1970. But it didn't make sense to me. He just didn't have that kind of money. We spent nearly twenty years paying this farm off. How could he be buying more land only two years after we moved here? He must've let someone else use his name. It just doesn't make sense otherwise. Unless someone *gave* him the land. And I really can't believe that either."

"Do you know the name of the previous owner?"

"Yes. Someone called Roderick Campbell."

I nodded. Obviously there were still Campbells in the district. It just might be worth tracking them down. The Creightons have never had any reason to hold a grudge against any Campbells and I am not a fan of traditional jokes about the miserliness of the Scots. But if Mr Campbell simply sold the block as a useful stand of timber there might be nothing unusual in the transaction. If someone else provided the money it didn't mean that Stephen went round telling the Campbell family ...

"So we're not really any further forward," Kaye said drily.

"Yes. We are. But I'm not sure that Liz will like what I've found. I brought back a selection but I left a great deal more there. Someone has been using your land as a firing range. And they weren't just a few yobs with a three-o-three."

"What do you mean?"

"A very nice arsenal in someone's hands. Even hand grenades probably. Some big bikkies by your unknown visitors. I think, just think, that that's why you got that card. For some reason they haven't had the chance to get up to the land in the period after they saw your notices in Sydney papers ... or maybe they didn't see them and only heard later on the grapevine. They may be wanting to do some sort of a clean-up job before you sell the land. They may just want to scare you enough to stay your

hand. But I can't guarantee that. So I think we have to take them seriously. If they've got that sort of weaponry they just may be willing to use it."

"But ... who are 'they', Bob?" Kaye had begun to frown. Liz too looked worried.

"I don't remember the exact time frame or the order of things ... but you remember what was going on in Sydney years ago? About 1970? The bombing of the Yugoslav embassy, talk of secret Croat training camps up in the Blue Mountains, and a group went off, apparently with the blessing of the Australian Government, back to Croatia to mount an uprising."

"Yes, I do remember," Liz said thoughtfully. "I remember seeing something in the paper and on the radio too. Stephen was upset about it. But he just said something about being thankful he had left all that behind him."

"Mmmm. The men got captured as soon as they turned up in Croatia. I've always wondered though. The government sent them on their way with a pat on the back ... but I am pretty sure someone in the police sent information, officially, unofficially, I haven't a clue. But we had just about had our fill of being called to knifings and pub fights and brawls at the soccer and all the rest of it. Nothing to do with me. But there were cops who only had to hear you say 'Serb' or 'Croat' and they'd start scowling or groaning and saying '*Not again!*' They weren't our favourite ethnic groups."

"So what exactly are you saying, Bob?" I always think Kaye would make quite a good cop. There is a kind of beady eye that never loses the main game about her. She might even have been better than me. But the opposite isn't true. I'm no great shakes with a pencil.

"I think it's just possible that when someone leaked information on their Blue Mountains' hideout they found themselves looking round for somewhere more secret. It would be a long way to come but it may be that they decided to hedge their bets and get several hideaways round the state. If one got raided they would simply move on."

"But you're saying that when things went quiet again—it didn't mean that they had given up. They were still training and making plans."

"Would you give up so easily? This was at the heart of their psyche, bringing down the state of Yugoslavia, gaining an independent Croatia. But it doesn't mean it didn't degenerate into young men playing with guns along the way. I've seen it happen. Stephen's generation were usually passionate about the sense of injustice and revenge they brought with them to Australia. But the next generation didn't always have the same interest. It was dad's crusade, not theirs. Yugoslavia had begun to recede in their minds. They were Aussies. It was fun to train to be a good shot, to chuck grenades, even maybe to get hold of a few small rocket launchers and feel like Terminator Two ... that sort of playing at heroes ... but they were much less interested in heading off to a country they'd never known and where they barely spoke the language. Just a die-hard core stayed true to the message."

Liz nodded slowly. "It might be like that ... but I still don't believe Stephen would have been mixed up in that kind of thing. He didn't need to argue about it with me. I wasn't urging him to take more interest in his heritage. And he knew he could tell me if he was being pressured to support ... I don't know ... some group."

I didn't like having to suggest this to Liz. She had been having an uncomfortable time already. "Is there any way they could've got some hold over Stephen, through friendship, through some sort of favour someone did him, through something he might've said without thinking, through something that happened in the war, maybe even some feud going back to his parents or grandparents. Anything that might've made it possible for someone to twist his arm."

Liz sat there for a long time, taking this idea seriously, but not coming up with anything.

"He was only fifteen when the war ended. He was sixteen years older than me. His parents died in the war ... and some other relatives. He saw it as coming somewhere and starting a completely new life. But he did work for a short while on the Snowy Mountains scheme. He met plenty of other people on it that maybe got him involved in ... I honestly don't know what. Some sort of promise that he would help someone maybe. But I feel we're clutching at straws. I just cannot believe that he would never have mentioned anything in all those years."

"He possibly didn't want you to worry about something that he believed would gradually fade away, lose interest, leave him alone."

"Yes ... that's true."

There was another possibility which I decided not to mention: that whoever had a hold on Stephen was blackmailing him over something he would never want Liz-Anne to know about. Something he had kept hidden for fifty years. But it was hard to run with that idea. Awful things undoubtedly did happen in the Balkans but how responsible could a teenage boy have been?

Liz-Anne cared deeply about him. I didn't doubt that. But she didn't regard him as a saint. If he had told her of something he had done as a child I couldn't imagine her holding it against him. She would understand and forgive.

Was there something about Stephen's life, something more serious and that he felt maybe wrongly that she *wouldn't* be able to forgive? I felt I was scratching round. Because it always came back to Stephen as a boy, not a hardened soldier.

Yet—the simple undeniable fact was that the one person who hadn't known about the land over the border was his wife.

"Liz, do you think there was anything in Stephen's life that he couldn't share with you—for fear that you would think less well of him, maybe even leave him?"

Kaye shot me a grim look. But Liz, after long thought, finally shook her head. "People did do awful things because they were ordered to do them. And the younger they were ... if he told me about killings there I would probably have thought 'well, it was war, things did go on' ... I honestly don't think I would've held it against him."

People. But what if Stephen had had to kill ponies to survive, dogs, cats, whatever Liz felt most affection towards ... Was there anything which would disgust Liz-Anne? Rape. Killing a group of women or girls. I didn't really want to go down this road. And the purchase of the land might've been a one-off offering of his name as a front-person followed by complete neglect and disinterest in the block.

"Liz ... did you get the impression that Stephen paid the rates on the land in person, or with a personal cheque ... something that would tie him in to an ongoing link to the land?"

"No. I can't find anything in his chequebooks or statements that seem to fit. It might've been paid in cash or he paid through a third person and put it down as several payments for farm repairs or something. I wondered if he might've kept an account separate for that land but I haven't found anything."

"The amount he sent to the soccer club was it more or less than the amount you paid on the land?"

"That was always a round number. It would've come out as a bit more than what I paid."

"Did he ever speak about soccer?"

"Oh, occasionally. He liked it when we could get SBS here. But he never or hardly ever talked about a club. He liked to watch the international matches."

"So—maybe he sent a cheque to Sydney. And they paid the actual account, maybe through a money order or bank cheque, something that wouldn't link it to a person."

Kaye seemed to find this a realistic scenario.

We heard the sound of a car in the lane and Liz got up and took my tray out to the kitchen. Kaye sat on.

"You're not happy about something, Bob."

"No, not happy. But I really can't guess at what kind of hold they may have had over Stephen. Anyway, let's sleep on it."

- viii -

I think Liz-Anne was happy to have the children there. They took her mind off possibly difficult ideas and questions. But the thing which had come to me sometime in the night and while I lay there listening to ponies snorting and crickets with a last song and thought of Stephen and Liz living happily and quietly here—was that it might have as much to do with Liz and her family as it had to do with Stephen. He was an orphan. He became part of her big lively family. My impression, for what it was worth, was that they liked him and made him feel welcome. Liz's father had helped them buy this farm. It might not only be Liz herself he wouldn't want to upset or disillusion. It was the whole family. And some people were more sympathetic to 'reffos' than others. I can remember my father-in-law going on about migrants and refugees who 'brought their wars with them'. His idea was that they all should be sent home. He wasn't alone in his lack of sympathy. Liz might have had to win over her family before they took Stephen to their hearts.

I lay there trying to remember Stephen as a person. He was a good-looking man. But then I knew that from Liz's various photos scattered round the house. Blue eyes, light-brown hair, a splendid physique. His English was good. He seemed to have no trouble fitting into Australian ways.

It suggested to me that even if the war had disrupted everything Stephen had started out in life with some advantages, a reasonable education, a family who wanted the best for him. Had he been better off than most of the Croats who came to Australia? Was there some sort of class or land or title or wealth resentment playing out in this mystery?

I got the bag of 'military' refuse out of the car and laid everything out carefully on a bench in the open shed next to Liz's chookyard. It was quite a collection. I'm not an expert in such things but there must've been at least ten different types of rifles and heavier stuff used up on that land. There were also various bits of twisted metal, rings, pins, anonymous stuff I couldn't guess at. Also in the pile were several scraps of rotting newspaper I had scraped out of a small cavity in a tree. I could only say for sure that the language used was not English.

I felt I needed an expert to advise me—and I couldn't think of anyone of my acquaintance. Some cops had built up a reasonable knowledge of the ethnic Balkan communities in Sydney. There were probably people in the Croatian community willing or able to try and give me a reasonably unbiased view of their more extreme elements. There might be academics who specialised in that part of the world ...

I left my interesting collection and went inside again. Harriet and Alison were out with Liz in a nearby paddock. Even if no one else regarded this shared holiday as a success I thought they would probably remember it happily. Liz was one of those women people always say of 'she should've had children of her own' whereas cops spend their lives wishing a large number of people had chosen *not* to have children. And I assumed Liz would have liked to have children but it just hadn't happened.

It was hardly a brilliant response to this suggestion but I thought it made a good excuse to ring Petra. I didn't know what time of day she headed off to Sydney uni ... or even whether she had days off or holidays at this time of year. But no harm in trying. To my surprise I got her on the first ring. "Bob! I'm just heading out the door! How are things?"

"Reasonable. Look, I won't keep you—but I need an expert on Croatia. Can you suggest one?"

"Croatia! I'm all ears! But yes, I might know someone. I'll sound him out. Where are you? Still up north?"

"Yes. Get him to ring me on my mobile or my number here is—" I gave her Liz-Anne's number.

She said "Can do" and that she wanted the full story sooner rather than later.

It wasn't the sort of conversation in which I got round to telling her I loved her. But then ... did I love Petra? I didn't know the answer—which struck me as strange.

Surely people, even old bumbling non-New Age guys, should know the answer to such a simple question.

Did Petra know how she felt about me? The answer was curiously comforting. I didn't think this intelligent woman who lectured in the obscure reaches of philosophy could answer a simple question like that.

I went over to the drawer where Liz kept her postcard and took it out and held it up to the light. The postmark wasn't clear but I was fairly sure it ended in 'field'. Lindfield. Haberfield. Fairfield. Strathfield. I couldn't be certain but Haberfield seemed the most likely. That made sense. The inner west was still strongly ethnic. Italian. Greek. Yugoslav. But was I jumping to conclusions. I was assuming that someone *within* the Croatian community had some sort of 'hold', and I didn't know how to interpret hold, on Stephen. But what if it was someone outside the community? Someone who knew of ... someone who didn't want the land cleared out because it would be strong evidence that someone in the Croatian community was doing ... had done ... The whole thing seemed to be too complicated in its possible permutations for a simple old sod like me. I like my crimes straightforward. I could never work out why Hercule Poirot was always at pains to find complications.

But I jotted down several queries for when Liz came back to the house. I didn't really want to go snooping through their private lives but I turned to the box in which Liz had indicated she kept Stephen's remaining financial stuff. There were several chequebooks there. I went through them all, noting any payments to what he had entered as 'Sydney FC' and the amounts. I also kept an eye out for anything else that might suggest a Sydney connection. The only possibility was an occasional 'R. Drag.' Was this a friend, a relative, a blackmailer? I found three mentions and three amounts. \$230. \$95. \$310. The amounts weren't large enough to pay rates and taxes, nor were they large enough to buy much in the way of sophisticated weaponry. So were these birthday presents or something?

I put everything back and went out on to the verandah. Deborah was sitting there with Aidan in her lap. I'm not sure that I really wanted to take time out from my caped crusader role to try and develop a different role ... But I came over and sat down beside her.

"The girls seem to be enjoying themselves here," I said cautiously.

She turned to me, then to look out again. "Yes, they love it here. They're already asking me if they can't buy one of Liz's ponies. I haven't got anywhere to keep another pony. And I haven't got the money ... "

I didn't leap in. I can't honestly say I felt that the girls were in any way my responsibility. Nice girls undoubtedly. But I have always found my one daughter more than enough to fill my life in the daughter line. "I think Liz is enjoying having them here. I think she regrets never having children. She will probably ask you to come back and stay—"

“She has already. I didn’t say yes or no.” She fell back into silence for a while. Then she turned to me again. “Bob, do you think I would be safe if I lived here?”

“Probably as safe as anywhere. Certainly safer than with your mother, I would think.” I had always taken the line that her husband was unlikely to leave the anonymity of Sydney to come and bumble round rural Australia in search of his wife. But Liz-Anne’s paddock had made me question that comfortable assumption. And if he did go anywhere then Deb’s home out in Tungin was the most likely place for him to turn up.

“Yes. I wish I could stay on here. I really don’t want to go on living with my mum. She is disappointed in me. She thinks I should be doing ... something. She never says what. Being a part of things, I suppose.”

“Mmmm. Because of Liz?”

“I don’t know. I like it here. But I just can’t seem to decide what I want from life. I really don’t know what’s wrong with me. I can never make decisions.”

I was tempted to give a wry response. What was Aidan if not a decision on Deb’s part?

She seemed to read my thoughts. “I know, Bob. But it wasn’t really a decision. It was just a sudden wild impulse. I thought if I could maybe have another baby here I would be safe. I didn’t think it through. And you ... ” She couldn’t decide what to say about me.

“Yes, I couldn’t resist. Beautiful young women don’t usually throw themselves into my arms.” I didn’t want to dwell on my limited romantic life. Even calling it a romantic life struck me as ridiculous.

“But you were already in love with Petra, weren’t you?”

“Deb, I’ve never been able to decide the answer to that. I love having Petra in my life but we only see each other about two or three times a year. I don’t suppose it would strike you as a grand passion. But I’ve never thought seriously about anyone else since I met her.”

“I know. And you were talking to her just now, weren’t you?”

“Yes, I thought she might be able to help me with a little problem Liz is having over her husband’s will.”

“It will always be like that, won’t it? You need each other’s minds.”

She had a faraway look about her. But I suddenly thought she had struck something on the head. Maybe me. We did need each other’s minds, not only minds but experience, ways of seeing life and the world. I doubt if Petra went weak at the knees when she remembered my paunch, my thinning hair, the pouches under my eyes ...

“I think so. But I want you to be happy, Deb. I want things to work out well. For you to be free to marry again if you want to ... ”

“Do you think Julian would be able to cope with me and the kids?”

“I honestly don’t know. Liz told us he had lost his wife in rather unfortunate circumstances.”

"I haven't told him anything about what happened to me and the girls. I think he wouldn't be able to cope with it."

"I think maybe it is Liz you need to tell things to. But I'm not really good at advising people ... but have you told things to Petra ... about what you would like to do ..."

"Yes, she knows all about me. She says that maybe I just need to let go. Do you think that would be better than dumping things on someone else?"

"But do you think you *can* let go?"

"Maybe. Some day. I really do want to forget everything we lived through. But what if something ever comes up, like a court case, and then ... someone might wonder why I never said anything."

"The someone being Julian?"

She went a little red. "I know I'm being stupid. But when he looked at me like that ... I *wanted* someone to look at me like that. It made me feel good. I didn't want to say anything that would spoil it all. But if I never tell the truth ..."

This was too difficult for me. I edged away a bit. "What say you invite Julian and the boys to come out and stay in Tungin ... or maybe if you all had a holiday together. You wouldn't all fit in my flat but you and the girls could stay there sometime when I'm away. And Julian and the boys could stay ... I don't know ... somewhere nearby."

"Julian asked me if I would come away with him for a few days. Girraween maybe. Liz said she would be happy to mind the boys and the farm for a night or two."

I think I looked surprised. Julian obviously didn't believe in letting grass grow under his feet. And that Liz was already playing go-between ... I probably should simply drop off their radar screens. "Does Julian know about Aidan?"

"I told him I left my husband because he was abusing me and threatening the girls and that I was so unhappy when I came home that I took advantage of your visit. I don't know how he interpreted it all. But he said it wouldn't bother him. I don't know if he was being honest. Do you think he was?"

I couldn't answer that one. I hadn't really been watching their body language ... or anything else. "Are you serious about Julian?"

"I don't really know, Bob. He is very nice. And I think I wouldn't mind living here. And Liz is very nice. But I just don't seem to be very good at understanding other people. I don't sort of trust my own judgement."

"Yes, I can understand that. But don't rush into anything, just let it develop gradually, just get to know Julian and his boys. See how the kids get along. See how Julian feels about the baby. And then there's all those other things ... schools, the girls' friends, all that sort of stuff is important to kids, to girls their age."

"I know. It all seems so complicated. Sometimes I would just like to opt out of everything. Petra says it might be because I never really had a chance to just be

young and go out with different people and have fun. Do you think that might be true? You know, just dating and going out in groups to parties and all that?”

“That could be true. But you can still have fun and relax, even while being a mum. Maybe the girls could come and stay with me some time and you could leave Aidan with your mum ... something like that ... and just go out a bit and dance and party and enjoy yourself. Something of that sort.”

“I’d like that. Just date and party and have the time to get to know Julian. But it’s hard to work it out ... he’s got the boys and the farm and the animals ... ”

It always seemed to come back to Julian. “I think ... just enjoy it. Things usually work out in the end.” I hoped that would be true for both Deb and Liz-Anne. Bob the Oracle has Spoken.

— ix —

Kaye came round the house with an old basket full of eggs and said she thought she would make a soufflé for lunch. From the significant look she was trying to send me I gathered I was needed to come and help her cook it. This didn’t bode well for the soufflé. But I got up with a creak. I hoped Deborah was aware that I was pretty decrepit. I heard of a bloke becoming a father at ninety-four or somesuch. I wonder how many nappies he got round to changing, let alone bouncing the baby on his knee.

Of course Kaye didn’t want my help. She just wanted to know if Deb had been talking about Julian. I said I wasn’t fussed on that love-at-first-sight idea. It’s usually the result of moonlight, grog, or desperation. “So you don’t want Deb to marry Julian?” She sounded sharp.

“I don’t mind in the least. But she has still got to untangle herself and that may not be easy ... and I don’t know how much angst Julian is carrying around. And blending family isn’t as easy as blending whisky—”

“Oh, you and your whiskies!” Kaye hates whisky ... and I don’t think she was particularly fussed on our crusty old granddad either. He chucked her under her chin as a baby and said he’d never seen such a scrawny bairn. It wouldn’t have mattered if he’d done it in private but I was there with another little boy from the neighbourhood who went home and asked his mum what a ‘scrawny bairn’ was.

“I think it’s something we’d do better to keep well out of—”

“Don’t you *care* what kind of family your son ends up in?”

Put like that I couldn’t very well say ‘not really’ ... and of course if Marietta drank because her husband was a monster then I hardly wanted the little lad to end up next door.

I said I thought we were jumping the gun. They’d only met two days ago. But Kaye said Liz had asked Deb and the girls to come and stay at Christmas. I said I hadn’t realised Liz was such a glutton for punishment.

At that Kaye gave me a long thoughtful look. “That’s the part that doesn’t make sense, isn’t it? I mean—here was Stephen unwell for months before he died. It wasn’t as if he fell dead suddenly with a heart attack. He must’ve known that Liz

would get bills to do with the farm. So why didn't he either try to get rid of it ... or say something to prepare her? I just don't get that bit."

Put like that—neither did I.

"Is it true that he had a relative in Australia? A distant cousin or something?"

"Yes. But he died years ago I think. And don't look at me like that. I know nothing about him except that he did come to their wedding."

"And?"

"And nothing. A man of about thirty who looked like anyone else. I don't even remember his name."

"It wouldn't be R. Drag, would it?"

"Don't think so. Though it may have had 'drag' in it. You'll have to ask Liz."

"Could the cousin have a family in Australia?"

"I've never heard of any. But it's not impossible. I don't know what the cousin did though I think he was down on the Snowy Scheme with Stephen."

"Down on the Snowy ... I wonder ... "

Kaye gave me a piercing look. I think I would much prefer the sort of sister who fits the image of the artist, vague and unworldly. "What do you wonder, Bob?"

"Could something have happened there where you had a lot of men crowded together in close quarters and a lot of unresolved quarrels from the war and old feuds and all the rest of it?"

She considered this. "It's possible. But what did you have in mind?"

"I don't really know. I feel like someone flying blind. It might have nothing to do with Stephen being Croatian ... or not the line my mind was running down. What if Stephen was the cause of an accident that hurt or killed another man. Driving earthmoving equipment, that sort of thing ... and instead of it being treated as an accident it was seen as him trying to get at someone for ethnic or political reasons. Or he met up with someone there he had known back home in ... whatever his hometown was ... and this person had a grudge ... "

"Yes, I can see there might be all sorts of possibilities. But it still doesn't explain why he kept everything from Liz. I always thought how close and caring they were."

"Then what would he have needed to do to shock and disgust Liz. What would she have been unprepared to forgive?"

She thought on that a while. "Rape, I suppose. Killing children. But surely Stephen would've been too young?"

"I suppose it isn't impossible for a fifteen-year-old to be involved in rape and murder. But, okay, what else? You knew Liz's family. Was there anything she was brought up to consider beyond the pale?"

"Her dad was in North Africa and I know he got caught there and sent to a POW camp. But I don't know any details. And he came home quite safely. I don't remember any talk of wounds or disabilities ... though I suppose he would've seen things he didn't like to talk about."

“But he would never have been involved with anyone from Stephen’s part of the world?” Though as I said that I remembered reading somewhere that men from the occupied countries did often end up as guards and in menial capacities under the Germans and Italians; it wasn’t impossible that a Croatian might’ve been set to guard prisoners. But again I came up against the age thing ...

“Is there any chance that Stephen was older than he’d said? He may not have had genuine papers when he came to Australia ... and we were pretty slack in checking things.”

“Well, maybe a year either way. Are you thinking that Stephen might not have been Stephen at all, that he exchanged identities with someone maybe?”

“It sounds farfetched—but not totally impossible.”

“So someone recognises him here and knew he wasn’t the person he was claiming to be?” She mulled over this. “And so he couldn’t bring himself to tell Liz because it would then mean that their marriage wasn’t legal and ...” She tailed off, trying to think what might be the ramifications of marriage under a false name. “Is there any way of checking any of this, Bob?”

“I suppose so. There must still be immigration records. But we come back to the problem of Liz. We can’t really go getting someone to dig in her husband’s past without her knowing and if we ask her for permission then she is going to go through what might be a lot of unnecessary worry and doubt.” I was beginning to wish that the council had simply and quietly been able to resume the land for non-payment of rates or non-removal of feral pests or something.

I took this to its natural conclusion: “What would happen if Liz’s nephew in Sydney simply put the land on the market and sold it for a song?”

“Probably nothing. But can we put someone else at risk?”

It might not be a genuine risk. But I couldn’t answer that question.

“And what if we brought the police in? Can we bring the police in, do you think?”

“There would be no harm in drawing their attention to the use of the paddock for target shooting. But so far as we know no crime has been committed except one threatening postcard.”

Kaye was silent for a while. The soufflé seemed to have been forgotten. Then she said firmly, “There *must* be a simple answer. Stephen was a decent man. I just do not believe that he would do anything to give Liz worry and stress or put her life at risk. There has to be something less than murder and rape and blackmail in his background. I don’t know what. Just trying to help out a friend who’d got himself in with bad company or something.”

“You sound just like Dell when you say that.”

Dell is our mother. She can never believe ill of anyone—or only when given no other choice. She is quite convinced that most people are fundamentally decent. It isn’t a bad philosophy. But not immensely helpful right this minute.

“So, okay, what are you going to do next?” She didn’t rise to Dell’s defence.

“Grill Liz a bit more ... and Petra is going to try to find me an expert on Croatia.”

“I know there’s occasional stuff about the Ustashe ... I’ve never taken a lot of notice ... but they were something to do with Croatia, weren’t they?”

“Yes, a fanatically nationalist group who were seen as Nazi allies in the war. I suppose it’s possible Stephen was a young recruit, a messenger boy, a guerrilla in training ... something he hoped he had left behind.”

“Yes. I do have the feeling that he came here, he married Liz, to leave something behind. But if he was genuine about leaving it behind ... would he leave strings dangling like that? It seems to defeat the purpose.”

“But if he’d been unwell for a long time ... or if he’d asked someone else to sell the land for him and thought the problem was nearly tidied up. Maybe he thought he had longer to live than he ended up having.”

“Could be. I think he went quickly at the end.”

- x -

The soufflé did eventually get made. Liz and the girls came in. Aidan got put in a makeshift playpen where he managed to sit up and watch us and play with a very noisy rattle. We all sat down to lunch and Kaye encouraged the girls to chat about their lives and Tungin and ponies and related innocuous subjects. I always puzzled over the way they had grown into such sane happy girls—while their mother was worried, depressed, and anxious. But then it wasn’t unknown for men to be monsters towards their wives while spoiling and indulging their children. And they had now spent eighteen months in the calm cheerful sane presence of their grandmother.

They bubbled over with enthusiasm for Liz’s ponies. They were frank that they were only beginners but I could see them plotting out a way to become real riders rather than kids playing round with an old pony. The worried look seemed to fade from Liz’s face as she listened to their happy chatter. I left them all to wash up and asked Liz if she could show me something. We went into the dim living-room and I said, “What can you tell me about Stephen’s relative here. Was his name R. Drag?”

She looked surprised. “No, Peter Bleiburg. Why do you ask?”

“Then who is R. Drag?”

“I’ve no idea. Are you sure?”

“It’s in Stephen’s chequebooks. I wondered if it might be short for something.”

“It doesn’t ring a bell. Do you think it’s important?”

“I’ve no idea. But Bleiburg doesn’t sound Slav.”

“No, it doesn’t really. But he was only a distant relative.”

“How well did you know him?”

“Oh, not at all really. He came to our wedding and was Stephen’s best man. We only had a small quiet wedding because of Stephen having no other family. I didn’t want him to feel overwhelmed by all my relatives.”

“And was Stephen Catholic?”

“No. He always said he wasn’t interested in religion and he didn’t come halfway round the world to get back into those old feuds. I’ve never been more than a token sort of believer. My parents went to church on special occasions but they never made a thing of it.”

“That is curious though. Most Croats I have come across are as passionate about their church as their soccer. Not the younger ones maybe but the ones of Stephen’s age. If he wasn’t connected by religion, family, or culture was he connected by language? Did he like to read the community’s newspapers and magazines? That sort of thing?”

“No. Not that I ever saw.”

“But you are absolutely sure that he was Croatian?”

“He said he was. I never saw any need to doubt. And he had a travel document to say he was born in Zagreb. It was issued by the Red Cross, I think. I haven’t found it when I was tidying out his things but it might still be somewhere around, fallen down behind a drawer or something.”

“So did Stephen ever become an Australian citizen?”

“No. Not that he ever said. He would’ve been eligible. But once we moved up here it would’ve been rather a hassle. It never seemed an issue.”

But maybe it *was* an issue—if Stephen Dollans wasn’t the person he claimed to be.

— xi —

I lolled around after lunch. Liz and Kaye took the two girls and went out in the afternoon. Deb took a nap. So did the baby. I won’t say I did. Though I did nod off for a little while. I woke to the sound of Aidan crying. I felt I should go and do ... something. Play with him, sing him a lullaby, change him, feed him. I did nothing and in a minute or two I heard Deb make noises at him. That solved one problem. The other problem in my life hovered as a vague and tiresome thing at the back of my mind. Because Liz had given me a small piece of information which I felt sure was important. Peter Bleiburg. Who was Peter Bleiburg? And if he was dead did he have family who might be able to give me a discreet insight into Stephen and his paddock?

The afternoon shadows came across this side of the house. I heard the car return. I heard Deb in the kitchen doing something with saucepans. There didn’t seem to be much else to do but get up and go out and see if she needed a hand.

“He’s a bit grizzly. Would you like to take him for a walk?” She had put him in one of those bouncinette things. I unstrapped him and picked him up and took him to look at ponies and chooks and all the rest. I felt like one of those characters in the sort of books I had in my childhood where the farmer always had a red tractor and the farm animals always lived in green paddocks and had nice friendly expressions on their faces. Bunkum from go to whoa. But it gave city kids the vague idea that living in the country was next best to living in paradise. No flies. No crows. No blood and mud and sick animals and rotten eggs and low prices.

As we were standing looking out over the mixture of poultry in Liz's yard, all clucking homewards after a busy day out, no battery hens or closed sheds here, the two girls came over to me. They had taken to calling me Uncle Bob which wasn't correct but I hadn't said so. Now they wanted to ask me if I thought Julian might become their new dad.

I said they should ask their mother. They told me she was hard to talk about things like that with ... I couldn't really say I was surprised. Deborah had kept things to herself for so long it had probably become a habit. "The other question is—do you like Julian and Mark and Aaron?"

They both gave the question a lot of thought before giving their verdict. "They're okay."

"Anyway," says Bob at his most avuncular, "you've only just met. Surely you don't have to start worrying about those things just yet. Just enjoy having some new people in your life."

They agreed to that. Harriet tried to tickle Aidan's bare toes. He didn't seem to like it very much. That was the extra dimension to the equation. Two girls, with shared experiences and a close sibling relationship, suddenly and mysteriously had a small brother foisted on them. They might find Aidan interesting. But I wasn't absolutely sure that they really wanted him taking up more of their mother's not very attentive stance. I could understand that a new relationship that might make them have an even harder fight to get attention wouldn't really strike them as the best of all worlds. I had the sneaking suspicion that it was Liz's attention and care they really craved. But this was a complication beyond me.

I asked them some banal questions about school and riding and what they remembered about Sydney. In the middle of it Liz came out to close up her hens and bantams and the girls left me without a by-your-leave to go back to the house with her. Aidan and I followed more slowly.

We were all in the middle of Deborah's steak and chips and salad when the phone rang for me. I went through into the living room and closed the door.

It was a man introducing himself as Anton Pavic. He said Petra had asked him to ring me. I like the way strangers always seem so willing to do Petra's bidding but I said, "Give me your number and I'll ring you from here. No reason why you should have to pay the costs of our conversation." He did so. When I got on to him a couple of minutes later he said immediately, "Thanks for that. I'm always willing to help but as I don't know you or have any idea of what you might be wanting to know it might take a while."

"Yes. I'll do my best to keep it simple. First off—have you ever heard of anyone called Stephen Dollans or Peter Bleiburg?"

"No, can't say I have. But Bleiburg isn't a name any self-respecting Croat would ever have anyway."

"It sounds German."

“Worse than that. The Bleiburg Massacre of 1945 is seared into Croat consciousness. No one who had anything to do with the Croat community here would have such a name. Or if they did they would’ve taken steps to change it.”

I tried to set out the situation as simply as I could. I told him about the land, the target practice, the threatening postcard, the fact that Stephen had owned the land for at least thirty years, even though he wasn’t particularly well off, also the scraps of newspaper I had found and the fact that Peter Bleiburg had apparently gone to the Snowy Scheme with Stephen, been best man at his wedding and had, according to Liz, died in 1994.

He agreed that there might be camps in remote areas that had never been identified with the plan to train and send young Croatian men back to fight for an independent state. He agreed that there were still some die-hard Ustashe elements in the community. But I felt all through his conversation a faint sense of disbelief.

I fetched out the scraps of newspaper I had found and tried, not very successfully, to read them out to him. Not very successful because a) I don’t read Croatian and b) the paper had suffered from the weather. He listened carefully and finally said, “Just at a guess I’d say you’ve got hold of a few scraps of *Spremnost* which is still around, pretty radical firebrand stuff, hatred of the Serbs dripping off every page, that kind of thing. I just might be able to find out which edition that article was in. It might give you some idea of how recently people have been using the land.”

I told him about the cut chain. But of course it might’ve been cut, courtesy of some local jobs, and might not have anything to do with a different kind of visit. I said I would appreciate any help he could come up with. He said to leave it with him and he would ask around discreetly.

“The thing that worries me,” I said carefully, “is Stephen’s wife. Is there any chance she could be targeted? She would like to sell the land.”

But as I said it, I realised there might be a different problem with selling that land ... if there was ever a query over Stephen’s identity. This property had been in their joint names. But that land was definitely in Stephen’s alone.

“Is there any urgency? If she could hold off for a week or two ... And to answer your question—I would be inclined to say that, if she is Australian, it is very unlikely she would be at any risk. There are some thuggish elements on the fringes of the community, some troublemakers, but they mainly confine their rantings to Serb hatred, just the occasional bit of anti-Jewish or anti-Gypsy propaganda. The chance of them targeting an Australian woman is very small ... unless there is something more to that paddock you haven’t picked up on.”

I asked him if he could hunt out whatever he could about that Bleiburg business and I would ring him tomorrow evening. The whole thing disturbed me; mainly, I think, because I was bumbling round in the dark. I tried telling myself that I often had the same feeling when horses intruded into a case. But there was a difference.

Even if you get it disastrously wrong horses don't pick up a sub-machine gun and let off a dozen rounds.

And the paddock. Was there something there I should've seen and hadn't?

— xii —

Liz-Anne unearthed a half bottle of port from the back of a cupboard after the children had gone to bed. She poured four glasses. Kaye laughed and said, "So where's the slivovic, Liz?"

"No. We never drank it."

"Did you eat Balkan food?" I asked.

"No. But that was partly because I didn't know how to cook it. I offered to get some recipes but Stephen said no, he preferred Australian food."

It didn't sound strange put like that—and yet Stephen was turning into the least Croatian Croat it was possible to meet. I didn't really want to go further into Stephen's life, not with Deb in the room; Liz might not mind sharing more but it might start to cut a bit close to the bone for Deb.

"I always think," Kaye said cheerfully, "that all the complaints we used to hear about Australian cooking were a beat up. All that good home-cooked food, the lovely peach blossom cakes our mum used to make, the desserts, the roast chook with that delicious stuffing and home made bread sauce ... I think busy women who cooked three healthy meals a day, seven days a week, every day of the year, should've been praised, not treated as though they were feeding their families junk food. If they'd got half the appreciation they deserved women might have felt they were carrying on a proud tradition instead of feeling they should be criticised for being dull cooks while sending out for a takeaway ..."

Well, that got everyone off on to the subject of food. It was only after I'd said goodnight to Kaye and Deb that I detained Liz for a moment to ask if she had ever heard of the Bleiburg massacre. She said she hadn't. I said the expert in Sydney said no Croatian would ever be called Bleiburg. She looked surprised. Then I asked her if she had his address, also the name and address of that distant relative she'd sent things to after Stephen died. She said she would look them out for me in the morning.

— xiii —

I woke to the farm (or the farm with its roosters and all the rest woke me) shrouded in a cool fog. It seemed very appropriate. I felt like someone trying to get home and not sure which road is the right one.

Everyone else got up and rushed around and fed poultry and milked the housecow and cooked breakfast and generally made a big racket. I grew increasingly convinced that despite the traffic noise of Surfers I thought I preferred it; at least it faded through familiarity to a background hum most of the time. Kaye called us all into breakfast. She had made one of Dell's old standbys, toad-in-the-hole, possibly because of all that had been said last night about home cooking ... or because she thought I was nostalgic for such things. Or there were bits and pieces left from the

barbecue. The girls seemed to think the name, the food, the idea, was screamingly funny. My memory of it was of the sort of stodgy stuff mothers used to fill up hungry tummies with ...

Then I asked Liz before she went rushing off to more farm chores to direct me to Stephen's address book, if he had one, and to any wedding photos they might have taken. She brought out an album and a bundle of papers in an old briefcase and said I was welcome to browse. I sat on the back verandah while Deb took over the kitchen table to give Aidan a bath in the makeshift tub Liz had unearthed. He seemed to like being bathed, going by the gurgles and splashes going on. It came back to me that I had been too busy as a young man to enjoy my children in that way ... and shift work is a killer. I have often noticed that young cops have a cap on their ambition: to get to a point where they are no longer on nights. Then their ambition peters out. I was a bit like that.

In the bundle of papers I found Liz's marriage certificate. This was interesting. Stephen signed it of course—but it was also signed by a P. Dollans. Was this Peter? It must be—if Stephen had only one relative there to support him. So when had Peter Dollans become Peter Bleiburg? Or vice versa.

And there was a further surprise in the photo album. Stephen was a handsome man (and Liz an attractive bride) and I picked Kaye out in half-a-dozen photos. But the surprise was Peter. He only appeared in two photos. He appeared to be a shy or retiring sort of man. But the thing that struck me was his close likeness to Stephen. A distant cousin? It was certainly possible. But going on these pictures I would've picked him as a brother or very close relative. He was about Stephen's height, the same pale brown hair, the same blue eyes, the same rather long face, something serious about it.

I couldn't find any addresses. I looked on the handwritten list of numbers beside Liz's phone. No Peter.

I went out to the kitchen where Aidan was in the bouncinette looking scrubbed and happy while Deb tidied up. He was certainly turning into a bonny little baby—if I do say so myself. Deb though looked rather drawn. She might've wanted another baby. She might be enjoying Julian's attention. But neither of them were really restless.

She raised her eyebrows at me. "Would you like to get him a rusk from the jar?"

It was a pleasant domestic moment and for the first time I wondered if I really did want to give up all chance to claim little Aidan Robert. But the moment passed. Kaye came bustling in, and she is very good at bustling, asking Deb if she would like to join them later for a drive and a picnic. Deb hesitated, then said she would. Kaye whisked up a damp washer and wiped the baby's mouth and hands. I had become superfluous again.

Liz, when she came back with the girls in tow, apologised for leaving me hanging round waiting. I said it was a holiday, no need to be sorry, I didn't mind

lolling around. She laughed at that. "So Kaye says ... Coffee, Bob?" Eventually we sat down in the living room and I handed her the certificate. "P. Dollans?"

She looked down at it, at first surprised, then vaguely amused. "So it was! I had completely forgotten. I don't think I really noticed. I just called him Peter and he didn't speak very good English so we didn't exactly have any long conversations." Then a thoughtful look came over her. "Do you know, Bob, I think it was years later that Stephen said something to me about Peter's real name being Bleiburg but he hadn't mentioned because of my father having been in the POW camp, something like that. I didn't really take very much notice as I never saw Peter after that one time at our wedding."

"He never came up here?"

"No. But I always assumed that when Stephen went away for a couple of days down south that it was Peter he was mainly going to see. My family had moved back to Coonabarabran so I never suggested going as I felt they would prefer not to have to speak in English and I knew they would probably go out to the Croatian Club and things like that."

"Was Peter older than Stephen?"

"Oh, I'd say so. Not a lot older. A few years. He was a very quiet reserved sort of person. I always felt he was a shy man."

I passed over the wedding album. "He also looks much more like Stephen than I had expected."

She leafed through the photos taken thirty-two years ago. Then she looked up and said, "Isn't that strange. I never really realised just how alike they were. I suppose I only had eyes for Stephen. Peter was just the relative I couldn't have a conversation with."

"Do you think they could've been closer than Stephen suggested?"

"I don't know, Bob. Looking at this I would easily take them for brothers. But why wouldn't he say so? Why tell me they were only distant cousins?"

"To keep you safe? Or because they didn't get on very well? Some bad blood somewhere in the relationship. Unless Stephen kept any letters from Peter it is very hard to gain a sense of him as a person. Did they write or phone regularly?"

"I don't think so. Peter used to send postcards but as they were in Croatian ... well," she shrugged, "and they only came occasionally."

"Did Stephen keep them?"

"I haven't found any of them."

"And they were of Sydney scenes?"

"I think so. Just the usual landmarks. Nothing personal."

"And do you remember where Peter lived?"

"I'm pretty sure he was living in Stanmore at the time of our wedding. I assume he went on living there."

"And did he ever marry, have a family?"

“Not that I ever heard of. He struck me as a loner but I really wouldn’t like to sound too definite. Just one of those people who keep to themselves. I remember wondering if he might have suffered some trauma in the war, just something about his eyes. I can’t really pin it down. And I can’t honestly say I am a very good judge of people ... ”

This might be true. Liz-Anne was too outgoing and cheerful and busy and outdoorsy to sit round trying to understand people. And Peter suggested someone who had gone out of his way to stand in the background ...

“So ... could Stephen have bought the farm for Peter, do you think?”

“It’s certainly possibly. But not money-wise. I’m sure Stephen did not have that sort of money. But he might have done the paperwork because Peter’s English wasn’t good enough. But I wonder why Peter would’ve wanted such a remote farm? I know I said he was a loner but I find it hard to think of him as a hermit ... ”

“And do you remember when Stephen told you Peter’s real name was Bleiburg?”

“No, not really. Some time in the seventies I think ... No, I think I can probably be more specific.” She sat back and closed her eyes and I let her ponder in peace. At last she said, “I am sure it was 1976. I had been having a lot of pain and they finally diagnosed endometriosis and I had some treatment for it which didn’t work and they finally decided the only thing was a full hysterectomy. I was very upset because we both had kept hoping for children. I remember saying something about hoping that Peter would have a family instead and Stephen said something about Peter’s name and he seemed very upset. But I assumed it was because of me rather than Peter. I couldn’t really imagine Peter marrying and having a family and I think Stephen felt he would be the last of the family here. So I encouraged my brothers and sisters to send their children up to stay with us and Stephen was very good to them.”

“And the family back in Yugoslavia—did he ever talk about them?”

“No, I always understood that there was no one close, that he only had very distant connections. I was quite surprised when he said that, right near the end, about me sending those little things back. I’ve always felt sure one of the things he sent was a diary. I don’t know if that is significant. Since then I’ve wondered if I should’ve sent them registered to make sure they did get to the right address.”

“Do you remember the name and address?”

“I’ve still got the paper here.” She took it out of the drawer where she had a bundle of letters. “Yes, I see I’ve been getting mixed up. Because there was only the one address but two people. M. Gehrens, an address in Zagreb. And a P. Kohl, same address. I never heard back from either. I just hope they were still alive. But I am certain Stephen had never mentioned them before that.”

“Neither of those names sound particularly Croatian. If anything I would think they were German. Is it possible that Stephen—and Peter—came from a family which was of German extraction but settled in Croatia ... and that might be why

they didn't feel they belonged in either expat community. They weren't really accepted in either."

"It could be. I wondered when I found out Peter's real name. But Stephen never mentioned it again, just the occasional mention of hearing from Peter, and I was too taken up with my own health problems. I suppose I should have taken more interest in Peter seeing he was my husband's only relative here ... but he was such a shadowy sort of presence. It always seemed hard to think of him as a real person. And Stephen made friends here and always seemed happy."

"I'm sure he was."

But I was increasingly certain that Stephen had gone exploring round Australia not only to find a place where he and Liz could settle but also a place for Peter. The real question was—why did Peter need a secret bolthole? And did he actually come and live on that land. If he'd been on the Snowy then he probably had enough money to pay for that block of land. Possibly all he had asked was for Stephen to do the actual paperwork ...

And was Peter's real name Bleiburg?

Or was his name Dollans and the significance of Bleiburg was quite different?

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I got pressured into joining the drive and picnic. It turned out to be on a neighbouring farm, owned by some people called Mullins, and down by a sort of lagoon where they'd put up a couple of wooden picnic tables. It was a bit disconcerting to discover that they also used the tables as jumps for their horses. I hoped they would restrain themselves long enough for us to have our lunch. It was quite a pleasant spot and they had a small open canoe which took the kids two at a time. Deb put a blanket down on the mown patch of grass and she and Julian and the baby sat down there and watched the kids. I sat down at one of the tables with Kaye while Liz and Mrs Mullins sat at the other and chatted. It turned out that Kaye had cut me out from the herd to try and persuade me to join her on her trip to Sydney to see Dell.

She wanted to get my opinion. Was our mother still coping in her house in Leura or should we be gently urging her to move into a retirement place? My own impression was that Dell was managing just fine and I certainly wasn't going to pressure her. But as I said this I realised that I wasn't absolutely certain whether Dell ate up all her food by the use-by date or whether she always remembered to refill the kettle. But I had seen enough of the pressure put on my downstairs neighbour to move into a home long before she needed to ... I wasn't going to do that to Dell. But Kaye was quite willing to take my assurances seriously. She hadn't come back to do any twisting of arms either ...

We ate sandwiches and pies and fruit and cake and cold drinks and lollies. Kaye and Liz were talked into trying the canoe when Julian and Deb went off with the youngsters to see the farm's horses. I was given the job of sitting down on the rug and minding Aidan while he napped. I think I was meant to make sure ants and

flies and mosquitoes and whatnot didn't crawl on him, bite him, sting him. I was tempted to go to sleep myself but instead I got out the book I had taken off Liz's shelf; a book of travel stories called *Dalmatian Diary*. The author, an Englishman, had travelled in the region during the transition of Croatia from being a part of Yugoslavia to being an independent nation. He was rather fond of the term 'collective madness' and I could picture this supercilious man looking down his nose at other people's chaos. Although he was quite interesting his tone was rather off-putting and I finally put the book aside and lay back.

I didn't really want to think on the idea that had come to me: Peter hadn't died in 1994. He had died much earlier and Stephen had kept on the land because it was his only remaining connection to his brother or his cousin. It was Peter's memorial. But this would suggest that Stephen didn't know what had happened to Peter.

Again I had that feeling of muddling round in a fog. Was Peter a war criminal? Was Peter an innocent man? What had Stephen known and believed. Had he put family before justice or did he know some far right people were out to get Peter ... My poor old head couldn't sort out all the possibilities. And what was the point anyway? Unless Peter or Stephen had ever been named as people wanted by courts anywhere it was hard to see how this puzzle could be resolved.

Had Peter and Stephen done something, seen something, heard something ...

Even an expert on Croatia, and Anton had described himself as a lecturer in Balkan and Eastern European history, might be kerflummoxed by all this. And there was the added difficulty; Liz-Anne had loved her husband. I didn't want to do anything to tarnish him in her eyes, not unless it was clear that Stephen had been involved in something where people still deserved to know the truth of what had happened. Had Stephen hidden Peter from justice?

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Everyone was a bit sunburned and weary by the time we got home. Liz and the girls went out to feed animals and exercise ponies. Kaye went into the kitchen to make a curry and chop up fruit, with Deb's help, for a salad. I didn't do anything much. Some sort of supernumerary. I had said I would ring Anton at seven. I could only hope he had some good ideas.

I was just about to sit down to dinner when Liz called me to the phone. It was the young woman I had stopped on the horse trail. She said her name was Joanne and that her father would be interested in talking to me. I said, "Okay, excellent, put him on." But this, it seemed, wasn't possible. Her father was going deaf and I would need to come and visit him. I suppose I sounded hesitant. A long drive with the joy of bellowing in some old codger's ear at the end of it—

She said briskly, "Suit yourself. But he says he remembers gossip about it, and he knows the Campbells. He's lived in the district all his life."

Put like that—how could I refuse? I asked her for directions and said I should be there by about ten tomorrow.

I had dinner but didn't take much notice of Kaye's curry. Did the old bloke have anything more than rumour and hearsay? I wasn't really hopeful.

I left the others still eating and talking to go in and ring Anton. You can't keep high-powered informants hanging about. I just hoped he had something that would help because I didn't really want to stay on here much longer. It was all very pleasant but I really didn't want to go on any more picnics and I had the idea that if Deb and Julian were going to take any steps forward I probably wasn't the best person to have hanging round in their background.

Anton sounded cheerful. "You've got me at the right time, Bob. I've been working on a book on the influence of the Australian exiles on events in the Yugoslav breakup and I've been going through all the literature I've got on hand that's been published in Australia. I haven't got complete sets of everything but a pretty fair overview ... and I got to thinking that the name Dollans did ring a bell."

"Good. Because I have information that Peter Bleiburg might originally have been Peter Dollans. I've also got two names for you in Croatia." I told him about Liz sending two small gifts off in Stephen's name after he died. He took down the names and address and agreed with me that they might be Croatians of German extraction.

Then he said, "I think you might have struck a can of worms with that idea of Peter disappearing back in about 1975. Because the Dollans thing is a very ambiguous editorial I came upon, written by a man I know was definitely Ustashe. He says that the community should always be clear in what they are asking for, a Croat state, but that they should be opaque in their methods—or words to that effect. Then he goes on to say that the Dollans method always works best in a place like Australia where there is insufficient understanding of the rightness of their cause. Now you could interpret that in many different ways ... but given the general tone of his articles and speeches and I did go along to several, he's dead now, he died from a heart attack about three years ago ... but he was one of the most extreme and he didn't usually mince his words when he said a nation born in violence, by which he meant Yugoslavia, must die in violence and that new states would be born from the fiery conflagrations of its death throes, that sort of thing. His speeches were full of similar images, 'death pyres', martyrs, the blackened ashes of an evil empire ... Ronald Reagan could've got some lively images from him. The old Evil Empire sounds tame by comparison."

"So what do *you* think was meant by the 'Dollans method'?"

"Going by other things he wrote and said I think it was a formulation based on that Nazi idea of 'Night and Fog' where everyone believes a relative is dead but no one can get any actual information. Everything is left in limbo."

"Yes, I think that could make sense in this case. But could that mean that when Stephen Dollans began to refer to Peter Dollans as Peter Bleiburg he was acknowledging in some way that he believed Peter was dead and he was dead because of what happened at Bleiburg?"

“I don’t know. But it could be. But you have a problem there if Dollans wasn’t the original family name. I’ve never found it in the Balkans—nor in German-speaking countries. I think it’s an Australian corruption.”

“So if Peter Dollans died in mysterious circumstances ... what might be the chances of finding out. I came upon some cheques Stephen had written to someone or something called R. Drag. Does that ring any bells?”

“Ah now, you might be on to something there. I don’t know for certain but there is a man called Raymond Dragicevic who worked in the Missing Persons unit for the Red Cross. You know how families got split up during and after the war and ended up in different camps, all sorts of things. There was a father and son team, Raymond was the son, the father died twenty years ago, and they did some wonderful work in tracking people down and reuniting them. The problem was—several times they tracked down people who didn’t want to be found and they started to get death threats and that sort of antsy stuff. Raymond finally said he wouldn’t take on any new cases unless the families were prepared to state that they knew for certain none of their relatives had been involved in war crimes in the former Yugoslavia ... but that didn’t work because families are sometimes the last people to know what their old uncle or granddad was up to in the war. So he finally retired and said he would only work on family history stuff for people who arrived in Australia after 1955. He hoped, that way, he would weed out the worst problems. I’m not saying R. Drag is him but there is a good chance it might be. He certainly might know what the family’s original name was as he’s done a lot of work on shipping arrivals, men who worked on the Snowy and so on. He’s semi-retired now but I’m sure he’d be willing to talk to you.”

“The only trouble is—if someone did kill Peter Dollans they might not want him dug up again, not if they think they’ve got away with murder.”

“True enough. And the chance of finding Peter now is pretty remote.”

But was it? “There’s the paddock.” I didn’t like my thoughts. Had someone found out about Peter and his remote block? Had he been followed there. Had he been killed there. Had Stephen been either blackmailed ... or had he kept the paddock in the hope that it might be a clue to what had happened to Peter? I couldn’t guess. And I didn’t think the police were likely to take kindly to any suggestion they dig up a hundred hectare paddock. Not with nothing else to go by.

“I’ve got three dates here,” I said to Anton, “and the amounts paid. Could you pass them on to Raymond, do you think? If they make sense to him he might’ve kept Stephen’s letters. If they don’t then we have to find a different connection. I’m sorry to ask you to help beyond a bit of advice but I think we are looking at a suspicious death.”

“Yes, I agree. Look, I’ll give Ray a quick ring and just see if I can get that sorted one way or another. I’ve got to go out for a while. If I ring you after ten is that okay?”

I said it was fine.

Had Stephen finally accepted that Peter was probably dead? Had he heard or read that thing about the ‘Dollans method’ and understood its meaning only too well? Was his decision to contact Raymond a fading hope that he might be able to find Peter for him? And had Stephen maintained the fiction that Peter was still alive, the postcards sent either by Raymond or by someone who was pressuring Stephen ... or even possibly just a message of thanks from someone at the soccer club?

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I sat around drinking coffee and watching a late movie which didn’t interest me. Of course Raymond might be away, Raymond might be big on confidentiality, Raymond might have found things out about Peter that Stephen didn’t like ...

It was after eleven when Anton rang back. “You’re in some luck, Bob. Yes, Ray did hear from Stephen Dollans, yes, he did try to find out the whereabouts of Peter Dollans, yes, he was inclined to think he might be dead but could not find any record of it either in the 1970s or in 1994. And yes, he is pretty sure that Dollans was originally Domaschenz which would seem to indicate a German origin though he says there was a sizable German-speaking community in northern Croatia. He also says for you to keep a low profile. You’re dealing with tough people who’ve not only maybe got away with murder in Australia but also may be wanted for war crimes elsewhere. Not many, just that hard core, but there have been mysterious deaths and disappearances in the émigré communities.”

I was hardly going to pass this on to Liz but I thanked him and said I would be in touch if I had any new developments. He said he would see if he could find out anything about those names and the address Liz had passed on.

I left early next morning. If we could get any sort of resolution while Liz was still surrounded by people I would feel much happier. I wanted to meet Joanne’s father and milk him for all he was worth. Because it was hard to see how Anton or Raymond could possibly find a dead body for me.

Although long drives give me a chance to mull over things I get tired of them; and this one didn’t promise a lot. Because the real question probably had its answer outside of Australia. Anton had given me a very brief rundown on Bleiburg which was, I assume still is, a little town in Austria. As World War Two was coming to its messy conclusion a large mixed group of refugees headed from the Balkans to British-occupied Austria with Tito’s Partisans hard on their heels. The British refused to let them into the town; they were forcibly turned back and thousands were killed by the avenging Partisans. To the people of Croatia and Slovenia this was another demonstration of Serb wickedness and was kept alive as such down through the years since. But the thing that struck me in the story was that surely the British, even if they had more than enough refugees on their hands, had a responsibility to allow these people safe haven? Even if only temporarily. Anton said there were both Nazi officials and ordinary German soldiers caught up in the stream.

He seemed to feel that for the Partisans this was their last chance to revenge their massive losses on the Germans and their collaborators; not the whole

explanation but this sense that those who had most to answer for were about to escape. Even so, most of the people who died were ordinary people, not responsible for the big issues. As I drove I tried to fit the Dollans, Stephen and Peter, into any of the niches this information seemed to offer. Were they young German soldiers who had deserted, who had got lost, were they collaborators, were they Partisans, (who were certainly not all Serbs), were they members of the Ustashe themselves, were they Austrians who had been part of the forcible prevention of people crossing the border, were they none of these things but assumptions had been made about them when they arrived as young men in Australia and found themselves drawn into the Croat émigré group on the Snowy. Nothing seemed more likely than anything else. Because, in that chaos, who could ever know the complete truth? Not me, anyway.

I found the farm I was looking for; partly hilly and timbered but with several flat cleared paddocks with several horses and a mule grazing. I know nothing about mules except that like donkeys they are said to be stubborn and unlike donkeys they are sterile. But this one was certainly a fine sight. I drove into a tidy yard surrounded by tall trees. A small weatherboard house had a prickly hedge around it and some lettuces and things growing inside the small yard. A couple of kelpies started to bark. I wondered how the family made their living.

The young woman heard me and came out. She stood at the gate waiting for me to come over; again I had the sense of a tough silent person. I would hate to live here but she seemed to belong. As I reached her she said “Hi. Come on in.”

Her father was sitting on the small back verandah where he looked into the trees where hens scratched through the bark and dust and weeds around several large woodpiles. I had expected to find an elderly man but he was only my age or a bit younger, a good-looking man with tough brown hands and a slow deliberate way of moving and talking. On the little table beside him was a waiting pad and pencil.

“He can’t hear you,” Joanne said calmly. “You’ll have to write things down. And he’ll answer you.” This suddenly struck me as a terrible tragedy. He looked the sort of man who had lived a vigorous energetic life. To have to admit to this kind of loss would seem humiliating.

I sat down at the old scratched table. She brought out a teapot and mugs and a plate of ginger nuts. Then she left us to our ‘conversation’. It actually wasn’t difficult because she had told him about me and the paddock. He asked to see my wallet that I had shown Joanne on the trail. I showed him. He nodded several times as though getting his various thoughts into some order.

Then he started to talk. I just let it flow. He wasn’t a particularly articulate man. It dropped away several times and he went round and round on things that didn’t seem to have any relevance, like the Campbells running a local sawmill which had gone broke. But I did get three things that interested me.

The Campbells had sold that block of land about 1970 he thought but it didn’t seem to be linked to their problems with the sawmill which didn’t fail till nearly ten years later. He thought they had offered to buy the timber on that land but it had

been knocked back and they couldn't afford to pay top dollar. I made a mental note to try and contact the Campbells if all else failed.

He also said there had been shooting up on that land for years although no one had ever actually seen who was doing the shooting. He wasn't sure if the owner let people come out and do target practice there as there were no animals on the land—or whether the owner didn't know what was going on. I didn't know the answer to that question either.

I wrote him a note to say I had found a huge quantity of spent shells and other rubbish on the land.

Then he came to the most interesting part of his story. He had been involved with the planning of the horse trail. There was a national trail that ran the length of the Great Dividing Range but this was an offshoot which was designed to eventually form a loop which would give people a further option. There had been a small local group which had looked at possible routes. If they kept to Crown land they didn't need to worry about getting landholder permission. On the other hand some of the best rough country for creating an interesting trail cut through several properties. He took the pad and drew a rough map showing the Dollans' land and the area where the trail now ran.

According to him when he was working his way down past the front of the property putting in rough poles to mark a possible route he had been curious about the property as there were rumours about it being bought by someone from Sydney. He had taken a few minutes out to go up to the boundary fence. He said there was quite a strong and unpleasant smell. He had assumed it was a dead animal but he had climbed through the fence and walked up towards the house. He had found some empty cans thrown under the house and wondered if it was the rubbish heap that smelled so bad. He had walked round the back and found a car parked there. It was a big American job, lots of chrome with fins, he thought a two-tone Pontiac and he had noticed the number plate started with OAT but he couldn't remember the rest of it.

There was no sign of anyone. But it was big enough to hide, in his words, a Boy Scout troop, and he had eventually gone back down to the proposed trail and gone on with his work. The trail in the beginning was only a narrow track, just marked out by riders and the occasional posts with small yellow bits of cloth on them. Only much later was a small grader taken through the most accessible parts to grade a better track.

“But I was back through there about a week later,” Doug said in his curious voice that sometimes went up when I expected it to go down, or got soft or loud unexpectedly, “and blow me down but the smell had moved down the track. I thought, bloody hell, it's following me around. But I couldn't see anything or hear flies. Just this smell. It wasn't my business what they were doing up there on the property ... but I wasn't too fussy about people that come down and dump their stinking rubbish on a horse trail.”

“Could you pinpoint the area where the smell was coming from?” I wrote on the pad.

“Pretty well, but I couldn’t see anything. They might’ve got sick of the stink up there and buried their rubbish outside their fence. People think Crown land is next best thing to a place to dump rubbish.”

I asked him to show me on the map. He did a rough x about three hundred metres beyond the boundary. Then he said he didn’t go through that way for about a month and didn’t notice anything much next time. I asked him if he could suggest a date. He said he thought it was not long before Christmas which was why they had had a break from marking out the trail. But he couldn’t say for sure. He reckoned that Joanne was about five at the time because he had discussed with his wife whether she was strong enough to come out and ride a few miles with the local group of about four keen endurance riders.

I wrote on my pad: “1975? 1976?”

He nodded slowly for a while. I have sometimes been able to narrow down a date in my own life by thinking back to what big case was going on at the time but I assumed Doug’s life probably had fewer noted milestones.

At last he said it was more likely to be ’74 or ’75 than later. He said he would try to pin it down a bit further. He got up and went in to the house. He came back with a very tatty piece of paper. It was a notice for the official opening to this little side trail. It ran up into the hills somewhere to the southeast of a hill called Bald Knob and wound about in steep rough country, judging by the route marked out on the other side of the announcement. And it had a date: May 1976.

“Must’ve been late ’75 that I was looking round. It took us about six months to get the trail all marked out.”

Then he looked at me with his calm deliberate expression and said, “Why do you want to know all this?”

I wrote down, “I think someone may have been killed and buried somewhere there.”

Joanne had come out to join us again, bringing a plate of sandwiches. She looked at my note and her eyes widened. Then she said in that same deliberate way, “Who was it?”

I wrote, “I think it may have been a man called Peter Dollans.”

“Dollans?” Doug said the name several time. “That sounds a bit like the name of the bloke said to own the block. Thought it was Dillon but could be Dollans.”

“His brother or cousin probably.” But there was a lot of wild country out there. Was it really possible to track down a twenty-four-year-old smell? Because, even if they *had* only buried rubbish—why that particular rubbish when burying rubbish didn’t seem to be a priority? And why not on the property?

“Could you point out the place still?” I asked them.

Doug shrugged and said he thought so.

Joanne said, “Okay, I’ll get the truck and a shovel. You can leave your car in the shade.”

I hate these situations. She saw no dilemmas in this idea of simply going out and seeing if there really was something there. Or maybe she realised that she would never enjoy riding along there again if she believed there was a dead body nearby. Whereas Doug had a different dilemma; could he trust his memory after all this time. And I had the worst dilemma. If you go to the police and say ‘I believe there’s a body buried at x and I’d like you to come and dig,’ you don’t usually get a pleasant reception. But if you go out and dig yourself and damage what turns out to be a crime scene you are equally unpopular. For the first you are some sort of nut, for the second you are irresponsible and should know better. You can’t win. And yet I knew exactly how cops felt. I had fielded all sorts of weird and wonderful claims in my time.

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The truck was a ramshackle vehicle with some fencing wire in the tray. One of the dogs came bouncing out and jumped in the back. The three of us squeezed into the front. It took us maybe ten minutes to reach the place where the riding trail branched off the road. There was a sign up saying people rode at their own risk and that it was a good idea to carry a mobile phone. Joanne drove some way along the trail then pulled into a kind of layby and got out. We then walked for about quarter of an hour until I saw what looked like the old house up amidst its trees. I pointed. They both nodded. We walked on some distance further. Then Doug said, “It was somewhere around here. I remember that big tree up there.”

There were quite steep banks shelving to the flatter area where the trail ran south-west.

Joanne took the shovel from her father and went up the bank and began trying to shove it in wherever there wasn’t thick vegetation. It wasn’t a hopeful scenario. A whole new generation of trees could have grown up in the last twenty years. But Doug had finally decided it was worth throwing his weight behind the quest and now he quartered the steep slope. At last he beckoned Joanne over with her shovel. He took it from her and began to turn a sod here and there. It was hard work. The ground was hard and tree roots got in the way. But whatever was wrong with Doug’s ears there was nothing wrong with his biceps. I was glad I hadn’t said, “here, let me”; I would’ve been shown up as a puny beach bum.

There wasn’t much for me to do but sit down on a log and watch Doug. His daughter stood away to one side with her hands on her hips. I wondered what sort of relationship they had. My own impression was that they were fond of each other but they would never say so. I have rarely met such undemonstrative people—and I say that from the vantage point of someone who isn’t into any touchy-feely stuff himself.

Now that he was here and with the firm shaft of a shovel in his hands there was something determined about Doug. I wondered if I had simply wetted his curiosity

or whether he felt it was his own honesty that was on trial. He made me feel tired just watching him. I wondered what the next batch of passing riders would think as he slowly and painfully denuded a small patch of hillside. Once he got us both to come up and help him remove a sapling. And I thought he was going to break the shovel on a large rock. He finally gave over and sent poor Joanne all the way back to get the crowbar off the back of the truck.

I was beginning to think we should've brought a Thermos and packed lunch with us (by my watch it was already well after two) when he said suddenly, "Ah-hah!" With a twist of his shovel he brought out a piece of rusty wire with a little triangular pennant of yellow cloth still tied to it. I went over. The nylon revolution has had its uses. Old and torn but still very much identifiable as one of the small markers they had used on the trail.

"I wondered where it had gone," Doug said in his slow unemotional way. "I was sure I'd put one in just down there." He pointed down to the trail below us. He wiped his face with a dirty handkerchief. Then turned back to the small excavation again and went on with his work. Joanne turned up a few minutes later and exclaimed over the marker. Then she handed him the crowbar and let him work away with it for another ten minutes.

Finally Doug straightened up and withdrew the crowbar. The pile of dry soil had grown on the slope behind him. But the thing that horrified us all was what was hanging off the end of the crowbar. His last thrust had gone through a bone. It looked like a vertebrae. Joanne gave a small gasp. I indicated to Doug to lay the crowbar down with the bone untouched and asked them where the nearest police were. It might be an animal bone but it was too big for a dog and the idea of someone burying a larger animal in that terrain didn't make a lot of sense. No one, unless they had been stealing horses and cattle, would bother to lug them up this slope.

Joanne said she would go and get help. As we hadn't brought the pad there was no easy way for Doug and me to have a casual chat. I suggested that we clear the topsoil carefully off the broad area but without digging deeply.

It was nearly two hours before Joanne returned with a sweating man in a uniform. His expression was a mixture of exhaustion, disbelief, and irritation. But then if I'd had a paunch like his ... Joanne explained and showed him the marker and the bone. He still didn't look convinced. I didn't really blame him. But I said I thought the bone was human and until it could be proved otherwise I thought the area should be treated at least as a possible burial site. It didn't cheer him up. But he walked back down the slope a way and rang someone on his mobile.

I had no idea how far any back-up would need to come. But it looked like being a long day. A very long day. It was after five when two more men turned up. We had carefully removed the topsoil from an area of about five square metres. If the skeleton had not been dismembered or worked its way down the slope over the years then there was a good chance there was a body in that space.

They didn't waste time. Either we were in the hoax business or we weren't. The sooner they knew the sooner they could get home for dinner and their favourite programs. I knew the feeling. But I left them to it. I had done the best I could. Now it was either a body or it wasn't. I rang Liz's number on my own mobile and told her I would probably be back very late and if Anton rang with any news just to take a message. I didn't tell her what we'd found.

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It was getting dark when they called it a day. They had followed out from Doug's find in a careful circle and were now convinced there was a skeleton there. But it was useless to try and do more by torchlight ... and their view was that if the body had lain there for years what was another night? They took our addresses and Joanne drove us back. I then had to face the long drive home still none the wiser. Had Peter Dollans been buried there all this time or was it someone quite different ... and would it be possible to tell?

Kaye came out to meet me. "Poor Bob. You look just about beat."

"I am. Completely whacked. But they have probably found human remains. They won't be sure till they've dug some more tomorrow."

"A body?" She sounded astonished then she said more soberly, "Peter?"

"I don't know. But it's possible." I told her what we'd found so far.

"Should we tell Liz?"

"I think—hold off another day. They should know by then if it's definitely human and if it's male and about the right age."

"But why, Bob, why do you think someone might've killed Peter?"

The sixty-four dollar question. And was the marker in the grave for reasons of convenience or because there was a significance to the yellow? Was it possible that Peter and Stephen had deserted something, that they were seen as turncoats, traitors, cowards ...

"I don't know. Unless the site reveals some clues we may never know. But whatever Stephen and Peter did or didn't do ... I think it's worth remembering that they were very young when they were caught up in a terrible situation with no clear guidelines as to who was right and wrong in it all. Liz is sure Stephen was a good man. I think he probably was. But that doesn't mean that other people saw him that way." Nationalism is a more powerful force than almost anything you can set against it. "I think it's likely that they were ethnic Germans living in Croatia. Where do you put your loyalties in such a situation? It's not a question that a fifteen-year-old boy should have to answer."

"No." She put a hand on my shoulder briefly. Kaye is not a lot more demonstrative than Joanne. "Anyway, come on in. We've kept you some dinner."

The others, fortunately, Liz and Deb and the girls, had settled down to a noisy game of Snap. Kaye sat in the kitchen and we chatted about her family, her husband and boys, or she did, while I ate steak-and-kidney pie then a plate of trifle.

I was glad to finally get to bed but getting to sleep was quite another thing. Still, it was out of my hands now. The police here would not want to buy into old ethnic feuds. But if we were lucky there might be clues still for the finding.

I would've slept in next morning but everyone started trooping past at the crack of dawn. Farm life has its benefits but it isn't exactly *restful*. The others all went out to do various things but I thought I'd better hang around just in case of a ring. The morning went by. I listened to the radio without much interest. I picked up books and magazines and put them down. I made myself several cups of coffee and ate a slice of fruitcake. I don't remember ever being like this when I worked ... but then, if you weren't getting anywhere with one case there were always others waiting. Here I just sat round and waited.

It was mid-afternoon when I finally got a ring from the first cop who'd come yesterday. He didn't sound enthusiastic but he said they had finished unearthing a skeleton. It looked like an adult male between thirty and fifty. The incredible thing he had to add was that they had found an intact piece of paper in a shirt pocket. The man had been wearing one of those artificial leather jackets that became popular in the seventies with studs on everything. They didn't know what the language on the paper was but it had a big black U at the top.

I said, "It is almost certainly Croatian." I felt sorry for this poor sod. Where, within fifty kilometres of Woodenbong, would he find someone to translate some Croatian?

He said, "Is that so?" His enthusiasm for the case had obviously dropped a few more notches. "Right, well, I'll tell 'em that."

"Anything else about the body?"

"It's been shot. The whole thing is riddled with bullets. You don't reckon it's the Mafia, do you?"

"I doubt it. I think it's a political killing."

He growled something about 'fucking idiots' and said he'd be in touch if they found anything else.

"Yeah, well, thanks for that. And you can tell them from me that there is just a chance it was a man called Peter Dollans who came to Australia after World War Two probably under the name of Peter Domaschenz or something very similar."

I think he liked this bit. I think he saw himself almost singlehandedly solving the case and being promoted out of the backwoods. I didn't tell him that there was a good chance they would never find the killer.

But after I'd hung up I thought that might be the key to all the rubbish on Stephen's land. This was almost like a ritual killing ... and so, every anniversary, the killers would turn up and re-enact the death. Exile communities, quite understandably, cling to rituals and symbols. When you've lost everything else you've still got flags and anniversaries and that sort of thing.

- xix -

When Liz came in in the late afternoon I diverted her into the living room to tell her the news. I said we didn't know if it was Peter but there was a good chance it was.

She sat there for a long time in silence. Then she asked why. I couldn't answer that but I told her I thought that Stephen couldn't bring himself to sell the land, even knowing it might give Liz trouble, because it was his last connection to Peter.

"But he told me Peter had died in 1994. Why did he say that if Peter had died twenty years earlier?"

I said I thought that he had continued to hope that Peter was still alive somewhere but that he had gone into hiding; I said Stephen had hired someone to try and trace Peter but they had come up empty-handed. I'm not sure but it seemed as though Stephen continued the charade with Liz either because he didn't want to risk upsetting her or being faced with questions he couldn't answer (like where had the funeral been held)—or because he didn't want to face the truth himself. I didn't know but I thought 1994 might represent a final acceptance on Stephen's part that Peter really was dead and he was never going to find out what had happened to him.

"Poor man," she said quietly. I didn't know if she meant Stephen or Peter or both.

"Yes."

"But—did they find Peter on Stephen's land?" The sudden thought seemed to distress her.

"No. A little way to the south." Was it Doug's entry on to the land while someone was there which had made that someone nervous—nervous enough to remove the body and bury it where it might not be connected to the land? Impossible to know. And with all that apparently wild space nearby it might've seemed a good idea to take advantage of it. After all, a farm, sooner or later, might get cleared or sold or rented or subdivided ...

"And do you think the person who sent me the card might've believed the body was still on Stephen's land?"

"It's possible. But it is a curiously laconic sort of threat. As if they themselves hadn't decided what to do."

"I'm glad you think it is laconic." She sounded wry. But then I've seen much much worse. After a moment she said, "So what do I do now?"

"Do you have anything of Stephen's? Just in case they can still get DNA? A lock of hair maybe."

"He was buried, not cremated," she said quietly.

I hoped it wouldn't come to that. "Liz, I'm sorry that things couldn't be resolved happily but I don't think Stephen wanted you to have any worry or upset. I think he probably assumed you would simply go ahead and sell the land. And I think that is what you should do."

"But is the land mine?"

“According to your nephew it is. There is no sign of Peter having a family ... unless the people you sent things to in Croatia might conceivably be his descendants. You could always ask the man in Sydney Stephen contacted to find out for you.” As I said that I realised Raymond had only been asked if Stephen had ever contacted him. He probably hadn’t hauled out his correspondence to check exactly what he had been asked. “In fact, it might be worth asking him if you could have back the letters Stephen wrote to him. Or copies.”

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It wasn’t as though I had wrapped things up. But I felt I should simply let Liz make any more decisions about Stephen and his family and his past. And I should leave the body and the crime to the CIB to make of it what they could. And I said to Deb and the girls, if not the baby, that it had been lovely to see them all and to get in touch if they could come to the coast any time. And finally I said to Kaye, yes, I would come to Sydney with her to visit Dell.

“Uh huh, and I want to meet Petra,” she said bluntly. “I want to know why my brother is totally uninterested in one of the most beautiful women I have ever met.”

- xxi -

Our part in the story of the Dollans’ brothers might’ve ended there if it hadn’t been for that unholy triumvirate or junta or whatever is the right word for Petra, Anton, and Raymond Dragicevic. Kaye and I came round to Petra’s to meet them. I had given the police Anton’s number in case they would like to get an independent translation of the message found on the body. He said it said: our methods may be slow but we have infinite patience when it comes to cowards and deserters from the glorious cause and the moment of retribution.

I could see in it the same ambiguity that Anton had mentioned before. But it was Kaye who said testily, “These were only boys, just boys who should’ve been in school, not caught up in war and having to make choices.” Petra smiled and said, “Hear! Hear!” I didn’t point out that we didn’t know when Peter and Stephen made their choices or what those choices were.

It wasn’t till nearly three months later that I heard from Petra that Raymond had traced those two overseas names. They were two elderly men of Austrian origin. They had set up a little folk museum in Zagreb to show their extraordinary collection of very early photos from the time of the Austrian Occupation up to the end of World War One. Only one of Liz’s parcels had reached them—but it was a gem. A diary kept by Stephen’s grandfather who had been a minor Austrian official in Sarajevo at the time of the assassination of the Austrian Archduke which precipitated a world war. Stephen’s mother had inherited the diary when her father died.

What was in the other parcel?

And how did Stephen and Peter spend the war and arouse Ustashe ire?

I don’t know. But greater minds than mine are working on those questions. I was just glad to see Kaye safely off and finally get home again and sit out on my

front balcony and feel a crisp afternoon breeze off the ocean. It was lovely to see Petra again, briefly, but I couldn't answer any of my questions about her either ...

So maybe the best thing about the relationship we have is that the questions don't need answering. They can just hang around listening over our shoulders or nip down to the shops or take a holiday or sit up and say 'Hoy! Remember me!'

It really doesn't matter.

- end -

DOUBLEBANK

- i -

(This is Rachel's story. I have tidied up a bit of the chaos in the middle. You will probably understand why ...)

Did I ever have some crazy idea that I would somehow, maybe thanks to the time I'd spent with James & Montefiore in Surfers, sail through law here in Glasgow? I thought Glasgow would be tricky. Which it is. But I had managed to convince myself that as a serious dedicated sort of person the course itself would be manageable. True. I am still alive, my wrists unscarred. But the first six months were unimaginably difficult. And it was hard living in the hostel in Hillhead. Everyone seemed to have some almost uninterpretable accent. And some of the students seemed dedicated to driving me up the wall—by their noise, by their constant requests to borrow everything I own, from my books, notes, paper, pens, use of this, that, and just about everything. One girl from Canada even hoped I would lend her some underwear. Where did I turn off the main road? Okay, so they're mostly a bit younger but only two, three, four years. But I sometimes feel like I'm about twenty years older.

I thought two semesters here were enough so I started looking round at flats, rooms, shared houses. Anything within walking distance of the uni here you just about have to camp on the doorstep, fight off dozens of ravening kids from Africa and Inverness, or spread a rumour that the last occupant had rabies. I was getting rather gloomy about the whole business. I even started giving myself pep talks: okay, kiddo, you've known worse. Etc etc. You might as well stay on.

One evening as I was coming out of one of the lecture halls there was a woman standing outside. I had not taken any of her lectures except a public talk she gave on the subject of 'True Crime Books and Their Ethical Questions' which impressed me.

She came over to me and said: Hello, I'm Anne Campbell. And you're Rachel Creighton, aren't you? I've seen you around the Law School. Given the numbers here this surprised me ...

I tried to think up a reason for her to come over and say hello, apart from intrinsic friendliness, which took a fair bit of believing—and came up blank. It's not that I haven't met friendly people here. But the problems of gross moral turpitude, i.e. messing round with the bodies and sometimes the minds of students, finally seem to have convinced people that a duty of care means you leave students strictly alone—except for bawling them out for handing in late and lousy papers.

If you're not in a rush would you like to come for a cup of coffee?

I said I would. I assumed she was offering to pay. Money doesn't go as far in Glasgow as it did in Surfers. Is this a pick-up? She assured me it wasn't. Oh! You're having me on, aren't you?

It's called laying out your case clearly. Something like that. She laughed. But I got the impression Anne Campbell was a very serious person. If she laughed it was because she had read somewhere that laughing is good for your health.

We went along to the car park where she had her Saab parked. At least it would beat walking on a gusty afternoon. Little by little I am finding things in Glasgow to like. But the weather is still sitting sulking outside my little intimate circle of likes.

Anne asked me how I liked it here. It takes a fair bit of getting used to. And you—are you a Glaswegian? No, further north. Near Oban. We went to a small café called The Fishwife's Bun. Its speciality was not the norm of fish and chips but a kind of fish rissole in a fried bun. Would I like to try one? I said I was game. And it would save on tea later. We took a small table near a window. The place was mostly done out in blue-and-white tiles and the waitress wore a yellow bib overall. Anne ordered two, along with two cappuccinos, two glasses of water, and a bowl of nuts and raisins. I wondered if this was her usual diet.

I can see you're wondering what I'm leading up to.

I am. I know you have to hide your curiosity when you get into court and someone holds up a piece of paper and says despite appearances this will prove my client is innocent!

Are you planning to specialise in court work?

At the moment I am just hoping to get through first year without falling flat on my face.

You will. I'm sure of that. It's partly why I decided to approach you. My cousin recently moved out of my apartment and I have been looking for someone who might like to share. I can manage on my own but I enjoy having company if it's compatible. I know it's a stab in the dark but I just have the feeling we might suit.

Up to that moment I hadn't thought about Anne as a person as opposed to someone I see around campus. Now I pulled up the very little bit I knew about her; as a person, as a lecturer, as a possible flatmate.

Is that based on anything stronger than the hope I look like someone who enjoys washing up. I held out my rather large hands. And who isn't too bad when it comes to vacuuming and carrying some groceries. Not exactly muscles but someone who won't skive off—

Denis Hardiman told me about the introductory speech you gave and he said it was like a breath of fresh air. That intrigued me. I was sorry you haven't been taking any of my lectures—but next year perhaps.

Her pal Denis had had the bright idea of getting all his students to give a ten minute introduction—not because he was interested in their life histories but because he liked to get an idea right from the start on how they came across, whether their voices were hearable, whether they could put together their ideas in a coherent form. Little things like that.

At first I had thought of talking about Australia. Then I changed my mind and did my talk on my first chance to get out of Glasgow. My great-grandfather worked at the Littlemill distillery about twelve miles out of the city. But when I got out there, and that was a saga in itself, I found the place was closed down. Still I hadn't come all the way to simply stand there and say How sad! I had wangled a walk around the site and some local history from an old guy who seemed to be stuck in about 1920. True, there is a limit to the amount I want to know about triple distillation, annual production, how many men were employed, where they bought their barley from. But he also had some good yarns to tell ...

Our fishy buns came and were very nice.

If you would like to come round and just see my apartment. It's in Kelvinside so it wouldn't be much further for you. If you like the idea we can go into it in more detail. If not—it would still be nice to occasionally meet up. I found this a vaguely surprising idea. After all, here was Anne, an attractive intelligent woman in her late thirties. She shouldn't need to be seeking out undergraduates.

But then you aren't. I mean, technically speaking, you are. But it is not like asking a nineteen-year-old to share.

I understood that. I suppose it is what every mature age student feels. That they are somewhere between students and staff. Life experience as opposed to technological nouse. But I still thought of myself as just a slightly older student. Not mature.

— ii —

Her flat, when we parked and went up in the old-fashioned lift, was nice. I thought it beat finding some grotty little bed-sit hands down. But what would sharing be like? She had a good view out over rows and rows of roofs, dark reddish rows of three and four storeys, and a small park with several trees springing into spring leaf. It didn't compare with the Pacific Ocean but I had gradually ceased to

think of sand and waves and hunks in board shorts. I even had the odd feeling that maybe those things were over-rated. Heresy, of course. But I had started to see the awful mindlessness of it all. Of course there are people in Surfers who have brains and use them but an awful lot have checked them in for the duration of their holiday. Checked them in full stop.

She showed me her spare bedroom. A little spartan. But I couldn't see anything to complain about. Except—What if you want to have friends to stay? Won't you want it then?

She said no, not really. She showed me that her two sofas were both fold-out beds for an emergency. And her kitchen, bathroom, and tiny laundry area were all immaculate. She had some bright abstracts on white and yellow walls, their colours picked out in the furnishings. There was a small dining table round in the L of the main room, also a desk with a computer on it and lots of drawers. She said she had a second computer in her room for preparing materials and doing research.

So what is this one specially for?

My book. She came over and stood beside the desk and lifted piles of printouts and notes. Then she reached up to the shelf above and took down several books. I do these as bread-and-butter.

They were titles like 'Jury Duty: What to Expect', 'Putting a Case Together', 'Dealing with Witnesses', 'Court Etiquette', 'Circumstantial Evidence: What Weight?'. I had seen them in the law library, snappy little booklets clearly set out and informative, particularly to someone from somewhere else, but I had not associated them with her as they were all in the name of Dr C.A. Campbell.

My first name is Colina. She sounded wry. Colin has always been a favourite Campbell name. So girls sometimes get stuck with Colina. I use Anne for everyday work.

In a way I was impressed. I don't know a lot of writers—and certainly not ones who bring out popular fast-selling books like these.

So your next book is another in the series?

No. It is something quite different. So it has tended to come last in the queue. But it is important to me. And if you are interested you might like to be my sounding board sometimes. Even a research assistant when you have time. But let me finish showing you around.

The upstairs in that old four-storey building had four flats round the central area where the lift came up. There was also a staircase with mahogany banisters. At some stage in its life this building had had a certain style about it. But squeezing in flats and lifts and nameboards and pigeonholes for mail and so on soon kills any lingering sense of style. Along the corridor from Anne's flat there was a door opening out on to a small landing that went down in the zig-zag of a fire escape.

I liked the place. It was modest but comfortable. But I would need to leave ten minutes earlier ... unless Anne felt like offering me a lift. I had thought of getting a bicycle or little motor scooter. But walking was a better way to get to know my way

around and a better way to meet people ... and small modes of transportation have a way of getting stolen.

The key thing really was money. Would it be more than the sort of place I had been racing round looking at. Or trying to look at. Anne named a figure which was less than the average bedsit. I said would that cover the costs of another person. She smiled a little sadly and said it was only to cover my room and utilities. I would need to do my own shopping. This I had already assumed. You don't expect someone vastly your senior to cook your breakfast and leave your supper in the oven.

I said: if you are willing to take a punt on me—then I'd love to give it a try. And if you feel it's not working just give me enough notice to find somewhere else.

She said she was glad I would like to share. Or trial it. It didn't occur to me then to wonder why she was a rather serious sad person, even when she used words like 'glad' and 'happy' ...

— iii —

And the first month *was* wonderful. I have rarely been so happy. Maybe it had something to do with spring in Glasgow. But, really, it was all about Anne. She was kind, thoughtful, always willing to help without being intrusive; we went one Sunday for a drive up to Loch Lomond—with another million people but that couldn't be helped. We decided to take turns to cook in the evenings unless either of us was staying out late. She gave me free run of her books including her excellent collection of law books. She showed me, or steered me towards, some of the interesting little nooks and crannies of Glasgow; places the casual visitor usually doesn't get to see.

But most of all she stimulated, stretched, challenged my mind. This amazed me. Me! Was this the person who would once have run a mile rather than exercise her mind? But her ideas, the things she challenged herself with, most of all her book—all of these gripped me.

Her book was going to be called 'Justice—How?' She said this wasn't set in stone but she wanted to challenge people to think about what they meant when they said they wanted, expected, sought, needed, justice.

If justice is dependent on the police catching someone and the court convicting that same person then justice is always held hostage to the failings of policing and the technicalities of the system. It isn't a given. And therefore a right only in the abstract ...

But when people say they want justice—quite often they mean they want revenge. An eye for an eye. The two things become indistinguishable.

So take a case where a family has been told there are suspicious circumstances. Of course they want answers. They want justice. They picture someone being punished. And then they are told that their son committed suicide. Suddenly the onus is back on them. Did they support their son. Did they see the signals.

Or they might be told it was an accident. He was definitely speeding. Or he blacked out at the wheel. They might blame him. He was always irresponsible. Or they blame the state of the road—which is obviously someone else’s fault. Or the mechanic who fixed his car. In the end justice is always hostage to something beyond itself. It is about conceptualisation.

Or we fail to define what we mean. There are our courts. There is the blindfolded figure of justice. But she is the only thing which is blind. We make assumptions all the time. And one family’s definition of justice is not another’s. Nor is it probably that of their lawyer, the judge, the next-door-neighbour, their elderly relatives. We are constantly moving our concept up and down that sliding scale.

We had endless long conversations. I don’t know if Anne got anything new out of me. But I found myself looking at everything from a variety of new and exciting angles. Of course when I got into the lecture hall and had to listen to someone droning on about torts or precedent or the differences between trusts and partnerships and limited liability and all the rest it was often hard going. But it always had the image of getting home, yes, home, and being able to talk some of my problems over.

Anne planned the book in three parts. The first would look at some unsolved cases. The second part would be the results of discussions and questionnaires, the third would look at ways in which people who had not received traditional forms of justice might be supported, helped, compensated; and how society as a whole might engage with ways around such apparent dead ends. She had already planned out the ten cases that would go in Part One. With some restrictions she had gained access to some police files on the investigations and why no one had ever been charged. Because it is a fact of life that suspicion is not enough and although I won’t say police in Glasgow beat up suspects (though I’m sure they do—sometimes) courts have a way of rejecting confessions gained that way. She had chosen her cases as a gradation of suspicion but also to show what part the media did or did not play in the case. I found these all fascinating. And I had ideas. Of course I had ideas. I hadn’t lived with Bob for the last five years without seeing that most cases, even old cold ones, can have solutions. Of course I’d had longer than that with him but you aren’t interested in your dad’s work when you’re a teenager.

For Part Two she had already sent out questionnaires to all sorts of people across the spectrum. She wanted to get thirty people under thirty, thirty in the under sixty group, and thirty over that. She also planned to talk to a number of small children to see how they begin to grapple with a concept like justice. All the written material would need to be collated and general trends and directions defined. Then she planned several community discussions which she would tape and write up. She also had a big city high school and a very small school in the highlands to visit. And several retirement homes.

I don’t really see myself as a people person. If it comes to that I am just as happy muddling round in the area of concepts. But I said I was happy to come and

help with recording equipment, notes, backup. Not least because it would take me to some places I would not otherwise have visited. I didn't pretend that I would be able to understand high school students here. Nor did I pretend that I would get much out of visiting a Gaelic-speaking group way up north. But I was game to give it all a try.

And Part Three would look at various ways in which a variety of cultures and societies had looked at ways to achieve justice even if the individual perpetrator was not known, identifiable, catchable. Things like ransoms and rewards. Things like holding the family, even the village or the clan responsible for individual wrongdoing. Things like independent reviews of evidence. Things like the state being required to compensate the victims, or their families, of unsolved crimes—and should there be a cut-off point of seriousness. Other ways of getting at truth—from threats, bribes, medication, hypnosis, honour ... even the idea of taxing a particular group more heavily to cover the cost of a particular kind of crime. Then she was going to look at all kinds of legislation from gun control to X-ratings ... and what people were prepared to pay for justice both in terms of higher taxes, loss of certain freedoms, restrictions on activities. In other words justice gained or lost weight according to how people saw themselves as being individually affected.

I guess it was more than the challenge of the book that excited me. It was Anne. I loved to listen to her, her voice, to watch her, the neat graceful way she moved; her smile, the glow on her dark red hair. I had always seen myself as determinedly heterosexual. Certainly I preferred the company of other women. But I saw same sex as somehow a pallid alternative to the 'real thing'. And it didn't take me very long to see that Anne was the completely cerebral person. She enjoyed walking, an occasional round of golf or game of squash, she was a good cook and shopped carefully. But I knew that she lived her life in her head. Everything else was a vague appendage.

Had she always been like this or had she had some bad experience somewhere along the way? I didn't know. And it was her business anyway. If she wanted to share—well, sure, I was right there.

— iv —

I had my own awkward ... I won't say man-in-my-life because he was nothing of the sort. But I had written to Robert Carlinghall when I was settled into life here. Nothing effusive. But I suppose I was curious. What had happened? Not much. Except his father had been removed to a private clinic for physical and mental testing. Was this a version of justice for the young woman he had killed? Probably not. And yet, when my anger cooled down, I could see that men were victims of expectations too. What can be publicly admitted and what not. And even if the old man would never admit responsibility—his two sons had borne the full brunt of tabloid hysteria. Was that justice? Probably not.

But then Robert kept writing to me. I didn't want him to. We were those ships that had passed by in the fog. I didn't want, and I couldn't really imagine him wanting, anything further. I had seen my letter as finishing things. He didn't seem to

see it that way. He actually wrote very nice letters. Pleasant. Interesting. Even amusing in a quiet way. But I never replied to any of them.

I struggled through end-of-year exams and kept my fingers tightly-crossed. In theory I wasn't supposed to work as I was here as a student. But as it was too far and too expensive to go back to Surfers and as I had months to fill in I had wondered about finding something where I could perhaps barter my talents. Such as they are.

But Anne said no, don't look for something in the black economy. It's too risky. Why don't I take something more off your rent in return for you doing more of my library and newspaper research.

This suited me ideally and she mapped out the areas in which she was still looking back on old cases. It would mean trawling through not just the local papers but more widely to see how places like Edinburgh and Aberdeen and Inverness had reported Glasgow crimes. Had they come up with a different 'take'. Was there an assumption that the place helped define the type of crime ... and therefore the most likely perpetrator. And if so should people in small largely crime-free places contribute equally to the cost of policing in crime-full places. Etc.

We mapped out the summer's work.

The book had ceased to be Anne's project. It had become mine too. And she had offered me not shared billing but certainly my name on the front cover in smaller letters. I thought I was a cynical old ... whatever ... not given to wild enthusiasms or gurgling hope. But I was thrilled by her offer. It never occurred to me that there might be any danger in the book ...

Robert rang me at Anne's one evening at the beginning of July. He had rung the hostel and got the Canadian girl who had wanted my underwear (surely I hadn't misunderstood her request?) and she had passed on my new address and phone number. I hadn't put any provisos on who could be given it. To tell the truth I hadn't even thought of him ringing me there. He would just, I assumed, fade out of my life like a ship disappearing over the horizon. Just a smudge of smoke remaining.

Had he got me any other time I would've given him a sharp No. But I was going round, on top of the world, thinking of myself as almost co-author of what I believed was going to be a stupendous book. Anne had given me copies of all her stuff so I could check and proof-read and come up with suggestions and ideas and follow up anything I thought might be worth looking at. My own image of writers, as people who clutch their material to their chests afraid the world will try to steal it, didn't apply to Anne. She was generous and willing to share. Might there be a catch? In the beginning I wondered about this. I had heard of students being asked to do all sorts of things for teachers—from baby-sitting and sex to research and typing. But the days passed and I felt that she was genuinely the person I saw. Very quiet, very private, very reticent. But also warm and kind and unselfish. I felt that I had just been very very lucky ...

And so, in the middle of my moment of euphoria, with Robert saying he was coming to Glasgow for a conference of private hoteliers or classy hoteliers or off-

limits-to-backpackers hoteliers or whatever they saw themselves as—and could he take me out to dinner. Of course the offer of dinner was always an inducement in a place where I had to watch my pennies. And before I stopped to recollect that I didn't want this man in my life I had said Okay. Afterwards I seriously thought of simply not turning up. He could eat with his fellow-delegates. It wouldn't hurt him.

I mentioned my quandary to Anne and she said immediately: You must go.

Why must I?

You need a social life. Justice is fascinating but it won't warm you in bed of a night.

I don't intend for Robert to warm me in bed of a night either.

She had laughed at that and said I would probably be a good influence on him. Then she wanted all the gory details and wanted to know how I had focused on the old man. I thought of saying 'why don't you go?' You would have more in common. She seemed to think I was worrying about not fitting in with someone who inhabited the fading grandeur of an unimportant title. I said it was the last thing on my mind. The only thing I wanted was the letters *after* my name ... someday. She laughed and said she believed me.

I think you are the sort of person who will only ever value the things you have struggled for.

I had never thought of it quite like that. But maybe it was true.

Well, I haven't struggled for Robert Carlinghall and I don't want him.

Would you want him if you did have to fight for him?

No. His mum told me she was descended from the Estutevilles or some such name. Can you imagine having her as a mother-in-law always worrying about pedigrees and stuff.

Well, all Campbells trace back to Gillespie Cambel in the thirteenth century. If you were interested I am sure you could also trace yourself well back—Scottish records are better than most—

Maybe. But it's that idea of I'm-better-than-you. No, you're not. Yes, I am. Etc.

She laughed at that. Then tell me this—why won't Robert leave you alone?

God knows. Other girls are probably worried because he's Bluebeard's son. I mean—would you want to go to *sleep* with someone who might take to you with a knife when you let your guard down and drop off?

Put like that—no. But I honestly think Justin and Robert are quite safe. I don't know much about Robert but Justin is a very talented artist, photographer, and designer.

I looked at her suspiciously. How do you know all this?

I looked at his web-site.

So simple.

But I still didn't want Robert back in my life. One dinner. That's it.

Anne said: then make sure it is a superb dinner. And I don't blame Robert at all for refusing to take no for an answer ...

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I had agreed to meet Robert downtown; a restaurant on Argyle Street with a French name. I was tempted to go in jeans and a t-shirt. That would send a clear message. But he was quite likely to find it 'refreshing'. I didn't want to be found refreshing so I went in a mid-calf skirt and blouse. I don't like high heels. Probably hearing Bob say something about women make life hard for themselves when some sicko jumps out on them in Kings Cross; how can they run in high spikes. So I put on my soft black pumps that make me look like an escapee from a ballet class—before I've been allowed to graduate up to pink satin.

Anne said she was going to go down to the corner shop and then she planned to work on the book. She said as I got ready to go down to catch the bus: I'll bet you find you like him more this time around. I said I could go to ten pounds against her proposition. But she didn't take me up on it. Too subjective a subject for a wager ...

It was probably just as well I didn't. Because in a mild way she was right. About halfway through duck with chestnuts I decided I did like him better this time around. He was more relaxed. More fun to be with. I didn't have to worry about his staff or his patrons. And it can be nice to spend time with someone who seems genuinely interested in your life without demanding that you 'spill all'. Even so, I wasn't going to let down any guards.

And he said Justin liked my idea of removing both wings of their house; the two Victorian uglinesses which framed the Queen Anne house. If Justin was such a marvellous artist then he had probably had that idea long before I came along to suggest it.

What about your mother? How does she feel about change?

She is thinking of retiring to a little place in Dorset. She has a sister there. I think she would be much happier. And Justin is looking at a co-tenanting agreement with all the people on the estate in return for keeping a flat there in readiness for him.

And where do you come into all this?

First son, you know. Still I've got Yorke House—

It's hardly *home*.

It is. For me. But I know what you mean. And it was worse after you had gone. Just something about you. It seemed so much more pallid and grey. As though it had no life in it. I had the terrible desire to strip everything and re-decorate. But I knew the feeling would wear off.

Which it did.

No. Not really. I kept asking myself why I had gone down that conventional road of soothing muted colours. I know there's a place for soothing—but not four storeys of it. I can't afford to do anything at the moment. Not till I get it up to a

going concern again. But I have been wondering about returning it to something closer to the Art Deco stuff they had there in the thirties.

Does Justin have suggestions?

Usually. But some are easier to live with than others.

We went out into the long summer evening. I find the idea of the ‘gloaming’ rather nice. Not nice enough maybe to set off the winter. We went to another place to have a drink and which had a small dance floor. I wasn’t wild about dancing with Robert, with anyone really, but they had a good marimba band and I let myself be carried along.

It was just after ten when I decided it was time to let all this feel-good stuff come to an end. No sense in letting Rob start thinking I might want to spend the night with him. He insisted on getting a taxi and coming with me. I said Glasgow’s streets were really quite safe and I didn’t need his company. But he saw fit to disagree with that claim—and it isn’t borne out by statistics. So when we got back to the flat I said I always went up the fire stairs. I thought that would prevent him from coming up for any sort of goodnight squeeze.

He asked the taxi to wait while he came up with me.

I had a key for the fire door and we went in. I thought I would very briefly introduce him to Anne (who knew—they might be instantly entranced) then send him on his way. But there was something a bit odd as we came along the corridor. Anne’s door was partly ajar. She wasn’t as trusting of Glaswegians as I was. She never left it open. And all seemed quiet. But she wouldn’t leave the door ajar if she had just popped out, not even to see someone else here in the flats.

That’s odd. Anne never leaves the door open.

Just check then. Make sure everything is okay before I go.

I pushed the door open with a couple of fingertips and went in.

Ever since that moment my life has been broken in two. The relatively peaceful before. And the agonising regrets of after.

The place was carnage. And Anne lay face down in the middle of it.

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Robert went to call the police and pay off his taxi. I bent down and felt for her pulse. But she had been dead for an hour or more and her body was cooling. I carefully removed myself from the scene-of-the-crime. I tried to take in the horror of it. The computer on her desk was smashed beyond repair. Things were thrown everywhere, papers, mugs, books, chairs were overturned. They had gone into her bedroom and mine and pulled out drawers and opened cupboards.

Was it simply some thugs looking for money?

I couldn’t be sure but it seemed to be focused on Anne and her desk.

I wasn’t thinking very clearly. Why Anne? Why beautiful Anne? It was that I couldn’t come to terms with. If someone had been desperate for money she would probably and ungrudgingly have given them everything she had in the house. Why hurt her? Why *kill* her?

Robert came back upstairs. I hadn't realised there were tears streaming down my cheeks. He came over and put an arm round my shoulders and handed me the clean handkerchief from his pocket. The police are on their way. Won't be more than ten minutes they said.

It doesn't make sense. I can't believe it. Not Anne! I don't know what I said. The usual. Because it *didn't* make sense. Anne had a chain for her door. Even a spyhole. She had let someone in. But who would she let in? Family. Friends. Colleagues. Even someone pretending to be a me that's lost her key? Neighbours? I couldn't get my head round anything likely.

Maybe Robert said other things. I didn't take anything in. And then the police came. They were quick. I'll say that for them. But I wasn't impressed by the careless way they went in and started touching things. But they called for backup and a doctor.

They took our names and addresses. When they realised I was the other occupant they looked suspicious, then dubious. No chance of staying here tonight.

No. I could understand that. But I didn't want to go. It was as though I felt I had to stay and guard Anne and all her things from their carelessness, their insensitivities, their gross jokes.

The big guns arrived. I still didn't want to go. And yet it was just as painful to stay.

They said we would need to make statements. Who knew. Maybe we had killed Anne then gone out to dinner? I suddenly had the hysterical desire to howl. Is This Scotland's Most Callous Murderess? Do people still get called murderesses? Probably not. And there I would be on all the tabloids staring into popping flashbulbs. There Robert would be. Another round of humiliation and public scarifying. I wanted to apologise for drawing him into this mess. True, he had insisted on coming up—

One of the detectives came over and said I would have to go somewhere else for the night. They would be busy here. If I would go in with a female officer to pack a bag and go to a hotel after making a statement—

I tried to get my mind round the chronology of the evening. I tried to think what I would need to take with me. A woman in her thirties came and stood over me while I put pyjamas and underwear in a bag. I went to the bathroom with difficulty to get my toothbrush then put my heavier shoes on and got a light coat from the wardrobe. I kept my laptop and my briefcase with the copies of Anne's material at the back of my wardrobe. I asked if it would be okay to take my stuff to work on if I couldn't come back tomorrow morning. She looked suspicious but after going through the briefcase she said I could.

Then I went out. I didn't want to leave Anne without saying goodbye, holding her one last time, somehow making a gesture ... in case I never managed to do so again.

The woman with me seemed to understand this because she asked them to let me say goodbye. But then with everyone staring at me I didn't know what to do. I squatted down and lifted her hand to my cheek.

Robert was out in the corridor. Already the police were knocking on all the other doors to see what other people had heard or seen. I felt dismally sure they wouldn't have seen anything. Everyone here was like Anne; professional, busy, ambitious, dedicated ... single or near enough. There were no garrulous old women to be looking out windows at the right time. There were no children running up and down the corridors and sliding down the banisters. No one intruded on anyone else. I had only met our neighbour across the corridor and glimpsed a couple of other people. And 'met' was too engaging a word for a brief exchange of hullo.

But there was one odd thing about the flat. I put it in my statement. Anne always liked to leave the curtains wide open. She said she rather liked the thought of all those lights and people and the distant hills and night sky out there. And it wasn't as though she wandered round naked. I said it didn't bother me. The only time the curtains got closed was when she drew the one which would shade her computer; she didn't want the afternoon sun shining in on it. But when we had come in all the curtains were firmly closed. Would a couple of hooligans bother? And if someone had bothered—then clearly they had worried about people in the distance being able to see something inside this apartment. But could they? I wasn't sure.

Finally they said they needed to know where to contact me. Us. Robert said he was sure he could get me a room at his hotel. It was run by a friend of his. They would find somewhere for me. The police obviously didn't care one way or another. They just wanted a contact number. They said I would probably be able to return by midday.

They had asked me about Anne's next-of-kin and I had said I thought she would regard her brother Ben who was a chartered accountant in Edinburgh as being that. I said his number should be in the telex by the phone.

Then Robert helped me into another taxi and we went round to his hotel. By now I truly felt bushwhacked. I just wanted to lie down and close my eyes. There was nothing more I could do for Anne, for now, and I don't know what happens when people get killed, when they die, but if there's more than this life ...

Travel well, dear Anne ...

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Robert came up with me. The only free space was a small room up practically under the eaves. Being holidays. Being in the middle of a conference. I wasn't going to be fussy. But he tried to get me to take his and he would take this one.

No. I just want to flake out. I'll see you in the morning.

He put both arms around me and gave me a light kiss on the cheek. Then he said: I know better than to argue ...

I should say something about Small Mercies but I *am* glad you were with me. I don't know how well I would've coped on my own.

Being Rachel Creighton—probably remarkably well. But no one should have to cope with tragedy on their own.

I thought about this later when I was in bed. It was true. No one should ...

But I didn't know then that worse was lying in wait for me. And that I would still need to do a lot of coping ...

It was already light and bright when I groaned my way up to awakeness. I felt something terrible had happened, something black that bowed me down, but for a minute I couldn't work out why I was in this strange room. And then it hit me with a horrible boing!

I got up slowly and dressed and went for a quick shower. But I still looked like something a cat had foolishly dragged up all those stairs to its den. And then I simply sat there unsure what to do next. One part of me didn't want to go back and go over everything (not least because of that terrible thought—what if I hadn't gone? what if I had been in my room when someone came by?) and another part of me said: you, better than anyone, must know what and why ...

I couldn't get away from my original impression—that it had something to do with the book. I couldn't really imagine people getting hot under the collar because of Anne's questionnaires or even by her discussions on the philosophical aspects of justice. But those ten unsolved, or maybe I should say uncharged, cases ... was there something in there? Had Anne come closer to the truth than someone felt comfortable with? I didn't like this thought—because the only people who knew about this aspect of the book were some of her colleagues and some people in police records.

But then I realised the people in the know were probably wider than that. Me, of course. Other students perhaps. People in the media. Her family. Her cousin who had lived with her. Other friends. Her publishers. Even possibly neighbours and acquaintances.

I took out the list of names and dates I had begun to work on through old microfilmed newspapers. And Anne had suggested looking at all kinds of other things—like tombstones put up to, not only the victims themselves but their close relations. How did they express that sudden death. Did they play it down. Did they express hopes that God would provide justice. Things they might not say in public. One of the cases was the famous 'Barrowland' murders. This was a big dance hall. And the suspect had been seen with the women who were later found murdered. He was even nicknamed 'Holy John'. But the police never found him. I find this extraordinary—and I couldn't help wondering if there had been a cover-up. Or someone had tried to frame him. Long before psychological profiling I felt that the people who had seen him as one of those repressed religious bigots Scotland can still produce, a man who felt that coming to a place and seeing girls in skimpy frocks, minis even, was torn between his love for what he determined as vice and virtue. The girls were having *fun*. That was the thing that probably sparked him off. Or the

perp if not that particular man. He probably lived at home with a censorious old-fashioned parent ...

But this case was too far back. Holy John, if it was him, would be a doddering old man now. Or would he? The sightings suggested he was older than his victims. But teenagers probably thought thirty was old. He might only be in his sixties. A bit more ...

Even so, I felt that the person who had killed Anne and wrecked her place was much younger. A later case then? But I felt sure there had to be at least an acquaintanceship. A friend. A neighbour. Family. A student. Anne would not open the door to the Holy Johns of this world ... unless ... yes, unless it was someone who had promised to give her information. But I still didn't feel that was very likely. She would arrange to meet them in a public place. Or she would ask them to come when I was there. When I was there ...

Was this the real reason she had wanted someone to share her flat?

She knew there were dangers in the book. And, living alone, it might be days before she was found. But they had left the door ajar. Was that to make it look like some thugs had found the door like that and barged in? Was it unintentional? Had they heard the lift rising, someone on the stairs? Did they know Anne was now sharing her place with someone ... I felt these questions were important but I couldn't answer them.

Had Anne always been afraid? Had I mistaken what I saw as her seriousness, even her sadness, for someone who lives with the constant vague fear that someone wishes her ... dead?

In the middle of this Robert came up to see how I was and suggest I come down and have breakfast in the little room with his friend the manager; he thought I probably wouldn't want to face the public dining room. I didn't. True. But I wasn't really keen on being friendly and chatty and grateful to the manager who turned out to be a man called Andrew McIlwraith.

I wasn't hungry but I had some freshly-squeezed orange juice and two slices of toast with lime marmalade and of all things a banana. Maybe they thought it would cheer me up. I have tasted better bananas.

The police had told Robert they wouldn't likely be needing him again. But they had told me they would have more questions for me once the Scene-of-Crime boffins had finished and they had a tentative time of death. I had the impression this talk of 'more questions' was designed to intimidate. I don't think they realised that I was far keener to find the perpetrator than they would ever be. To me justice was both an abstract concept and a burning need. If a thousand more questions could shake loose some key word or memory from my brain—go for it.

They offered to come with me to the station. But I said I would be okay. This was partly true. I wanted a quick resolution. But it was also part bravado. I was after all the daughter of a cop. I was a law student. I had seen and heard things ... I didn't go to pieces easily. But there was something that I hadn't fully taken on board. How

you feel about violent death is always mediated through your feelings for a particular person ... and it is always mediated through your own sense of self. What if that was me. What if I am next. What if my family, my children, are next. The people who come out and bay at pedophiles are saying: I am terrified my children will be next. You have destroyed my belief that the world is a safe place for children. Of course the world has never been a safe place for children but no one likes to admit that. Except for groups like Save the Children. If adults were decent human beings, with sense, self-control, and unselfishness ... we wouldn't need to be worrying about saving children ...

Andrew then called me a taxi, 'on the house', and asked me to come back and stay here—even if the police said I could now return home. I said I would let him know. I think this was just the casual thing that immediately came to mind. I don't think I had any premonitions ...

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But as the morning's interview progressed, and they really did want to shake free anything I had seen or heard since coming to live with Anne, I felt the questions were gradually being skewed in a certain direction. It was very odd Anne singling me out. It was very odd Anne asking an undergraduate to share her apartment and help on her book. It was very odd that I was out the one evening someone came in. It was very odd that Anne had given me copies of all her material. (Strictly speaking she also had another copy in her drawers on campus.) I wasn't sole repository—but it looked as though I *had* been singled out. I told them that my father was a retired Detective Inspector and that Anne was looking for a fresh perspective on all her material. I told them I had saved for more than two years to come here—and I wasn't going to throw everything away so carelessly. I told them I was twenty-eight so it wasn't like Anne inviting a teenager to share. I told them what our financial arrangements were.

I told them it was purely coincidence that Robert Carlinghall had invited me out to dinner last night. I told them that Anne had urged me to go. I told them I wasn't interested in English toffs. I preferred down-to-earth ordinary people who had not been born with silver spoons in their mouths. But of course none of this was cutting any ice. It was me saying what I would naturally say if I was—

Because that was the gist of all their questions. I had means, motive (possibly), and benefit.

Here, hang on, a tiny mo! Yeah, I had the means. It might've been a lover's tiff—if you are really scratching round for a motive—except that I have never been to bed with a woman in my life. The benefits are hard to find. I will now lose a very pleasant place to live. I have just lost a good friend. Anne had a publisher's contract already signed for the book. Which makes no mention of me, either as a co-author or as someone to receive royalties. Anne planned to change that. So why would I kill her *before* she had done so? Every time I said 'kill' I felt it was going to stick in my throat along with the big lump already there.

So why did I take away my copy of all that material? Why not some of my own stuff to study? Because I was planning to come into the library today anyway and work on old newspapers for Anne. That was what I was thinking about. Not my own stuff. And if it is humanly possible I want this book finished and published in the way that meant so much to her ... and if it doesn't have my name on it and if I don't make a penny out of it—I don't care two hoots. *It is Anne's book*. That is what matters about it.

So why don't you care about anything else of hers?

I do care. But her work, her reputation, the law—those things meant more to her than the pictures on her walls and the china in her cabinets. She wasn't precious about *things* ...

I don't think they believed me. But then I didn't know how to explain Anne to them. They couldn't seem to see that she lived in her mind. It was the things of the mind that mattered most to her. But then their days are filled with people who kill for money, for things, for very down-to-earth clear reasons. I just hoped her brother when he arrived would be able to make Anne clearer to them.

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He arrived the same evening. He was much bigger than Anne, starting to run to a paunch. A man who looked like a successful professional. He drove an Aston Martin and wore clothes that looked expensive. But he was obviously deeply distressed about Anne's death. He kept saying he couldn't believe it. They asked him if she had a will. He said she probably did. Most lawyers think in terms of wills—even if they were still under forty. He said he hadn't seen Anne in three months. She had come to visit him in Edinburgh at Easter. He said the cousin, Morag Mitchell, would be the person to ask. He gave them her address. He didn't know why Morag had gone to live in Carlisle. But he thought it probably had something to do with work. She had managed a catering company here. She had also probably found this small apartment rather constricting ... for someone who enjoyed entertaining. But, no, Anne had not given any particular reason for Morag's departure.

So it was a perfectly amicable parting.

So far as I know.

It probably was. But as he and I and two CID people sat in that still chaotic flat I felt a vague sense that it hadn't been quite like that. Nothing concrete. But I had the feeling that Anne made a careful decision not to invite any other family member to share. This might simply be that she could think of no one suitable. But it might also mean that relations between herself and Morag hadn't been as amicable as Ben Campbell believed.

Yet Anne would certainly open the door to Morag—even if they had parted on a sour note.

Morag would also have known about Anne's hopes for this book. So was this the ultimate way to get back at Anne? By destroying something which she was

investing a lot of time and thought in? Without knowing the other woman I couldn't make any real guess at any of this.

They didn't really want me muddying the waters. But I said I thought that Anne had been—not exactly afraid but perhaps a little worried about something or someone. I was surprised when I first came here that she didn't relish her peace and freedom from other people's intrusions. And she said that she wanted company, even the company of a stranger. I didn't know but I wondered if she saw company in terms of safety rather than someone to have breakfast with.

For the first time I felt there was another agenda here. One I wasn't privy to. I was looking at Ben as I talked about safety. And something seemed to come into his eyes. I couldn't pin it down. An idea seems much too definite. A hint of ... worry. There was someone in Anne's life about whom she had at some stage expressed ... what? Concern? Doubt? A vague sense of unease?

I think Ben saw the wheels begin to spin in *my* head. The little numbers start to click and whirr. The ratchets try to engage. He said: I wondered why she bothered. She had the money. She didn't need to share. She was a very private person. And she *was* dedicated to her work. I really find it extraordinary that she would invite a noisy extroverted Australian into her flat. It seems totally out-of-character.

I have never thought of myself as either noisy or extroverted. My friends back in Surfers might have a different take. A bit of music maybe. No sense in being a shrinking violet if you want a guy ... but hardly *noisy* and *extroverted*! Honestly! If it hadn't been for the feeling that Ben genuinely liked his sister and wanted the thugs caught I would've taken an immediate dislike to him.

We spent hours going over things. They wanted to know exactly how the curtains got pulled. Who did what when. They wanted to know our routines. Did I always work in my room and Anne at the desk. Did I cook, clean, shop. Was there any possibility that the perpetrators had mistaken Anne for me? The unspoken part of this was they thought I was the sort of person who would get up lots of people's noses. Whereas Anne was ...

I knew I was well up their noses. They were like those people who always want it to be a vagrant—not one of the family. But even if I looked very slightly like Anne I was at least six inches taller.

They kept leading the questions back to me. I had to have more information than I was letting on. I had to be No I in the frame. The one night I'd gone out on a 'date' since coming to live with Anne. And they had obviously done some homework on Robert Carlinghall. He might be white as driven snow ... all the same, it was very very suspicious that the one person I chose to go out with was a person who had been blacklisted and splashed all over the tabloids. It made me sound like some sort of weird chick who gets her kicks out of dating jailbait.

The irony of it all, all their snide statements about the Carlinghall family (who, after all, hadn't been top of *my* list for Family of the Year), was to make me feel something of the agony Robert had felt, as another private person, when he saw

those blaring headlines and pointing fingers and departing staff. I didn't want to feel sympathy for him. But I couldn't help seeing him as someone who had dealt with it all in a very quiet dignified way.

Quiet dignified ways aren't my ways. I felt a burning anger. Try to pin things on me would you? It may well be the last thing you ever do!

I suddenly wanted to spare him any connection with this mess. It had been too late for today's papers. But it would be out in full force tomorrow. I couldn't guess what spin they would put on it. But I was suddenly terribly sure it would be put down to a lesbian tiff. What I had seen called 'lover babes' in one news story about other women. The thought of being called a lover babe was so ridiculous that I felt they would surely go for something else? Money? Anne's jewelry? I didn't think the tabloids would worry about such esoteric things as copyright and shared billing. But they would find something. Just as well I wasn't a Macdonald. The Scottish papers I had noticed were occasionally more willing to see things playing out as the culmination of ancient feuds and massacres than were the English.

They finally said I would need to go back to the hotel. But if Ben was willing I could move back in here tomorrow.

It doesn't matter to me. And it isn't fair to Rachel to deny her the space she's paid for.

Then he said he would come in and pack up all Anne's stuff for storage.

As we, Ben and I, prepared to leave, I turned back to the detectives. What about Anne's father and other brother in Belfast—do they know? Maybe Anne told them something.

But Ben said it would be better if he told them. It would be a terrible shock to them. But they had always worried about Anne's preference for female company ...

As I reached the door I said: do you know yet how Anne died?

She was hit on the back of the head.

Then, it wasn't druggies, gangs, thugs. She kept a small amount of money near the door for people calling by for charities, that sort of thing. Not in her desk. And she kept her handbag in her bedroom. Did anyone hear anyone coming up in the lift.

They said the lift was heard at about eight o'clock.

Going up or down.

They said it was probably up.

So the people went out the fire escape door later?

It was one of those which needed a key from outside but opened by the handle from inside. Was that significant.

Whether it was or it wasn't they didn't intend to tell me.

— x —

Robert and his fellow hoteliers were still out to dinner somewhere when I returned to my room. The nice woman Andrew had on his front desk (not like Miss Goo Goo Eyes at Yorke House) said they had a nicer room spare. But I said, no, I would be returning to the flat tomorrow. She sounded sympathetic and said if I

found I couldn't stay on at the flat to return here; they would always find room for me. She said something about nightmares.

I said I would soon need to start looking to return to the student hostel. I think she saw my reluctance because she said she knew someone who had a little granny flat they rented out and she wasn't sure if it was tenanted at the moment ...

I said it was very kind of her. That was the problem. It was kindness and sympathy which broke me up. Not the police with their sharp eyes and grim looks and the whole unspoken thing: you think you've been clever and got away with it but we'll get you. I was certain now that they saw me as a lesbian and Robert as window-dressing.

In a strange way they were right. I did love Anne. But I was certain she was as hetero as I was. She just didn't see sex as very important. It didn't seem much consolation that night ... but later I got round to thinking that she had found that last month of her life exciting and stimulating. She had found someone to admire her mind. I think that did mean a tremendous lot to her.

I had gone into the lounge area to see what papers were on offer here when Robert came back. Of course Andrew didn't bother with Rupert Murdoch's offerings. People here would never learn that they had rubbed shoulders with a murder suspect.

He came over and sat down. How was it? Any developments? Those sorts of questions.

It was absolutely rotten. They think Anne and I were having an affair and I got upset with her for some reason, jealousy maybe, and whacked her over the head with a blunt instrument. You're my window-dressing. I didn't want them to know I am that way inclined.

That's ridiculous! Anyone less ... then he didn't know what to say. It's a kind of energy for life. But I think it's also a sort of sexual energy. The air around you seems charged up with this strange kind of passion for life and justice and truth. I have never met it in any other person.

I didn't know what to make of this. It might be a compliment. But I didn't really think it was what he was looking for from the women in his life.

You always make me think of a wildcat. Something which is absolutely itself and never truly wants to fit in with other people's complacent little lies and subterfuges and accommodations. I think, if you really did decide to wipe someone off the face of the earth, you would then stand round and wait for retribution ... not run away and pretend or hide behind someone else ...

Probably. But there isn't a lot of comfort in that when the police twist everything so that it starts looking suspicious. After all, I took the briefcase with Anne's material in it not so I could work on it next day but so that they couldn't damage or lose it. And I said I would go out to dinner with you because Anne urged me to ... but you can see how suspicious that looks with Anne not here to confirm it.

Was it only that?

No. Not quite. You caught me in a mellow mood.

It must've been. I was all primed for you to say no. He gave me his nice smile. No urchin grin. No sarcastic grimace. I didn't know if he had learnt it at his mother's knee or at hospitality college. But it was nice. I felt I could do with some nice smiling after the day's grilling.

I do have mellow moods. Sometimes. But I don't know whether to be grateful to you or not. If I'd been there Anne would probably still be alive. If it was an addict trying his luck he might not have tried again ... but if it was someone determined ... then next time I went out ...

Something seemed to knock up against an idea but I couldn't quite grasp it.

He suddenly leant forward and took my hands in his. Rachel, I know you will solve the case—probably long before the police do—but don't talk about it. I am not sure you're safe if it is someone who planned it.

How did they know I would be out last night? You knew. The restaurant knew. Anne knew. Who else did?

Anyone she told.

Yes. I think that's it. Did someone simply call around and find Anne alone and take advantage. Or did that someone talk to Anne during the day? By phone. By email. When she went out to post a letter. Anything.

The computer is probably beyond resurrection. But did someone ring? Did she have a dialback service. Did anyone ring her before you left.

I didn't hear the phone. But she also has a mobile. And she didn't say anything. Could someone have had the place under surveillance. I know that sounds a bit melodramatic. But if someone really did think we were having an affair they might've been watching ... or if someone wanted to catch Anne on her own.

But who? Did she ever speak of someone giving her a hard time ... at work, her family, round that area ...

I thought at first it had something to do with the book. It was going to deal with ten unsolved cases. High profile cases. Someone ... and I don't know if I mean police or the killer ... or even something like the establishment ... might have started to worry that Anne might dig up something which had been missed. It seemed so focused on her computer and her desk. But anyone who knew about the book would surely know she had copies of most of her material.

But that needn't stop her coming to solutions when it was put together and published. Could someone have wanted to delay or stop publication?

I spent some time thinking over this. At last I said I thought they couldn't be sure of this. Many people knew about the book but who knew just where Anne was with it?

You.

Yes, me. But Anne probably shared with colleagues. She may have told Ben. The publisher probably knew.

And Ben? Did you feel he was sympathetic? You seem to be good at dissecting families.

I'm not. I think I am like Miss Marple. Curious connections pop into my mind.

But it is about families, isn't it. I suppose all violent death is. Even if we just want to say someone was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

I think I found myself staring at him. Because all death is all about family. No one truly dies alone. Dies in a vacuum. There are always strings tying them to ...

I felt Ben was sympathetic without being ... *close* ... But I don't think he liked me mentioning Anne's family. I mean the wider family. I felt there was something but I couldn't pin it down. Maybe just other stuff getting in the way. And the cousin Anne used to share with ... have you ever heard of a company called Farmhouse Catering?

No. But we can ask Andrew.

You're off, though, tomorrow?

Yes. But if you think I can help—you know I will stay on.

It was the same thing all over again. Andrew's receptionist. Now Robert. I suddenly wanted to put my head down and bawl.

At last I got myself under control. No. Go home.

You make me sound like a naughty little dog.

I started to laugh at that. But it was painful laughter. Somewhere between mirth and misery.

I know. I'm sorry. But you have helped me talk it all through.

The trouble was I couldn't see where all this was taking me. If anywhere. But I was grateful. Bob is a great believer in letting people run off at the mouth. The problem here is I didn't have a suspect to do this useful let-down-your-guard gabbling. The only person running off, I suppose, was me.

Rob, I do appreciate you being here, you don't know how much. And I'm sorry I wasn't very sympathetic to your family problems. But I think you are right. This is a family thing ... but I don't know what I mean by that.

Andrew came over to join us briefly. I was glad of that. Another minute and I would probably be telling Robert something ridiculous—like I couldn't cope without him.

Farmhouse catering, he said, do you know anything about them.

Andrew sat down and steepled his fingers. A very small outfit. They've got a new manager. They had a problem with the last one. But I don't know what.

Could you find out. Robert looked at me. It was like someone giving me the thumbs up.

Why? Do you want to buy them out?

No. The previous manager is probably the woman who shared Anne Campbell's flat. Her cousin.

The plot thickens. Andrew had a much more obvious sense of humour than Robert. None of that acclaimed dour Scottishness about him. But then he said he'd

trained in Paris. In that case, he went on immediately, stay here and I will see if I can get a hint for you.

It wasn't that we were going to leap up and run away. And yet the very fact of *doing* something seemed to re-energise me. It's okay for Poirot I suppose; sitting in a comfortable chair—but one of the hardest things to do is ... nothing. Not when your mind, your emotions, everything, is boiling and bubbling with anger and frustration and despair.

After he'd gone, Rob turned back to me. I love it.

Love what?

The way you get people to do things for you.

Do I? I want to do things myself but I don't know where to start and what to do.

He reached out and touched my cheek. I want to be your comfort, your support—and instead you make me want to somehow whirl you upstairs and make passionate love all night—

I shook my head slowly. The idea was ridiculous. And yet ...

He ordered drinks for us both. He said a glass of port was a poor alternative but it would probably make it easier to sleep. I didn't really expect Andrew to come back. He *did* have a full hotel to run. But just as I was getting up, wondering whether to say something totally offputting and twee about beddy-byes, Andrew came back.

He looked pleased with himself. Not what I was expecting, no fraud, no inefficiency, but Morag Mitchell was a religious bigot by all accounts. She ran the company well, she worked very hard, but she was a disaster when it came to good relations with her staff. She lectured them, she intruded on their private lives, she refused to take on non-Christian staff even when they appeared to be better qualified. The new manager describes her as 'Ian Paisley with tits'. But I don't know where that takes you. She is now running a small company in Carlisle.

She could be up and back to Carlisle in a few hours, couldn't she? But I couldn't really see it somehow. She had lived with Anne for at least a year. Why wait till now—if she had problems with Anne's much more tolerant and embracing view of the world? But then Anne was tolerant of some things and not of others.

Bible John, I said suddenly, cutting into their discussion on how long it would take to get from Carlisle to Kelvinside and ... possibly back.

Who's Bible John? Robert stared at me.

Barrowland, Andrew immediately knew what I was talking about. That undercurrent in Scottish life. That rigid holier-than-thou subset. Not very obvious in Glasgow maybe. I always thought that Bob's dad and granddad left Scotland in the hope that times would be less hard in Sydney ... but my gran, Dell, says he left because he was fed up with some of the things in Scotland, not least some elderly relatives who didn't think much of working on Sundays and him drinking in his local ...

But this is Holy Bible Mary ... or Holy Bible Morag. And a whole lot of years later.

Yes. But Morag might not be the only one in the family like that. What about Anne's dad, her other brother Neil. Wouldn't Belfast hold them in something that's a bit like a time-warp?

Would it? The two men looked at each other. Then they both nodded slowly. And why had they gone there in the first place? I wish I'd asked Anne more about her family.

But I couldn't do the forensic work, the police checking. Nor could I pin-point the problems they might have with Anne. Was the book seen as somehow un-Christian? Or did Morag know something about the cases Anne had been working on? Did Morag believe that men like that Bible John who, allegedly, went out and strangled the sort of hussies who hung around dance halls were doing the world a favour? A sort of Scottish version of the Taliban.

I finally left them. I was tired and yet everything was whirling round in my mind. And I still had these terrible moments when I felt I needed to cry some more.

- xi -

Robert said goodbye the next morning. I moved back into the flat. Either the police or Ben Campbell had removed most of Anne's papers. The place seemed curiously spartan. I hadn't really seen it like this before. That comfortable clutter. And yet (I seem to be saying 'and yet' all the time now) I could see something spare, almost austere about Anne. It wasn't that she did without comforts. But all of them were very carefully chosen. No point in having hundreds of CDs if you didn't want to listen to them regularly. True, she preferred Beethoven to Midnight Oil. But we had had no problems where our likes and dislikes clashed. So had the problems with Morag been more fundamental? Or was I jumping to conclusions and Morag was irrelevant?

I had hardly looked around to see what food was still edible and got out the paper to do some more flat-hunting, soon, when the police were back. This was a senior detective and a black sergeant. I found them both quite hard to understand. They asked me my plans. I told them. But I said I would stay here until Ben asked me to leave. Did Anne have a will I asked them reluctantly.

She did. This was the senior man. Left everything to her brother. Bad luck.

Why wouldn't she leave it all to her brother?

Because you were hoping—

So I killed her before she could change her will.

No. Because she said she wouldn't.

Are we both on the same planet? I met Anne a bit over a month ago. Why would I want her to leave me a small flat in a city I don't particularly like—when I am in line to inherit a flat in Surfers Paradise with a lovely view of beach and sea. Do you think I am some sort of masochist or something. I am an only child. I don't *need* anything of Anne's.

Perhaps this wasn't completely honest. Bob now has a small son. But he is making extremely heavy weather of facing up to the fact. It is going to be quite a while before Aidan runs any chance of tipping me out of my putative inheritance. And I didn't mind sharing. And I realised there was one thing of Anne's which mattered to me. Her book. But it wasn't merely questions of inheritance. There was a ninety-nine per cent chance that the publishers would look for someone with Anne's experience to complete it, not someone like me. I accepted that. So long as they were true to Anne's vision. The name on the front cover really didn't matter to me. I would be gone again in several more years ...

And then I got stuck into them. Had they checked with people in the flats who might have seen the curtains closed. Had they checked on whether Anne had rung anyone, anyone had rung her. Had they saved anything from the computer hard drive. Had they found the weapon—

Who is running this investigation, girlie, the older man said.

Girlie! I almost fell on him, tooth and claw. But I contained myself. Perfectly relevant questions. You may not care about justice for Anne but I do.

They reminded me in no uncertain terms that I was still very much in the frame.

It doesn't matter if I am or not! I want you out doing the hard yakka.

And yet—anger can only carry you so far. I needed things to be doing. After they had gone I was strongly tempted to sit down and ring Bob. Tell him what had happened. Ask him what I should do next. But in the end I didn't. He might feel honour-bound to jump on a plane and come over ... and I knew as well as he did that he really couldn't afford such trips. And what could he do in a strange city, a strange system, a strange country—that I couldn't?

Instead I went back to Anne's material on unsolved crimes. *Was there a clue in it?* I couldn't find anything obvious. But it didn't mean a local person would not see nuances and connections and possibilities beyond me. The police had warned me not to leave Glasgow but they hadn't warned me not to go down to the library ...

The other problem had not really impinged yet because the address had not been published. But it wouldn't take long. Someone here would tip the media off. Someone in the police would pass the details on. There *had been* gory headlines. Lawyer Struck Down. Bashed to Death. All sorts of lurid assumptions. But Anne was a lecturer not a trial lawyer. There might be disgruntled students but they were harder to blow up into a major story than crims threatening revenge.

But when I got the bus into the city centre I could hear two women discussing the case and betting that it was a teacher and student. They would no doubt run with that idea until someone told someone the 'student' was female. Then it would become a lesbian, maybe even a 'dyke love nest'. Instead, when I got home again, I found two of Anne's colleagues there. I knew them both by sight. They immediately commiserated with me and asked if there was anything they could help with. I said it would help if the university were to make a statement, even just the Law faculty,

about their regrets and sympathies and hope that justice would be done. I also said that Anne's brother had gone back to Edinburgh (I still haven't got used to the way people zip to and fro between the two cities) but would be here tomorrow again. I gave them his mobile number and suggested they might like to ask him about a memorial service for her. But I had the strong feeling they had come out of curiosity, not out of affection and respect for Anne. They seemed to expect to be invited up but I made no move to ask them. I felt sure they had not come here while Anne was alive ...

But as I went up myself I wondered about her father and other brother. Would Ben arrange a funeral here? Would they come over from Belfast? I went in. The police had removed everything from around the telephone; notes, numbers, messages. I didn't know whereabouts Morag lived in Carlisle but I did know the street where her father lived in Belfast; her father and her brother. Now that I came to think on it this seemed rather strange. Surely Neil, in his forties, should be out there with a wife and family ... or, at least, some sort of life of his own. Was the father an invalid? Not that Anne had ever mentioned. Finally I said 'here goes' and rang Directory. To my surprise they immediately came up with a number. I hovered over the phone then; should I, would I, what if the police hadn't been in contact? But if they hadn't that was appallingly slack ...

I finally rang. I got an answering machine. A man's voice asking me to leave a message. I gave my name, said I knew the police had been in touch, and just wanted to leave my sympathies. Afterwards I thought I should've simply hung up and tried later. I couldn't very well keep ringing to leave my sympathies. I was still sitting round feeling rather awful when the phone rang. It was Andrew. He asked me how I was and said Rob had been worried about going off and leaving me.

I said I didn't need any mollycoddling—but did he happen to know anyone in Belfast.

Oh aye, lots! Why?

I need to know if either Colin or Neil Campbell was away from Belfast the night before last. I know they could be over and back in a few hours. But someone might've noticed if one or both of them was missing ...

So that's the way your mind is working?

At first I was sure it was something to do with Anne's book but now I think that's a blind. And I genuinely do not believe that Anne would've let in some youths no matter how sympathetic she felt towards youth unemployment. And there was something odd that I've been trying to get clear in my mind. I think the very faint marks on the carpet might've been from a walking-stick. I wonder if either Colin or Neil uses a stick.

Well, if you promise to keep a low profile—I'll see what I can find out in Belfast—

What is your definition of a low profile?

Not going back into the lion's den would've been a good start. But as you're there—just living very quietly and not tearing strips off police or anyone else.

I'll do my best. No point in telling him about the police this morning—or my call this afternoon. I passed on the number though. Then I went out and walked several blocks over to see what I might see when I looked in this direction. I had left the curtains open. If someone was looking out they would get a reasonable view of anyone. It wasn't hard to know which one was Anne's flat because of the fire escape. Then I went back, closed the curtain, walked back down and did the same sort of checking. They were thick curtains. Even if people were moving round inside they would only be the vaguest of shapes.

While I was doing this an elderly woman with what looked like a grandchild came along. She was obviously curious.

You didn't happen to look up and notice if the curtains were open or closed the night before last?

That's the place where that lady was murdered, isn't it?

I said yes. It is always hard to know when and where and how to give out information. She might have a hotline to the sleaziest of sleazy journos. But I decided to take a punt.

Someone she knew came to see her. They came inside and pulled the curtains and then they killed her.

How?

By hitting her on the head.

That's very sad. But at least it was fast. Not like dying of cancer.

I don't s'pose you noticed what time they pulled the curtains?

You're Australian, aren't you?

Yes. Over here to study. I waited for her to say whether she did or not.

But it was the child which suddenly piped up. I did.

No, you didn't, Lachie. Don't say things like that! But he was adamant that he had seen a man come over and pull the curtains just as he was finishing his tea.

What time would that have been?

She suddenly seemed to decide this conversation was fraught with danger and jerked the little boy's arm as she turned and hustled him away. I let them walk a little distance then quietly followed. I wanted to know which address they went in to. But instead they walked some distance and went into a newsagency. If they went there regularly it wouldn't be hard to track them down later. But it might simply have been a way to avoid me. I didn't think I was any great shakes at following people invisibly. Definitely not 'The Shadow' ...

— xii —

Ben came back the next morning and said he was sorry but he would need to ask me to leave by Saturday.

Are you going to sell ... or move in yourself?

I haven't decided. And it isn't really your business.

No, but I had assumed I would have a home here for a while yet.

Things have changed—in case you haven't noticed.

I can do sarcasm quite well too. It was a definite temptation. But I didn't really want to put him off side.

Well, come and have a look at the floor. It didn't really register before. But I have been sitting here thinking on it.

He came reluctantly. He didn't want to be part of my amateur sleuthing. But he had told the police, in my hearing, not to leave any stone unturned. Listening to me speculate probably came under that heading.

See ... here and here and here. It's faint. If it had been a wet night I might've thought it was caused by an umbrella ... but I think, whoever came in ... or one of them ... had a walking stick.

For a moment he simply stood there. And then he seemed to pull himself in. It wasn't quite like that. Hard to describe that faint sense that someone has stepped back from the situation.

No, you're just clutching at straws. It could've been here for weeks. Anne could've gone out to get something.

You're forgetting, Mr Campbell, that I lived here. I'm not Sherlock Holmes but I am fairly observant ...

Then it might be a good idea if you were a little less. A horrible thing was done here to my sister—and we have absolutely no guarantee that that person is not still hanging around.

You are warning me off, aren't you? You know who came here and why. But you are not prepared to go to the police and tell them. You would prefer it if they gave me a hard time because I am a stranger and have no connection to your family.

You're crazy, you know, really crazy. Of course I don't know who came in and did this terrible thing!

But you have suspicions. So go and share your suspicions with the CID sods. You know what your family felt about Anne—

But this time he cut me off and said: Saturday. Without fail. And I'll be here to make sure you don't take anything of Anne's away with you.

Be my guest.

No. You are mine—and don't you forget it.

No, Mr Campbell, it will be months before Anne's will is proved. I have paid to live here. And the strangest thing about you, the thing I really don't understand, is why you are prepared to cover up for someone else. Divided loyalties maybe. And I don't think you really did care very much about your sister ... but surely you, too, must want justice as passionately as she always wanted it for other victims.

He stood there for a long moment. Then he turned to go out. Don't forget. Saturday.

— xiii —

The police came back next morning. I asked them about the marks in the carpet. They were now virtually invisible but I wondered if they had shown up in any of the crime scene photographs.

Not my business, they said without apparent interest.

Not my business! I thought Anne was exaggerating when she raised serious questions about the way police here do their investigations. She said straight out many of the investigations and searches were sloppy and perfunctory. Now I am sure she was right. Possibly you had more reason than I ever did to want her out of the way before she could publish her book.

Instead of pulling up their socks they got stuck into me. I was a nuisance. I was getting in the way of their investigation. I seemed to be intent on bringing up irrelevant rubbish and stupid questions—

I went to town on them then. If marks on the carpet that were not there when I went out and were there when I came home and found Anne dead were not relevant then they were off on Planet X—and I had a good mind to lodge a formal complaint.

You do that, girlie.

They seemed to know that girlie would distract me and result in another tirade.

Right, I said, name your boss. I'll get straight on to him.

Strangely, that seemed to worry them. Did they think I had more influence than I really had? But later I saw a paper and the statement made by the head of the Law faculty and I thought it might've influenced their unwillingness to go too far. Police get away with a lot—but they are not immune when the law bods bring out their big guns ...

Okay then, tell me one thing—when are Anne's father and brother arriving from Belfast and why are they being so slow to come? And does one of them use a walking stick?

Not our business, now they just sounded bored. An awful lot of things didn't seem to be their business.

But then I wasn't privy to what went on when they got back to their desks and were galvanised into action by the arrival of Andrew McIlwraith and his information.

If I was a nobody then Andrew had a reasonable degree of clout in Chamber of Commerce and other circles. Both Neil and Colin Campbell had left home a bit before five on the significant afternoon. They had returned late, after eleven. Andrew had used his contacts well. He had also found out that they had both flown out of Belfast on the six p.m. flight to Glasgow ...

The rest as they say is history.

— xiv —

Andrew came round to be with me when the police brought the two men to Anne's apartment. I was grateful to him for his presence. And then I lost the plot completely. Never before or since have I experienced a rage so primeval, so terrifying.

Because Anne's father had the hide to accuse her of being a lesbian, of having unnatural sex with dirty women, of profaning God, if not the family. It was a slanging match of epic proportions. I may not be able to quote the Bible at the drop of a hat but I know a bigot and an unnatural father when I see one. And he was accusing me of moving in so I could have sex with his daughter! The words rolled off his tongue—wanton, filthy, jezebel, a witch, an abomination.

Call me an abomination, would you, you creep! Oh, if it wasn't so dreadful it would almost have been a kind of bizarre fun—because he was so used to the women in his world creeping back into their kitchens, bowing to his patriarchal wishes ... and there *was* something ancient and patriarchal in his looks, his demeanour, and he had obviously milked it for all it was worth. But then this lowest of the low, this creeping worm, with nothing of human decency to him, had never loved and admired Anne. Why? Because she had quietly and politely rejected their world and created her own?

It was almost as though Andrew and the police stepped back to enjoy this battle of the giants of invective. I didn't know I had so much in me waiting to be hurled at someone.

And yet it wasn't the old man who had killed his daughter. It was Neil and his crooked ankle and his stick who had closed the curtains and moved round behind Anne while her father abused her—and brought the heavy head of his stick crashing down on her skull. It was Neil who was truly sick. Not content with killing her he had continued to smash it down on Anne, on everything around her, including the computer. But then he had been brainwashed for forty years ...

The police charged the two men and took them away again.

Andrew came over and put an arm round my shoulders. I was glad of it. I suddenly felt drained and shaky.

How did he know? They know? Morag?

About Anne and me? Yes, I'm sure Anne asked Morag to leave because she couldn't stand her self-righteous meddling ... and Morag kept an eye out, or had someone do it for her, to see if Anne moved another woman in. But Morag, I'll bet, was one of those people who see everything in terms of sex. I doubt if she ever understood that Anne wanted someone whose *mind* she could engage with.

He looked at me. It was a long considering sort of look. Then he nodded.

But you want both? Did Anne?

No. I think she had come to terms with all that talk about biological clocks ticking and so on—and had decided that she enjoyed a certain degree of affection, she might even have enjoyed an affair, but not if it got in the way of things of the intellect.

That didn't bother you?

No. I reveled in it. Can you understand that you can have that level of excitement from thinking?

Not really. But then my mind is mainly taken up with thinking about staff problems, petty theft, redecorating, what to cook for a party of twenty Thai businessmen ...

I nodded. I didn't know either. Not till I met Anne and got involved with her book and everything ...

I don't know if thinking about her book was some sort of emotional trigger but I felt the tears rise up again. Andrew asked me what would happen to it. I said it would go to Ben Campbell and the publisher would probably look for another academic to complete it. But I had gradually come to terms with this. It doesn't really matter now. I've got all Anne's notes and records. It's like an essential part of her.

Do you think Ben knew—about his father and brother?

Maybe not *knew* but I think he was worried. When I mentioned seeing marks that suggested someone came in here with a walking stick ... I knew then that he knew, or suspected, that his brother had been here ...

So what now? Where will you go?

Flat-hunting.

Come and stay at the hotel until you find somewhere.

It was very kind of him. And from there I went to the little 'granny flat' his receptionist Catherine Matheson had offered me out in Broomhill. It was a bit further to travel but it was comfortable and not expensive. The hardest thing was the thought of remaining here, of going on with life in a place which had ceased to seem interesting and exciting. I assumed some more gritting of teeth and digging in was in order. But when I felt a bit more together I would try and write it all down. Not just yet. It didn't take much to make me fall back into tears and blue moods. I just hoped I could get myself together before the new semester started. And maybe someday I would get round to doing what Anne had suggested with family research; maybe I could give Robert's mum a run for her money. A different more peaceful kind of sleuthing.

— xv —

It was Andrew who said what I really needed was a special dinner and he would make all my favourite foods and have my favourite drinks, even my favourite flowers for the night, if I would just tell him. It was sweet of him. The vague thought that he might have something more in mind came and went. I knew he still vaguely hoped that he and his estranged wife and ten-year-old daughter might get together again. At least he *said* he hoped ...

He had prepared what he regarded as his best table in a quiet nook with a view along Sauchiehall. He pulled my chair out for me, got me a drink, and said he would be back soon. I sat there sipping and at last feeling a kind of peace. Nothing would ever be the same. But Andrew and Robert had been there for me. I wondered how I would've coped without them. Rage *can* carry you along. But only so far ...

I was sitting there looking out on to the evening and dreaming vaguely of home, of sun and sand and blue sea. There was a sound of steps behind me and I turned back from the window.

Robert sat down in the other chair. He smiled at me. He picked up my hand and kissed it lightly.

What are you doing here?

Ah, Sherlock, that is the question. But see the little clues. He reached out to the vase, the special menu in its elaborate calligraphy ...

I couldn't help laughing. I thought it was Andrew just being kind to a lame duck.

Lame duck! I heard about you confronting Colin Campbell. Andrew is still in awe of you. But he said you were too fierce a woman for him to contemplate ... anything.

So where do you come into it?

I didn't know it myself until you came into my life—but I cannot seem to deal with ordinary women any more. They just seem pallid and grey and uninteresting. I felt bad about not being here for you—but I knew it would only make things worse for you if the media made the connection. So I gave Andrew *carte blanche* to do everything possible for you ...

I wondered—about how he got that information so quickly from Belfast. He got on to an agency, didn't he? I didn't know what sort of friends he had there—but I couldn't see them being so professional, so quickly.

He nodded. As to where I come into it ... it's your call, Rachel. I'd like to go on being a part of your life, but I know it's not the moment to ask you for anything serious, just—

Oh, ask away, Rob. I'm getting myself back to normal. Slowly.

But Andrew came in with cocktails and I put normal on hold till later ...

- The End -

