Country Casebook

(Omnibus Twelve)

by

J. L. Herrera

The characters and events in these stories are fictitious. Some of the places exist.

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Book Sixty-Seven
Case No. 1: Through the Mist

A heavy mist was enshrouding parts of the Darling Downs when DI Carlton Payne left Winville, planning to call in to see Sergeant Walsh in the small town of Buckton on his way home to Brisbane. He had made a quick visit to Winville in the hope of finding out where a man calling himself Dean Rounds might fit into a secretive North Queensland crime family, the Plowmans.

As he drove and chatted with his wife the mist began to rise in pearly billows, leaving the newly visible sun to turn the dew droplets along the fences into a million diamonds. He said thoughtfully, "I don't mind this part of Queensland when it's like this. Pity it can't be like this very often."

She laughed and said, "City boy! The trouble is you're always comparing it instead of accepting it for what it is."

In theory she was right but in practice he knew he would never want to live here. The small town of Buckton began to show up in the distance and he said instead, "What say you go on down to the shops while I just drop in and see Dennis and then I'll come and find you."

The shops in Buckton were not emporiums of great style and diversity but she felt that small town shops needed all the custom they could get. She said thoughtfully, "There *are* a couple of birthdays coming up … "

He got out in front of the little brick box which housed the police station and she drove on down and found a park. Both Sergeant Walsh and his constable, Grant Schroeder, were in the station as Payne came in. He went on in to the interview room and Grant made him a coffee.

"So—any luck with Dean Rounds?" Dennis came in and sat down.

"Not a peep out of him but he's Terence Fulcher for certain. Police in Rocky went round some of the customers with a photo and they all said, yeah, for sure, that's Terry. But it doesn't explain how he got to Winville from Rocky so quickly, he couldn't have driven it in that ute. Or why." Rounds was thought to have been sent to shoot a dog which struck police as overkill. Fortunately he had failed as the dog had been with a neighbour rather than in his kennel. But it left a number of questions unanswered. "They went over that ute with a fine tooth comb and they've found human blood which doesn't match Rounds but whether it's suspicious … he says he has no idea when and how it got there."

Dennis had no intention of involving himself any further with the case. It was up to Carl Payne to track down every member of the Plowman clan and try to sort out the complexities of their aliases and relationships. Not least that Fulcher aka Rounds might also be a man called Fletcher. He just said, "Uh huh, and if he's Alvin Massey as well … but what about Doug? Is he going to appeal?" He wasn't sure if the ages would fit. He had wanted Rounds charged with cruelty to a different dog, the little Australian terrier they had found abandoned on the farm a Paul and Fifi Dawkins had rented, but so far no one had agreed with him that there was sufficient evidence to mount a charge.

Retired DI Doug Towner had been found guilty in a Brisbane court of killing a woman called Sandra Hoysted. Her husband, Sam Hoysted, was doing time for her murder. An embarrassment for the justice system.

"I've only heard things on the grapevine. Doug tried to get them to go for you and your tape recorder, that the taping was illegal and that you had not entered the tape in as evidence, but Stainforth said they couldn't say that the judge erred in law because he didn't know what you were going to do. I suppose you were banking on that?"

Walsh gave that a slight grin. "I could've just said he abused my little daughter but the tape brought it home to them."

"Anyway, I heard via John Duarte that Doug couldn't come up with any other grounds other than that no one witnessed anything—and that's not a goer—but Duarte has put in for Sam Hoysted to get another appeal. Sam wouldn't agree to any sort of pardon and it's unlikely they would want the expense of another trial. And even if they want to see the back of him they can't just open the gate and let him out. So an Appeal seems the most likely avenue. But I hopped straight in and said I wanted Sam Hoysted charged with the disposal of a body. Of course he'll say he didn't know what was in that crate. But no one bothers to get you to fly from Prickly Creek out to Meandara with a crate and then pays you fifteen thousand smackers for a joy flight. Sam will find it hard to wriggle out of that one. And then I want to put the focus on Ruby Jackson."

Dennis said, "Good. So have you got anyone in your sights?"

"Not up to me. First I want an inquest on the body. If they bring it in as murder then we can get the resources to go after some of the Plowmans. You getting some prints off things they left behind on that farm should help."

Ruby Jackson's skeleton had been found on a farm over by Prickly Creek which had been farmed by two men calling themselves Richard and Simon Ferguson. Her son had brought his plane down there more than ten years ago and ended up dead and in a crate to be disposed of. Dennis had tried for years to find out exactly what had happened on that farm that day. There were a number of stories wandering about but he had never been sure which, if any, to believe. The only certain thing was that Doug Towner and Sam Hoysted had taken the body of Willy Jackson to a property north of Meandara. Hoysted had later claimed he didn't know what was in the crate they had loaded and unloaded.

"And the Hoysted boys' civil case against Doug Towner?"

"I heard that Doug arranged for Charlie De Jong to go to his house and remove his personal belongings and get the house rented out. I imagine they didn't want to sell as the Hoysted boys would immediately claim the money. But the court might say it has to be sold anyway if they can't find a way to get that money Doug stole back from those Swiss banks."

"But wouldn't the banks have to return it if it's proved to be stolen?"

"Dennis, Swiss banks are notorious for holding on to ill-gotten gains. I very much doubt if they've returned everything the Marcoses and Suhartos stole. Doug could arrange for it to be returned to his accounts here but I can't really see him doing that."

"But what if you could find a way to get him over a barrel, that payroll robbery in Mt Isa for instance. He gets a lighter sentence in return for bringing his money home. And then the Tax Office can have a go at him."

"Very Machiavellian, Dennis. But I'll pass on your suggestion. So any other problems on your plate?"

"The bloody Maxwell trial next week. I wish he'd just roll over. He still refuses to tell anyone where all that toxic rubbish stored on his farm came from so the farm can't be sold to help the kids. S'pose he thinks he'll get away with it and come home again. And that Bertoli bloke from Melbourne … and can you get me another good constable for when Grant leaves?"

"Not my area."

"You got me Grant."

Grant Schroeder was being transferred to Kingaroy in the New Year.

"I called in a favour. I felt you deserved something better after Lester Moody."

Dennis nodded. "Fair enough. And I don't s'pose anyone could be like Moody. He was the most disgusting lazy slob I've ever met in the force."

After Carl Payne had gone out Dennis said, "I wonder what he meant by Machiavellian?" Grant couldn't enlighten him. But he was secretly pleased to hear himself called a 'good constable'.

*

Mrs Payne parked and went first into Mercer's store and made one purchase. Then she went on along past the video shop and the Commonwealth Bank and went into the Combined Churches' Op-Shop and chose out several attractive pieces of glass and an unopened jigsaw puzzle. The little shop was nicely set out and had a friendly atmosphere. Mrs Greenaway was there with May Hickman and they chatted as they wrapped the glass, pleased to see a new face. As they wrapped, Father Colgan came in. Mrs Payne when asked if she was merely passing by explained that her husband was round at the station talking with Dennis Walsh.

"Nothing serious, I hope," Mrs Hickman said.

"No. My husband is a detective inspector and he's just been looking into a problem in Winville."

Colgan nodded. "It is an odd thing. I would like to think the Church is the heart of the community but I sometimes think more people go round to Sergeant Walsh for advice."

"And—do you think he gives good advice?" Mrs Payne said with a smile.

"In everyday terms of right and wrong, of what the police would concern themselves with … yes."

"And they would come to you for spiritual or moral advice?" Mrs Payne said.

May Hickman agreed that they would but added, "And I think quite a few people share their troubles with George Johnson, the barman over at the Coolibah."

"And would he give good advice too?"

The others communed briefly then Father Colgan said, "You don't get to seventy without learning quite a lot about human nature. And a pub is a less rarified atmosphere in which to learn. People tend to be on their best behaviour when they come to church but I don't think you can say that of pub patrons."

When Mrs Payne shared this later with her husband, he said, "I suppose it bears out your idea that country people have just as much nouse as city people. They just don't have that streetwise cleverness—"

"I think country people can be just as devious but the environment is different. As soon as I walked into the shops they knew I wasn't local and they were curious. If I walked into a shop in Brisbane people wouldn't know and they probably wouldn't care. When I was young my mother was very fond of saying 'what will the neighbours think' and of course she meant it literally."

He agreed with this. "And it makes policing different. I would guarantee Dennis knows everyone on his patch, at least by sight, good, bad, and indifferent. Whereas we tend to know baddies and potential baddies but not the wider community. I wonder … whether I can apply any of this to the Plowmans … "

"I expect those Italian women who married into the Plowman family went to confession. I wonder what they told their parish priest?"

The women, yes, but there was a sense that the men of the family were amoral. Did they ever, like certain Mafia men, give lip service to religion while the only advice they took was from their family elders?

"I haven't got the time to go looking but it would be interesting to know how the parents of those seven Plowman boys became the way they were and why they made the choices they made."

"I'm not sure it would be safe to research and write such a book. Not yet. Not until you've rounded them all up." She had sufficient confidence in him not to add on 'if you can—'

*

In mid-afternoon Dennis Walsh took a call from John Goodrick. John usually preferred to keep police at courteous arms-length. But now he was ringing to say that old Dan Goodrick was threatening to burn down his house and sheds and he wanted him stopped.

Dennis said grimly, "They're his buildings. What's it got to do with you?"

"He asked me to sell the place." John usually urbane sounded angry. "I told him the place wouldn't move unless he tidied it up. So now he's running round with a box of firelighters. I want him stopped."

"You offered to clean the place up for him?" Dennis thought the place was in such a mess that it might be beyond some cleaning and tidying.

"Of course not! He's the one who asked me to put it on the market."

"So? That's between you and him. It's not police business."

"It will be if the old fool burns himself and half the neighbourhood."

Dennis beckoned Grant over and told him to go round to Dan Goodrick's place.

"What do you want me to do?" Grant felt a bit nervous. Old Dan was light-fingered but not violent. It was more the thought of his younger fitter relatives getting involved.

"Tell him—if he lights a fire and it gets away—I'll throw the book at the old fool. Other than that just size up the situation and tell them to work it out peacefully between them. That little farm is hardly worth fighting over."

The trouble with this was that people could fight over things that didn't seem worth fighting over. A stray animal. A leaning fence post. A car parked carelessly. A kid's lunch.

When he got round to Dan Goodrick's smallholding on the outskirts of Buckton there was only Dan, John, Chad Scully who did odd jobs round the district, and Dan's son Craig Goodrick. He had had dealings with all of them at various times and hoped he could deal with them all now.

John didn't look enthused to see Grant. Possibly he had hoped Dennis would come. Dan, looking like a scarecrow come to life, was firmly holding a box of firelighters. Grant said politely, "What seems to be the trouble?"

"This old fool here," John got in before everyone else, "says he's going to burn down everything. You'd best stop him."

"It's his property. He can do what he likes. But if he burns anything outside his boundary Sergeant Walsh will throw the book at him."

"There! It's not his business! So you can't stop me."

Dan took a couple of firelighters out of the box and headed for his house. "Just watch me!"

It was Craig who went after him and in a flying tackle brought him down with a thump on the hard ground. The firelighters sprayed into the dry grass. Grant ran over and helped Dan up and said, "Are you okay?"

"Of course I'm not okay!" Dan still sounded winded. John Goodrick picked up the firelighters and returned them to their box which he held on to.

"So why do you want to burn everything down, Mr Goodrick?"

"Because he's an old fool," John and Craig said in near unison.

"It's mine." The old man looked defiantly at the others.

"But where would you go if you burn it?" Grant wondered if he was missing something.

"The Annexe."

"You mean—they've found you a room?"

"No! They bloody well haven't! But if I'm homeless … "

There was a sort of logic in this but he couldn't see the Hospital Board finding a room for Dan if he'd set his own place alight.

"What about your son? Couldn't he help you?"

"Him! What's he ever done for me?"

"And what's he ever done for me?" Craig retorted.

Grant could see the discussion wandering off and he hurriedly said, "But if you wanted to have your property sold—how will burning it down help?"

"I asked him—" Dan indicated John with his elbow, "and then I changed me mind. So there!"

John said angrily, "Well, if you don't tell me you don't want to sell—how'm I s'posed to know. I can't read your bloody mind! And I've gone to all the trouble of drawing up an ad and taking some photos to put up. But seeing you don't want to clean the place up—you can't expect much."

"So you definitely want to withdraw it from sale?" Grant hoped he sounded authoritative.

"I do."

Grant knew Dennis wanted to see Dan move. But he couldn't be forced off his farm no matter how messy it was.

Chad Scully said diffidently, "I could take down anything you don't want, Dan, a bit of salvage."

Neither John nor Craig looked likely to agree to this. John said sourly, "And how long would that take? Two years?"

While Chad pondered over a comeback Grant said, "Well, it's up to you, Mr Goodrick. Just don't burn anything down while you're deciding what to do."

He didn't feel he'd been much use but then it was hard to decide what was best for the old man. And even if he knew … Dan was still a stubborn old sod who was not keen on taking advice from anyone …

He told Dennis what had been going on. Then he said, "But I wondered if I was missing something?"

"It's a bit odd. Dan likes to look and sound decrepit but I have an idea he's got a bit salted away. He could afford a nice little unit in town if he really wanted it. I just hope he hasn't been burying money—or things he's pinched—on the farm. And now maybe he's forgotten where he stashed them."

"But it still doesn't really make sense," Grant said hesitantly. Maybe there were things which were blindingly obvious to his boss.

"Yeah, why ask John to sell it and then withdraw it?"

"John said he'd taken some photos to advertise the place. But maybe the photos looked so awful that John told him he would only get peanuts for the farm?"

"Could be."

It was only when he was walking home that Dennis thought again of those photographs. Who had taken them? John or his young tearaway of a son, Brett Foley?

*

As they were getting ready for bed, Dennis told his wife Fiona about the impasse with Dan Goodrick. "What d'you think about Dan—d'you reckon he really does have money stashed away?"

She hesitated over this. She knew from her time as manager of the Bank of the Darling Downs that Dan had several accounts and it was possible he had accounts elsewhere. But it was hard to know just how much Dan made from his petty pilfering. She was inclined to think that he kept himself in meat and vegetables at no cost to himself. Some things he undoubtedly sold on. But did he also stash money away at home? She was uncertain but thought it was quite likely. And it wasn't as though Dan spent money on his wardrobe, nor did he travel, so his main expense seemed to be his beers in the pub.

"Money in his mattress? I think he quite likely does have cash on his farm. But that still doesn't really explain … how would burning things down help? He couldn't claim the insurance if it was deliberate."

"I wonder if he caught that young fella poking round when he was s'posed to be taking photographs to go on the ads?"

"What young fellow?"

"John's son. That Brett Foley that was in the bank with you."

Fiona considered this in silence. At last she said, "Yes, that might fit. He would almost certainly hear from John or somebody else that Dan stashed things away."

"S'pose I'd best go and see Dan one day but there's no guarantee he'll tell me what's going on."

"And it isn't really police business, is it?"

"Preventing crime?" The whole business made him feel gloomy. He had done his best over the years to stop Dan stealing. But his occasional successes were probably only a drop in the bucket. "Though what Dan does there … it's hard to care what the old fool does to his house and sheds … "

He could go and talk with Chad Scully. Chad might know what was going on and Chad though slow and ineffectual was fairly honest. Usually honest …

They were busy the following day but Dennis found a moment when he was downtown to drop by John Goodrick's office and ask if Brett had done the photographs. John agreed that he had.

"So did Brett upset Dan? Did Dan catch him poking round?"

"You're whistling in the wind, mate," John said rather sourly. "Brett was there half-an-hour, got some reasonable pics, so what bee the old bastard's got in his bonnet … anyway. I've taken it off the market and he can do what he wants."

Half-an-hour? Dennis thought that would give young Foley time to do some poking around and it was unlikely John was timing him …

He spent the evening going over the Maxwell case. It was a nuisance having to go to Brisbane for it. They could easily have brought him back to Winville for the trial.

And next morning he went round to see Dan Goodrick. There was a car parked that he thought he recognised. If he was right it was a further complication. As he walked over to the house Dan came shuffling out.

Dennis jerked a thumb at the parked car and Dan said, "Nothing to do with me. She just turned up. Said if she cleaned and tidied everything I could then give her the farm and I could go on living here as long as I liked."

"She?"

"Lynnell."

So he was right. "Thought she was in Winville?"

"So? Doesn't stop her coming back."

"So that sounded like a good deal to you?"

"Not too bad." The old man suddenly grinned. "One in the eye for Craig."

Dennis had long ago realised that there was no love lost, no familial relationship between Dan and Craig. Dennis hadn't even found out they were father and son till he had been in Buckton quite a while.

"And she thinks that'll give her a real chance to find all the cash and goods you've got stashed around this place?"

Dan quickly hid his surprise. "None of your business what I do."

"Depends. So what brought Chad around?"

"Dunno."

Dennis couldn't see any point in prolonging the conversation. He simply turned and went over to his car. He looked back before he drove away. Dan was talking to someone unseen. So it was quite likely Lynnell had heard the whole conversation. But then it was very unlikely she had offered to help Dan out of love for him or love of cleaning up other people's messes …

He went round to the Scully household to be told by Chad's wife Pauline that he was round at the Co-op. Dennis drove round and found Chad putting a bag of laying pellets into the back of his utility. Chad didn't look pleased to see him. "Got a minute, Mr Scully? I just wondered who asked you to go round to Dan's place?"

"John did. Said there might be a bit of work for me there. But then Dan said he was going to burn it all down … so I come home again."

"Lynnell's round there now. She's offered to clean it all up for him if he'll give her the farm. He seems to like the idea. She said she'll let him stay on there as long as he wants."

Chad took a while to digest this. Then he said cautiously, "You think we should make the same offer?"

"Up to you."

Dennis thought that interest in doing a deal might at least stay Dan's hand when it came to burning anything. And he thought Pauline and Chad might do Dan a better deal. But then Dan probably still blamed Chad for taking his dog, years ago. Still, the more people taking an interest in that small farm the better … And he didn't want Lynnell Morton back in Buckton and giving him more trouble …

*

While Walsh was concerning himself with the internal carryings-on of the Goodrick clan, Winville police had a more serious matter on hand. The body of a young man had been found by a truck driver by the side of the road south of Winville.

DSS Sullivan had gone out with DC Kelly at three o'clock in the morning. The body was lying partly on the gravel verge and partly into the dry grass and his first thought was that the man had been walking on the road and had been hit and tossed off on to the verge. But Dr Watling when he arrived said immediately that he thought the man had already been dead when he landed face down on the roadside.

Police might grumble about the early morning call-out but there was no sign of Watling being disturbed by the call. He straightened up and looked both ways down the dark highway. It was far from ideal trying to assess the situation by torchlight but he didn't think the body should be left till morning.

"He's grazed but there is no sign of bleeding. This could suggest he had been dead an hour or more when he ended up here."

"Pushed out of a car, you mean?" Sullivan would almost prefer a hitchhiker and a sleepy driver. It would likely make for a less serious case. Drivers who pushed dead bodies out on to country roads were usually responsible for those bodies being dead in the first place.

And here they had no idea of the vehicle and little possibility of someone seeing something.

"Probably. We'll get him into the morgue van when you've finished photographing him in situ. And search round carefully in case anything fell out with him or he had things in his pockets."

DC Kelly said, "It's just along from the Norwilla turn-off. I wonder if they wanted to get rid of him here and then turned off?"

It was possible. And as not many cars came through Norwilla of a night time there was the slight chance that someone up early for some reason just might have noticed or heard something.

Sullivan said to Kelly. "Your job, first thing."

And as the morgue van disappeared into the distance they turned back to what was almost certainly a crime scene. But it yielded up nothing except some flattened grass. They were left hoping that Dr Watling would find a clue to the young man's identity or that that truck driver had noticed more than the body …

*

Greg Sullivan sent DC Kelly out to the small hamlet of Norwilla to ask if anyone had heard or seen a car coming through. He had been tempted to leave it. Dr Watling would quite likely help them to come up with an identity for the body. But there was always the possibility, and he was influenced by the case of the young man found in a wheelie bin, that the body had been denuded of wallet and other identifying items. And people soon forget what they'd heard and when.

Norwilla seemed asleep in the pleasant sun of late Spring. But he got an immediate response when he stopped in at the little general store. Mrs Landy said, "Last night? As a matter of fact I *was* up in the early hours. This jolly tooth—and I can't take the time out to go to the dentist until Mary can come over and hold the fort. So it was around two when I got up and went in to the shop to get some cloves to chew on. I came through with my torch and something went past … of course you want something better than me saying something—" She seemed to stop in mid-sentence and look away to the big windows both sides of the front door. Though there were items stacked up she had a reasonable view out.

"A station-wagon, I think, and I'm not sure of the colour but grey or silver or tan or something like that."

"Would many cars come through of a night?"

"Up till about ten. But only the occasional one after that. Why d'you want to know?"

"Do you have any idea which way the car went?"

Barbara Landy wondered why there should be any secret about passing cars but she said thoughtfully, "To the left at the junction, I think. But don't take this as gospel truth."

"No. But we appreciate your help. The body of a man was found by the road just before the turn-off."

"Goodness me! What sort of a man?"

"Fairly young. In his twenties. Blonde hair. Blue eyes. Medium height. Wearing jeans and a t-shirt. We will get you a poster if we can't get him identified."

She couldn't think of anyone local the description might fit. "A country boy?"

Brent Kelly hadn't given this a thought and could only say, "We're waiting on the doctor to tell us more."

He wrote up the details when he got back to the station. It might be completely irrelevant. But it was possible the person was cutting back towards Oakey or Toowoomba or they preferred not to drive through Winville … He hoped the others were learning more from Mason Watling around at the hospital.

But Sullivan said gloomily as he came in, "Nothing. Not a speck of identification on him. Let's hope his teeth will pin him down. And Mason thinks it possible he was poisoned. He's doing tests."

This was a surprise. Brent Kelly repeated Mrs Landy's question and Greg said morosely, "Looks like he'd been doing some manual labour. He had blisters. I wonder if he died by accident? Some on-farm chemical and someone panicked?"

Most farms had some nasties in the sheds …

Then Greg seemed to answer his own question. "Nothing we can do until he gets back to us. So we'll do a poster and you can drop it into the *Courier* and the radio and a few places round town."

"I said I'd get one for Mrs Landy."

"And Petra's checking his prints so let's hope he's been a naughty boy somewhere." Greg didn't sound hopeful. And Petra unfortunately came up blank.

*

Sergeant Walsh when he heard about the mystery man just said, "Well, keep me posted. I'm off to Brisbane on Saturday." If Greg had hoped for something more then he knew it was unfair to expect Dennis to solve this for them in the way he had solved the Maxwell case.

"Good luck then. And I'll get Brent to drop you in a few posters. Someone must know who he is." In theory someone always did know. In practice they might well have dozens of reasons for not sharing their knowledge. And if the man had been thrown out of a car then who knew where the car had begun its journey. Or what its destination might be.

Greg went back to hoping Mason Watling could solve most of the mystery for them.

And Dr Watling certainly brought his usual meticulous care to the post mortem. His initial report said the man was in his late twenties, in good health, had probably been dead for four to five hours before he had been left by the road side, and had probably died from ingesting poison. "I'll let you know as soon as I've pinned that down. Might've been accidental and someone panicked but his last meal was a curry. It just might've disguised the taste of something."

Mason then went on to make the case more potentially difficult. "I think you just might be looking at a recent arrival, maybe someone on a working holiday. I'd like to get an expert to look at his teeth. I think we may be looking at work done in continental Europe."

Greg wasn't sure whether this would make their task easier or harder. If the young man was away from home and not good at keeping in touch his family might well not realise that anything had gone wrong. He might even have come to Australia to get away from 'something'.

"DNA might help to pin him down but don't bank on it." Mason rarely encouraged police to jump to conclusions.

"Mrs Landy asked if he had been doing farm work."

"I'd say so. There's a bit of grease under a fingernail. And his hands suggest recent manual work. I've found dust in the pockets and seams and shoes so I'll get all that analysed. It just might tell us what kind of farm he's been on."

"His prints don't link to anyone here. Unfortunately."

"Might they link to someone elsewhere?"

"They might. But we would probably need more before we can go trawling … " Or we would need to be sure he can't be identified here. And was the young man both perpetrator—of something—and victim? Or just victim?

Greg went back to hoping that whatever expert Mason could line up would provide them with the information that the young man had some very unusual dental work, only done in one particular place … and then he dismissed the idea. Most things came back to the ordinary slog of police routine. And as he still felt slightly guilty that he hadn't taken the death of Paul Pickering seriously enough he quietly determined that no one could say he had tried to dismiss this death as probably an accident and not to be taken too seriously.

*

Dennis and Fiona planned to go to Brisbane on the Friday night and look round car yards first thing on Saturday morning. Fiona had finally decided it was time to sell the Magna and get something new. It had given her good service. She privately would prefer to get a European car but she needed to think about what was best for Buckton. She didn't want anything which would stand out. She needed to be able to get most things fixed at the garage here. And she didn't want something that would require expensive parts to be sent from Brisbane.

"Should I get a sedan or a station wagon?" was her next thought.

"Whatever you like best."

"New or second-hand?"

"New will give you a warranty. But if you see something with only a year or two on it that you like—go for it."

He privately thought a station wagon would probably be more useful than a sedan but he didn't want to influence her. She would be the one mainly driving it.

Jake Moss was sending a junior out to help Grant over the weekend. The Maxwell trial began on the Monday and Dennis hoped he would be finished with it on the same day and could get on the road home. Fiona would bring the children back on the Sunday afternoon.

Dennis would have preferred that they went to a motel or something but as Fiona's mother had gone out and bought a fold-down sofa for the kids to sleep on he felt he had no choice but to go to her unit for those few days. He knew perfectly well that Mary Greehan still believed Fiona had made a mistake in marrying him and probably always would believe and the knowledge didn't make for a beautiful relationship between them. He sometimes wondered what it would take for her to get to the point where she simply accepted him. And having her sole company on the Sunday night might make even court on the Monday seem preferable.

Case No. 2: Complexities

That Dr Watling had also been called to give evidence at the Maxwell trial pleased one person in Winville. Dr Leslie Davis always felt more relaxed when he knew Watling was not on the premises. Winville District Hospital seemed to become his own fiefdom again. Though he gave no sign of it, or thought he didn't, a number of the staff knew perfectly well that he resented Mason Watling and hoped he would soon get bored with Winville and move on.

Watling left Winville on the Saturday morning and the body of another young man was found lying in the grass off to the left side of the road north of Winville late that afternoon. Davis felt a certain pleasure in being called out to pronounce on the body. He knew several of the police were disappointed that Watling wasn't there and it gave him an added buzz to know that they were now dependent on him.

And as soon as he walked down to the body which had rolled down the slight embankment to lie in a grassy ditch he could see its likeness to the body they already had. He made a slight production of feeling for a pulse even though the body had begun to bloat and a trail of ants seemed intent on something in one pocket.

He looked up and said, "Dead for two or three days. And he's almost certainly related to your other body. Brother. Cousin."

Both Greg Sullivan and Petra Moore could see the likeness. The wavy blonde hair. T-shirt and jeans. Similar height and weight. And there was a secret relief in that likeness. So

far they hadn't got anywhere in identifying one young man. Two missing would almost certainly make their job easier.

Mason Watling regularly traveled with old Tom Dick in the morgue van but Leslie Davis saw that as beneath a doctor's dignity. He gave a string of rather pointless orders to Mr Dick before getting back into his own car. "I'll do the p.m. on Monday," were his last words to Sullivan and Moore.

Greg was tempted to say "I would prefer to wait for Mason to come back" but he accepted that it wouldn't be appropriate. Instead he searched the area with more than usual thoroughness. If a cowboy was going to do the post mortem he wanted everything else done by the book. Petra Moore had lived long enough in Winville to understand this. But the only thing they could turn up was a small piece of dried mud which looked as though it had fallen from the sole of the man's shoe.

"So did the driver doing the drop-offs come through Winville or do a loop around Winville and get back on this road north of the town?" Petra said musingly.

"Let's try for some CCTV footage in town. We've got a rough idea when the first one was dropped off. If we can't find anything to suit then the driver might have avoided coming through. You wouldn't want to be stopped for something when you've got a dead body on your back seat." There was the small possibility the driver had come the other way but finding both bodies rolled off that side of the road made a northbound vehicle more likely.

Petra agreed. The likelihood of being stopped at 2 a.m. wasn't large. But with no idea of the driver it was hard to second-guess him. Or her.

"So should we get on to Immigration now that we know we are looking for two?"

"If they arrived together … yep. But how long ago did they arrive?"

They both pondered on this. The men could've been here two years—or two weeks.

They were still discussing this as they drove back to town. "So who can we get to analyse that soil from a boot?"

Greg considered this before saying, "Try Matt Holloway at the DPI." Privately he didn't think it would help. Except that it hadn't rained in the last week so the man must've stepped into an overflow, a seepage, recently. And if they could find the car there might be some unnoticed mud on a seat.

Then he went back to thinking on the possibilities in Immigration records. Photos of two young men. Might that spark a memory? Two young men together. Two young men apart. But it was worth a try … He would get Reid Strohling to get the best pictures he could of this young man for identification and then hope …

*

The Walsh family tried three Brisbane car yards before Fiona chose a Ford Falcon station wagon. She knew there were several round Buckton and this one with only 9,000 kms on it should be suitable. She took it out for a drive by herself while Dennis and the children looked at other less suitable vehicles before walking down the road to a café.

"So which one do you want to drive home?" she said to Dennis when they were together again.

"If you feel comfortable driving it home I'll take the Magna."

He didn't like driving in Brisbane at any time and in any car. But he could leave after the rush hour on Monday or early Tuesday morning if he wished. "So tomorrow—what do you want to do with your mum?"

"A drive out to Bribie. Maybe. Unless Mum has a strong desire for something else."

Mary Greehan had bought herself a delightful two-bedroom unit in Auchenflower and put the fold-down sofa in the living room. She had brought her favourite items with her and just hoped the children would not be feeling too boisterous. It was a lovely place with river

views and Dennis thought if you didn't mind not having a garden and chooks it was as good as anywhere.

She was polite but cool towards Dennis. It was harder to determine her thoughts about her grandchildren. She asked them, rather pedantically, questions about home and school and what they liked doing of a weekend. This was an immediate encouragement to Elise to talk about horses and riding and her grandmother listened and nodded, though without following anything up. It was natural for young girls to like horses, she believed, but it also lead on to doing dirty jobs in stables …

Elise had begun to wear her hair not as a mop of curls but as a fringe and the rest scraped back tightly into a ponytail. When her grandmother commented that this was rather severe for a young girl Elise said, "Oh no, you can't ride with hair all around your face" and she demonstrated with her hands someone trying to see where she was going. Dennis and Fiona smiled at this but he could see that Mary was struggling to know how to relate to Elise—because she was not a little girl to be treated as a little girl yet Mary was unwilling to treat her as a young woman. Elise was tall for her age, calm, sophisticated, confident, and Mary vaguely felt she wasn't ready to accept this granddaughter. She wanted a small pretty girl to be moulded into—

The conversation over dinner somehow got on to statues and the idea that Buckton would seem more important if it had a statue … "But a statue of what?" Fiona said gently.

"A horse," Elise immediately said.

"You can't have a horse," Dennis put in. "Oakey's got a horse."

"A dog then." Robbie felt daring as he said this.

"There's already a dog sitting on a tuckerbox somewhere." Elise liked the idea of an animal. "A cat maybe."

"I know," Fiona said suddenly. "What about two brolgas like the ones that sometimes come to the Environment Park."

"But where would you put them?" Dennis tried to picture such statues beside the war memorial.

"They could be behind the memorial or in the playground or outside one of the schools … or in front of the RSL Hall or … " She could see that this kind of conversation was better than her mother quizzing the children. The trouble, she thought, was that Mary didn't see them often enough and they had grown, physically and mentally, without her being there to notice.

She suggested she might play a couple of tunes for Rob to sing along with after dinner. She knew her mother would like to think that Buckton was not totally devoid of anything artistic. But her mother immediately wanted to know what they were doing to find Rob a singing teacher. Talents should not be left to wither. Dennis said, "No, he's still coming to terms with the idea of getting up in front of people. He would prefer to sit quietly at the back of the hall."

Mary, perhaps a little reluctantly, accepted this. But she felt Fiona could be doing more not to force but to gently persuade … For most of her life she had believed children could be gently moulded into the character and style you wanted. And it was difficult to accept that these children, and certainly Elise, were beyond any such subtle manipulating.

As to where to go on Sunday she suggested Dreamworld, not because she wanted to go there herself but because she thought it would be preferable to sitting on a beach getting sand in everything. An amusement park would keep them fully occupied.

They took both cars so that Fiona and the children would not need to come back into the city later. Mary, to her surprise, quite enjoyed her day out though that was partly because she could walk and chat with Fiona while Dennis took the children on rides.

He had offered to go to a motel or something for Sunday night but she said he must stay. He wasn't looking forward to the drive back with her or the evening as a twosome. Of course his mother-in-law would never be rude or critical to his face but he always felt in her an unspoken regret that Fiona had not chosen someone else, some rising young banker or business graduate. And deeper than that he felt that Mary Greehan was a disappointed woman. Fiona believed that if her mother had had a career she would've been happier. But he didn't think this was a complete explanation. After all, there were plenty of people with careers who were still miserable. Rather he saw it as a belief that nothing in her life had ever quite met her expectations. Nothing had brought with it the satisfaction she believed was her right.

From being annoyed with her he had gradually come to feel sorry for her. It wasn't something to be said aloud. Or he didn't believe he knew how to say it. And when she said something over their quiet dinner about Fiona 'missing' things he said firmly, "There's other things beside ballet and concerts."

"Of course, Dennis, but it is the world she was meant to move in, the people she was most at home with." This might be true. Fiona had friends and friendly acquaintances in Buckton but he had never pretended that she really belonged there.

"She has satisfactions in her life which you aren't allowing for."

"The children? Well, of course, children do make a difference."

"It's more than that. Her writing, her financial services business, the work she does on the Council, the charity work she does. She finds satisfaction in them all."

"And in you?" There was a slight edge to her question.

"Maybe." He thought of saying 'that's something you can ask her yourself' but he decided not to. "The thing is, in Buckton she is part of a community, she knows everyone, even the people she doesn't particularly like. It's not like picking out a few sympathetic friends who agree with her."

"I'm not sure that I find that much of a recommendation."

"I think it's called 'a rounded life'."

"I still think she would be happier here—"

"In the way that you're happy?"

He didn't mind to make this a blunt question.

She looked at him and then away before saying, "Yes, that way." It had the impression of closing a door firmly. Her private life, thoughts, feelings, were to remain private, so far as her son-in-law was concerned. She asked him if he would like more coffee but he said no, he'd best get some sleep. "I'll drive in and try to find a parking station spot. With luck I'll be able to get straight on the road home afterwards."

"You're welcome to come back here if you don't finish in the one day. Just ring me first." He thought this was what made Mary Greehan impregnable. Courtesy would always be her armour. It didn't require any feeling behind it. He simply thanked her and got up.

*

The Court had called Mason Watling first before Dennis as arresting officer. Mason had brought photographs of the dead body of Paul Pickering but some to and fro between the lawyers meant that the jury did not get to see them. It made the jury more curious but that seemed preferable to anyone gasping or fainting or coming over queasy.

Mason described the cut on Pickering's forehead, the slight contusion on the back of his head; he described the way he was lying and where; then he said in his calm cool way, "Neither of those injuries seemed enough to cause death. But as he was not found for at least ten days afterwards it was impossible to determine what other events may have contributed to his death in the way of shock, fright, perhaps a dizzy spell, too much sun, worry, anxiety, perhaps something he had eaten. For this reason his death was treated as misadventure but

that could include accident, suicide, or homicide. The cut on his forehead was clear, even though it was infested with maggots when I saw him. So I couldn't determine the cause of the cut. It was slightly jagged rather than clear. But that didn't preclude an accident. It made suicide less likely. It was a slightly odd way for someone else to attack him but not impossible."

He was asked several questions by Maxwell's lawyer but it didn't substantially change anything. He eventually seated himself at the back of the court while Dennis Walsh came in. His job was harder. He had had to deal with Winville's desire to write it off as an accident. And it was hard to explain the circumstances of Burt Wagner's visit and his own suspicions. But Winville had done him photos of Pickering's house, sheds, the view from the road, the supposed grave, and several pictures of the farm machinery. These were handed to the jury.

He didn't see his role as being to make his colleagues in Winville look efficient and on the ball. But neither was he there to make himself sound like the Lone Ranger. He went over Winville's discovery of Wagner's assault charge, Pickering's debts, but he saw no reason to draw attention to Pickering's young lady visitors as they had been proved irrelevant to his death. He told the court that he and Sergeant Applegarth had visited Wagner who had admitted to being asked by Greg Maxwell to go in and find Pickering and report his death. He told the court of their visit to Maxwell's farm, of his arrest, of the search for the weapon. He described the finding of blood on it. A court official removed the barbed-wire cosh from its plastic bag and held it up.

Dennis, watching the jury's collective response, thought that was the moment when the jury stopped seeing Maxwell merely as a middle-aged farmer with a family and started to see him as a nasty piece-of-work. The very fact that someone would go to the trouble and time to make such a weapon told against him.

Maxwell's lawyer understandably jumped in to say there was no evidence that the cosh belonged to Maxwell.

Dennis said calmly, "His wife said he always took it when he went round to see Paul Pickering about the machinery. A partial print was found on it of Maxwell's right thumb. The blood on it has been found to be human though they could not get enough to identify the victim. The cosh was found on a high rafter in one of Mr Maxwell's sheds."

"That still isn't proof. Someone else could have put it there."

"Who?"

The judge intervened to say he did not want lawyers or witnesses to start speculating. He pointed out that it was up to the jury to determine whether the evidence they had been given was sufficient to determine ownership.

When Sergeant Walsh left the court some ten minutes later, after a brief nod to Dr Watling, he felt reasonably sure that the cosh would be the deciding factor. Perhaps there were other things he should have emphasised but he thought he had kept it simple and straightforward. The jury might have liked to know more about the strange life and behaviour of Paul Pickering (they were probably wondering why he had dug a 'grave' and why he constantly bought new machinery) but he wanted the attention to remain squarely on Greg Maxwell. He knew nothing about Greg Maxwell's legal 'muscle' but he had probably missed a golden opportunity to obfuscate. But then—could any city lawyer really understand Paul Pickering and Greg Maxwell? He could see something of what drove Maxwell but he still felt that Paul Pickering was too odd to be understood by an ordinary bloke like himself.

It was a relief to get on the road home. But it was disconcerting to have thoughts of Mary Greehan travel with him. He didn't want to think about her and even less did he want to feel sorry for her.

*

Dr Davis was as good as his word and pulled the body of the second unknown man out on Monday morning and did a cursory inspection. He, then, certain this was a brother to the other body simply reproduced Mason Watling's report on the first body. Sister Cromer, asked to assist, was disturbed by his cavalier attitude to the body but reluctantly agreed that except for his longer exposure he was almost certainly a victim of the same poison and the same manner of disposal.

Mason Watling, unaware that Davis had gone ahead, took time after his court appearance to go round to see Tad Lombardi at the busy suburban practice he had joined which had four other doctors and a physiotherapist. He told Lombardi a vacancy would be coming up at Winville as Dr Murphy was moving on and would he be interested.

Although Lombardi saw it as a compliment, he didn't think Watling would offer unless he had been impressed with his work in Buckton, he said, "No, I am not interested in another country practice."

"And what about your former partner, Sorenson, does he feel the same?"

"Brett? Heck no. He's lost his nerve. He's working in a medical supply warehouse."

"Pity. Do you have a contact for him?"

"He's still got the same number, I think." Lombardi passed it on. "So how are they getting along in Buckton?" He couldn't raise any enthusiasm but a faint curiosity surfaced as he thought back.

"Dr Long seems to be managing quite well."

"No disasters yet?"

"Not that I am aware of."

His impression of Dr Long was of a capable woman who had been accepted by most Bucktonites, all except a few diehards who didn't think female doctors could be good doctors.

He didn't rush to ring Brett Sorenson. If he had given up practising altogether he would soon get rusty. And he didn't think Winville deserved a doctor who had lost the cutting edge. Sorenson, when he rang and introduced himself, said immediately, "I wouldn't be any good. I haven't done any work with patients in six months."

Watling had no intention of pressing him to return to general practice. If he really had lost all confidence in himself then it was probably best that he looked for another career. He said coolly, "Well, the position will become vacant in January. I just thought I'd let you know." He rang off If Sorenson didn't want to fight his way back to acceptance then he was better out of general practice.

As he took the road home he wondered too if they could find someone for Winville who could stand up to Leslie Davis … because if he couldn't get Davis moved on between now and February then Davis would be left in charge in his absence.

The thought depressed him. And his spirits plummeted further when he was told next morning that the autopsy on the mystery man had already been done. He said to the orderly, Jim Werner, who did some of the work in the morgue, "You mean Davis has already done it?"

"Yesterday."

"Well, let's have a look."

As Werner slid out the body of the second mystery man, Dr Watling looked down briefly then said, "Get him on to a trolley while I get Davis paged."

The orderly was well aware that there was no love lost between the two doctors. He had also attended autopsies done by both doctors and was well aware that Dr Davis had taken less than half the time on the second body as Dr Watling took on the first. The time taken wasn't necessarily the key factor but he felt sure Watling would have something to say about his colleague's work.

True to form Davis came in and said immediately, “What’s your problem?”

“You’ve done your report?”

“Only a draft. I’ve been busy.”

“May I see it?”

Davis handed over two pages and watched Watling read carefully before saying, “Right. So you removed his stomach to see if he had been eating curry. What else?”

“What do you mean—what else?”

Davis had copied Watling’s report on the first body almost word for word; either to save himself work or so that Watling couldn’t be seen to be criticising his own work.

“You say he died from the ingestion of poison but you provide no evidence. What have you sent to be tested and what tests did you request?”

“I haven’t had time to send anything anywhere.”

“DNA? Blood group? Teeth? Did the police take his fingerprints?”

“If they did they didn’t tell me.”

“You didn’t check?”

“Not my business.”

“So why do you say he died from ingesting poison? Where is your evidence?”

“You can see from a mile off they’re related. If the other one died from poison this one must’ve.”

“Maybe he did. But you have to provide the evidence.”

“Oh, come on. Don’t tell me you never make assumptions.”

“Well, I assume you are a very lazy slipshod doctor but that is irrelevant to a double homicide.”

Leslie Davis had gone red and looked angry but the riposte that Jim Werner expected didn’t come. Instead he shrugged as though Watling was an irrelevance and said “He’s all yours,” before walking out.

Watling continued to stand there holding the skimpy report. Then he went into the small office and rang Winville CIB. He got Petra Moore and asked her if they had been notified about the post mortem on the second unidentified body. She said Dr Davis had told them at the scene that the autopsy would be done on Monday but then he had rung later to tell them Tuesday at 11 am. “We were just about to send someone around.” It suggested Davis had not wanted any police there when he did his cursory post mortem.

“Did you take prints at the scene?”

“We did. There is something interesting about them but we would like DNA confirmation. They suggest the two men were identical twins. The fingerprints aren’t the same but they are so similar it suggests more than coincidence.”

“I see. Well, that should make identification easier. Now, Dr Davis did a part post mortem yesterday but I think, if you can send someone round now and get photographs that will help.”

She said she would be round in ten minutes. He knew there had been occasional friction between Sullivan and Moore but he found her a brisk and sensible person to work with in the occasional times when their paths crossed. He turned back to the body lying still and pale on the trolley and checked the tag. Dr Davis had listed him as ‘John Doe’ and Watling removed the tag and asked Werner to do a new one to say: IDENTITY UNKNOWN with the date and place where he was found. He was annoyed. John Doe handwritten could so easily be misinterpreted as John Dee or Dorn or a number of wrong spellings. He put gloves back on and got a clipboard while he waited for Petra Moore to arrive.

She came with a camera and tape recorder and he got her to take pictures from every angle. The man had a big nose and a pugnacious chin but it was his teeth which were of more interest to Watling. “The differences are small but I think this man too had fillings done

possibly in Eastern Europe. I spoke to someone in Brisbane and left photos and one filling for analysis. But with luck Immigration can find you a set of identical twins. The other thing I want to do is see if he has any dust in his seams, his socks, his pockets, which might give us a clue." There was a faint stickiness in one pocket which had attracted ants which suggested he had put a sweet or a cough lolly there …

He went over the body with Petra listening carefully to show her a couple of identifying marks, a smallpox inoculation scar and two crooked little fingers. "Otherwise he seems to have been in good health. But if we can't track down an identity his bones might give us a clue."

"So what did Dr Davis actually do?" She looked at the cut down his torso and the rough re-sewing. It might be better if they didn't find any relatives to witness the way Dr Davis treated dead bodies.

"He took his stomach."

"And you think this man was poisoned too?"

"Not until we've done tests."

When she'd gone again he went into the small office there and made himself some notes. The whole thing made him feel tired and dispirited and for a moment he toyed with the idea of simply leaving Winville and Leslie Davis behind. But this situation had to be dealt with and at last he got up and went out again and said, "Jim, just put him away for now and I'll be back to take x-rays and more photos later."

"Right you are. And do you think this one was poisoned?"

"I think the other man was poisoned with nicotine but I need confirmation. There was redness in his throat and a faint smell. It's harder to tell here because of the time lapse."

"You mean—he was a smoker?"

"You can distill pure nicotine from cigarettes. It's a quick-acting poison."

Jim Werner smoked. But now he said rather awkwardly, "Well, maybe that's a good reason for giving up?"

"Mmmm, but the puzzle is why anyone would go to all that trouble."

*

When Pauline and Chad Scully went round to see Dan Goodrick to offer to clean up his house and do some repairs Dan said, "If you want. But I don't know why everyone's makin' such a bloody fuss."

"Do you really want to move out, Dan?"

"Maybe."

"Then the nicer the place looks the easier it will be to sell."

"Nah. I'm doin' a deal with Lynnell. But I don't mind if you give it a clean. I don't reckon Lynnell'll bother."

"Well, we've got an idea you might like."

Dan looked sceptical but waited to hear it.

"We thought maybe we could do a swap. You have our house and we'll have yours. Our house and yard is big enough for you to have your dog and some chooks."

Dan stood there mulling the idea over and at last he said, "I'll think about it." Then he turned and waved at his house and sheds. "I'll leave you to it. I'll let Lynnell know you're going to clean it for me."

Pauline had blanched at the dirt and grime of Dan's kitchen and bathroom but she pitched straight in with scrubbing brushes and bleach and soap. Chad, less energetically, fixed several gates and dug out the silt and rubbish under the grid. Dan wandered round looking pleased. Even if Pauline and Chad didn't notice several people downtown wondered why Dan was looking so smug.

A few days later, and after they had made lists of things to be painted and repaired, Pauline said to Dan, "Well, have you decided if you'd like our place?"

"Sorry, Pauly, nothin' doin'. I told Lynnell first she could have it, gotta keep me word, y'know."

"But that's not fair, Dan. We've put hours and hours into cleaning everything up—"

"You offered. I never asked you."

"But—"

Nothing she said seemed to have any impact. When she told Chad he just said gloomily, "We shoulda known."

"But it's not fair. All we did for the old coot."

"You know what he's like."

"But why should Lynnell get it? She hasn't lifted a finger."

Chad meditated on this. "Because he's scared of her, I reckon."

Pauline didn't know whether to buy this suggestion or not. Lynnell was good at getting her own way but Dan also seemed to be able to get whatever he wanted.

"I still don't see why she wants it. She's got a place in Winville even if she doesn't like living there."

Chad seemed to go into suspended animation again. Then he said with unexpected prescience, "I guess she wants to be a big frog in a little pond … like she was before."

Chad was a very little frog in that pond and he couldn't really see why anyone would want to be talked about. But he understood Lynnell Morton well enough to see that she had enjoyed having people defer to her in Buckton.

"So what are we going to do?"

"We haven't got anything on paper. Don't reckon we've got a leg to stand on."

But Pauline was less ready to accept defeat. "Dan isn't going to listen to us but I wonder … what if we could get Dinny Walsh to talk to him?"

"It isn't police business." They had already made some plans about what they could do with Dan's acres although Chad, true to form, half expected any plans he made not to work out.

"But it's worth a try."

And Dennis Walsh confronted by a determined Pauline Scully next morning said, "So what's your problem?"

"It's about Dan and his farm."

He waved her into the interview room and sat down himself. "So what's he up to now?"

She explained how she and Chad had tried to clean and fix things and their offer to Dan. "Maybe our house is a bit big for Dan but I thought his place would be good for us. Chad could grow some fruit and have chooks and maybe rear some turkeys for Christmas. But now he says he's still going to give it to Lynnell and there doesn't seem to be a thing we can do about it. Is there anything you can do?"

Dennis privately thought a swap might be good for everyone. Chad constantly struggled to find work. He tended to be hired only when there wasn't anyone more efficient on offer. And although Dan would probably soon turn their house into a pigsty it might be possible to arrange for him to have a regular cleaner. Certainly the Scullys' neighbours mightn't be fussed on having him move in … but then he *was* getting older and frailer … less energetic …

"It isn't police business."

"I know." She hesitated then brought out what she hoped would sway him. "But you don't want Lynnell back in Buckton, do you?"

"So she said Dan could stay with her in that house?" He found that rather hard to believe.

"No. She just told him he could stay on there."

"And she would live—where?"

"She didn't say."

Dennis didn't commit himself to doing anything. But he went round later and put these questions to Dan who started out by telling Walsh to keep his nose out of his business and then that Lynnell would get herself a place in Buckton.

"So why does she want your place if she can't live in it?"

"She'll have to pay for it. I'm not givin' nothin' away."

"So she has to pay for your place and another place for herself? That doesn't make sense."

"She can stay with me if she wants."

Dennis couldn't see Mrs Morton wanting to share with Dan. Whatever her many faults she was neat and tidy when it came to looking after her house and garden.

"I reckon you're being conned, Dan. She'll have you out of here in a few weeks—and then where'll you go?"

Dan Goodrick didn't appreciate the idea of being conned; and more so as he had been putting together a plan to con Lynnell by hinting at the stuff he had hidden around his place and then forgotten where he'd put things. Lynnell would end up paying his price in the hope of being able to search undisturbed whenever he was out.

"You're an old fool, Dan. That woman's not that easily conned. You'd be better to do a deal with the Scullys. That way you know what you're getting. Anyway, up to you." He turned and went back to his car.

*

When Dennis got back to the station Grant had two bits of news. "There's an e-mail from Greg to say they gave Greg Maxwell twenty years. And Harry Kuhl rang to say that the man next door was in a fight and he called the ambulance to bring him into the hospital. He thinks the man who came to see him attacked him and then drove out again."

"This is Peter Darcy we're talking about?"

Grant agreed. "So what should we do?"

"Ring the hospital and see how he is and then we may need to go out and check the farm." Peter Darcy had set up his farm east of Harry Kuhl's place to spell racehorses. He also ran some cattle. He had several times complained about Harry's menagerie, particularly his donkeys.

A few minutes later Grant said, "They say he's still unconscious."

"Okay, bring the camera and we'll duck out and see if his animals are okay."

They stopped in to see Mr Kuhl on the way. He was sitting in his kitchen with his pet fox sitting up on his haunches beside him, waiting for some food. He came to the screen door and said, "How is he?"

"Still out to it. Did you see what happened?"

"I was down in the bottom paddock and heard two fellas arguing, dunno what about, then I saw one hit the other and knock him down. Then that fella went back to, I reckon it was a white pickup, and then he just drove out. When I didn't see the other fella get up I rang the ambulance. Hope I did the right thing?"

Dennis wasn't sure how good Mr Kuhl's eyesight or hearing was but it all sounded pretty straightforward. They drove back to the road and then in Peter Darcy's gate. Dennis didn't think Darcy was good with animals, too strung up to get them to settle, but he had the place set up nicely with eight small paddocks for the horses, each one with trees and its own water trough and feed bin. Beyond these small railed paddocks were some Herefords.

"We'd best check the house, see nothing's left on. Have a look around for chooks, a dog, and then we'll have to think about feeding the horses."

The house was sparsely furnished but quite tidy. A plate and glass were on the kitchen table and Darcy had put out a packet of mince to thaw. Dennis put it in the fridge. But it was the bedroom which gave him pause. There were several feminine items there, hand cream, lipstick, a hairbrush, and in the wardrobe was a dark coat and a floral scarf. There was nothing to stop the man having a lady friend. But this suggested she only came occasionally. He wondered if she was local or came out from Toowoomba. Maybe she was the other man's wife and he had come to have it out with Darcy? It probably wasn't relevant but he took two hairs from the hairbrush and slipped them into a plastic bag.

The horses were more difficult. There was some grass in their paddocks but he assumed they got chaff and grain for their evening feed. They went over to the shed and into the makeshift harness room at one end. There were a number of empty buckets waiting. Bags of chaff were leaned along the far wall. There were also several bags of mineral and vitamin supplements.

"I think we'd best just give them some chaff and oats. They can miss their pep-me-ups for one night."

When the six horses paddocked had been fed they went out again. "I wonder if the horses are safe? We'd best ask Harry to keep an ear out." Of course whatever the men had argued about might not have anything to do with the horses but with no apparent security there was the faint niggling worry that someone might come in. The horses might be also-rans but there was always the possibility that one of them was worth stealing …

And Peter Darcy when he walked out of the hospital the next morning was not grateful to anyone, not the hospital, not the police, and certainly not his next-door-neighbour, and told Grant when he drove out to check on him that they should've left him as he was.

Grant said, "People were worried about you."

"Well, they had no business to be poking their noses into my life."

"So who was it who attacked you?"

"No one."

Grant tried several more questions but finally gave up. If the man didn't want to share anything that seemed to be the end of the matter. But Dennis said, firstly, "How did Darcy get home?"

"He must've hitched a lift."

"And this other bloke—you've got no idea who he was?"

"He wouldn't even admit that someone had attacked him."

"So this bloke gets off scot-free? And he thinks he'll do it again?"

Grant could see this but with nothing to go on except a white pickup there didn't seem to be anything more to be done. Darcy might change his mind. Someone might say something … And if that unknown woman cared for Peter Darcy she might not want that other man to come round and knock him out cold, with impunity …

*

Winville CIB had checked with Missing Persons and then with Immigration. Two men entering Australia together might be findable. They had photos, they had size and weight, and approximate age. And several days later Immigration got back to them with a possible match. Two young men, Adam and Scott Smith, had arrived from London five weeks ago. Their ages on their passports were given as twenty-eight, both born in Leeds, their first visit to Australia. They said they were tourists, here for three months, and with more than adequate funds to pay for their holiday.

Greg said, "Now we're getting somewhere. So we need to know more about them."

Jenny and Brent ran these names past the MPU without finding anything. But when they tried an internet search they unexpectedly came up with something interesting. An Adam and Scott Smith were 'persons of interest' in a case in northern England. Two bodies had been found buried, so far unidentified, and the Smiths had been seen in the area where the bodies were found. The only clue to the bodies, according to reports, was a scrap of newspaper found in a pocket and the language of the scrap had been identified as Bulgarian. Police were reportedly looking at recent arrivals from Bulgaria.

Jenny and Brent looked at each other and then Brent said, "What odds it's really the Smiths in that grave and these guys stole their identities and passports?"

Greg agreed that this was possible. The Smiths were described as small time drug dealers and the deaths were assumed to be drug-related. But none of this came close to explaining why two young men would be dumped near Winville.

"I think I'll ring Mason and see if he thinks Bulgaria is a possibility." He knew Mason had had queries about dental work on the first body found. "But first I think I need a map. I don't even know where it is."

Dr Watling when Sullivan finally caught up agreed that Bulgaria might be a possibility. "Unusual to see a blonde Bulgarian but not impossible. Or they'd come there from somewhere else." He wasn't prepared to commit himself to anything more definite and Greg went back to thinking on their next step.

"We can't tell the Poms to check if those bodies were actually the Smiths—or can we?"

"Surely we can just ask them to check. The Smiths must have teeth on record. Maybe they got diverted by that newspaper and didn't check. But can we do it ourselves or do we need to involve the AFP?"

Greg was all for calling in the Federal Police. The case was starting to look too large for them. And he always assumed other police could do a better job than him. But Brent said, "We can get the details of the local police there and just run the idea past them. If the bodies aren't the Smiths—at least we've got a quick comeback on that."

Greg sat there tapping a pencil on his desk. He would much prefer to go through official channels here but then he thought of the difficulty of persuading other people to take the leap of faith they had just taken. And how long would that all take? At last he said, "Okay, go for it."

As Brent Kelly went back to his computer Jenny Forman said thoughtfully, "I think we're looking at two people. I mean, you could bury hundreds of bodies out here and no one would find them. So why dump them on the roadside? I think maybe someone killed them but someone else wanted them found for some reason."

Both Greg and Petra agreed that this was possible but it didn't seem to open up a new line of enquiry. Greg went back to hoping Mason would come up with something and Petra left the case to work on a different problem. By the time they knocked off Brent had sent off an e-mail carefully delineating the possibility that the unidentified bodies in Yorkshire just might be Adam and Scott Smith and the Bulgarians might actually have stolen their identities.

It might be a leap of faith too far but they all secretly hoped they might someday be congratulated for solving a mystery which had baffled British Police …

*

Mason Watling took the investigation in a different direction several days later. After x-raying and taking a cast of the first young man's teeth he had removed one filling and sent it off for analysis. He had also carefully bagged up every speck of extraneous material and sent that for analysis.

He rang Greg Sullivan to say that as well as specks of soil and plant material from the first body they had also found several tiny bits of cotton fibres.

"Fibres from what?" Greg thought the world was probably coated with cotton fibres.

"Not from clothes. I mean raw cotton. From a boll."

"You're sure about that?" He didn't usually ask Watling whether he was sure of anything. The doctor rarely committed himself to anything until he was sure.

"I think they've been on a cotton farm, or mill, or maybe a truck that's been carting cotton."

"Well, that should help us. Thanks."

"I'll send the full report over."

A cotton farm? Greg immediately began to think on a possible next step. Cotton grew south-west of Winville around Cecil Plains. So to drop bodies near Winville no longer seemed quite so strange. An hour's drive at the very most. But if Adam and Scott Smith came in as tourists what would bring them to Cecil Plains? Were they working in violation of their tourist visas? Were they visiting family or friends? But then … if they were really Bulgarian … would they have family and friends at Cecil Plains? Enemies then? Because someone had chosen to kill them. It all began to seem very complicated and he went back to telling himself 'don't worry about the big picture, just keep going with your ordinary routine'.

Case No. 3: Which Woman?

Buckton's police station had an unexpected visitor several days later. Dennis had begun making notes of things to be done for Christmas. Grant and Stacey Lynch had driven up to Kingaroy on Sunday to have a look around what would be his new 'beat'. Stacey hoped she would be able to get into a course to train as a physical education teacher next year.

The woman who came in briskly had lots of blonde curls tied up in a high pony tail, a frilly blouse, a red leather vest and black pants, finished off with red leather ankle boots and a big matching shoulder bag. She said, "I thought you might be needing some help."

Dennis didn't recognise her and said, "About what?"

"It was my husband who whacked Peter Darcy."

"I see. Well, best come in and I'll get some details."

She gave her name as Kari Woodbridge and said she lived in Drayton.

"So how d'you know Peter Darcy?"

"Well, we're not exactly an item but I come and stay now and again. Barry doesn't like that but he can like it or lump it, far as I'm concerned."

"So were they arguing over you?"

She seemed to like the idea but then she drew back from it and said only, "I don't know what they were arguing about. Barry's always arguing with someone. It doesn't mean much."

"Is he ever violent towards you?"

"Now and then. He seems to think he-men can't talk things out."

"Do you want him charged?"

"Not worth the effort. I'm going to leave him anyway."

"For Peter Darcy?"

"I wouldn't think so. Peter's pretty boring—in bed and out of it."

"Has your husband ever been charged with anything?"

"Bit of a dust-up in the pub, one time, and he accused someone of planning a ring-in years ago, and they ended up going at each other. He's like that, always in somebody's face."

"So—has he got any horses at Peter's place?"

"One or two. Peter could tell you."

Dennis didn't bother to tell her that Peter Darcy wasn't giving anything away at the moment and certainly not the names of his clients. "So how did you hear that Peter was in hospital?"

"It's all around the track. Everyone seemed to know."

"Any specific person?"

"Maybe. But I wouldn't know who starts things."

"You said your husband was boasting of it."

"Yeah, but I don't think he'd tell other people. He just wants me to know what he did to Peter."

"Well, thanks for letting us know. Oh, by the way, what vehicle does your husband drive?"

"We've got several. A station wagon, a truck, a ute."

"What colour are they?"

She gave him a searching look. "White."

Harry Kuhl could easily have mistaken a ute for a pickup. But he couldn't get rid of the feeling this woman had another agenda. She wasn't here to help. But just what she wanted was less clear.

"So where can we find you if we have more questions?"

"Peter will let you know if I move."

She got up with a bit of a wriggle, hitched her bag back up, said "Good luck" and went out.

Dennis finished filling up his form. With luck the name and address for Barry Woodbridge were correct. He turned and said to Grant, "What did you make of her?"

"It sounds like she wants to make trouble for her husband."

Dennis nodded. "But why come to us when Darcy's said he doesn't want anything more done about it? And I don't think she's the woman he has to stay with him."

"Why not? She looks like she'd do that."

"The things I found there suggested someone very quiet and discreet. This dame'd go round telling the whole world, give her half a chance. No, I wonder if Darcy told her 'nothing doing'. Well, I'll let Toowoomba know and you can duck out and run this Barry Woodbridge past him. He just might tell you what's going on."

Or did she have a bone to pick with the woman who sometimes *did* stay with Peter Darcy—and if so how did she know who it was?

But Grant found Peter Darcy no more communicative this time. To Barry Woodbridge's name he just said, "So?"

"Don't you want him charged?"

"Nothing to do with me."

"Are these his horses?"

"None of your business."

Grant finally gave up. But as he drove back to Buckton he mused on who Peter Darcy's secret lover might be and whether she knew he had been in hospital. He knew most police would be only too ready to drop a case like this, where the victim didn't want any action taken. But he felt there was something off about it all. Maybe some of the horses were stolen? Maybe that woman wasn't really Barry Woodbridge's wife? He went on thinking up scenarios until he was back in town.

*

It was DS Moore in Winville who said, "There was a bit in the paper about a man over near Cecil Plains running over his wife."

The others looked at her without seeing a possible connection. “It’s a cotton farm,” she added.

“You think there’s a connection with our bodies?” Greg had endorsed one leap of faith. He showed no willingness to make another.

“If we’re correct in thinking that two people were involved in those deaths and the bodies being dumped—then maybe one of them didn’t want to risk the other talking out of turn.” This might make sense but Greg only said, “They saw it as an accident.” Of course police much preferred accidents. They didn’t require long hours of hard work.

“We saw Paul Pickering’s death as an accident.”

Greg didn’t like being reminded of this. “Well, get the details if you want.”

A man called Gordon Bankes had been backing up his truck and didn’t see or hear his wife. He had hit her and run a wheel over her before he realised something was wrong. The man who shared this with DC Forman said Bankes seemed very cut up over it and kept blaming himself. He had told them he didn’t know why she had gone behind the truck, whether she had gone to pick something up or just went behind without realising. Certainly toddlers got hit by backing vehicles but it seemed a bit odd that a grown woman should. Still, there didn’t seem any reason for police to be suspicious. The Bankes if not a happy couple had certainly never come to police attention …

“Did they have anyone staying with them or working for them?”

“We didn’t ask but there was no sign of anyone else there.” Sergeant Wilkinson hesitated and said, “They’re not ploughing or harvesting at the moment so not likely to have extra help. Why do you ask?”

Jenny explained the reason they had now linked their bodies to a possible cotton farm or cotton gin. He said, “Yeah, I heard about them being found. But why would they be visiting the Bankes?”

“Have the Bankes got any connection to the UK?”

“Do you want me to ask?”

“Could you? We think the two young men were Adam and Scott Smith from the UK—or at least the men were using their passports.”

“Okay, I’ll ask around.” He didn’t see any need to ask for more clarification.

And a few days later he got back with the information that Gordon Bankes was born in the UK but arrived as a five-year-old and that he had a son Damien who had gone on a visit to the UK five years ago. “Could these young men be friends of Damien and he gave them his parents’ address when they said they were coming for a visit? And something went wrong?”

Wilkinson showed no sign of wanting to make any leaps of faith. He said non-committally, “I guess it’s possible. But I think you’d better ask your own questions. You know more about what’s going on.”

“Does Gordon Bankes smoke?”

“I’d say so.” He didn’t bother to ask why Winville wanted to know.

*

It was all round Buckton on Thursday evening that Lynnell Morton had gone into the Coolibah Hotel and had a big row with Pauline Scully. It was Mrs Perriman who told Dennis and she didn’t mince her words. “She was leaning over and screaming at her like nobody’s business. I didn’t stay. But I could hear her all down the street.” Dennis knew Mrs Perriman had no time for Mrs Morton. It was probably mutual.

“What were they arguing about?”

“I think it’s got something to do with old Dan Goodrick. Lynnell was calling Pauline a ‘snake in the grass’ and a ‘two-faced slut’ and worse things. Pauline never got a word in.” She seemed to muse on the unpleasant scene before saying decisively, “I don’t want her back

in Buckton. I know it's a free country and people should be able to live where they want. But I would rather that Winville keep her." Then she added, "And I imagine you would too." Lynnell Morton might look like a nice grandmotherly soul but he knew she had hounded her husband, abused her two younger daughters, bashed her grandchildren, and undoubtedly connived at one and probably two deaths by poisoning.

He nodded. "I can't see why she wants to come back anyway. She's lost most of her old … friends … "

Pauline was certainly no longer a friend. And Mary Burchall had at last found herself some male company and would probably prefer Leon Gamble who had bought Alex Moy's farm to sitting round as one of Lynnell's acolytes …

"I wonder if she's got herself into trouble in Winville," Mrs Perriman went on in a musing way.

"It sounds like Dan's gone ahead and done a deal with Chad and Pauline and Lynnell doesn't like it. So unless she looks around for another place to buy … "

"Yes. Well, let's hope there's nothing on the market she would want."

The trouble with this was that if Lynnell didn't mind doing some repairs there were several not very smart bungalows on the market. And a couple of days later Bronwen Applegarth came up to him in the street and said, "I see Mrs Morton is back here to live." Her disapproval was evident.

He understood her stance. Lynnell had been very rude to her, in fact, to a number of women around the town, including Fiona. She had also been rude to him but he thought he could wear Mrs Morton's invective. But when it came to women who had never been anything but polite to Mrs Morton he felt like being rude to her himself. And the fact that Mrs Morton had chosen to return to Buckton was unlikely to mean she had had a change of heart and would now be all sweetness and light.

"She is." He had just heard that John Goodrick had browbeat old Mr Whelan into selling his house cheaply. He saw no reason to dwell on the fact.

"You should've stopped her."

"How?"

"Mr Whelan has children. They might not like the way he was cheated out of his house."

"Was he?"

"A give-away price just so John can get his sister in there."

"It's up to the Whelan children to look out for their dad."

"That isn't good enough—"

"It still isn't police business—"

"It will be—when she poisons someone else."

He left Mrs Applegarth with the last word. But he wondered if pressure *had* been put on the old man to sell cheaply? But then—what constituted 'cheaply'? That old cottage was hardly likely to have buyers lining up. And the Whelan children? Where did they come into things?

*

Gordon Bankes told DC Forman the police could look around as much as they wanted "but it was an accident". Jenny Forman might have been reluctant to suggest to her boss that they get a forensic team on to the property to give it a thorough search—if she hadn't gone round several of the neighbours to ask them about the Bankes as individuals and as a family.

Janet Hunt on the next door farm said immediately, "A very sad business all round." She said she didn't have much time for Gordon but that his wife Elaine had been a nice woman. "And all her worries about her son did get her down."

"What sort of worries?"

"Well, Damien went to the UK about five years ago, a working holiday, and he was going to visit some relatives, I believe. He used to write home nearly every week and then it got to maybe once a month, and then she didn't hear from him in six months. She thought maybe he had a girlfriend and was taken up with her. Apparently he told her not to worry. But then, I don't know how long after he got there, but he didn't even get in touch for Christmas. She wondered whether she should try to get in contact with police there to see if he was safe. And then, maybe it was last February or March, he said he was going to go traveling in Europe, but no explanation of why he hadn't been in touch." Of course letters might have gone astray …

"Did he say what part of Europe?"

"I don't remember her saying anything more about it. But Gordon would know."

She got some small insights from other people but no one knew where Damien had gone traveling. One woman said she didn't think Gordon was very nice to his wife. "Violent, you mean?" Forman said.

"No. It was harder to pin down. Sort of that he looked down on her, like she wasn't very bright or good at things. He sort of put her down. It probably doesn't mean anything much now. They say it was an accident. But don't let him tell you how much he loved her because I don't think he did."

But 'not loving' and killing were quite some distance apart.

She went back to see Gordon Bankes just to ask if he knew where in Europe his son had planned to travel. He seemed to ponder on this before saying, "I don't remember him saying a place."

"Could it have been in eastern Europe?"

"I'd only be guessing."

"Bulgaria?"

"No idea."

"So have you got an address for him?"

"Nah. Up to him to write and say where he is."

"And you're sure he's safe?"

He shrugged. "Up to him."

She left it at that. And had she been wise to mention Bulgaria? She couldn't decide. Nor was it easy to decide if his face had tightened slightly when she'd mentioned it.

And when Greg said, "So you want us to send in the experts to look for—what? Hair? Clothes? Backpacks?"

"Anything. I know there's nothing definite. But I can't help wondering if the missing son has something to do with it. With these two men in the morgue, I mean."

Greg too thought none of it could be called suspicious, just vaguely suggestive. But at last he gave the go-ahead to ask that the farm be searched. Or at least the house and sheds.

Gordon Bankes seemed to accept the forensic team with equanimity and just said, "Go wherever you like."

DSS Sullivan, when he heard back from them, read their report and sighed. They had found absolutely nothing to suggest the two young men had ever been on the property. It seemed to be the end of a promising lead.

*

Fiona Greehan had discussed the possibility of them all going to Brisbane for the launch of her financial thriller but in the end she went alone. She had friends in Brisbane who would come along. Getting everything organised at home seemed a major operation and it wasn't as though it would be terrible exciting for the children.

So Dennis was sitting by himself in front of the TV after the children were in bed when Greg Sullivan rang to have a moan about the case.

Dennis said, “So the farm didn’t have a suitable vehicle?”

Greg had forgotten that aspect of their search, Mrs Landy’s putative station-wagon, and said, “They’ve got a station-wagon but so have lots of farms. And no sign of any mud in it.”

“Uh huh. And you’re sure the bods found nothing there?”

“Not without digging up the whole bloody farm.”

“And he’s had weeks to vacuum and clean?”

Greg agreed gloomily. And if the young men had been traveling lightly, a backpack apiece, there wouldn’t be much. Dennis gave the matter some thought. The fact that it had seemed a possibility didn’t necessarily mean they were on the right track …

At last he said, “Before you sign off—get a sniffer dog. Give him a smell of the first body’s clothes, then take him in. Bankes might not have thought to slosh some bleach or disinfectant around.”

Greg didn’t greet the idea with enthusiasm. And putting in for a sniffer dog would not make him look good if it came up blank. But at last he put the suggestion in motion. “If this doesn’t work we’re back to square one and I’m handing the whole shebang over to Brisbane. They’ve got the resources.”

Petra Moore agreed with this. It was only Jenny Forman who continued to agonise over whether or not she had seen something, some nuance of body language, of expression, and perhaps not interpreted it correctly. Maybe it wasn’t anything to do with the young men. Maybe it was the wife. Gordon Bankes had chosen this way to get rid of an unwanted wife and he had, it seemed, got away with it.

*

As there was no cricket on Saturday afternoon, Constable Schroeder drove out to Dinawadding, partly to visit Stacey Lynch and partly to check on more vandalism of the empty siding. He didn’t think there was much he could do about the vandalism except take pictures and pass them on to Winville. After all, half the kids in town seemed to think it was fun to go over and break things, scribble on things, prise things loose … and if the Railways didn’t care about their property then why should the police waste time on it …

Except that the place was now an eyesore.

Stacey had begun to pack up for her return to Brisbane. She was hoping her exam results would be good enough to help her get into the course she wanted. They sat and talked over a coffee before Grant said he’d better be getting back to Buckton.

He would miss Stacey when she went. He would miss Jenny Pym too. And the odd thing was that he thought he would miss Jenny more. He wasn’t sure why this should be. But he thought it had something to do with being completely comfortable with Jenny. He didn’t have to be anyone, prove anything, apologise for anything, try to change anything …

Dennis hadn’t asked him to call in anywhere else or check up on anything else. But as he drove he thought he might just call in to see Peter Darcy. Maybe he would still stonewall but maybe he might have had a change of mind and would now explain what had happened.

Although the farm seemed a place of perfect peace as he drove in, the horses under the trees lazily swishing at flies, he felt a little nervous. He need not have psyched himself up to ask questions because there was no sign of Peter Darcy. He knocked back and front of the house and went out round the sheds. The hope that he might pin something down faded. He looked over the horses and then went back to his car.

He told Dennis of his abortive visit on Sunday morning when he came into the station briefly. Dennis just nodded and said, “The horses? They looked okay?”

“There were seven bays and the brown we saw last time.”

“Seven bays? And all alike?”

"Well, pretty much." Grant had not studied them closely. "A couple with some white on them."

Dennis just said, "Uh huh," and left it. But Grant was suddenly curious. "Why does it matter if they look much the same?"

"It's probably nothing—but you remember that dame, that Kari, saying something about her husband being in a fight over someone wanting to plan a ring-in? Well, what if it was the other way around? Maybe Barry Woodbridge wanted Peter Darcy to help him pull a fast one?"

Grant didn't know enough about racing to see how this would work and diffidently said so.

"What better place to organise something away from prying eyes than at a place like Darcy's? He keeps a low profile. You hardly ever see him round town. The horses come there. He can dye a white fetlock, fiddle with a brand, turn a full tail into a skimpy one, maybe use a board to get a mane to lie on the other side of the neck … and all in peace and quiet. Maybe he was willing. Maybe he wasn't."

Grant still wasn't sure just how it would work but he said, "I guess we'll never know."

"Depends."

And when Dennis took his children out to Dave Hickman's place on Sunday afternoon to see his horse and discuss things with Dave he also said, "Would you happen to know a Barry Woodbridge in Toowoomba?"

"We-e-ll, only in passing. Why?"

"What's he like?"

"I've heard people call him a bully. But he does pretty well. Look in the paper and you'll see him winning regularly. He seems to get good horses."

"We think he's the bloke who had a fight with Peter Darcy and put him in hospital."

"Really? Still, it wouldn't really surprise me. What were they fighting about?"

"Darcy refuses to admit there was even a fight."

Mr Hickman looked surprised. "He didn't want him charged?"

"Heck no. A bit odd. But I don't reckon he wanted anyone sniffing around."

Hickman smiled at that. It struck him as just the way to get Dennis Walsh interested. "And you want me to keep an ear out?"

"Hard to say. A woman calling herself Kari Woodbridge came to see us and said she was leaving him. She also said he was in a fight with someone who wanted to involve him in a ring-in."

Dave said he hadn't heard that. "And you think it might've been the other way around? And I didn't know he had a wife … not that I'd know … "

"There's seven bays in Darcy's yards but it mightn't mean anything."

"There was an Italian bloke, a famous breeder, he wrote a book and he'd looked at horses round Europe and I think he said bays were the most common. I don't know if anyone's ever looked here. Bays and browns, I guess."

They went on to talk about other things over a cup of tea and Dennis put Woodbridge and Darcy out of his mind. After all, Dave had two well-grown foals to be admired as well as Elise and Rob wanting to make a fuss of 'their' racehorse, Hansom Days.

But when he had a spare minute he put both names into the computer to see if either of them had a record.

*

The sniffer dog was seen by Greg Sullivan as his last desperate throw of the dice. If the dog found nothing to interest him Greg had the doom-laden thought 'I don't know what else to do.' His subordinates were much more upbeat. They might not have the passports of

Adam and Scott Smith but they had a reasonable identification and could probably strengthen that. So the UK police would almost certainly want to know more—and in the process they would almost certainly be able to offer some helpful ideas.

And to Brent's excitement he found an e-mail waiting when he opened up the CIB room and turned on the computers. There was a message from a DI Jon Deeping in the UK to thank them and to tell them that the bodies found had been identified as Adam and Scott Smith. 'A case of identity theft possibly. But we are still investigating the Smiths' last known contacts so we can't yet suggest identities for your bodies. A possible Bulgarian connection is interesting. The Smiths owned a farm here but didn't spend a lot of time on it. They sometimes hired casual labour. Eastern Europeans do come to Britain to do farm work.' He went on to ask for photos of the two men to be faxed and to be kept up to date with their investigation.

After Greg had read this he said gloomily, "Let's hope we can get something worth passing on."

Petra Moore said briskly, "We'll have the DNA results any day now. So that might help. But I think we should tell this DI Deeping about Damien Bankes."

Greg said there wasn't much point unless they could get something useful from the dog when it arrived.

"I think it would still be worth passing on. We've been told that he hasn't been in touch with his parents for more than eight months. Even if there isn't a connection he is still missing. He may be missing on purpose but there is a real possibility that something has happened."

Greg reluctantly agreed but said their first response should just be the requested photographs and a brief summary of the case. "Leave Damien out of it for the moment."

Petra accepted that. The English DI might be deeply committed to the case but he might also just want to have enough so he could close it on the grounds that the killers of the Smith brothers were now themselves dead. It could well save him a lot of work.

But the beagle that a Constable Klein unloaded and gave the first body's clothes to for a long sniff proved to be excellent value. Someone, possibly Gordon Bankes, had cleaned and vacuumed everything meticulously but he hadn't bargained on a dog's nose. The animal went straight up to one of the beds in the room in the wing off the main house.

His handler said cheerfully, "He's got something. Is this what you were hoping for?"

Mr Bankes received the news with a poker face and agreed that they could take the bed, "and a lot of good it'll do you."

Greg said a non-committal, "We'll let you know." He wasn't wildly hopeful but people rarely cleaned as well as they thought they did.

The dog had seemed sure but Forensics came up blank. Not a hair, not a scrap of skin, not a stain, just a faint smell. And a dog's nose was not enough to prove the men had ever been on the farm. The team's spirits went down with a thump.

*

Buckton Police had a visit from DPI man, Kieran Dobbs, who said immediately that they had checked with every energy company and had come up blank. "None of them admit to losing or dumping any transformers. So the stuff we took from Maxwell's farm came from somewhere else."

"You're going to try Maxwell again?" Greg Maxwell had refused to talk about the toxic chemicals found stored on his farm.

"No. He's a waste of time, I'd say. But we're getting a detailed analysis. Chances are we'll find extraneous material there which will help."

Dennis agreed that this was likely. They talked a bit more about the farm and then Kieran asked about Wally Barron's farm. What was Dennis going to do with it? Dennis had

been astonished when he learned old Wally Barron had left him the farm. Now that probate had been granted he was the owner of the house and farm.

"With luck I can rent the house out. I've got Winston painting it. But I'll keep the cattle there. I could agist cattle but I reckon it's better to have my own stock on it. I can only get out about once a week to check on things." Winston Pounder was a good reliable painting contractor.

The house was a bit far out of town to be easily rentable but Kieran occasionally heard of people wanting a bit of land for children's ponies or goats. "I'll keep an ear out." Then he said, "Any news on those mysterious men Winville found?"

"They hoped to link them to a cotton farm over Cecil Plains way, bloke named Gordon Bankes. But I reckon he'd done a super cleaning job because they got nothing there."

"So you still think it's him?"

"Good chance."

"Well, Matt Holloway told me they found a couple of cotton fibres in that mud he analysed. So you could be right." Cotton, being so light, tended to spread easily if there was any wind at harvest time.

"Yeah, but how to prove it?"

Kieran had a lot of faith in Dennis Walsh's ability to put small items together and come up with a result. "You'll get there. And I'll tell you something else Matt told me. He said Damien Bankes was a really nice young man. Don't ask me how he knew him but it might be worth having a chat."

Kieran had only been gone a few minutes when an unknown woman came in rather diffidently and said she'd heard that Peter Darcy had been attacked. She had softly waved hair and was dressed in a quiet blouse and skirt.

"And you are?" Dennis wasn't sure he wanted to re-involve himself in anything to do with Peter Darcy but this woman seemed closer to his image of Peter Darcy's unknown female visitor.

"I'm Estelle Woodbridge, Barry Woodbridge's wife. I know you think Barry did something to Peter but I am sure he didn't. Barry's all hot air. He wouldn't actually hurt anyone."

He sat down with her in the small interview room and said, "We had a woman in here a while ago who said she was Barry Woodbridge's wife, said her name was Kari."

"Oh no, she isn't his wife."

"Was she ever?"

"No. They were an item once but it went nowhere."

"He's not still carrying on with her?"

"No. Not that I mind if he is. I am going to leave him. I've found someone else."

"Not Peter Darcy?"

"Of course not."

Dennis began to feel the whole thing was vaguely surreal. Who were these people and why did they keep coming to him? Did women fantasise about being married to Barry Woodbridge for some unknown reason? He thought it would help to know what Barry Woodbridge was actually like. Was he extraordinarily handsome or something?

"So why come to us?"

"I may not want to stay married to Barry but … you're looking in the wrong direction."

"And what is the right direction?"

"That's up to you. I don't know."

"As Peter Darcy says he wasn't attacked by anyone you're wasting your time coming here to say Barry Woodbridge didn't do anything."

"I didn't want you to believe Kari."

"So how did you know she'd been here?"

"I hear things."

"So this ring-in Barry was planning—what do you know about it?"

She looked startled, then faintly annoyed. "That's more of Kari's nonsense."

"How d'you know that?"

"I know Barry. Anyway, I mustn't take up any more of your time. I just wanted you to know the truth about Barry."

"Uh huh." He got up again. He didn't feel like thanking her and he didn't think she was here because of a disinterested desire to 'help police'. After she'd gone out, still looking faintly ruffled, he sent a message to Winville to say 'Matt Holloway knows Damien Bankes, talk to him'. Then he said to Grant, "I'd leave this whole Darcy thing—except—two wives, both lying—" And then he didn't know whether this insight was worth anything. And wrong direction? Did she want him to go looking for someone else as Peter Darcy's attacker?

And when Dave Hickman got back to him to say, "I talked to a mate in Toowoomba and he says he doesn't think Woodbridge is married," it began to seem even more bizarre.

"Could he have been married in the past?"

Dave thought this was possible but said it must've been quite a while ago. "Darren says Woodbridge has a nephew and two lads but no sign of a woman round the place. I don't know if this is any help to you?"

"Could there be another Barry Woodbridge?"

"I haven't heard of one … but I guess … over to you, Dennis."

It only made things murkier but Dennis thanked him and said he didn't know what game Peter Darcy was playing at but with luck it wasn't criminal. And to Grant he said, "We'll give Darcy one more visit and tell him to keep his nose clean. If there's anything funny going on—then maybe it's at the Toowoomba end." Though there were a couple of Woodbridges in the phone book there was only one B.

And Peter Darcy didn't greet them with pleasure, saying sourly, "What brings you bods back? You're wasting your time."

"Just to say, if you've got any ideas about helping Barry Woodbridge do a ring-in or anything else dodgy—think again."

"As I said, you're wasting your time."

As they walked back to the car Dennis stopped and looked around. Grant was right. All the horses in view seemed to be bays. It might merely be coincidence but he remembered an old-timer telling him 'they always go for bays, easier to dye a white sock black than chestnut'. And bays with their black points rarely had the flashy white socks seen on some chestnuts.

As they drove out, Grant said, "He didn't like it when you said that."

But then Peter Darcy had scowled all the way through their visit. It was hard to tell whether there was more to it. They then called in to see the Robeys on their way back to Buckton. Someone had bashed the Robeys' mail box with a hammer, leaving it a crumpled mess. As no one else had reported damage to their mailboxes it suggested spite against the Robey family rather than general vandalism. They lived almost opposite the big Mackie farm. They had three children at school in Buckton but they had never come to police attention. So if it was spite it suggested a private feud or upset.

Dennis, as he always did, looked round carefully, but came up empty-handed. Easy for someone to simply bash the old metal box. They didn't need to grab hold of it. There was the faint suggestion of a car parked along the road but the gravel gave up no footprints. "Have a chat with Tufnell, he just might've seen or heard something. Otherwise we'll just have to

keep an ear out." Barney Tufnell did the mail round south of Buckton. And people sometimes boasted about their petty offences in the pub.

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Greg Sullivan, still agonising over whether to pass everything on to Brisbane, felt he should make one more effort to get something before he gave up. The thought of ringing DI Deeping in the UK daunted him but he finally jotted down some questions and asked the others what they thought. Jenny and Brent both said, in essence, 'Go for it' but Petra Moore thinking of Greg vaguely waffling on, and at great expense, wasn't so sure. "Just keep him up-to-date by e-mail," was her suggestion.

Greg nodded, still undecided, but got out the phone book to check time differences. And Deeping might not always be in the station anyway. But his thoughts gradually hardened. The fact that Petra obviously didn't think it was a good idea probably helped. He knew perfectly well she regarded him as a ditherer. And he was honest enough to admit she wasn't far wrong. But he had gradually come round to the idea that Damien Bankes might be part of the equation after all, because without him it was hard to find a reason for two Bulgarians to come to Cecil Plains.

When he finally made the late-night call he knew it might achieve nothing except a hole in their budget. But it had slowly become just one of the things to be done. And he was in luck. He got Deeping straight away and introduced himself. Deeping, after his momentary surprise, sounded pleased. If he had a slight difficulty with Greg's Aussie accent then Greg was also slightly at sea with broad Yorkshire. Greg immediately pitched into the question of why the bodies had been assumed to be Bulgarian? Surely one scrap of newspaper would disintegrate anyway? "Interesting," Deeping said to this. "The guy was wearing singlet, shirt, a leather vest, and a bomber jacket with the page in a pocket, he was lying face up. Someone had put some quicklime in the bottom of the grave and the men's hands were resting on it, so no fingerprints. We got on to the Home Office but also doing the usual around the nearby farms, and that's how we got a sighting of the Smith twins. They were identical twins, blonde, blue eyes, in their twenties, so they were more noticeable than normal. So you're saying both Bulgarians were also blonde and blue-eyed?"

"The Bulgarian bit isn't sure yet but it seems likely. So how would they have got the Smiths' passports?"

"We went into that. The Smiths only applied for passports in September, their first time. They weren't very bright and they had never traveled. So they probably never considered going out of the country. We think these other men said it was easy money, get passports, sell them on, and they probably thought it sounded like a good deal. Then when it comes time to hand over the new passports and while the Smiths are counting the money, just knock them on the head, bury them with a scrap of paper, then head off. You never found any passports?"

"Not a whisker. We've searched the farm of Gordon Bankes. The sniffer dog said they were there but we can't find hard evidence. That's the other thing. Damien Bankes left here five years ago to go to the UK. We think he may have met up with the Bulgarians. He hasn't been heard of, according to his dad, since about March. The dad may be lying but there's just a chance Damien Bankes is also dead."

"Do you have an address for him?"

As he said "No" Greg realised he had been remiss. The house and outbuildings had been searched for any sign of two blonde strangers but they had not looked for anything to do with the missing son. "I'll try the dad again. He's not offering anything so it might come back to immigration and employment records."

As soon as he got into work next morning he said, “We need to go straight back to the farm and see if Damien’s letters home are still there.” Everyone in the room heard the urgency in his voice.

“Now?” Petra said.

“Now. Brent you come with me. It’ll muck up our morning but it can’t be helped.”

When they finally drove into the yard and couldn’t find Gordon Bankes their day became even more mucked up. “Can we go in without him?” Brent hazarded.

“I’d say so. He’s already given us permission to search everywhere.”

It might make trouble later as Bankes could now say he had seen it as a one-off but Greg felt he could wear any comeback. Nothing was locked and he said to Brent, “Anything about Damien. Address books, notes by the phone, letters, documents.”

And in among what had been Elaine Bankes’ drawer of odds and ends they found a packet of letters. “Best if we can take the lot and go through them properly. We can leave him a note and tell him to get on to us if he has a problem—”

But as he spoke they heard a vehicle coming up the lane. They stood and waited for it to pull in and park. Gordon Bankes didn’t look happy to see them but said only, “All yours.”

“We’ll bring them back. We just want an address for your son.”

“Don’t bother.” He went on into the house and closed the door.

When they finally got back to the station Greg detailed Jenny Forman to go through everything. “Addresses, work, girlfriend, meeting anyone, travel.”

DC Forman nodded. Some of the letters were dated and she shuffled them into order, leaving the undated ones aside. The most obvious help was the address. “So he was living in Leeds too,” she said, “So we can tell Deeping.”

She thought it would be best to work backwards as any likelihood of him meeting their two mystery men would almost certainly be recent. Half an hour later she said, “Well, he had a girlfriend. He only calls her Natalie but they should be able to find her. And he worked for something called Titan Freight. So they must know if he resigned.”

“Terrific.” Greg’s gloomy prognosis had magically changed. If the employer and the girlfriend were the sort of people who chatted with him about his friends they might know something useful. He said, “Get an e-mail off to Deeping straightaway.”

In the evening he rang Dennis to pass on the news before saying less enthusiastically, “But we still can’t link our two bodies to that farm.”

“Well, leave Gordon Bankes aside for the moment. He might get careless if he thinks you’ve lost interest. But get a second opinion on Elaine Bankes. Could she have been dead before he backed over her? And talk to Matt Holloway.” Greg had put Holloway on the back-burner. The personality of Damien Bankes might be important but he was unlikely to have told Matt Holloway anything about his new life in England.

Case No. 4: To Marry or Not To Marry?

It was nearly a week before Winville got a long e-mail from DI Deeping. ‘Found Natalie Preston. They didn’t live together. She has 2 young children from another relationship. They considered marriage. She says he met with 2 men he called Anton and George, they suggested a business partnership, he wasn’t keen. He liked his job. But he said he would go and look at their proposal in his holidays. She said he told her he was going to Europe for 3 weeks. She has never heard from him since. She didn’t know whether to try and list him as Missing. She said she felt sure something awful had happened to him. We have found an Anton and Georg Von Schiesser entering the UK on Bulgarian passports a year ago. May be them. We’ve tracked Bankes to France, Italy, then Egypt, but they are not helping as

we can't say he's wanted. We've contacted the Bulgarians to try and get more on Anton and Georg.' The e-mail also said that Natalie thought Damien was a very nice man and would not have abandoned her without a very good reason.

Greg said, "Watch this space. I think we're getting there. I wonder why they didn't get married. That might've made things easier. For us anyway."

"Those two kids," Petra said drily.

"Well, yeah, so Jenny, duck round to see if Matt Holloway's in his office. Take those letters and see if he can expand on Damien."

She found Matt Holloway in and he immediately said, "He's missing? That's not like Damien. You couldn't meet a more decent guy. I met him at a Field Day and we stayed in touch. This would be eight or nine years ago. He always sent me a Christmas card. He thought of looking at getting agricultural work but he decided to drive for a freight company. He said it was a good way to see the UK."

Jenny, having read his letters home, also thought he sounded a nice man. Though he wrote to his mother he always asked after his dad. She said, "Did he mention Natalie?"

"Last Christmas. He said he was thinking of getting married and coming home. I think it depended on her. He was an only child so the farm would come to him but I don't think that was it. More that he'd seen the country and he didn't really like the way things were going. He didn't expand on that so I don't know if it was something specific."

"He never mentioned anyone wanting him to join them in a partnership?"

"No. He said one time he missed the space here, that everything there seemed so crowded. He said he liked driving to the north of Scotland for that reason, get away from crowds."

"Did you ever meet his parents?"

"Only Gordon and I got the impression he was a bit of a bull-headed old so-and-so. The sort of farmer who always knows best. Sometimes I agree, not all the new ways are better, but I think he would argue just for the sake of arguing. I might be wrong. But I think that's partly why Damien decided to go. If he stayed home to work with his father it might not work out."

"So who helps on the farm now?"

"I'd say he gets contractors in. But his wife also worked on the farm, drove the tractor, did some of the heavy lifting."

"You never met her?"

"No. But I have an idea she came from a farm over near Cambooya. I might be wrong but a farm anyway."

"Well, if you do remember any more, give us a ring, would you?"

"Can do. And I hope you find he's okay."

It might be that Damien was less keen on Natalie than she on him. He might've wanted to gently ease his way out. But that didn't explain why he would not contact anyone, girlfriend or employer, unless he had some reason to completely sever ties …

She now felt pretty hopeful. There were still many dangling threads. And in following them up they might come to that central puzzle: why had the two men come to visit Gordon and Elaine Bankes?

Though she pondered on this in spare moments she couldn't come up with a satisfactory answer. It might be blackmail. The Bankes were not poor but neither did they seem to have the sort of money which would make the long journey worthwhile. But then, maybe, the men assumed anyone owning a big farm must be rich?

'I think we're missing something.' And having thought that she wondered if there was someone else in the picture they just hadn't found yet.

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Dr Watling let them know he had the DNA results. “Anything yet to compare them with?”

Greg had to say no but he told the doctor what they had so far found out about a possible identity. “Well, we can do a chemical analysis of teeth and bones if necessary. It might help to pin down where your bodies grew up.”

“Can you do it or should we do it?”

“As it is an active case you should be able to get it done.”

“We’re going to have to hand it all over to Brisbane. They’ve got the facilities.”

Dr Watling could see that the case with its international ramifications would be better handled there. But he could also see it dribbling away into the sand if there was not sufficient pressure to get results. “Have you had any contact with the Bulgarian Embassy —if they have one here?”

“No. We think the men are Anton and Georg Von Schiesser but we can’t prove it. With luck Brisbane can.”

“Those names sound German, not Bulgarian.”

Petra had said the same thing. It just seemed to be an added complication. “Could be,” Greg said without enthusiasm.

“Well, that should make them easier to find. Blonde identical twins with German names maybe living in Bulgaria and then coming to the UK.”

Put like that, they did begin to sound sufficiently unusual to be easily findable. “So what would German boys be doing in Bulgaria?”

“It is too long since the war for that to be an issue. So maybe there on business. The German Embassy, some sort of professional … ” There seemed to be various possibilities. “Anyway, I’ll send you the DNA results and the report Dr Flandrin did on the teeth. It might help bolster your case.”

And when everything they had done on the case was pulled together it did look professional and almost conclusive. The only jarring note, according to Jenny Forman, was the sketchy post-mortem report done by Dr Davis. Sullivan said, “They can’t expect too much. And Stimson can keep in touch with Deeping. So I’m glad to get it out of our hands before Christmas.” DI Dan Stimson hadn’t sounded excited at getting the case but had said “Well, give me everything you’ve got.”

When he passed this development on to Dennis Walsh it was to have him say, “That woman’s death—can you get them to get a second opinion? I still think she could’ve been dead before she was hit by the truck. Unless she was deaf. And did you get any sightings of her in a station wagon?”

“Yeah, it’s a bit suspicious. I’ll pass it on.” Greg, with everything no longer his responsibility, was quite willing to agree and shunt the suggestion on. If Brisbane didn’t act on the suggestion he wouldn’t feel in any way remiss. Except … he had forgotten about doing a search of the one CCTV film they’d been able to get from a garage. But that was probably only a formality.

His relief was not shared by his two constables, Forman and Kelly. They both thought that Winville could have soldiered on and quite possibly resolved more. “I can see why Greg wanted to hand it on,” Forman said slowly, “but we were going really well. And I bet we could have found out something about the Bulgarian end.”

Brent Kelly thought so too. It would be harder, of course, but they could’ve found someone who could speak Bulgarian to help them check Bulgarian phone books and business directories and electoral rolls—if Bulgaria had those things. “And if those two men have been listed as missing in Bulgaria … I wonder if they have Missing Persons Units?”

"Maybe they don't care if people go missing … and if Bulgaria is in the EU then maybe there's so many people coming and going that they don't register who leaves and who comes in?"

"We need to know more about Bulgaria."

But if the case was no longer theirs—did Bulgaria matter any more?

Jenny and Brent considered this before Jenny said firmly, "I don't trust Brisbane. I think we should go ahead and see what else we can find out."

Brent agreed. "So I wonder what they'll do with the bodies? They can't send them anywhere till they can prove—"

"That's a thought. They have to find the Von Schiesser parents and if they find them then they find out … well, what's going on."

"It's a sort of Catch 22 … and maybe the parents don't know their sons are dead."

"You remember that man Greg found that spoke Russian? Well, I wonder if he might speak Bulgarian—if they're a bit the same."

"Just before we check with him—let's just see if we can find a Von Schiesser with an address in Bulgaria." They both went back to trying to get a breakthrough with the internet. They knew they had been lucky with DI Deeping and the Smith Brothers and they had no realistic hopes of getting lucky again. They learnt various things about Bulgaria and the name Schiesser but nothing which seemed to link their mystery bodies to anyone.

But Mr Ivan Kreisky was more helpful. He said he could muddle along in Bulgarian and what did they want to know. Brent explained how they were pretty sure that the mystery men found on the roads outside Winville were Bulgarian but when he proffered their likely names, Kreisky shook his head, "That doesn't sound Bulgarian to me, more like German."

"But there might be Germans in Bulgaria, mightn't there?"

"Of course, of course, but how will you find them?"

Brent passed on the possible avenues they had thought of and Mr Kreisky said, "So you want a Von Schiesser in the capital?"

"Anywhere there really. We thought their father might have a business."

"It is very possible. But how old are your men from the roads?"

"About twenty-eight."

"So if they were born there you are going back into the time of the Communists. So maybe not a business then."

"Maybe a diplomat, maybe an expert in something."

"Computers, electronics, aviation. Yes, I think they would look to Germany for their experts, they would think the Germans know more than the Russians."

"Would there be any kind of association, maybe a club, maybe there's a German place where they go to … you know, speak German and read German books."

"There must be. But how will you find out?" Mr Kreisky coming unprepared to the problem felt rather lost. And what could these two keen young people actually do from here?

"I know," Jenny Forman said suddenly. "You know those travel guides? Well, they often have addresses for various embassies for people wanting to get visas and they would have maps and they might have addresses for police." She jumped up. "I'll go and see what I can find. It's not too late." Mr Kreisky watched her go and said, "She has lots of, what do you say, 'get up and go', in her."

Brent agreed with this. "And if we can find somewhere to write to—could you help us translate it into Bulgarian?"

Mr Kreisky, thinking of his rusty language skills, said cautiously that he could try.

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Sergeant Walsh sent Grant Schroeder round to see George Hickman who put out a monthly newsletter called the *Buckton Bugle* with the latest items for the Crime Stoppers

section. In Brisbane, Grant thought, it would be all about stolen cars and burglaries but here it was about vandalised mailboxes and stray dogs. It was as his family liked to say a reminder of the narrowness of his life in Buckton. But then he cheered up. He had also heard all the ins and outs of the mystery case involving the Bulgarians here on stolen passports. Buckton might be a little dot on the map but interesting things did happen here. And here he often felt he had a 'front row seat'; in Brisbane he would probably be making the tea or tidying up or filing or …

And then his spirits went down again. He would be gone soon and he didn't look forward to trying to settle in to a different station with a different boss. He didn't see it as his dependence on Dennis Walsh but he did have times when he dreaded the thought of someone who would either do nothing but criticise or who would just let things go as not being important. Jenny Pym understood this because she knew Dennis and that brought him round the circle to the thought that he needed Jenny in his life as much, if not more, than he needed Dennis. And it was not something he could share with anyone because people could understand him missing Stacey who was young and cute but they would not see Jenny in the same light. Jenny was still attractive but she wasn't eighteen and her brisk no-nonsense manner didn't endear her to most men. But Grant didn't see her like that. Her sense of decision gave him confidence and a sense of strength. With her he always felt he too could get things done and make decisions.

George Hickman was just sitting down to a late afternoon tea when Grant came to the door. He said cheerfully, "Come and join us." His wife May put out an extra mug and plate and came and sat down with them. "I suppose you're looking forward to your move," she said, "so I hope Dennis can get someone good to take your place."

"I guess it's good to get more experience," Grant said but not as though he really believed his own words.

"But Buckton has started to seem like home," May said kindly. "And Jenny will miss you, so will we all."

"Still, best to see the world when you're young," George said cheerfully. "You get old and somehow everything seems a bit more effort and you think of going places and you like the idea but then it all starts to feel too much of an effort and then you think maybe home's nicest after all."

"Or some people are just naturally stick-in-the-muds," May said with a smile.

"I wouldn't mind being closer to a beach." Grant felt very comfortable with them but he didn't think he could discuss anything personal.

"True. So what has Dennis sent you up with?" Grant handed over the couple of paragraphs of small problems and George said, "The Robeys' mailbox? Yep, we heard about that. It seems their oldest lad is a bit of a bully at school. So maybe someone was getting back at them for his behaviour."

Grant hadn't tried to second guess a motive behind the vandalism. "Do you think it's personal?"

"If it was closer in to town I might just think someone's had a skinful and feeling belligerent but if you're going to drive out there I'd think you'd need a reason."

Grant considered this and finally said, "Do you think it might be a *parent*?"

"Someone's who's a bit cheesed off. You hear people say 'what's wrong with the parents that they let him behave like that?' or something about more discipline but parents don't always hear what's going on at school and kids don't necessarily tell them."

Grant was pleased when he went away again. It was only a small thing, a smashed mailbox, but it would be good to resolve it himself. He remembered an experienced copper on his first posting saying 'if you don't catch the little oiks at it then you're wasting your time trying to get a result'. But Dennis took everything seriously and if he couldn't get a result it

wasn't for lack of trying. Except … wouldn't a disgruntled parent complain to the school rather than go out and bash a mailbox? Perhaps the parent was the sort who liked to deal with matters himself?

He was just making himself a bit of dinner when the phone rang in the station. May Hickman said rather diffidently, "I was thinking after you'd gone, Grant, that there were rumours about Peter Robey. It may be nothing, but I think he was straying a bit, and that he was sometimes seeing someone over near Norwilla. You might like to ask Jenny because she knows Marita Robey quite well. I've seen them having lunch in the café once or twice."

Grant, from thinking it might have something to do with the Robey children, now wondered if an aggrieved spouse might be responsible. "Thanks for that, Mrs Hickman, that might be the answer."

And when he'd hung up on that call he immediately rang Jenny Pym, hoping she wasn't on duty. He was in luck. And she agreed that she did know Mrs Robey though she hadn't seen her in a couple of months. And she agreed that Peter did sometimes stray. "I don't know who he goes to see but Marita said to me 'if he can do it so can I', you know that business about 'what's sauce for the goose'—but I don't know if she actually did do anything or if she was just letting off some steam. Still, this's Buckton, someone's sure to know."

Grant agreed with this. But not everyone shouted their business to the skies. And people out on farms were not as obvious in their peccadilloes as people around town. "What sort of woman is Mrs Robey? I mean, would she go round telling people?"

"No, not really. She's a bit of a mouse really. Those kids walk all over her. I think she just got really riled up about Peter thinking he can do what he likes and she'll never say anything, let alone think about leaving him."

"I've heard one of the Robey kids is a bit of a bully."

"It wouldn't surprise me. I've often noticed it. Meek mums often end up with little pains for kids. They see their mum putting up with things at home so they think they can get away with it in the playground."

Grant had never thought of what kind of mother might have a bully for a son. "So maybe she did find someone and it made someone else upset?"

"I would look for an annoyed husband rather than an annoyed wife, I think. If Peter goes to see a married woman—then maybe her husband found out?"

And came round and bashed in their mailbox? It seemed an odd thing to do but as he thought about it later Grant realised it was most likely Peter Robey who would have to make or buy another mailbox … and the person, having got away with it once, might keep on doing it. But he didn't like the idea of confronting Peter Robey with his infidelities or trying to get Marita Robey to admit to an affair. Instead he asked Jenny if she would be free for dinner on Christmas Eve.

And Dennis when he heard of this line of enquiry said, "Well, if he wants the bastard caught he's going to have to offer a name."

"But what if it's the wife?"

"And there's an upset wife around? No. If she's got any sense she's looked for a single man." And there were more single men around the district than single women. Then he said suddenly, "Just a thought—what about Peter Darcy?"

Grant took a minute to consider this. Then he said carefully, "But he's never going to admit to anything."

"No. She might tell us. But I still think it's Robey you need to talk to. Nip out and get him on his own, get him to tell you if he's seeing a married woman."

"What if he won't tell me?"

Dennis gave that a bit of a grin and said, "It's his mailbox."

Grant did as he was told but without much confidence in being able to resolve anything. And Peter Robey over at his tractor shed just dismissed the question with, “My private life is none of your business, son.”

Grant considered his response and finally copied Dennis. “It’s your mailbox, sir.”

“So it is.” Robey sounded sarcastic. “Well, we’ll leave it at that then.”

“Then why did you come to us?” Of course Dennis would’ve added “You think we’ve got nothing better to do, mate?”

“Some bastard damages my property—I want to know who.”

“And now you think you do?”

“Probably. Unless it’s my wife’s fancy man.”

“What fancy man?”

“She thinks I don’t know.”

Grant felt he was out of his depth. And whether Dennis was right or not he didn’t think it was police business. “Well, if you don’t want us to do anything more I’ll leave it at that.” Grant hoped he sounded decisive.

Peter Robey merely shrugged and turned away. Grant went back to the car and drove away. He could see that Robey in a weathered sort of way might still appeal to some women. But he was more concerned with the thought that there was a hint of violence behind the farmer’s apparently calm words. He had never come to police attention for fights in the pub or complaints from his neighbours but maybe it was the involvement of other people in the family’s private lives which had sparked things off. People often believed they were not a prey to jealousy until they were put to the test.

When he came to write the visit up and share it with his boss Dennis only said, “What vehicles on the farm?”

There had been a truck in the shed and a Hiace van and … “There *was* a white pickup there.”

Dennis just nodded.

“Should we ask Mr Darcy—”

“Not just now. And just note that Robey didn’t want any further action taken. And let’s hope he does some hard thinking about his love life.”

Grant was busy through the rest of the day but when he went down to the café for fish and chips in the evening he found himself remembering Dennis’s words; ‘hard thinking about his love life’. Of course that was all about Peter Robey. But what about some ‘hard thinking’ about his own love life? And that brought him round the circle. Was it love he felt for Jenny or something less? Could you feel so good in someone’s company if you didn’t love them? He was still taken up with his thoughts when he sat down in the booth beyond Artie Kees and waited for Ila Curtis to cook his meal.

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DC Forman and DC Kelly finally decided to ring the German Embassy in Canberra and ask for their advice on finding a German family in Bulgaria. They would need to do it from work but they were both reluctant to do it with Greg there. Greg believed the case was now out of their hands and would probably veto any further action. Well, perhaps not veto, Greg was rarely firm, but he would undoubtedly say he would prefer that they leave it. “We’ll do it when he goes out to lunch,” Jenny said. “I wouldn’t think the embassy would close for lunch.”

It all worked out beautifully. Petra went out to a dental appointment in mid-morning and then Greg said he was going to see someone and would then go on to lunch. They felt like conspirators when they put through their call. They asked for ‘the Information Officer’ saying they were calling from Winville Police. ‘Police’ seemed to be the key because they got a serious-sounding man who said, “How can we help you?”

Brent explained that two men called Anton and Georg Von Schiesser had been found dead in Queensland, their passports hadn't been found, but they had evidence that they were Germans living in Bulgaria. He then asked if the German Embassy in Sofia might be able to help them.

If the man wondered why a lowly country DC was ringing rather than someone from the Federal Police he didn't say so. Instead he said he could get them the embassy address and a couple of German associations and e-mail them in a couple of hours. Brent, on tenterhooks in case he got asked a leading question, was profuse in his thanks. He gave Jenny a thumbs-up but then they both got serious again. Ringing Canberra was one thing. Contacting people in Bulgaria quite another. "And maybe I shouldn't have made it sound like a done deal," Brent said soberly. "But it's done so let's hope … " Jenny accepted that this too might just be a matter of passing on information but the sense of doing something always boosted her spirits. She was very fond of Greg but sometimes his belief that a problem was too big for them seemed like a cop-out and his dithering was frustrating.

The official was as good as his word, sending them phone numbers and e-mails for the embassy, a cultural association and a Goethe Society functionary. He was also kind enough to add that he thought all three would have people who spoke English. "Wow! So which do we do first?" Jenny said. But they heard Greg talking to Stephanie at the front counter and hurriedly put their information to one side.

It was evening when Brent and Jenny could sit down at her house and nut out what they would send. "They must've been there long enough to become Bulgarian citizens," Jenny said with confidence, "so there's a good chance someone knows them."

They prepared a basic letter then tweaked it to go to each body. "Of course there's still a possibility we've got the wrong identity but at least we're being proactive," Jenny said.

"And the German community can't be all that big," Brent said. "But maybe we should have said something about them being blonde and blue-eyed?"

"It probably doesn't matter. We said they appear to be identical twins. There can't be that many identical twins there."

They felt better about their clandestine work when Greg got a message from DI Stimson the next morning to say he'd been through the material but probably wouldn't be able to get much done before Christmas. "Either he's busy with other stuff or he's a lazy sod," Greg said. "He doesn't say anything about getting the bodies to Brisbane so I guess we'd better check with the hospital here to see if they can keep them over Christmas. Brent you can check with Watling."

Dr Watling had confirmation for them that both men had been poisoned with nicotine. "First time I've come across it here but it's a relatively easy poison to distill." Then he asked about identities. Brent said there was a good chance the men were Anton and Georg Von Schiesser.

"Well, that's an interesting one. So living in Bulgaria but I wonder if they had been there since childhood?"

"Can you tell? I mean by looking at their teeth and bones?"

"I told your boss you can get an analysis done but if you've got their names that will save a lot of time and money."

"We hope so."

"This is just a thought but I met a Bulgarian doctor at a conference several years ago. He works in genetic research there. I think I might still have his card somewhere."

"Do you think you could contact him?" Brent said in tentative hope.

"I'll have a look later."

Brent came back to the CIB room with the cheerful news that 'Dr Watling might know someone in Bulgaria'.

"We can let Brisbane know."

Brent and Jenny looked at each other.

*

When replies began to trickle in they weren't terribly helpful. The Embassy said that if the men were Bulgarian citizens Winville would need to contact the passport office. Unfortunately they didn't see a need to tell anyone in Australia how to get in touch. The cultural group said they did not have anyone by that name as a member. The man from the Goethe Society said the society was currently not meeting. Brent and Jenny discussed their way forward over lunch. "Do we wait to see if Mason can come up with anything or do we try and contact that passport office?"

"I think we wait for Mason," Jenny said slowly. "Because it would be more personal. Someone he actually knows might be more willing to tell us things. All these others are sort of impersonal."

"If we had names for his parents that would be a big help. I wonder what Gordon Bankes did with their passports? Oh, no, that's no good. They were Smiths. So I wonder what they did with their original passports? Did they sell them on?"

"We could ask Deeping."

"Should we put it to Greg?"

"No. It's just a quick query. Did someone leave the UK in those names."

It was Christmas Eve when Jon Deeping contacted them. 'It was a question we had followed up. Anton von S, left the UK on 3/9 for Brazil. Georg left 10/9 for the USA. Unless we can prove fraud it will be difficult to get co-operation but we are trying.'

Brent put out both hands, palms up, and said, "Better him than us."

"I still think the answer is back in Bulgaria," Jenny said with more decision.

"We can tell Mason … or Greg … " But in the end they let it go. They could pass it on to Stimson after Christmas. And there was still the station party in the afternoon.

But just before they packed up for their break Dr Watling rang and asked for Greg Sullivan.

"After talking with young Kelly I rang an acquaintance of mine in Sofia." Greg had forgotten the capital of Bulgaria and was about to say "What's Sofia got to do with anything?" as Watling went on. "He was very interested to hear what I had to say about your little problem with those twins. He has done some genetic research into twins. Not yours but others of German origin. It's a touchy subject in the wake of Dr Mengele but it's an interesting question. Do identical twins both inherit the same health problems. But that's by the by. He had heard of a Kurt Von Schiesser and he thinks we may have got caught up, marginally, with an international trafficking organization. He couldn't give me any details, he lives in a world of his own, but he did give me a contact in the police there. I don't think their police are averse to a bribe or two but I assume this man is reliable. I'll send it through for you." Before Greg could say anything about it being Brisbane's case Watling had said 'Merry Christmas' and rung off.

Greg sounded slightly bemused as he shared the call with the room and said "Who's Dr Mengele?"

"You know—the Nazi doctor who did nasty experiments on children?" Petra sounded critical.

"Oh, that one. I didn't know you pronounced it like that. And who knows if this Kurt bloke has anything to do with the bodies in the morgue?"

"There is that. But Stimson can contact him and see if he's got some missing boys."

"There is another thing. Deeping sent us another e-mail, maybe he thinks we're still working on the case." Petra shot Brent a questioning look as he shared what Deeping had told

him. Greg looked slightly annoyed, was the case going to stick to them like a burr, but said only, “Tell Stimson.” Then he got up and said, “I’m off. Have a nice Christmas everyone.”

“Just one thing before you go,” Petra said briskly. “I picked up a possible car for you on that footage. No number unfortunately but there’s a chance the driver is a woman. We might be able to get the image made clearer. The time fits for someone coming south through Winville after the drop off.”

Greg nodded. “Well, tell Stimson.” It sounded too vague to be worth getting excited over. But Petra thought he could have shown more interest.

Jenny Forman was on call for Christmas Day but secretly hoped there would be no call-outs and no more on the Bulgarian case. Rui Lopes was coming into Winville to have lunch with her and they had booked a table. He was used to things coming up in her life but she had been looking forward to it all week. Dr Watling was as good as his word and the name and address came through as she said goodnight to the others. It could wait. After all, some Bulgarians probably took Christmas off too … And what about that girlfriend? Did she hope that Damien would at least be in touch for Christmas?

It was DI Deeping, possibly still feeling grateful to Winville, who sent her an e-mail over Christmas to say that Natalie Preston had been in touch again. Her children were six and four and her six-year-old had told her Damien had told him about his planned trip. Damien had reportedly shown her son on a map where he was planning to travel and the boy had shown Deeping on the map where Damien had run his finger. According to this Damien had run a loop from Egypt up into Eastern Europe. It wasn’t proof of anything but might be confirmation that Damien had planned a short visit to Bulgaria. The Bulgarians had been asked to check if Damien Bankes had entered their country and equally importantly if he had left. ‘We found he took out UK citizenship 2 years ago but kept his Aus so a dual citizen. He was traveling on his Aus passport. He had not applied for a UK passport.’

Jenny Forman considered this in silence before saying aloud to the empty room “Did they want him to get a UK passport and sell it on?” Was that what Dr Watling had meant by ‘international trafficking’ or was something else being trafficked?

She doodled on her pad: People. Drugs. Wildlife. Criminals. Diamonds. Passports. The answer might be there but she finally decided, though reluctantly, that the case was too big for Winville and that Brisbane could have it with her compliments.

And then she wondered if they should have offered to pay for Dr Watling’s phone calls.

*

The Walsh family hoped no one would need to interfere with their Christmas celebrations. They had opened stockings, sung carols, made phonecalls to Townsville and Brisbane, and eaten a very luscious and filling lunch. Fiona’s book had sold well coming up to Christmas and Mrs Wilson at the newsagency told Dennis she had already sold an amazing fifty copies. There was a sense of relaxed happiness in the household.

But in mid-afternoon Grant rang to say apologetically that Peter Robey had come in to the station and that he had been very angry. He had fixed a new mailbox to the post and now that mailbox had also been smashed. So what were they going to do about it? Grant had tried to say that he had told the police to leave the matter but Robey argued that two lots of vandalism made it twice as serious.

“So has he gone?” Dennis said wearily.

“He told me to come out tomorrow and find some clues. I said I could. But I don’t see how I can find any clues when we couldn’t find any last time.”

“And he still wouldn’t tell you who he’s carrying on with?”

“I didn’t ask him.”

"Mmmm … okay, leave it. I'd say he has a fair idea who's doing it. But don't let it spoil your Christmas. It's only a bloody mailbox."

Even so, Grant was glad to have Dennis with him when he drove out to the Robey farm next morning. He found an angry Peter Robey slightly intimidating. The original mailbox had been replaced with a large tin, possibly a large biscuit tin, and it too was now a sad sight. Dennis wandered around, looking for either footprints or a sign of a car parked along the verge. A car driving into the farm had obviously drawn in by the mailbox but that, presumably, had been the family checking for last minute Christmas mail on Christmas Eve. There was no sign of anyone getting out to check.

They drove on up to the house and asked Mr Robey when he had noticed the damage. "Yesterday, of course!" He still sounded angry.

"You went out yesterday?"

"Course I went out yesterday. How the bloody hell d'you think I would've seen it if I didn't go out?"

"Was it okay the day before?"

"Course it was."

"So you're saying it was done on the night before Christmas? Someone clearly doesn't like you."

Peter Robey seemed slightly taken aback by this blunt statement. "Who says? Just some bloody idiot."

"Maybe. But if you don't want to tell us about anyone you might've upset then there's not much we can do." Dennis had considered the story of someone getting back at the oldest boy for bullying but the schools had broken up and it didn't seem likely they would bother with a campaign in the holidays. It still seemed to come back to an annoyed spouse.

"Okay then, put up a mailbox a bloody idiot can't break. If we hear anything we'll be in touch."

Robey showed no sign of being impressed, let alone grateful. "Well, see that you do."

But as they drove back to Buckton Grant said, "Do you really think he was the one who bashed Peter Darcy?"

"Good chance. A lot o' blokes seem to think it's okay for them to stray but not okay when their wife does the same thing. But whether this's payback … it might explain why Peter Darcy wouldn't tell us who bashed him, he didn't want to put the spotlight on the wife. So this's a more subtle way of getting back at him. Trouble is … Robey might start thinking the same thing … and we still don't know for sure if Marita Robey *was* playing around with Peter Darcy."

"Are you going to ask her?"

"Can you see her telling us?"

Grant could see that that was unlikely.

They were nearly into Buckton when Dennis said musingly, "Could there be a connection between one of those dames who came to see us and Marita Robey?"

Grant couldn't see how this might work although one of them *had* told Dennis he was looking in the wrong direction. So was the right direction Peter Robey? And if it was how did they know?

Case No. 5: Some Puzzles …

Inspector Jake Moss turned up in Buckton from Winville three days after Christmas. He said to Grant, "All ready to go?"

"Sort of. I'm a bit nervous."

"You needn't be. You'll soon learn the ropes there."

It was true that Dennis had told him, as soon as he arrived in Kingaroy to drive round and get to know his way about his new patch but he didn't know if this was what Moss meant by 'ropes'.

Jake turned back to Dennis and said, "And isn't it time you went for promotion, mate?"

"Doesn't bother me one way or the other."

"Still, about time you became Senior Sergeant Walsh."

"You want me out of here?"

"Not unless you want to move."

"Maybe when the kids are a bit older."

"Fair enough. So what I want is to bump you up and have you in Winville two days a week. So can I put that in train?"

"If you can get me an experienced junior."

"Young guy, arriving mid-January. He's got eight years in the force. Should know what's what."

Dennis wasn't going to say anything in front of Grant—and there was no guarantee Jake would admit to wanting a counter-balance to his incompetent deputy Brad Merrill—but he thought it might be the underlying reason for his sudden concern about promotion. Jake had wondered if Merrill had been 'got at' but had finally accepted that Merrill's problem was not corruption but merely laziness. He wouldn't be the first cop to always look for the easiest way out. But even with promotion Merrill would still be senior to Dennis. Moss, though, thought Merrill had gradually and painfully acquired a healthy respect for Dennis. He might not admit to it but he was unlikely to pull rank.

"So Bertoli's gone?"

"Yep. And Rounds. Payne is certain it was an alias, that he's Terry Fulcher, but shooting at a dog and missing him isn't enough to start a full scale investigation—and we couldn't link him to a gun." He, and Dennis, still felt certain Bertoli had a connection to a William Caulfield in Melbourne but they hadn't been able to make the link there either. It happened at times, this failure to get anywhere with cases founded on strong suspicion.

"Pity. And did Payne tell you he's wanting to get Sam Hoysted for disposing of Willie Jackson's body?"

"He did say something but better him than me. We even copped a bit of flak over Doug's conviction. Seems people still prefer Doug to Sam or they still prefer to think that Sam was guilty as charged. Maybe it's that thing—if you no longer feel you can trust police—where do you go when you've got a problem?"

"Well, if he can get a conviction for Ruby Jackson's death I'll be content with that."

"They took the bones to Brisbane. I don't know if they thought Watling wasn't good enough. Anyway, there's to be an inquest in March so that should stir things up."

"Good. And what about you and Susan?"

"She'll finish here end of January and move to Winville. So I hope you'll get someone good here. But one thing she did mention—d'you know if Leslie Davis is actually qualified to do autopsies?"

"The Hospital Board there must've checked, surely?"

"I wouldn't bank on it. If it was between getting someone only partly qualified and having to send bodies away they'd take the first option. After all, every doctor cuts up bodies when they're in medical school, don't they, so they must know *something*."

"In theory. But he diagnosed hepatitis which is a notifiable disease as pneumonia."

"Yeah," Jake gave that a slight grin, "but I think it's more he's never prepared to change even when it's clear he's wrong. Everyone else makes mistakes but not King Les. I

heard on the grapevine that Watling called him some choice names. So he can't wait for Watling to go off to the UK and leave him in charge."

Which would have its dangers. But with moderate luck things would be quiet, death-wise, until Dr Watling returned.

"So what's happening with those Bulgarians that were giving Greg a hard time?"

"The case has gone to Brisbane. Greg still thinks that guy ran over his wife on purpose but he's clammed up tighter than an oyster."

"Greg has?"

"No. That fella over near Cecil Plains. He's the key to it all, I reckon, but I don't see him telling anyone exactly what happened and he'll probably sell up now, he won't want that kind of acreage now he's on his own."

"It could be worth Greg—or someone—dropping by every so often, he might get rattled."

"He might." Jake didn't sound convinced and he possibly, like Greg, was glad to see the case taken over by DI Stimson.

*

Fiona Greehan, downtown to go to the post office while the children were at a program put on by the library, went into the café for a sandwich and a cup of tea. Grant was there getting a sausage roll and a can of Coke. Fiona asked him if he was in a hurry, otherwise he might like to share a table with her. They sat down in one booth and she asked if there was anything she could help with when it came to packing.

"I'm pretty okay but I don't really want to go."

"We'll miss you when you're gone." She thought it wasn't Buckton he would be sorry to leave but Jenny Pym. Some women had found his relationship with Jenny rather strange. Someone had said in the op-shop, 'what is it with Grant that he wants someone old enough to be his mum? Aren't there enough nice girls around the place to suit him?'

But she could see, and perhaps she had looked at Grant through different eyes, that Grant had somehow changed since he had started seeing Jenny. It was hard to pin down but he seemed to have grown in maturity. There was a new calm confidence about him. He might still defer to Dennis and ask his advice but in his other relationships he no longer seemed like a young man just starting out in life.

"And, you know, Kingaroy is not all that far away. You and Jenny will still be able to see each other often."

He gave her a searching glance then turned back to his lunch. "I just wish I was a bit older."

"No, don't wish your youth away. And Jenny probably wishes she was a bit younger but that is one of the jokes life plays on us. You've been good for each other. Now it's up to you, and the future, to decide what you really want."

"Sometimes I think I know and sometimes I feel all at sea."

"Time—and good will—and love—will answer most of your questions," she said gently. And even if they took it no further they would still have something nice to look back on.

She was still pondering on their possible future as she made her way to the library to meet up with the children and take them to the swimming pool for half an hour before the sun got to its hottest. In a way it didn't seem fair that no one would find it strange if Grant was eighteen years older than Jenny …

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Grant, with his car packed, left on the Saturday morning after New Year. Dennis went back into the station and in to Grant's small flat. As he had expected Grant had left it neat and clean. There was nothing needing to be done except that Fiona would come and take the bed

linen home with her to be washed and check for anything in his frig which wouldn't last till the new man arrived. It had the feeling of a chapter ending.

He went back into the station and spent half an hour looking through their open files. There were the couple of problems New Year had thrown up and there was the lingering puzzle of those two women who had both come and claimed to be married to Barry Woodbridge. There must be a reason for two women to come and lie to him but he couldn't make more than a stab at a guess.

His horse was running this afternoon in Winville. He could've asked Grant to go later but he could see that the young man needed a weekend to settle into his new home before starting work on Monday. So Fiona was going to go to the races with the children as his stand-in. He thought she might enjoy it more, too, if she wasn't merely his appendage as 'owner's wife' and he hoped she would have the thrill of leading Hansom Days in.

Which seemed to bring him round the circle to Barry Woodbridge again. Was he, with Peter Darcy's possibly unwilling help, really planning a ring-in? It was all so vague and nebulous. It was quite possible that Barry Woodbridge was a perfectly respectable trainer who had never even thought of trying to cheat anyone, owners, punters, stewards, bookies … and two women for whatever private vendetta had tried to slander him.

On an impulse he drew the phone book over and looked up that number for B. Woodbridge. He wouldn't be getting ready yet to go to the races. He might not want strange coppers wanting to know about his marital history, if any, but it seemed worth a try.

The phone rang and rang and he was just about to give up when a youngish-sounding voice said a breathless "Hullo' and asked who it was.

Dennis said he was ringing from Buckton Police and could he speak to Mr Woodbridge.

The man at the other end said he was Liam Woodbridge and that his uncle was still over at the stableyard. "What did you want him for?" He sounded vaguely apprehensive. Dennis wondered if he had ever been in trouble with the police.

"Has he got a wife?"

"No."

"Did he ever have one?"

"No. Look, what's this all about?"

"I'd rather talk to Mr Barry Woodbridge. When will he be in?"

The young man might know all about his uncle's private life but even so it didn't seem appropriate to put the mystery of those two women to him. He might even just think it was a joke. And who knew—maybe it all *was* just a bizarre joke.

"He should be in any minute now. I can go and get him—no, I hear him coming in. I'll get him for you. Hang on."

Dennis was starting to wonder if this really was a good idea when a big booming voice said, "Woodbridge. What's this about a police matter?"

Dennis said who he was and went on to say, "Two women have turned up in Buckton, both claiming to be married to you. One calling herself Kari and the other Estelle. D'you know what's going on?"

"Is this some kind of joke?"

"No." He felt like adding 'I wish it was' but he kept to the matter in hand. "Both came to Buckton Police to tell us they were married to you, that you had bashed Peter Darcy and that you had something to do with a ring-in. If they aren't married to you then what the heck is going on? Do you know them?"

"Look, someone's taking you for a ride. I'm not married, I was married for two years thirty years ago, a bitch called Serena, but I don't know who these two dames could be or what's going on—"

"D'you know Peter Darcy?"

"I send him a horse now and again but I don't know anything about his private life and what's more—I don't want to."

"Have you got any horses with him at the moment?"

"Two."

"Have you ever had trouble with women?"

"What sort of trouble?"

"Anything. Letters, phonecalls, turning up on your doorstep, spreading rumours about you. Do you have any women owners?"

"Only as couples, wives of men I know. So what do these women look like?"

Dennis gave him a brief description of both women and Woodbridge ruminated a minute or two. "Can't call anyone to mind. But I'll keep an eye out. Now, I'm a busy man."

"I'll leave you to it then." If anything, the whole business had got even more murky. He had half-expected the women to be ex-wives with a bone to pick. But this blanket negation … and he didn't think the man would deny having other ex-wives because somebody would be sure to know something …

Except for wasting police time there didn't seem to be a charge he could lay on them if they turned up again. They might be spreading scurrilous rumours but then some people made that their business in life. And he didn't think, if that was their game, that they had picked the right target. Barry Woodbridge didn't sound the sort of man who would be reduced to a trembling wreck by a few stories being circulated. But what about Peter Darcy? He always looked rather tense and worried.

Darcy would make a better victim but why then bring in Barry Woodbridge? Dennis finally gave up and went back to finishing up some routine paperwork before going home to lunch. But as he walked in the gate he wondered if Woodbridge ever brought horses to Winville to race …

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Several days later Walsh had a ring from Greg Sullivan in Winville. According to him, DI Stimson was trying to put work back on to Winville. "I thought we'd got rid of the case but he seems to think we should be out there hassling Gordon Bankes. He keeps saying 'he's the key to it all'. Well, maybe he is but we never got anything useful out of him. So I don't know what Stimson thinks we can do that he can't."

"Probably worth reminding Bankes every so often that he hasn't fallen off the radar. But Bankes isn't on your patch, only those two bodies."

"We sent 'em both to Brisbane. They said something about repatriation so they must know something they're not telling us."

"Yeah, bit hard to send a body home if you don't know who it belongs to."

"And it never works, these cases where you don't know who's in charge, like that business with Frank Whatshisname."

"So what're you planning to do about Bankes?"

"Go and see him, I s'pose," Greg said mournfully. "That's why I'm ringing you, get you to come. He thinks I'm a pushover, maybe you can … "

"Can what?"

"I'd say 'scare the pants off him' but I don't reckon he scares easy. Just another copper he doesn't know and can't second guess maybe."

It occasionally helped; just someone who could not be easily pigeon-holed. But Dennis suspected that Gordon Bankes had chosen his position, on everything, and nothing would shift him now.

"I wonder what he did with the passports and things. Maybe the dog needs to run all over the farm but for all we know he dumped everything in the Condamine or took stuff to the tip."

"Yeah, I don't reckon that's a goer. So when are you free?"

They arranged to meet up on Sunday afternoon at the Norwilla turn-off.

With luck the new man would be here and could handle anything but Sunday afternoons were usually a time for people to sit back in the shade and read the *Sunday Mail* or have a snooze.

And true to his expected arrival a young man turned up on Saturday morning, came in to the station and said cheerfully, "Hi, I'm Troy Dann, your new constable. Where should I put my stuff?"

Dennis introduced himself and opened the door to the flat. "Bring your stuff in then I'll show you around."

By the time he went home for some lunch and the young man had gone down town to find food Dennis felt he had learned more about Salvatore Dann, his family, his other postings, his hobbies, than he really wanted to know. The young man seemed confident and knowledgeable, which would be useful, but he also struck Dennis as a chatterbox. He hoped Constable Dann would prove as good at actually getting things done as he had in talking about them. It might be nerves but Dennis thought the easy flow of his conversation had come from long practice.

He was guarded when he told Fiona the new man had come. "He seems to know what's what."

"I hope so," Fiona said fervently. "The whole point of having a junior is surely so you can take life a little easier."

"Don't think the powers-that-be look at it like that. So what's the plan for this afternoon?"

"We're going out to Lyn's so Ellie can have a ride on Migloo. Lyn's got six brumbies there she's breaking in so we'll have a look at them too. But don't worry—I won't let Elise talk me into buying one of them."

"Good oh, and I've been thinking—you probably need a towbar on the Falcon—for when we get talked into getting our own float." He said it drily but Fiona was serious when she said, "I'm not sure how I'd go with a float on behind. I think you would need to do the driving." She could probably practise turning and backing …

"I'm not sure if I'm serious or not. D'you think the passion for horses will stay strong?"

"I've wondered that too but for the moment, yes, she would still rather have a pony than a best friend—or a pony *for* a best friend."

Elise had suggested to Rob that he was getting too big for his pony Benbow and he should have her pony Freddie and she would get a horse from Lyn Harding. But Rob had stuck his toes in and said he wasn't giving up Benbow. He was usually quiet and biddable but in this case he had shown a strong stubborn streak. So perhaps it would be true to say that Benbow was *his* best friend.

Dennis, down at the toolshed one afternoon had noticed Rob playing in the little farm he had created for himself in the back yard. It had seemed proof that Rob was destined to be a farmer someday. He loved animals but Dennis was slowly becoming aware that he also loved his ballet lessons and that his little farm was more of a retreat, his own little quiet place, rather than proof of anything more. He had done nothing to encourage Rob with his singing but now he wondered if it mightn't be a good idea to think of some lessons.

If the little model farm was slowly losing its place in Rob's life …

Fiona said to his suggestion, “I talked to Mrs Pratt about it and she suggested Dan Sansom who does the music for one of the primary schools in Winville. I had a talk with him and he said, ring him when he’s back from his holidays.”

“Fair enough.”

Fiona was taking the children for a week at Caloundra on Monday so thinking about horses and singing and pretend farms could wait till they came home again.

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Greg Sullivan didn’t look any more cheery when he picked Dennis up past the turn-off. “It’ll just be more of the same,” he said gloomily, “I’ll bet you anything you like.”

“Then it’s back to Stimson so I don’t know what you’re worrying about.”

“You don’t know Stimson—”

“Neither do you.”

“I know him better than you do. He’s one of those blokes that wants everyone else to be running around. He’s told me several times he will *collate* everything we give him. I think that’s his favourite word. We do the work and he just sits back and *collates*.”

Dennis had met men like that: they managed to look very busy without doing any of the footwork themselves.

“Bit hard to do much collating if Bankes won’t talk to us.”

“He’ll still expect something.”

“Give him some waffle. He can collate that.”

Sullivan gave that an unwilling grin.

The farm lay around them in perfect peace as they drove in and parked near the garden gate. A truck, presumably the truck which had run over Mrs Bankes, was parked in a long open shed. Dennis walked towards it. But it was the station-wagon near the fence that interested Greg. He took a photo from his briefcase and looked at it carefully, then at the parked car.

The truck, if it had ever shown signs of the hit on Elaine Bankes, had been cleaned since. Dennis left it to come over and see what was interesting Greg.

“This’s what we got from footage from the Caltex garage—see the long scrape along the side … and look here … someone’s used a spray can but he hasn’t quite matched the paint properly.” The tan-coloured vehicle now had a long line of slightly darker brown along one side.

It might mean the man just hadn’t had time to get it to a panel-beater or didn’t see that it mattered much but it just might mean … “Does Bankes have a reputation as a tightwad?”

Sullivan considered this before admitting he had no idea. “So you’re suggesting that if those Bulgarians turned up wanting money he’d soon tell them where to get off?”

“If the son was being held hostage somewhere—would the Bankes pay up?”

“She probably would but I’m not so sure he would. And it would depend on what they were asking … and what sort of proof about Damien they’d brought with them.”

“If you own this amount of land in Bulgaria, and machinery, you’d probably be seen as rich.”

“I think the mother had some money of her own. Petra looked into her background after Matt Holloway told her he thought she came from a farm over near Cambooya. And do you know what she found? She lived near Norwilla as a child, went to the school there, then they moved. So she would’ve known the area. It puzzled me, you know, that she would drop one body off then do a loop around and then come back through town and risk running into police and ambulance if the first body had been found. My idea is that if she saw vehicles she could just turn off towards Norwilla again and do a loop and get back on to the road down the back way. But you wouldn’t do that at night if you didn’t know the area.”

No. You might find yourself in a road that only ended at a farm or petered out altogether. Of course all this speculation depended on their assumption that it was Elaine Bankes who had dumped the two men.

"Did they agree on it or was it her own idea?" It would be quite hard for a woman to manhandle the bodies but not impossible. And she was said to be a big woman and fit from farm work … "I think," Walsh mused, "that he would've been happy to bury them somewhere on the farm after the problem of their demands had been removed, but that maybe she was squeamish, that she didn't like the thought of them buried so close to home … or maybe she wanted them sent home to their family."

"And she didn't think we would ever link them to her? We probably wouldn't have if he hadn't run over her."

"Did he think she would talk out of turn?"

"Men don't trust women to keep their secrets. Some men don't. And she must've wanted to know what had happened to her son. She might've nagged him."

"I wonder if there's someone else involved. If they came straight here from the UK then they must have a contact in Bulgaria and he must be wondering what's going on now. They must've brought proof that they had Damien. A photo, letters, a tape. But I s'pose they're in the same place as their passports and things. Still, it might be worth putting a tap on the phone in case they try to get Damien to talk to his dad."

"You want me to put that to Stimson?"

"Worth a try."

The door opened and a man came out, banging the screen door behind him. He looked as though he'd been taking a Sunday afternoon nap. His graying hair stood up and he looked a bit bleary. But his voice was sharp as he said, "So what're you bods after now?"

"Have you heard from your son lately, Mr Bankes?" Greg sounded only mildly interested. But Dennis could see that Gordon Bankes would probably interpret Greg's mild manner as weakness or incompetence.

"No. And it's none of your business."

"Do you want him listed as missing?"

"No, I do not want him listed as missing because he isn't missing and he'll turn up in his own good time."

"Your wife was upset, wasn't she, when she hadn't heard from him in such a long time."

"Letters go missing. He had a bird. I told her it was time to let go."

It sounded reasonable enough but Dennis thought Bankes wasn't keen to talk about his son. "You know he went to Bulgaria and disappeared. Dangerous place, Bulgaria."

Dennis had no idea if it was or wasn't but he wondered if it was possible to rattle Bankes.

"Says you. You don't know the first thing about it."

"We know your son went to Bulgaria and that these Bulgarian cowboys came here to sting you for some dough, that you poisoned them with nicotine in their curry, and your wife dropped them off along the roadside. You then killed your wife so she couldn't talk out of turn. So I would suggest you get your affairs in order, Mr Bankes, because you are in big big trouble."

"Like hell I am. Now, I want you bods to stop hassling me. I have just lost my wife in tragic circumstances and I am not going to be accused of anything else."

He then turned and strode back towards the house.

The two men looked at each other then Walsh said loudly, "Tragic circumstances, my foot. She was killed by her husband." Bankes showed no sign of hearing and a moment later the door slammed.

"He's never going to admit to anything. But I think we've got a bit for Stimson to collate," Greg said. "And I think a phone tap just might be interesting though I don't s'pose he does much chatting on the phone himself."

"It's more who might ring him. Has he got an answerphone?"

"Don't think so."

Greg took several photos of the station-wagon then got back into his own car. It was a frustrating case but he thought they had done their best. Maybe it hadn't been wise for Dennis to lay out the case against Bankes and more so as a lot of it was still speculation but on the other hand the man might've been comforting himself with the thought that the police knew nothing and had nothing.

"So now we wait," Greg said as they drove out.

"And I bet that place will go on the market in a week or two."

"I wonder if Elaine Bankes left a will?"

"Would she leave it to her son or her husband?"

"Depends whether she's a partner in the farm."

But as they couldn't answer their questions on the road Dennis told Greg the strange story of two women both claiming to be Mrs Woodbridge.

"And what's your explanation?" Greg said when he had mulled it over.

"Don't have one."

"You think they're both batty?"

"Bit hard to see how they both could be. Maybe he's pissed them off in some way and this is payback but seeing Peter Darcy says he wasn't attacked that's not a goer."

"And you're sure he was attacked?"

"Harry Kuhl saw it happen and called the ambulance but I think it was Peter Robey who attacked him. I think he was having a quiet fling with Robey's wife and that was why he didn't want us brought in. But it doesn't explain these other two dames, what their game was."

"Could they be related to the Robeys?"

"Possible, I s'pose." He tried to think how this might work. And a connection to Mrs Robey or Mr Robey?

He mused on it when he was back in his own car. Would it be worth trying Mrs Landy at the store in Norwilla? She knew everyone for miles around. She was a mine of information on local goings-on. He wasn't surprised to find the shop open. He doubted if she ever closed except in an emergency.

He bought a couple of things and asked if she had ever met women called Kari or Estelle.

She was surprised by the question but said she knew a Kari slightly. "I think it's her brother she comes to see sometimes. He has a farm about ten k's south of here. Lots of blonde curls?"

"That sounds about right. Is he married?"

"Not now. I think he was married but she left him and took the kids. I don't know where she went."

So she couldn't be Peter Robey's mystery woman. Not unless she had set herself up somewhere to be visited. It was going out on a limb but he thought Mrs Landy just might know. "You don't happen to know a Peter Robey, do you? I've heard he visits a woman here."

"No, I don't. You think he visits that Kari when she's out here?"

"I don't really know what to think. But someone seems to have it in for him. And I'd heard he was seeing a woman here. I just wondered if there was an angry husband in the mix."

"That does happen. But I haven't heard of anything like that here lately. I can keep an ear out if you like."

He was tempted to let the whole thing go but as he'd come this far he thanked her and said he'd appreciate it.

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Monday saw the excitement of Fiona and the children leaving for a week at the coast. Dennis had promised to mind their bantams, feed Rob's new kitten, go down and check on their ponies, and ring them up every evening. Then he went in to deal with his first day with Constable Dann.

Dann had opened everything up and looked the soul of efficiency as Dennis came in and said, "Any phonecalls?"

"There's one from the manager at the supermarket and there's people here to see you. They say their dad was cheated but they didn't say who their dad is. I've asked them to sit in the interview room. And the supermarket has a problem with vandals in last night and he said they'd tried to come through the back loading bay and get into one of the store rooms—"

"Right then, off you go. Take the camera and get shots."

Dann seemed about to say something about the camera as Dennis handed it over then he seemed to think better of it. As he went out Dennis took up an interview form and went in to see the unknown people who had come to complain about a cheated father.

Two nondescript middle-aged people, a man and a woman, were sitting looking rather peeved. Walsh sat down heavily and said. "Right, what's the problem?"

"I'm Ian Whelan and this's my sister Cath Barnes. We've heard that pressure was put on our dad to sell his cottage and move."

"Your dad being Don Whelan?"

They both nodded. "So who told you he was pressured?"

They looked a bit cagey and the man said, "It's all round the pub."

"You always believe pub gossip? So what does your dad say?"

"He's not happy with the way John Goodrick hassled him just so he could get our home to sell to his sister."

So that was where Lynnell Morton planned to live? Walsh had hoped she wouldn't be able to find a suitable, and suitably cheap place.

"So how often did you visit your dad?"

"We both live in Brisbane. It isn't easy to get up often."

"And when you came up you helped your dad with maintenance, painting, a bit of work in the garden?"

"No. He never asked for any help."

"So why did you expect good money for a place that's just about falling to bits?"

"That place is perfectly good. Goodrick wouldn't have wanted it if it was a mess." Ian Whelan had gone rather red and looked annoyed.

"You think your dad should've kept the house and asked Goodrick to find another tenant?"

"Why not? But all we're saying is that he never should've been pressured into selling."

"So your dad told you he was pressured?"

"He did."

"What sort of pressure?"

"He said," the woman came in, "that he wasn't ready to sell but that, he said 'John never let up on me, day or night'. So I think that qualifies as pressure, don't you? And then he found out that John Goodrick wanted it for his sister. That makes it worse."

"Was he happy with the price he got?"

"No, he wasn't."

"Did he have a solicitor?"

"No. John Goodrick said he would do everything and just bring round the papers for him to sign."

"Mmmm … so we need to bring in Goodrick and your dad. Can you bring him round? I'll just see if I can get Goodrick round here for 11 a.m."

The whole thing wasn't really police business unless threats had been made. But it certainly looked as though Goodrick might've wanted to advantage his sister at the expense of the old man. When he had teed it up with Goodrick to come round, over-riding Goodrick's claim that he was 'too busy', he said to his visitors, "Do you know what your dad got for the house?"

"That's not relevant. It's the way it was done."

The rumour round town was that the old man had been paid 'peanuts' but that depended on who had started the rumour.

"Well, bring your dad round at eleven and we'll hear what they both have to say."

Neither of his visitors looked particularly happy with this but said they would go and see their dad. "But if he doesn't want to come," Ian Whelan said bluntly, "we're not going to force him."

"If he doesn't want to come then that's the end of the matter."

As they went out Walsh half-hoped the old man would say 'leave it', not because he wanted John Goodrick to get away with any sharp dealing but because it would probably come down to Goodrick's word against the old man's. And old Whelan waffling on vaguely would probably not be convincing. It was very unlikely he would have kept a record of how many times he was approached or what was said each time.

Constable Dann was back by the time Goodrick and the Whelans turned up. He said he had got some smudged prints but the damage was minor. "Anyone see anything last night?" Dennis said.

"The manager wasn't there. He told me he lives the other end of town and that he's always gone by 8.30 at night."

"I meant neighbours, people over the side fence."

"They didn't actually get into the store room, you know. I asked the manager about anything missing and he said it was only the damage to the door. He said you always took his problems seriously but I don't think he expected us to get anyone for this."

"Well, sit in on the round table and then you can go out and talk with the neighbours. It'll be a way of getting to know people."

The young man didn't look excited by this prospect but sat down in a chair by the door of the interview room. He hadn't heard Dennis called 'the Ogre of Buckton' but he did believe that behind that façade of strong purpose was an old fogey, content to live out life in a small town with its small problems.

Dennis sat down in his ponderous way, sat silent for a moment, then said, "Ian Whelan and Catherine Barnes have brought a complaint that their father Donald Whelan was unduly pressured to sell his house by you, John Goodrick." Goodrick started to say something but Walsh over-rode him to say, "Now, Mr Whelan, do you agree that you were unduly pressured to sell your house?"

The old man looked at his children and then at John Goodrick and there was a hunted look in his eyes. Finally he said, "I wasn't ready to sell … not until I was sure my kids wouldn't want the house."

"You had discussed this with them?"

The hunted look was back in his face. "Not really. They always said they were busy and to ring them some other time to talk about things."

It didn't make his children sound good but the old man waffling vaguely on about Buckton was probably not an exciting conversationalist.

"I thought you had more children than two?"

"Yeah. There's Diane and William, they're not here."

"Did you talk to them about your house?"

"No."

"So what did Mr Goodrick say to you?"

"He asked me … it must've been at least ten times … he said it was hard to get a tenant and he thought it would be better to sell. I didn't want to sell but I got sick of him comin' round all the time."

"Had he looked for another tenant for you before he suggested selling?"

The old man looked supremely uncomfortable as he said, "He reckoned it was hard to find a tenant. He said there might be someone in the new year but he couldn't guarantee it."

"You see," Ian Whelan chipped in. "He wasn't trying."

"I told him he could advertise if he wanted but he said no, he would leave it with me." Goodrick sounded self-righteous.

Dennis turned back to the old man. "Did he ever get a nibble, did he say?"

The old man looked at his children and then back to Dennis and said unwillingly, "He did take someone to look at it but they said they could find something in better condition round town."

"You thought of getting some maintenance done?"

"I didn't think it was worth it."

"Not even to get a tenant?"

"You shouldn't be hassling our dad like this," Mrs Barnes stepped in. "You're as bad as this man here."

"I am not hassling anybody," Dennis said grimly. "I am trying to get some facts in front of us." That he was strengthening the case for John Goodrick and his nuisance of a sister was unfortunate but he wasn't impressed by the Whelans' case.

"It's not facts we want," Ian Whelan said with suppressed anger. "It's the way this man behaved to our dad."

"Well, the first fact is that Mr Whelan didn't want to sell his house, he wanted to rent it out. The second fact is that Mr Whelan didn't want to do any maintenance on the house to make it attractive to potential renters. Are we agreed on both those facts?"

There was a mutter of agreement but no one looked particularly happy. Dennis turned to John Goodrick and said, "Over to you, Mr Goodrick. What rent was Mr Whelan asking?"

"He wanted twenty dollars a week."

"How hard did you look for people willing to pay that?"

"It was up on my board. It was on my web-site. I said he could put it in the paper but he said he would leave it with me."

"So when did you suggest he sell it?"

"I took some people to see it but they said they would rather rent the place up by the Bowls Club which was twenty-five but a lot nicer and well looked after. So I said to Don would he think of selling and be done with all the worry. He said he would talk to his children. I don't know if he did. But every time he asked me if I'd found someone and I said no, then I would again suggest he sell. My sister was looking for a place and I told him he could get a quick cash sale so the place wouldn't be on the market maybe for months while it continued to go downhill. He accepted that and the deal was done on the spot. I think he got the best deal possible but if he wants to complain to any official body he can. I don't see that it's a police matter."

"When you suggested selling did you put him on the spot? Make it clear he was stupid not to sell?"

"I'm sure I didn't. Is he saying I did?" Goodrick turned to look at Don Whelan and the old man looked embarrassed.

"Mr Whelan, were any threats made or was it more like water dripping on stone?"

The old man looked at his children rather helplessly. "When someone says every week you'd be better to sell … in the end you just give in."

"So when Mr Whelan told you he didn't want to sell you were unprepared to accept his decision, Mr Goodrick?"

"I only made the suggestion. He was under no obligation to accept."

"You made the suggestion—how many times?"

"I don't remember."

"It was at least ten times," the old man suddenly fired up.

Dennis nodded. The old man was better off selling but it *was* a case of water dripping on stone. "Were you happy with the price you got?"

"Not really."

"Do you think you should have rejected that offer and hoped for a better one?"

"Dunno really."

"Did you inform your children about the offer?"

"I s'pose so."

"Did they give you any support when you said you weren't happy with that offer?"

"I didn't tell 'em I wasn't happy."

"So what do you want done now? Do you want that agreement annulled?" Dennis wasn't sure how easy this would be. "Do you want to go back to looking for a tenant?"

The old man, enjoying life in the Annexe rather than trying to batch for himself, finally said, "No, I guess we can leave it."

"Right then. We'll leave it at that."

"But that isn't good enough!" Ian Whelan stood up. "An old man wasn't respected when he said no. No means no. You should make that clear to this sleazebag of an agent!"

John Goodrick also stood up with a comeback ready but Dennis said, "Next time, think about giving your dad some support. He is your responsibility, not mine."

Constable Dann thought they might stay to argue but in some curious way Walsh had deflated the situation. None of them seemed to know what to do next. John Goodrick was the first to go, saying he was a busy man. The younger Whelans went to the door. The old man stood up looking a bit shaky. He held out a hand to Dennis and said, "I never had the courage to say anything when they always said they were too busy to come and see me."

"Well, enjoy life in the Annexe now."

For the first time the old man managed a slight grin. "Yeah, it's probably all for the best but I just don't like the idea of Mrs Morton in our house. She was that rude to my wife one time."

"Yeah, she has a habit of being rude to people."

And now, he thought gloomily, he would be stuck with the woman again. Perhaps the years she had spent in Winville had mellowed her but somehow he doubted it. But as he wrote up the interview in the duty book he wondered if his children would be so cavalier towards him in his old age. It might be wishful thinking but he felt certain they wouldn't let him be pushed into anything by the John Goodricks of this world. But then, unless he had a stroke or went senile, he thought he would be able to stand up for himself.

The very young and the very old … they always needed someone in their corner.

He was still thinking on this as he looked to see how his new constable had written up his first call-out. To his relief it looked clear and professional.

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NOTE: The book Dave Hickman was trying to remember was Federico Tesio's *Breeding the Racehorse*. And looking back over the casebooks I see I have given Oakey Racecourse a longer life than it really had.

Book Sixty-Eight
Case No. 1: The Missing Driver

Wednesday had grown unbearably sticky and humid in the small Darling Downs town of Buckton and finally, as people were sitting down to dinner, it had unleashed thunder and lightning and a brief downpour before moving on.

Sergeant Dennis Walsh wasn't really surprised when the morning brought a report of a car crashed into a tree out past the small hamlet of Burleigh. Possibly they'd been caught in the downpour. Dennis told his new constable to join him so as to get to know the area around Burleigh.

It meant having Troy Dann asking him who looked after traffic problems in Winville.

"If it's serious we'll call Sam Hassan. He's a sharp cookie."

But instead of wanting to know more about Constable Hassan Dann said, "I remember the guy we had in Ipswich when I was there. He seemed to think it was mainly his mission in life to be nice to any women caught up in an accident. But then some guy complained and said he didn't think the cop needed to be putting his arm round his girlfriend just because they'd hit a signpost and this guy was called in and asked to explain and he said the guy was like just standing there not giving his lady friend any comfort even though anyone could see she was really shaken up. They let it go but then I moved so I didn't hear if he got into any more trouble. But then I was asked if I was interested in Traffic and I said 'not yet' because it can get a bit stressful, you know, seeing people mangled and someone told me it was Traffic cops who took more stress leave than anyone else. I've never checked that one out but it could be right. I remember one car ended up right in the Bremer and there was all this carry-on because they thought people had drowned but when they got to it the car was empty. I guess someone thought that was a quick way to get rid of a stolen car. And the owner was way up at Esk. They thought the car had been used in several hold-ups but they couldn't prove it."

He continued on with reminiscences of past cases and problems. Dennis liked to think as he drove but he thought he would get precious little thinking done whenever he had his new constable in the car with him. Not that it really mattered. But he could see that he would soon get tired of these endless monologues. He could tell Dann to shut up but it seemed easier

just to try and tune him out. Dann didn't look for responses from his boss. He just seemed to like to hear himself talk.

The car, a silver Honda Accord was about a kilometre beyond the Burleigh store. It had certainly hit a tree. But it also appeared to have been rear-ended going by the damage to the back bumper and the boot. He parked well beyond the accident and walked back on the bitumen. The accident had obviously happened after the storm.

There were several footmarks in the soft verge but the car was empty and the doors locked. "So what d'you think went on here?"

Constable Dann had seen his boss look closely at the ground. "Someone helped her out, maybe took her to a hospital."

"And the marks at the back of the car?"

"Something could have happened earlier on, someone bumped her in the supermarket maybe."

"Why do you say 'her'?"

"Well, of course I don't know. But I think it's a car women like."

"So what would you do next?"

"I'd ring the nearest hospital and see if anyone had been admitted. Of course she might have gone to a private GP or even a chemist."

"And the car?"

"It's far enough off the road not to be a traffic hazard. And when I'd found the driver then she could say what she wanted done."

"Right. Ring Winville and get on to Sam Hassan. Tell him what's happened. Tell him to check the rego for an owner and check with the hospital."

He listened in while Dann did this. Then he said, "Always keep your instructions simple. He doesn't need a whole long story and don't speculate as to what happened. Let him see for himself without your ideas floating around."

"I thought it would help him to know the possibilities."

"No. That can come later. Now ring Noel Barnard in Buckton and tell him about the car. If we can't find the driver quickly then it'll need to be towed."

"It would surely be pretty safe out here until she can be found—"

"Well, if you don't mind the Evans kids getting the door open and driving off."

"What? Out here?"

"Yep. Out here." Did this young fellow genuinely think only city people stole cars? "And go and have another look at those marks round the driver's door."

Dann didn't look enthusiastic but did so. If they were going to hand the case over to Winville then their work was done.

"She got out—or someone helped her out. They must've taken her to a doctor or something."

"Don't be so quick to make assumptions. She was rear-ended somewhere. If it was on this road then was it accidental or deliberate? And was the driver who stopped helpful or otherwise."

"We don't know. We won't know until we find her."

"Alongside the best possibilities you start by putting the worst so you're not left flat-footed. And stop thinking this's such a peaceful little spot nothing bad could ever happen here. Bad things can happen anywhere."

He could see that Dann didn't really believe him. The breeze sighed in the trees. A magpie suddenly burst into song. The road stayed deserted. Off to their right they could see a couple of ponies cropping grass. A picture of rural peace. And therefore evil could not lurk.

There might be a simple unexceptional explanation for this accident but Dennis felt uneasy with the very real possibility that someone had been dragged rather than helped from

the car. Even if the driver hadn't been wearing a seatbelt the accident itself didn't seem serious enough to leave someone unconscious and unable to exit the car under their own steam.

"We'll go back to the store and have a snack and check on things there," Dennis said.

As they drew in by the store Dennis pointed out where various people lived, including the Evans family. "The dad works at the Butter Factory but he seems to think it's okay for his kids to be a nuisance. They stole a car and burnt it in the Environment Park, just as well the wind was not blowing from the north-west or they would've burnt out the Park."

Dann started to tell him a story about two men they'd gone after in a state forest as they went into the shop. Dennis introduced Dann to old Terry Mitchell and his daughter Wendy. "Accident along the road. Did either of you hear anything last night?"

"Only the storm. I'd say we were in bed by ten." Terry Mitchell seemed to have taken on a new lease of life when he moved in here. Perhaps because his daughter did most of the work leaving him free to potter and chat. "Several people told us about the car but said there was no one in it. I did just wonder if those kids had been up to something. They pinch things in here all the time but I can never catch 'em at it, the little blighters."

Dennis got himself a pie heated up and bought a loaf of bread and a couple of cans of soup.

Dann looked at him in surprise. Later he said, "Wouldn't it be easier to do your shopping in Buckton?"

"Little country stores need all the help they can get."

Constable Hassan rang to say he was nearing Burleigh so they finished their snacks and drove back to wait for him.

He pulled in and got out. He waved to them but walked all round the car looking closely before coming over to be introduced. "Nasty. But I've got the owner for you. A Shirlene Paton and an address in Toowoomba."

"So what the heck was she doing out here late at night?"

"Who knows. I've left Archer checking the doctors round Winville. If we can't find her we can put out an Alert."

"Now, do you want the car towed?"

"If we can't find her. Leave it with me and I can call Noel if we need him."

"Thanks, Sam. The family okay?"

"We're all fine but we're planning to move soon. To Cunnamulla."

Dennis didn't take very much notice of Troy Dann as he talked on about accidents he had attended as they drove home. It was understandable that the Hassans might choose to go to Cunnamulla. Sam's wife Ali came from out west and still had a mother and other relatives somewhere there. And maybe it was time for Sam to take on a new challenge. He had been happy working under Jake Moss in Winville but he was young and fairly ambitious. A new challenge would be good for him.

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Constable Hassan rang Walsh in the evening to say they hadn't found Mrs Paton but that he'd rung her address in Toowoomba and found she was living with her mother after leaving her husband several months ago. She had told her mother she was coming to visit an old school friend out this way but she didn't think her daughter had mentioned the friend's name.

"Did you find out what schools she went to?"

"No. I can check if you like."

"So how old is Mrs Paton?"

"She is thirty-four."

"Right. So we want a woman of that age out past Burleigh."

"I guess the friend could be male if she had ended her marriage. The mother said he was always trying to get her back."

"I'll drop out tomorrow. I can't think of anyone suitable offhand but I have an idea there's a youngish couple on the farm past the Grubers."

He thought he would like to have some quiet time to himself. Of course home was quiet with the family away but Constable Dann was never lost for words. George Johnson at the Coolibah had said to him on Tuesday after Dann had been in to check on several small thefts including grog, "By jingo, that young bloke can talk. I hope he's actually getting the work done."

So far that didn't seem to be a problem. But Dennis could see a time coming when he would have to put his foot down.

The grass along the verges already seemed greener. Dennis saw the car was still there but Noel Barnard from the garage in Buckton had come out with his tow truck. He was pleased to see Dennis. "Locked and no sign of the keys anywhere. That young fella in Winville rang me to say they hadn't been able to find the driver so it looks like I'll have to break a window to put it in neutral if I can't get it unlocked."

The roadside was now pretty well trampled but Walsh was still inclined to believe the woman had been dragged out, that her heels had faintly scored the ground before she had been lifted. He might be seeing in it things that weren't there but he thought he would like to meet the husband and size him up. If he was determined to get his wife back how far was he prepared to go?

"I'd say so, Noel." He stood back and watched Noel get the driver's door open.

"Just while you're here, Noel, I'll check the glovebox to see if there's a clue to where she was heading."

But the glovebox only yielded a folder of documents for the car, a fold-up umbrella, a small packet of tissues, a paperback called *Linguistics for the Layman*, and a small manicure set. The boot when Noel managed to get it open yielded a spare tyre and jack, a wrench, a bag with some rags, and a placard to say NO CUTS.

"So no handbag and no luggage. But would a Good Samaritan take everything?"

Noel considered this. "Probably not. But I'm afraid I've messed up any prints if someone's pinched her luggage."

"She might've had something on the back seat. It would be more obvious to whoever stopped. So don't touch the rear doors and I'll get them checked later."

He left Noel when the car was hitched from the rear to begin its slow journey to Buckton. He called in to the Grubers' farm and asked Mrs Gruber if she knew of any women in their mid-thirties round the district. "Well, there's Katey next door. And there's Alicia about three k's along, the place they've called 'Rotoranga'. Why do you ask?"

"The woman who had the accident and has now disappeared was coming to visit a schoolfriend here somewhere and she is thirty-four apparently."

"I see. Where was she coming from?"

"Toowoomba."

"I'm pretty sure Katey grew up in Toowoomba before she married Ben."

"No one in your cottage now?" He pointed to the old cottage where a young couple had lost their baby to snakebite.

"They went back to Winville. It isn't easy to find anyone wanting to rent this far out."

"True." So far he had not found anyone wanting to rent his inherited farmhouse. He had fifty head of cattle running on the land but no one had shown any interest in renting the empty house from him.

He found Katey Gorringe in when he called at the next door farm. She immediately said, “Have you got any news? I’ve been so worried about Shirl since I heard about her car being found. I rang the hospital in Winville but they hadn’t admitted her.”

“So just tell me what the plan was.”

She said, “Come in, I was just making smoko for us. My husband will be in soon.”

She had set out two mugs and a plate of scones. She hurriedly got out another mug and pulled a third chair up to the table by the kitchen window.

“You know she left her husband a while back?”

He nodded.

“And he never leaves her alone. He thinks he’s God’s gift to women so how dare she walk out on him. She gave up her job as a relief teacher two months ago. He was even turning up at school sometimes and he rings her mum up to ask where she’s hiding. She thought she’d like to have a quiet week out here with me, just get her breath back sort of thing, and decide what to do. She’d like to go right away but she’s scared he will still find her.”

“How does she think he can trace her?”

“I’m not sure, but he’s got pots of money so he could probably hire someone. And you know how they were listening in to those private conversations of Prince Charles? I guess there is equipment you can get to sort of find where someone is.”

He agreed with this. “But do you think he would go to such lengths?”

“He could easily find someone else. Women do go for him—until they find what he’s like. I think it’s that she walked out on him. He’s never going to forgive her for making him look bad.”

“So d’you think he might’ve followed her out here?”

“It’s possible, isn’t it? That’s why she planned to come late, she hoped he would’ve given up and gone to bed if he was watching her. I said to her, put the car round the back and just come in to the sleep-out off the back verandah whenever you get here. But she wasn’t here when I got up and then my husband had to go into Burleigh and he saw the car. So I rang the hospital when he got back. Then I rang her mum but she said she’d left the night before. So we didn’t know what to do. We didn’t want to do anything to embarrass her in case she’d met up with someone she knew. But we were starting to think we should ring and tell you she’s missing.”

“Do you know if she’s got any other friends out this way?”

“Not that I know of.”

It was always that difficult thing. Had someone disappeared under their own steam or had someone else made them disappear. With luck someone with useful information would respond to Winville’s Alert.

*

The air was growing increasingly muggy as Walsh parked and went in to the station. Another storm would be helpful if it was mainly rain. Constable Dann said immediately, “There’s a woman in there, she said she would rather wait for you but I said I had no idea when you’d be back and that maybe I could take a message. She said it was rather private but it’s not like I would go telling everyone.”

Dennis hoped his garrulous junior knew when to keep his mouth closed. It was doubly important in a small community that people could trust police not to spread gossip about their private business. “Okay, now Noel’s brought the car back so go and fingerprint it. Noel will show you what he touched.”

He opened the door to the interview room and was surprised to see Sister Martin from Buckton Hospital sitting there. So it must be her own problem rather than the Hospital’s she had come about.

He sat down and said, “Is it a local problem?” She was a rather reserved and private person and he hadn’t heard of her being annoyed in any way.

“No, it isn’t, Dennis, so that’s why I thought I should run it past you. It’s really advice I’d like. I don’t think there’s actually anything anyone can do.”

“Okay, fire away.”

“I’ve got a distant cousin staying with me at the moment. She’s a lot younger than me. She married a man out at Miles several years ago but almost the minute she moved there she started to get these nasty poison pen letters. She wondered if it might be a previous girlfriend of his. But she didn’t hear of anyone. He kept telling her not to worry, that it was some local sicko and they would soon lose interest. But it just kept on, virtually every week, usually a folded page pushed into their letterbox. She suggested going to the police, that the threats might escalate into violence, but he said there was no sign of that, just someone letting off steam. He kept telling her to throw the letters away, that she shouldn’t brood over them. But she couldn’t help brooding because they’ve never let up. It’s been nearly three years now. She finally packed up and left Miles, she said she couldn’t bear to live there any longer knowing someone there hated her so much. Her mum and I keep in touch and I suggested she come and stay with me and that I would ask your advice.”

“Uh huh. So what does her husband do there?”

“He’s a dentist. Ford Bowman. He seems pretty popular. He’s always got more patients than he can handle.”

“And did she have work too?”

“She tried to find work but except for a bit of casual work she’s never been able to get anything. I know it can be hard in country towns but I wondered if the poison pen might’ve made it harder, in some way, for her to find work.”

Dennis remembered a case in Dalby where a man had spread spiteful rumours about his wife to stop her gaining employment.

“I know anonymous letters are more likely to be women than men but I find it hard to believe someone could hate her so much. She is a very gentle kind person.”

“Okay, so did she keep any of the letters?”

“She’s kept them all. She thought of throwing them all away but I think it was her husband always on at her to throw them away that maybe convinced her to keep them so she would have something to show the police if she ever got attacked.”

“Well, bring them in. With so many we just might get a line on what sort of person was sending them.”

“Do you need to meet Nella?”

“Not at the moment.”

And the letters when she brought the bag down next morning bore out her information about a long and sustained campaign. “Are they in any order?”

“Well, roughly. Starting from here and she just kept putting each new one on top.”

“Okay, soon as I’ve got time I’ll look through them.”

“I suppose you wish you were at the beach with Fiona and the children?”

“They ring me every night with their news.”

Jeannie Martin had never really wanted to marry. She had seen the unhappiness her parents’ incompatibility had brought them. But now when she thought of such wildly different people as Dennis and Fiona she could see that people could get around their differences with enough love and effort. She wondered if her parents had tried in their early years and had just gradually given up trying. Maybe they even found a perverse pleasure in sniping at each other. She had seen two fellow nursing sisters, Iris Hitchener and May Hickman, marry apparently happily. But she felt no real regrets. She and Kath O’Brien did things together when they were both free but she always felt a kind of deep peace when she

walked into her house and knew it was completely hers. She wondered if she could encourage Nella to see that a woman could be happy without a husband instead of seeing herself as a failure …

And if anyone could pick up something from those letters she thought it was probably Dennis. It was not that he saw himself as sensitive to women's problems, and he certainly would not refer to his 'feminine side' as she had heard younger men sometimes say. She wondered just what they thought they meant. But Dennis had two advantages over a lot of men. He tended to stick at things till he got a result. And he was good at picking up on small discrepancies. She thought both would help. And although he would never say so she thought he cared about people in an unsentimental way.

*

Constable Dann explained to Noel Barnard what Dennis wanted and said he had not done a lot of fingerprinting out-of-doors and he wasn't sure how useful it would be if they couldn't find the woman driver and it was possible the accident was a way of misleading the police and everyone else.

Noel only said, "Nearly new car. So I'll leave you to it."

He had wondered about the accident himself and he was pretty sure the damage to the back of the car was very recent. But there was no point in doing any repairs until he was sure the owner would eventually turn up to collect the car. He had made out an invoice for the towing but whether it would get paid—

When he came out half an hour later Dann had gone. He got an old canvas car cover and put it over the vehicle until he had time to ask Walsh 'what next?'

What next, unexpectedly, was Morgan Paton turning up in Buckton on Saturday morning to say he would need to arrange to get his wife's car back to Toowoomba.

Dennis took his name and address and asked him how he knew the car was out here if he and his wife were separated.

He sat back and said easily, "My mother-in-law told me."

Dennis could see that Katey Gorringe was right. This man probably would attract women. Crisp graying hair to give him a distinguished air. Clean-cut perfect features. Height. Style. Hollywood surely wouldn't say no. And yet there was something about him that spoiled the picture. Dennis couldn't think what it was. Instead he said, "So d'you know where your wife is?"

"No. I was hoping you could tell me."

"D'you have any idea where she might be? We haven't found her in a hospital or with a GP."

"So you think she might've got a lift with someone?"

"Some idiot had rear-ended her. I don't imagine she then got in with them unless it truly was an accident. But only an idiot drives up that close in wet weather."

Mr Paton considered this impassively. "Maybe her car was playing up?"

"No, nothing wrong with the car except damage front and back."

"So can I take it and get it fixed for when she turns up again?"

"No. Not without her permission."

"But I am her husband—"

"As she was not living with you—"

"We are not legally separated so I am her husband."

"I'm sure she'll turn up and we can get all that sorted."

"And what if she doesn't turn up?"

"Unlikely. But in that case I s'pose her accounts and belongings will be frozen for seven years."

He didn't think Paton liked this idea. He didn't particularly like it himself.

The front door opened and Troy Dann came in with his groceries and went into his flat to put things away. “Well, Mr—er—Walsh, let me know if there is anything I can do or if my wife turns up.”

“By the way, do you know where she was heading for when she had the accident?”

Paton hesitated, possibly wondering how much it would be correct for him to know about his wife’s activities. “I believe she had friends out here. I don’t remember if she ever told me their names.”

“So do you want her listed as missing?”

Paton hesitated over this too. “What would that involve?”

“You can continue looking for her yourself, unofficially, and just ask us to keep an ear out. Or it can be done officially. Usually we wait for a period of time before notifying the Missing Persons Unit. Your wife has now been missing for more than forty-eight hours so she can certainly be listed. But it is probably worthwhile to wait to see if there is any response to the Alert that Winville has put out. Can you give us a list of her friends and the schools she worked at so we can get in touch with them?”

“She didn’t really have any friends—“

“I thought you said she was visiting friends out here?”

“They weren’t really friends, acquaintances more.”

“Okay, what about work? The schools she taught at?”

“I couldn’t tell you offhand. But mostly in Toowoomba, in and around.”

“Can you get me a list?”

“I don’t see the point.”

“Your wife has been in an accident and is now *missing*, Mr Paton. Anything which might help us find her is the point.”

“She never talked about school.”

“What did she talk about?”

“She was a very quiet person.”

“She was so boring you were glad to see the back of her?”

“Of course not! What sort of cop are you to suggest that!”

“I am the sort of cop who wants to find a woman who may have been hurt—concussed—maybe deliberately rear-ended by some hoon—and I’m not getting much help from you.”

Paton seemed to regret his brief spurt of annoyance because he said coldly, “I expect courtesy from the police—not stupid comments—so I’ll expect to hear from you as soon as you have found my wife.” He stood up briskly, gave Walsh a contemptuous glance, and went to the door.

Dennis watched him go with a slightly puzzled frown. He was a hard man to read. He obviously had no soft feelings for his wife but even if he had followed her and caused her to have an accident, there was something about him which suggested blood and mess would be anathema to him. Whether he was correct in thinking that …

Troy Dann said, “Who was that?”

“The husband of our missing lady, one Morgan Paton.”

“Really? He reminds me of a guy who gave us a lot of trouble one time. He was always complaining about his employees. He always said they were cheating him and we couldn’t convince him that if he had no evidence it wasn’t a police matter and he kept telling everyone how useless we were because we couldn’t stop the thefts. I think he had that sort of persecution mania where he thought everyone was out to get him. It must’ve been hell to live with him. I remember his wife left him—”

“Well, there’s never been a company didn’t have things pinched, even if it’s only boxes of rubber bands. But you either wear the losses or you put programs in place to catch the pilferers. Anyway, I’m off home to get ready to go to the races. If there’s a problem ring

Winville. If it's a hassle here I should be back by 4.30. Fiona will be back late this afternoon." He had not tried to arrange for them to meet up in Toowoomba. The kids would probably be eager to be home and Fiona would be tired of driving.

Dann liked the idea of being in sole charge and it got him away from the suggestions of several locals that he should play cricket with the Butter Factory men "because Grant did". He found cricket very boring but there was no chance of getting any soccer here, so the next best thing was to watch the English Premier League on TV in his spare time.

The afternoon passed away peacefully. The only visitors were a couple with a caravan wanting to know how to get to Garramindi. When they had gone again he debated on whether to stay in the station or go into his flat and listen to the radio. In the end he went into the stock room and tidied and changed things around to what he thought was a more efficient arrangement.

In mid-afternoon Fiona drove into the driveway and unloaded children and bags. She put a basket of fruit in the kitchen and took some out for Troy. Robert put his duffel bag of beach things in his room and said, "I'm going down to see Benbow." It didn't really surprise his mother. Fiona sat down and wriggled her tired shoulders. The white ute was gone so Dennis was out somewhere. She tried to remember what he had said about his horse. Had he gone to the races or was he out dealing with a problem? She didn't want it to look as though she and Dennis never discussed anything.

Elise said she was going over to the pool for a while. "Then lots of suncream," Fiona said as she picked up a bag of fruit for Troy. So far as she could gather he mainly lived on spaghetti. She wasn't sure if he was particularly fond of it or just didn't know how to cook anything else. He had told everyone round Buckton who cared to listen that he had a Sicilian grandfather called Salvatore and that he wouldn't have minded being called something simpler but that his grandfather had insisted that his daughter call at least one of her boys after him. She found herself feeling vaguely sorry for him although she wasn't sure what sparked the feeling. Except for having a rather long face he was a personable young man. But he only ever seemed to talk endlessly about things which had happened in his previous postings or about his family. She had never heard him mention a girl or any of his own interests. She knew Dennis hoped to get him involved in the Community Youth Club but he might find Grant a hard act to follow. The young people had mostly admired Grant for his sporting skills … and his nice personality …

Constable Dann thanked Fiona for the fruit without looking very interested in it. Possibly he shared the views of other young men who thought fruit and veg were only the things their mothers had made them eat.

"Did Dennis say what time he would be back?"

"He said about 4.30. But I guess he gets excited when his horse wins and he won't hurry back. Do you think his horse is likely to win today? I don't know if he bets much but he must've won a bit by now."

"I think he always has a little flutter. Anyway, I won't keep you." She noticed that Dann had been changing things around. She wondered if he had run it past Dennis first. He wasn't a man for change for change's sake. Perhaps she should give him some warning …

*

Greg Sullivan had been getting the occasional flak from the citizens of Winville. Quite a few people seemed to prefer to believe Sam Hoysted was guilty of his wife's murder. Bill Garner, who had been manager at the tannery until it closed down and now did Greg didn't know what, was the latest to bail him up in the street and earbash him.

"It doesn't make him a wife killer, Mr Garner," he said, trying to sound calm and reasonable.

"Hoysted was the dodgiest businessman I've ever met. Of course he was guilty! And everyone knows he was always bashing up on his poor bloody wife."

"No. It was Doug who spread that rumour."

"That's rubbish and you know it! You could see she was frightened of her husband—"

"How often did you see them together?"

"Often enough. She avoided him—"

"Well, we know she was scared of Doug because she told her mum."

"She meant she was scared of Sam I'll bet you anything."

Greg wanted to get away from this belligerent man. "You can ask Doug for his side of the story. I can give you his address and you can write to him."

"Nah, don't bother. But I still know I'm right and you lot got it wrong."

Greg was relieved to see the man walk away. But in a way he understood. Most of the businessmen around Winville had never had anything to do with Sandra Hoysted but they had had dealings with Sam Hoysted or they had heard stories from other people. And Sam cut corners, backdated receipts, evaded tax, spread rumours about his competitors, sold uninspected meat, swapped poor quality for good quality … the list was probably much longer … and the end result was that quite a few men around town didn't want Sam Hoysted back.

'I could've told him Doug and Sam disposed of Willy Jackson's body but I don't s'pose he would believe me … and strictly speaking, we haven't heard from DI Payne.'

But Carlton Payne had certainly been to see Sam Hoysted in jail. With Doug Towner found guilty of the murder of Sandra Hoysted the question had been: what to do with Sam Hoysted. He had refused a pardon, telling his lawyer John Duarte that he wanted to clear his name. So he was set down to have an Appeal in March and he believed it would endorse his innocence and open the jail gates for him.

He assumed that DI Payne had just come in to give him information about his Appeal though he wasn't sure why the police would still be involved. Wanting something more on Doug maybe?

Payne said briskly, "That time you flew from Prickly Creek to Meandara with Doug Towner. Did he tell you why he wanted you?"

For a moment Hoysted just looked blank. It wasn't something he had ever dwelt on. "It's a long time ago. I think he said the pilot had had an accident and the plane needed to be delivered to someone out there."

"Okay. So tell me just what happened that day. Take your time."

This sounded sympathetic but Hoysted was sure it wasn't. And why bring it up all these years later?

At last he said, "I think Doug rang me and asked me to come out to the farm."

"Did you want to?"

"Not particularly."

"But Doug said you owed him?"

"I don't remember. Just that he had a problem I could help him with."

"Go on."

"When I got there I could see the plane down by a small dam."

"Was it in the dam?"

"No. But one wing was out over the dam. He asked me if I could taxi it up to the runway. They had graded a strip sort of diagonally across the farm but it was still pretty short."

"Was there anyone else there?"

"I didn't see anyone. There were several cars parked over near the house. Doug said the cop had come from Garramindi but that he had told him he would handle it so the man had gone again."

"So Doug was first on the scene?"

"He must've been."

Payne sat calmly and waited.

"It took me a while to familiarise myself with that plane. Then I managed to taxi it up the slope and on to the runway."

"Did you put anything on the plane? Luggage? Food?"

"No. I helped Doug load a crate on. He said it had to be delivered to someone."

"What sort of crate?"

"A box. It was pretty heavy. Wrapped in canvas, I think."

"What time did you get to the farm?"

"Don't remember. But probably after four. It was getting dark by the time we were ready to leave. Maybe it was winter. I don't remember. It was pretty hairy getting that plane off. And pretty hairy getting it down the other end. The runway there was pretty much just a wide lane. I was a nervous wreck by the time I got out. A guy came out and told me to go over to the house, he said he'd put a snack out for me. I went over. He'd put out a plate and a couple of stubbies. I needed a drink."

"What then?"

"Doug came in and said we'd drive back to Winville. We got in a dark green ute. I went to sleep on the way but I s'pose we came through Dalby and back to Winville. I woke up just as we were coming into town. Doug dropped me off and said he would arrange to get our cars back."

"What then?"

Sam seemed to withdraw any enthusiasm for telling the story. "I think Doug and me went out to the farm next day. He had a young fella drive us. I don't remember his name. I got my car and drove home. And that was it."

"When did you find out you had taken Willy Jackson's plane and that he had disappeared?"

"No, I think it was Rushton's. Someone said a plane had gone missing. But Doug knew all about it so it wasn't my business."

Carlton Payne thought that Sam's wonky moral compass had meant a lot of things weren't his business. "When did Doug pay you?"

"Next day, I think. He brought round a little port and said I deserved to be remunerated."

"I've heard there was fifteen thousand dollars in that suitcase."

"I'm sure there wasn't."

"So you didn't count it?"

"Why should I?"

"To declare it as earnings to the Tax Office?"

Sam looked vaguely uncomfortable but then the idea of declaring it had probably never even occurred to him. It was a nice little under-the-counter payment and he had intended to keep it that way. But circumstances had conspired against him …

"So how did you spend it?"

"At the races."

"Money laundering?"

"Of course not! I'd earnt that money!"

"And you gave some to your boys and they kept a list of all the serial numbers. Did they do that with all the money you gave them?"

"How would I know?"

"You told them this money came from Doug?"

"I may have."

"And we found several of those serial numbers belonged to notes which came from a payroll robbery in Mt Isa." Unfortunately they didn't have a complete list which begged the question of how much of that money was 'hot'. "How do you think Towner came by all that stolen money?"

"I guess someone put it into circulation."

"In Winville?"

"Why not?"

"And it just ended up in the pocket of a man who had been an investigating officer on that payroll robbery in Mt Isa?"

"How would I know?"

"When you went back to the farm at Prickly Creek—who was there?"

"I didn't see anyone."

"What did Doug drive home in?"

"I think he had a dark green ute."

"So when did Doug tell you that you had helped him get rid of the dead body of Willy Jackson?"

"He didn't."

"But you knew you were being asked to do something illegal?"

"That's rubbish!"

"Come on, Mr Hoysted. You knew the plane didn't belong to Doug. You knew you loaded a heavy crate. You knew you had been paid a very large sum of money for a couple of hours work. You knew Willy Jackson's plane had gone missing. And you said nothing. Did Doug tell you to keep your mouth closed?"

"No. Of course he didn't."

"You knew without needing to be told?"

"That's rubbish!"

"So you went on believing that Doug Towner was as pure as driven snow?"

This put Sam Hoysted into a cleft stick. "I believed in him … then."

"He looked after you?"

"Well, I guess he did. Then."

"Why would you need looking after? Grown man. Respectable businessman." He thought Sam Hoysted *had* needed looking after with all his less-than-straight business dealings, his carelessness, his greed. And one day Doug Towner had got tired of minding out for Sam Hoysted. And so he had got rid of Sandra Hoysted who was critical of the way Doug and Gavin Whittaker had been looking after her stepsons' trust fund and by putting Sam in jail for her murder he got rid of another liability.

"Not looking after … just … a mate looking out for a mate, that sort of thing."

"Well, you will be charged with the illegal disposal of a body and I will notify the Tax Office."

"But—you can't do that! I've spent all these years in here for something I didn't do!"

"That will be taken into account, Mr Hoysted, so it is very unlikely that you will be doing any extra time. I can't speak for the Tax Office, of course."

*

Dennis Walsh took his children out to the Environment Park near Burleigh on Sunday afternoon. Clouds were building in the east but it might not mean anything here. The couple of storms had freshened everything up. He stopped at the place where the car had hit the tree but there was nothing there now except evidence of a broken headlight and marks on the tree

trunk. He had wondered if someone concussed could have staggered off through the grass but there had been nothing to support the idea. His thoughts had run in a slightly different direction.

If you had an inconvenient wife then how to dispose of her? And there was the nice peaceful environs of the park nearby. Why not make it look as though she had gone there and had fallen down in the scrub and died?

But when they drove in and wandered down to the lagoon there was no sign of circling crows. No sign of anyone. The lagoon was respectably full. Dragonflies flitted across it. A cloud of mosquitoes rose around a small side pool. All seemed perfectly peaceful. Water trickled along the creek beneath the tangle of sheltering bottlebrush. The children went off to explore, Elise with her Christmas present of a camera.

He sat down on a log and pondered on Morgan Paton. If a wife went missing the husband was always the first to fall under suspicion. But somehow he couldn't picture Paton getting his hands dirty, walking along a muddy verge, perhaps getting blood on himself if she hadn't been wearing a seatbelt … He thought it might have encouraged his dislike of Paton, those perfectly manicured nails. Men out here didn't have perfectly manicured nails. Perhaps he was being unfair …

So could Paton have got someone else to do something? It would not be difficult to make a nervous wife more nervous on a wet unfamiliar road by tailgating her, pretending to pass and swerving in, maybe keeping their headlights on high … But who could he get? Hiring someone was always risky. Sometimes people, even people sworn to secrecy, spoke out of turn. But then Paton was a very goodlooking and wealthy man. Was there another woman in the mix who was as keen as he was to get rid of the old wife? And something had gone wrong. She had possibly braked suddenly because of a wallaby on the road and the car too close behind her had rear-ended her?

But what then?

Would another woman have dragged her out?

And taken her … he couldn't decide. Back to Toowoomba?

He could hear his children laughing in the distance, perhaps taking silly pictures of each other. Another car drove in but he didn't recognise the people who got out. He thought he would go and collect his family and just drive up to see Mr Winter who lived on the farm the other side of the park. He was well away from the road but there was just a small chance he had heard something.

His farm too seemed a place of perfect peace. He came out, followed by a young Border Collie. When Dennis explained the situation to him he said he had seen the car next day but no one there. Mr Mitchell at the shop said the police knew about it but no one knew where the driver was. "The only thing I can tell you is that Rob Roy here started barking in the night." He indicated the dog which waved a plumy tail. "I was just getting ready for bed so I walked outside but I couldn't see anything. I can't see cars on the road from here. I don't know if my dog heard the crash."

"What time would that have been?"

"My clock was just on ten when I came back inside. So about ten to, I'd say."

"That might be helpful." Of course the dog might've been barking at some night creature but there was a good chance he had heard the car hit the tree. "Have the Evans' kids being giving you any more aggro?"

"No. Thankfully. I think the oldest one has left home. But you could tell Fiona that my next book of poems will be ready in April and I was wondering about asking her to launch it for me—now that she is a much more famous writer than I will ever be."

"You'd best give her a ring closer to the time. I'm sure she'd be happy to do it."

"They've got her books in the shop here. I don't know how well they're selling but Terry Mitchell told me you brought his dog back to life. I think he thinks selling your wife's book is a way of thanking you."

When they were home again Dennis checked in with Constable Hassan in Winville. He said there had been no response to their Alert so far. Dennis told him about the barking dog and the possibility the crash had happened around 9.50. He also told Sam about Morgan Paton's visit and the possibility he might have a new woman in his life.

"So you think we need to get Toowoomba to have a look at him?"

"I'd say so. First he told me she was coming to visit a friend, then he said she didn't have any friends. I just wonder if he was stalking her. But somehow I don't see him as wanting to damage his own car or wanting to get himself dirty and messy. He's a bit of a fashion plate, I reckon."

Sam hadn't heard this expression and Dennis tried to paint a picture of Morgan Paton. "Just something about him. I don't reckon he's ever cared for anyone but himself. But he was quite keen to get her car back. I wonder if we should get an expert on to it? Troy has fingerprinted the back doors but it just might be worth getting a more detailed go-over."

Hassan agreed with this and said it might be best if the car was brought to Winville. He said they would make the arrangements with Noel Barnard. Dennis had not noticed anything useful like chips of paint from another car but a very close look might come up with something to help them.

And Winville after getting their lab technician, Reid Strohling, on to it came up with several prints which differed from those they had found on the driver's seatbelt, the gear lever, ignition key, and things in the glovebox. They then went looking for items on the floor, down behind the seats and in the boot.

After he'd talked with Sam Dennis thought the investigation had changed slightly. He no longer believed Shirlene Paton had gone missing voluntarily.

But why make her disappear? Wouldn't it be better to have it look as if the accident had killed her? Listing people as missing left everything up in the air. Though if she had no children perhaps it would not matter so much. And having come that far in his thoughts he wondered if Paton's statement about still being married was more emphatic than it had needed to be. Might it suit the man to have a missing wife? Other women could move in but there would be no pressure to marry them … He couldn't decide if Morgan Paton would think that way. And he could have the marriage ended much sooner than seven years if he wanted … He thought the old requirement of waiting five years before filing for divorce from a missing person had been changed but he needed to check that …

And why had Paton come all the way out here to get her car? Was there something about the car? In the car? Anyway he could trust Reid Strohling to do a thorough check.

And if Paton was so attractive to women … was there already another woman in his life … and would that woman be willing to scare off the previous wife? 'I think we need to know a heck of a lot more about our Mr Paton.'

Case No. 2: The Jacksons

DI Payne did not expect to get any endorsement from Doug Towner of Sam Hoysted's story. But Doug, thinking any further prosecution couldn't make life worse, just might let something slip.

Doug Towner was quite enjoying life behind bars. Coppers in jail often got a hard time but Doug wasn't seen in this light. And living life in a wheelchair also made a

difference. Doug might not have been on the side of small time crooks but he had certainly been on the side of some of the big guys and this intrigued some of his fellow inmates.

True to form, though, he said he had no memory of going to Prickly Creek, of going anywhere with Sam Hoysted, and "who the hell was Willy Jackson?"

"Now I know you are decaying rapidly, Mr Towner, but no one could forget going all the way out to a farm at Prickly Creek, heaving a crate on to a plane, getting Hoysted to come and pilot that plane, going all the way out to Meandara, driving all the way back to Winville, going back out to Prickly Creek to get your car, giving Hoysted a suitcase containing fifteen thousand dollars and telling him to shut his mouth."

"Well, I don't. So that's the end of the matter."

"So who killed Willy Jackson?"

"How would I know?"

"His wife came to you—after she'd hidden some samples of yellowcake—and asked you where Willy and his plane were. Rushtons also contacted you."

"I don't remember any of that."

"Your family, the Plowmans, calling themselves Richard and Simon Ferguson, were on that plane. Why did they kill Willy Jackson?"

"Don't know who you're talking about."

"Willy Jackson had been bashed on the head. So had his mother Ruby when we found her buried on that farm. Now I doubt if you did that bashing, but these were your relatives. So I think you knew a lot of what was going on. And they knew you would tidy up their messes for them."

"You're starkers, that's what you are, mate. I don't even know what you're talking about."

That was the trouble with men like Doug. A court might be willing to believe he was losing the plot and couldn't be expected to remember what happened twenty years ago. But Payne wasn't buying it.

"You're a good liar, Mr Towner, but not good enough. And you and Sam Hoysted neglected to wear gloves when you loaded and unloaded."

The insinuation might have disturbed a less tough man than Doug Towner but he just raised a cynical eyebrow.

"And a woman in Dalby has recognised your photo. She says you're the man who asked her father to fly a plane for you and took him away in a dark green ute."

Towner shook his head slowly. "You're off with the birds, mate, you and that big oaf in Buckton. You need to get a life."

Payne let his gaze rove around the small bare interview room. "You can forget everything, Mr Towner, even your name and which Swiss bank you used to sock away the money you stole, but we can still make a very strong circumstantial case against you."

A joint inquest would be held in March on the bodies of Harold William and Ruby Jane Jackson. One crushed skull might be an accident. Two added up to homicide. And Carlton Payne believed that the people who had known them both deserved to have the truth.

"That's pie in the sky, mate. No jury is going to convict me on your fairy tale."

"People in here might not care that you killed what they've been told was a wealthy woman. But they may look at you very differently when you are linked to the death of a poor old lady who never did you any harm."

The trouble would be that Doug was only indirectly linked to both deaths. But the fact that he had been in charge in Winville and had done nothing would tell against him.

When Carlton Payne got home and told his wife of his visit he added, "and you know, love, the worst thing about it was having that sleazebag call me 'mate'."

She could understand this. She sometimes thought men were too free with their use of ‘mate’ and more so when it became an excuse for not remembering people’s names or pretending there was a relationship when there wasn’t.

“Are you going to tell Dennis Walsh?”

“It’s out of his hands but as he found Ruby Jackson I’ll let him know where things are at.” She was tempted to ask whether he saw Walsh as a mate but decided not to.

*

Dennis Walsh with his wife’s help had been going slowly through the bag of letters Sister Martin had dropped off to him. The very first one said ‘Don’t think you can move in here bitch get back where you came from’. They made depressing reading. And with more than ninety to wade through Dennis began to feel depressed.

When he finally finished the chore he thought they were illuminating. But he waited till Fiona had also finished reading them before trying to put his thoughts into some sort of order. She said, “How could someone do that to another person?”

“Easily, by the look of it. But did anything strike you?”

“Well, they never actually make threats. They just keep telling her how stupid and dirty and ridiculous she is. I mean they don’t say, if you don’t go away I’ll do something nasty. Is that why her husband told her to ignore them?”

“No. I think the bastard was playing safe.”

“The husband? I thought it was women who were supposed to write anonymous letters?”

“Not always. And if there had been an actual threat then she probably would have taken it to the police.”

“So when you say the husband are you serious?”

“Yep.”

“But—surely not? How could a man do that to his new bride?”

“That’s what I’d like to know.”

Though she had a lot of faith in his ability to get to the heart of a problem she felt he must surely be wrong this time. “So what can you do about this?”

“First I need to meet this Nella Bowman, see what sort of dame she is, and I think I’d best get the letters checked by Strohling. It isn’t likely her husband always wore gloves. But it’s a tricky business. I don’t think he can be charged with sending threatening material through the post.”

“But there must be some way to expose him? This is a kind of torture.”

“Yeah, you couldn’t pretend a thumbscrew wasn’t a thumbscrew but a bit hard to get someone for mental torture.”

And when Sr Martin brought Mrs Bowman into the station he could see what a toll it had taken on her. She was thin and tense and her gaze seemed to flit away as though she saw something nervewracking over his shoulder.

He spoke calmly as he took her details and then said, “How did you receive these letters?”

“It was always a folded over page slipped into the mailbox.”

“Always?”

“I think, just once, it came posted, but no address on it.”

“The postmark?”

“I wasn’t sure. Maybe Chinchilla.”

“Did you ever see anyone by your mailbox?”

“No. Sometimes people would walk past but I never actually saw anyone stop.”

“Okay. So the box was where? Draw me the gate and box.”

She seemed to find the request a bit odd but she obediently took the pad and pen he handed her.

"Mmm. And where was the latch on the gate?"

The latch was next to the mailbox. He merely nodded as though it wasn't very interesting. "So who did you think was sending them?"

"At first I thought it might be a previous girlfriend. But his mum said he hadn't been very interested in girls till he met me."

"She nagged him to find someone and settle down?"

"Well … I think she maybe did a bit. He was thirty-six when we met … I think she wanted grandchildren." And Nella was still in her twenties.

"So what sort of woman is she?"

"She was quite nice to me. A bit bossy, you know, telling me what to do … and she kept telling me not to put off having a family … "

"Did you tell her about the letters?"

"Sort of. I didn't make a big thing of it. I did ask her if he'd had other girlfriends and she said she'd never met any. I think that was why she was nice to me. I think she was starting to worry that he was maybe … well, you know, not … and I think he always preferred to be with other men … and he was never very interested in … sex … and he often said rude things about other women … but I'm sure he wasn't … gay, I mean."

Some men just weren't very interested in sex, full stop, for various reasons, and a sex-mad society probably made life harder for them. Everyone was expected to want endless sex.

"So what did you do about the letters?"

"I said I thought I should show them to the police and he said, no, that for sure they would stop … and then he started telling me to throw them away. One time I found he'd put several of them in the rubbish and I took them out again. And then I hid them all. But maybe he was right. Maybe if I'd thrown them all away I would've felt better."

"Till the next one arrived?"

"That was the thing. You see, I was always on edge, every time I'd go to check the mail I'd get sort of all knotted up inside, sometimes I felt I was going to vomit, it's a horrible feeling, always waiting for something … and knowing someone hated me … but wouldn't say it to my face."

He agreed with this. He hated it when people sneaked behind backs, spread rumours that couldn't be attributed to anyone, lurked in the shadows.

"And you never suspected anyone?"

"No. That's what made it seem worse, not having the faintest idea who it might be."

"Well, I think it was your husband."

She stared at him before shaking her head slowly. "No, I'm sure it couldn't be. He never said nasty things to me."

"Well, I'll get them checked by the lab in Winville. They might be able to get some fingerprints, maybe some DNA. The printing often looks like it was done in a hurry which is unusual for a poison pen. They usually take their time over each letter."

She still didn't look convinced but she thanked him for taking it all seriously.

As she and Jeannie sat over dinner she said again, "I'm sure it couldn't be Ford, it just couldn't be." She was obviously looking for some comfort and reassurance and Sr Martin said, "I trust Dennis but this one time I'm sure he must be wrong. And it's always women who do it … at least in my experience." Her experience wasn't large but she had come across it occasionally in books.

"That's what I thought, too. For a while I wondered if it could be my mother-in-law. Sometimes mothers-in-law don't think their sons' wives are good enough for their precious boys." As she said this, she felt tears come to her eyes. There had been no one she could turn

to for comfort because she had known no one there except Ford and his mother when she had moved to Miles. “But I couldn’t see how she could be putting the letters in our mailbox. Yet it is a horrible feeling, suspecting someone, and it makes you start suspecting everyone. Now, I wish I had gone straight to the police. Maybe they wouldn’t have taken me seriously but at least someone else would know. But I knew Ford was friendly with some police, they were patients and sometimes he would go for a drink … and I didn’t want anyone to laugh at me.”

“Did you think anyone would do that?” Jeannie frowned at the idea.

“You know how they say people always write letters to themselves? So I thought maybe people would think I was just wanting to get sympathy, that I was lonely and a bit screwed up, that I had no friends and just wanted to make myself sound important … I don’t really know what people were thinking but no one was ever really friendly. I mean people in shops and things were polite but that’s not the same. That’s why I wondered if my mother-in-law might be saying things about me, that I wasn’t looking after her son. I don’t know. Maybe I *am* screwed up. I can never sleep properly. Maybe it was all my fault.” Tears started to trickle down her face.

Jeannie Martin was not a demonstrative woman but she got up to come round the table and give Nella a hug. It was a pity there was no clear-cut villain Nella could accept but maybe the lab would find something …

Mrs Bowman looked like ‘death warmed up’ at breakfast and admitted she hadn’t slept. But she said falteringly, “Perhaps he *is* right, perhaps it really was Ford. I kept thinking back over little things, I always told myself they didn’t mean anything. And I still don’t know … maybe I really am crazy. But I sort of trusted your sergeant. So what should I do now?”

It was strange. She had found Dennis Walsh a bit daunting. His size. And his pale blue gaze was disconcerting. Yet she had felt safe while she was with him. And it was a very long time since she had felt safe.

“I don’t know, my dear. Just wait, I think.”

But Dennis Walsh had immediately got on to the case. He let Reid Strohling know he was sending ninety-eight letters to be checked. He also was sending Nella Bowman’s prints for exclusion. Constable Dann would bring them to Winville in the morning.

Reid Strohling was rarely enthusiastic or hopeful and he ran true to form, saying, “Then don’t hold your breath. Even if someone else left prints they might’ve had a genuine reason for leaving them.”

This had worried Dennis too. Ford Bowman could say convincingly that his wife had handed letters to him to read. But someone taking a letter to read and someone folding it over … there would surely be a difference …

“One other thing, Dennis. Those prints on your car, on the door handles, nothing cross-checked but I would be inclined to suspect a woman. It’s not definable. There are big women and small men. But keep it in mind.” And women with long fingernails held things differently to a man with blunt nails.

“I will. Thanks.”

But would a woman do the bidding of a man like Morgan Paton? She might. But why? Shirlene Paton had left her husband. They could divorce. He might not want to share his estate with her. But if she was working and if they had only been married two years then she could not expect much. And he looked the sort of man who would want some sort of pre-nuptial agreement.

So maybe he had run down the wrong road and something quite different was in train. Maybe it really had been a hoon. Maybe she had been taken somewhere quite different. Maybe she was in hospital in Dalby. Maybe her friend was not leveling with him. Maybe the whole thing was an elaborate set-up for reasons he could not even guess at. Maybe she was the one with someone else in her life and they had had a quarrel …

‘I’m not getting very far with anything,’ he thought gloomily. ‘Maybe I’m the old fossil Troy thinks … and thinks I don’t know what he thinks.’

*

Constable Dann set out for Winville next morning, taking the packet of letters, and going first to the Court House for a small case. He rang Dennis in mid-morning to say he was sorry but someone had taken the packet from his car. He couldn’t understand how they could’ve got into the car or why they would’ve taken it. Maybe they thought it contained valuables of some kind.

Dennis said grimly, “Why the bloody heck didn’t you drop them into Reid before you went to court? You had plenty of time.”

“I’m sorry. I thought the case was listed for ten o’clock.”

“Well, get straight round and report the theft.”

Dennis found his junior’s story highly unlikely. But what on earth was the kid playing at to leave his car unlocked? He rang Greg Sullivan and told him what had happened and said, “Soon’s he comes in take his phone from him and check who he’s been ringing. I smell a rat.”

Sullivan was less sure. Young constables did do careless things. So did old ones, for that matter. A moment of inattention, being nervous about a court appearance, someone distracting them … “Seems a bit drastic, Dennis.”

“I need to be sure.”

“You think he’s been got at?”

“I need to be sure it was just carelessness.”

Greg thought Dennis was over-reacting. Poison pen letters were a fact of life. Did they really need this level of forensic testing? And it probably wouldn’t show anything anyway. But it was easier to go along with Dennis than argue. He said he would.

Constable Dann, unsurprisingly, objected to Sullivan asking him to hand over his phone. “What’s my phone got to do with anything?”

Greg didn’t feel like arguing the point. He just stood there waiting and the young man reluctantly complied. Greg handed it to DC Kelly, saying, “Check all incoming and outgoing calls and texts and list them.”

As he handed the phone over, he accepted that Dennis might be right to be suspicious. Constable Dann didn’t manage to hide a faint look of alarm.

Kelly came back ten minutes later and said, “How far back do you want me to go? This is the last week. I can cross-check these numbers.”

Greg took the list and said to Dann, “Okay, who did you ring last night?”

“My mum.”

“Give her a ring, Brent.”

The look of alarm was back on Dann’s face but he said nothing. The phone went to a voice saying, “Hi, this’s Craig. Leave your name and number and I’ll get back to you.”

“Your mum is called Craig?” Greg said mildly.

“No. But my dad is.”

“Okay, we’ll try all those numbers later. Now, off you go and have a good look around the Court House. An opportunistic thief would probably chuck them away when they don’t find any valuables. Leave your car keys here and go and have a good walk around.”

Dann tried to look non-committal as he handed the keys over but Greg knew it was the last thing he wanted to do. So he said, “Okay, son, tell me what’s really going on.”

He waved Dann back to a chair and sat waiting. Dann too sat down but said nothing. At last Greg said, “Someone paid you to lose those letters. So who and why?”

Troy Dann shook his head. “That’s not true. I’m sorry I was careless and I lost them. That’s all.”

"Okay. You stay here while Brent and I have a quick squizz in your car."

He knew he had struck oil by the faint slump in the constable's shoulders. And sure enough the letters were under an old overcoat in the boot. Greg pulled the packet out and came back into the station. "Brent, get these straight down to Reid." He went back into the CIB room with a sinking heart. What on earth … or who on earth … had got the young man to wreck his career for a bag of letters?

"Okay." He sat back down heavily. He would much prefer to hand this over to Dennis but it had gone beyond that. "I'd best get Jake Moss to come and listen in to your explanation."

Petra brought four coffees in and they all sat in silence while they drank and waited for Inspector Moss to arrive. The morning had grown warm and windless and the sense of a storm coming seemed to add to the tension in the air.

Jake, bustling in, said, "Hi, Troy," and to Greg, "What's going on?"

Greg explained the situation as he saw it and at the end Moss turned to his young constable and asked him what was going on.

Troy Dann said nothing was going on, that he thought he'd put the packet on the front seat and panicked when they weren't there. He'd forgotten that he'd put them in the boot.

Moss nodded without looking convinced. He opened the folder he'd brought down with him. "You told DSS Sullivan your dad was Craig. I've got him down here as Michael Webster Dann. So which is he?"

Dann stared at Moss then turned away and put his head in his hands. The silence lengthened.

Finally Moss said, "Someone asked you to make those letters disappear. Did they pay you?"

"No."

"Did they offer to pay you?" It might be that payment depended on delivery.

Dann said nothing.

"I haven't got all day to waste." Moss stood up again. "I'll have to stand you down until we've got this mess sorted out. You'd best go back to Buckton now and I'll get your boss some help. You don't go anywhere till I say so. We'll keep your phone and follow that up. But if someone is using you or has a hold over you … tell me now."

Dann continued to look at the floor. Moss waited a minute then went out again. Greg gave the young man back the car keys and said, "You're a fool. Did you really think you could put one over Dennis Walsh?"

He thought Dann probably *had* thought 'old has-been going nowhere in a small country station … he won't get suspicious … '

"And if you've got a corrupt pal in the station out there—tell us. No point in you carrying the can alone."

So easy to think: if I can get paid for a packet of old letters then why not. No one is going to care one way or the other.

Dann didn't respond to this offer. Greg put the phone in a drawer. "Well, you're in big trouble now, son, and there's not much I can do for you. I know there's cops who wouldn't waste time on anonymous letters but they're not your boss. Dennis takes everything seriously. So off you go and do some serious thinking on your way home."

Dann stood up and went out without looking at anyone. "Do you think he'll just go back to Buckton and face Dennis?" Petra said rather wryly.

"He's a fool if he tries to do a runner in a police vehicle. Anyway, get me Miles and we'll see if there's a Craig in the station there."

Walsh was out when Troy Dann got back to Buckton. He had considered hurriedly changing cars and heading off but then the problems of disappearing seemed larger than the

awful business of staying put. He went into the station and made a phone call, then went into his flat and started packing his belongings.

*

It was nearly three when Dennis got back from a problem over near Burleigh. He just got in to the station before the storm broke. To his surprise he found Constable Archer sitting in the station. Archer said simply, "Jake sent me. Troy's been stood down, pending an enquiry."

Dennis merely nodded. In a way he was glad it was now out of his hands. And even if Reid in the lab failed to find anything incriminating the very act of trying to get the letters back via Troy would tell against Mr Bowman. Except … if he'd done it through a third person and no money had changed hands it might still be hard to find a charge that would stick to Mr Ford Bowman.

The storm made conversation virtually impossible for the next half hour so Dennis had a late sandwich and spent some time re-arranging the stock room so he knew where everything was again. He hadn't objected to Dann tidying. The place could probably do with some re-thinking but he would've preferred Dann to run it by him first. But he was well aware that thinking about the stock room was a way of not thinking about Troy Dann. He hated to see young men go off the rails. They then had to live the rest of their lives with a black mark against them.

As the storm quietened to steady rain he said to Glen Archer, "You can stay with us unless you'd rather stay at the pub or go home of a night."

Archer considered this and finally opted for the pub "if it's not expensive".

"No. Very reasonable. And they shouldn't be full up."

He knocked on the door of the little flat and asked Constable Dann to join them. Troy at first said "no, no point" and then he accepted that he had to face Walsh sooner or later; he couldn't cower in his flat till Jake Moss sent him packing.

He came and sat down in the interview room and said to Walsh and Archer, "What will happen?"

"Not up to me. So now tell us what went on. You've got a mate in the station at Miles so you rang him and told him all about the letters we'd been given and he said he was sure Ford Bowman would like them back because he knew Bowman had been sending this filth to his wife for years. And Ford said, yeah, he'd even pay you something for the letters. How much did he offer you?"

This might still be speculation but there was a good chance that Bowman's friends had known what was going on. The image of him as a man's man, a man with lots of mates, might bolster the idea. He was taking a risk if he shared it with his mates in uniform but they might well think 'no crime has been committed, just a bit of a laugh' …

Dann didn't respond to this, saying instead, "I really had forgotten about putting those letters in the boot."

"And you thought I wouldn't care that you'd lost them?"

Dann hesitated then said, "They're only rubbish."

"Ford Bowman is one sick bastard by the sound of it. He put his young wife through years of misery. And you think that's okay?"

"It was only a joke."

"Only a joke! Then God help any woman you take up with!"

"They didn't do anything to her."

"Who told you that?"

"You did."

"No, mate. I said we probably couldn't get him on sending threatening material through the post. That's a different matter. But if you think protecting sick bastards like Bowman is worth your career that's up to you."

"My mate said he's a decent guy."

"And what did your mate judge that on?"

"I guess he knows him."

"So what was the offer?"

"There wasn't an offer."

"Don't lie to me."

Dennis was tempted to blow up but he held himself in with an effort.

"It's true."

"You thought you'd wreck your career for the fun of it?"

"No. But I didn't really think it through."

"Someone asks you to do something illegal and 'you didn't think it through'?"

"Well, I didn't."

"Okay, so what's your friend's name?"

Dann seemed to wrestle with the question, finally saying, "I can't tell you."

"Honour among thieves, eh?"

The young man didn't respond to this. Dennis sat back and rasped his chin while he thought. It wasn't up to him to get names out of Troy Dann. By now Winville probably had been on to Miles. But he still wanted to hear exactly what had happened from his young constable himself.

"All your finances will need to be checked. Maybe you've got in the habit of losing evidence. A little fiddle here and a little fiddle there. So bang goes a good career."

The whole thing depressed him but he was glad they had got on to it quickly. Once a man started slipping off the rails …

"I didn't. I never did anything—"

"Not up to me now. If you'd come to me as soon as your mate asked you to do the wrong thing … maybe we could've nipped this in the bud."

Dann just shrugged.

*

Dennis was down in the dumps all evening. He told Fiona what had happened but asked her to keep it to herself for the time being. It would be all around Buckton soon enough, or as soon as Dann left, and like any such issue it would make police look bad.

Fiona thought it over before saying, "I've always felt sort of sorry for him. I'm not quite sure why. I think it's got something to do with the way he relates to people—or doesn't relate to them. I wonder if this was him trying to prove something to someone—or maybe to himself."

"He always seems to want to make it sound like he was at the heart of every case." He hadn't listened very closely to most of his junior's stories. So maybe he'd missed clues, insights, which might have been important.

"So the person he was in contact with … maybe he was someone Troy wanted to impress?"

"Guess we'll find all that out. And we might've gone ten years and not had any contact with anyone in Miles." Was that it? That by some awful chance Nella Bowman had come in with her letters and her story. And even worse, if there was no recorded discussion, Ford Bowman might still get away with it. "I wonder … if I gave this story to George … whether she would agree."

"You could try. After all, the letters, I assume, belong to her, and you can't consider the copyright on anonymous letters, not unless someone admits to writing them. If she would

agree … but I still find it hard to understand how anyone could keep up such a sustained campaign against someone they claimed to love."

"Maybe if it's all brought out into the open that question might get easier to answer. Maybe he's done something similar to someone else. Maybe he realised he'd made a mistake and this way he could end the marriage without it looking like it was anyone's fault."

They could speculate but he found Ford Bowman's behavior as puzzling as Fiona obviously did.

Jake Moss rang him about nine in the evening to say, "We got on to a man called Craig Mello in Miles. He admits to knowing Dann, they were together in a station before he got sent to Miles. But he claims to know nothing about any letters."

"Does he know Bowman?"

"Says everyone does."

"And Mello? Could that be Italian?"

"S'pose so. You think that made them mates?"

"Who knows. So what next?"

"I've passed it on. They may say it isn't serious, not if we can't prove there was an arrangement."

"Mmmm, well, he can't stay here. Can he come to Winville for the moment? Leave Glen with me for a few days."

And maybe a chance to do some hard thinking might convince Dann to come clean. Dennis was usually prepared to give kids another chance, unless they'd done something truly awful, but Dann wasn't a kid and he couldn't have someone in the station who was willing to sell evidence on. And Dennis was certain money came into it.

Next morning, after Troy Dann had left for Winville, Dennis showed Glen Archer around the station and suggested he go out and drive round town to get his bearings. As Dann had been going out to his car Fiona had been coming in to the station. She was on her way to Winville with the children to get a few last minute things for school and then to take them to a movie and she wondered if Dennis or his new constable needed anything. She said to Troy, "I'm sorry we're losing you but do confide in Inspector Moss and get everything sorted out. He's a decent man." She wasn't surprised when the young man simply ignored her and went on out to his car with his head down.

And he showed no willingness to confide in Jake Moss who ended up saying. "Well, you and your mate Craig will be dealt with by Internal Investigations and we will also want to know if any other officers in Miles have been compromised by a relationship with Ford Bowman. So tell me, why did you ring Miles in the first place?"

Dann ignored the question rather than try to justify anything. Finally Moss went on, musingly, "Your pal got Miles and you got Buckton and you didn't think that was fair. You wanted something more exciting than a few stray cows and a Saturday drunk? Is that it?"

He thought he'd struck the truth by the way Dann looked at him and then down again. "So you told your mate about the letters and how your boss thought Ford Bowman might've written them and he wanted the lab to check them. And your mate was worried when he heard who your boss was and said he'd get back to you. So he got on to Bowman who said he'd like them back and would be generous. And like some poor bloody idiot you thought you could get away with it because anonymous letters are a fact of life and nobody takes them very seriously—except the recipient."

Then he sat back and waited. At last Dann said "They were only letters."

"Yep. Only letters. But they were also evidence. And tampering with evidence is a serious matter." That they were only potential evidence in a potential crime might muddy the waters. "But it really comes down to trust. And you have abused that trust."

If Constable Dann took this on board he gave no sign of it.

*

DI Carlton Payne, unaware of the upset in Buckton, rang one evening to tell Dennis about his interviews with Sam Hoysted and Doug Towner. Walsh listened carefully and finally said, “It’s going to be hard to get Doug while it’s such an indirect involvement.”

“I know. I thought of trying to do a deal with Doug. If he’ll give us details of his Swiss bank account we won’t proceed with any case against him for the disposal of Willy Jackson but my wife said Ruby and Willy are more important than the Hoysteds’ money.”

“They are. But what you really want from Doug is the connection between him and those bloody Fergusons.”

“I know. But Doug says he doesn’t know any Fergusons. So we’ll probably try to get him on failing to investigate Willy Jackson’s disappearance.”

“I think there’s another crime you might be able to get him on. When Frank Obidini was shot at Japana I always wondered if it was Vic Brewster who shot him, not suicide, but I didn’t know then Brewster was a crack shot.”

“I don’t see how we could prove anything now, Dennis.”

“No. But the thing is—Frank Obidini’s documents ended up in Townsville with one of Doug’s relatives. It may be too late to get him on that but you could put it to him, what arrangement he made with Vic Brewster.”

“So where is Brewster?”

“Don’t know. But I’ll bet he still has some connection to guns. I’ve always wondered if that was why he ended up in a place like Japana when he knew nothing about cattle, he was there to train the men to shoot, and I’ll bet Henry Neumann offered him a good deal to train him some mercenaries.”

Dennis might be right in thinking that but Carl Payne didn’t think he would get very far with trying to pin anything on to a rich man in South Africa; and so long after the fact. He made himself a note to get his junior to look for Vic Brewster but to Dennis he said only, “We’ll see what comes out at the inquest on the Jacksons. They are going to be presented to the Coroner together so that might get us some resources and a spotlight on that farm.”

With that Dennis thought he could be content.

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One person was delighted when he heard the date for the inquest on Willy and Ruby Jackson. Sergeant John Applegarth at Garramindi. It had always bothered him slightly, in quiet moments, the way people could slip through the cracks so easily. Whenever he was out and about he made a point of asking people for anything they remembered about the Jacksons. People had begun to forget there ever had been any Jacksons in Garramindi. So he didn’t get much but the memories passed on to him were positive. And when he broadened his questions, pointing out that Willy’s wife and his two friends Wayne Booth and young Ranke had also died several people said they had never seen anything suspicious but when he put it all together it did begin to sound ‘a bit much’. But what did they know about the two men who had bought that farm from Wayne Booth? They almost invariably said, ‘Nothing much’ or ‘Never met them’ though one old lady said, ‘But Ruby must’ve known something’. John agreed with this but he thought it was probably ‘suspected’ not ’known’.

“Would she have shared her suspicions with anyone, do you think?”

Although everyone he put this to said they would think about it, he wasn’t very hopeful. Ruby Jackson had lived a very quiet life, going to the shops, keeping a few hens, chatting with her neighbours. But she had not joined things like the CWA, nor did she ever go in the pub. It wasn’t looking good. But one woman said, “If Ruby told anyone anything surely it would be her daughter-in-law, Jill?”

So what had happened to all Jill’s papers after she died in a road accident? It seemed most likely her parents had cleared out her house. But old Mr and Mrs King said vaguely that

although there were still several boxes of their daughter's things stored in their garage they didn't think she had kept very much in the way of papers.

"Did she keep a diary?"

"Only her work diary."

"We sold her furniture," Mrs King put in. "I don't think we looked through every drawer. But Jill was very tidy. She didn't leave things lying around."

"How did she get along with her mother-in-law?"

"She wasn't very polite about Ruby, I'm afraid."

The Kings seemed to find this admission faintly embarrassing but Applegarth's memory of Jill Jackson was of a woman who didn't take fools kindly. Though whether she also blamed Ruby for the fact that her husband had had a secret relationship with other men was a mystery. And John could see that Jill might not have been the first person Ruby would have turned to when her son went missing.

And yet … Ruby probably continued to believe that Jill knew, or had a good idea, what had happened to Willy Jackson. For a moment he found himself wondering if Jill Jackson had got so tired of her mother-in-law's importuning that she had done something nasty to her. Then he dismissed the idea. Whoever had killed Ruby Jackson had placed a big boulder over the makeshift grave and it had taken Grant and Dennis considerable effort to move that rock. Jill Jackson could not have done it.

He asked if they would mind him having a look at what they had kept from their daughter's house. "Help yourself," old Mr King said. "We still think there was something suspicious about Jill's death and some of the people she knew but I suppose it's too late to find anything out now."

John hoped it wasn't too late but he was not about to give them any comfort. It was certainly possible Jill Jackson had got caught up in something she couldn't deal with but he also privately thought she hadn't cared very much about her husband and had tried to turn his disappearance to her financial advantage.

So he wasn't very hopeful that he would find anything about her mother-in-law in the couple of cartons he took back to the station with him to look through in spare moments. And his initial exploration did not bring him any joy. There were several recipe books, clippings from women's magazines on cleaning household items, a couple of leaflets on cattle diseases, a bundle of Christmas cards which he set aside for reading, a packet of unopened handkerchiefs, some old records from her time running baby clinics, a packet of photos which he set aside, several gardening magazines, several blouses and scarves, some letters and dockets from various shops which he also set aside, a couple of vases wrapped in newspaper, a Fay Weldon novel, a couple of vet bills, a pair of pretty white shoes (perhaps from her wedding day), and several copies of *The Financial Review* which he also set aside.

Perhaps there would be clues but he wondered if he was clever enough to find them. Probably the coroner would find Death by Misadventure on both bodies and there the matter would sit. But he sat down to start on the Christmas cards in a positive frame of mind. After all, Dennis Walsh had been an example in never giving up. For a few minutes he sat there with his mind far away from the cards, thinking back to the time when Dennis had arrived in Buckton and he had been so scared of him that he had seriously thought of giving up on the police. And how he had gradually realised that Dennis wanted good work and initiative … And then he went back further to his time with Joe Bosch after Ricky Olson had scarpered, unable to cope any longer with Bosch. He had understood that. Joe never lifted a finger if he could help it … and discouraged his junior from doing anything helpful. No wonder Dennis had been horrified when he arrived in Buckton. And now old Joe had been charged with cruelty to an animal. He pulled himself up abruptly from his trip down memory lane and went back to the job in hand.

He made lists of the names of the people who had sent cards, sometimes to Jill and Willy, sometimes to Jill alone, but he came to the end of the pile without feeling much the wiser. There was nothing from Ruby and no one mentioned her.

He next took up the vet bills. It was interesting that Jill would pay to take her cat all the way to Vince Bromby in Buckton. She must have been very fond of her cat. Perhaps she even liked cats better than people. Ruby Jackson had had a cat. Had the two women ever talked about cats? Had Jill ever confided anything in Bromby? He didn't know where Bromby had gone when he left Buckton but presumably to another veterinary practice.

The letters might be more useful than people writing 'Hope you and Will will have a great Christmas' but he had a call from the local pub so he put the letters in a drawer and went out.

It was two days before he could get back to reading the letters and he soon realised they were all old so perhaps the newer letters had been stored somewhere else or she had got more rigorous about what she kept. He made notes on dates and the senders. A few were about baby problems, two he thought were from people she had gone to school with, one was offering her a good investment, a couple were from people travelling overseas telling her about their experiences, and one which he put aside was from her sister Joanna. This one was obviously written to her when she'd said she was going to marry Willy Jackson. She wrote 'I know you know what you want but if you don't mind me saying so I don't think Willy's the man to help you get it. He will always be led by the stronger will. This may be you and perhaps that will be good for him – but will it be good for you?' John wondered how Jill had responded to this.

More importantly, could he track down Joanna and see if Jill had ever confided in her after Willy disappeared or after Ruby apparently left Garramindi. Several people told him Joanna had gone to Brisbane, which he knew from the address on her letter, but what was her married name and was she still at that address all these years later? In this he was in luck because his next-door neighbour, old Mrs Carey, said she thought she'd married a Norton and there was a D & J Norton in the Brisbane phonebook at that address.

He rang rather diffidently and asked for Joanna Norton. He explained that the joint inquest on Willy and Ruby Jackson would come up in Brisbane in March and he wondered if Jill had ever shared anything with her after they disappeared.

Mrs Norton after first expressing surprise that it had taken police all this time to do something said she didn't think she could help. "I don't like to be rude about the dead but Jill didn't have much time for either of them."

"Why do you think that was?"

"Well, I don't know if you knew them but she soon found that Willy preferred men and she blamed his mum for clinging to him. She desperately wanted a family of her own and Willy was always away when she was at home. She was sure he did it on purpose. He was a good pilot and always got work but somehow most of his jobs seemed to take him to western Queensland. She was sure he did it on purpose. So she was planning to have an affair but I don't know if she did. She got involved with Wayne Booth but I think that was only a business arrangement."

As she spoke he wondered if it was significant that that Fay Weldon novel seemed to be about a woman expecting a baby.

"Do you think she knew what happened at that farm the day Willy brought his plane down and got killed?" This was maybe a bit blunt but he hoped she was interested in getting some answers too.

"She was scared, I know that, scared of the men Willy had got mixed up with. Mum said she changed completely, she didn't want to drive at night, she got a nervous habit of always looking round, like she thought someone was waiting in hiding to grab her."

"Did she ever say anything specific, do you remember?"

"After Jill had her accident my sister Suzanne told me she'd had a letter from Jill saying that if anything ever happened to her to go and tell the police that the men on that farm that killed Willy were hit men from north Queensland, that they were lying low after a job up north. She said how could Willy be so stupid as to get mixed up with men like that but she thought they had offered him good money and then they had killed him so as not to have to pay up. But I don't know if I believe that. Jill was pretty down-to-earth but occasionally she could get carried away and tell you some wild story."

"Would you be able to give me your sister's contact details? It would be interesting to know if she kept that letter. Do you think she ever went to the police?"

"No. I'm sure she didn't. Like me, she just thought Jill had gone over the top about something and would soon calm down."

He noted down Suzanne Johansen's phone number and got on to her later that evening. Mrs Johansen agreed that she had got such a letter but said she hadn't taken it seriously and her dad had told her police thought Jill had swerved to avoid a wallaby and had gone into a tree.

He asked the all-important question. "Do you still have that letter?"

She didn't respond to this, saying instead, "You don't believe she was serious, do you, all that stuff about hitmen out at Prickly Creek, I think someone was feeding her a line, don't you?"

"Maybe. But both Willy Jackson and his mother were murdered, so there was someone in the mix who didn't mind to do something nasty to the people he didn't like."

"I guess … well, I'll have a look but don't get your hopes up."

"Would you mind if the man who is investigating the Jackson deaths came to see you? His name is Carlton Payne." Strictly speaking Payne was only involved because of the possible connection to the Plowman family.

Suzanne Johansen said she didn't mind but that she didn't get home till around six most days. When John hung up he felt a faint trickle of excitement. Maybe there were clues where no one else had looked. And could Joanna be right when she said Willy Jackson was killed so they didn't have to pay him?

His own fingers felt clumsy as he typed out an e-mail and sent it off to DI Payne.

Case No. 3: Where there's a Will

Bill Borrie had run the Coolibah Hotel in Buckton for so many years and his father before him that no one could remember the hotel not being a Borrie hotel. But as Bill had never married nor had children he had turned the hotel into a co-operatively-owned business and named Emma Doig as the licensee. Everyone working there at the time had received a part share, the largest shares going to Emma and the long-time barman George Johnson. If anyone left they were required to sell their share back to the others because Bill didn't want absentee shareholders. Since then the co-op had sometimes employed people in the normal way but the shareholders could decide to grant them a share after a certain time.

Bill had been growing increasingly frail and forgetful and it didn't really surprise anyone when he was hospitalised. People were sympathetic. Bill was almost an institution in Buckton, if a rather retiring one. Only the current helper in the bar, Pauline Scully, wasn't happy with the way things were going. She told her husband that she had asked Bill to leave her a share of the hotel because she thought she deserved to be on the same footing as the others. She told her husband that Bill had promised but now he was going to die and nothing had been done.

"Maybe the others can organise it," Chad said vaguely.

"He's still the boss. They listen to him."

"Not for much longer."

"And that won't be any good because they talk about keeping things the way Bill wanted. So I'm going to go round to see Bill and if he doesn't do something—you know what? I'm going to resign. That'll teach 'em a lesson. They really need me. And they won't be able to find anyone else. And I'll tell everyone what a skinflint Bill was."

Chad was unhappy about this. He had always liked Bill, perhaps seeing in him some of his own indecisiveness, and he didn't want his wife calling Bill names. But he said nothing.

What Bill said to Pauline, if anything, was only relayed through Pauline's version. She came back from the hospital saying Bill was hopeless and she wasn't going to be treated like some girl that was only there to look cute when she'd worked like a navvy and Bill needn't think she was going to put up with it.

"You aren't going to go to Dinny Walsh are you?" Chad was nervous when his wife was on the warpath.

"Of course not! Don't be stupid. I've handed in my notice so let them do what they like. They'll be sorry. And when they come crawling to me to ask me to stay on—it'll be on *my* terms. You'll see."

"When do you finish up?" Chad wasn't sure he really wanted Pauline at home telling him what to do. He was enjoying pottering round on the few acres they had got from old Dan Goodrick.

"Next Friday. George said they would give me a week's pay. So that'll teach them."

It might. But George managed to line up a temporary barman in Darren Lockwood who said he'd done a bit of bar-tending in his student days and thought it would be a good way to meet people round town. George sent ads to several papers and then went round to see Bill to tell him what had happened. But Sr Martin as she came into the ward with him said, "I'm afraid he's not responding but talk to him, he might still be listening."

George sat down beside the comatose figure and shared things but old Mr Borrie gave no sign that he'd heard. Unexpectedly George found tears coming to his eyes. He and Bill had worked together for more than forty years and the future suddenly seemed to be missing a vital part. At last he took the old man's hand, gripped it briefly, and said, "Thanks for everything, Bill, they've been good years."

The old man lingered on another five days before slipping away quietly.

Emma Doig, when she heard, said, "If we had a flag I would fly it at half mast."

Although Bill had had less and less to do with the daily running of the hotel it still seemed to leave a gaping hole. For several days the pub was a subdued place and patrons hardly liked to have cheerful conversations over a drink.

And when Bill's will was read it was found that he had added a codicil just before Charles Mather retired to say that if Pauline Scully and Kristen Low were still with the hotel next Christmas they were to be granted shares in the hotel.

Pauline Scully immediately tried to claim that Bill had meant this Christmas just passed but Sonia Lockwood, who had heard stories from her husband, said quietly that the will made it clear that it would be the Christmas after Bill's death so there was nothing to be done and young Kristy would have to remain in Buckton employed at the hotel if she wanted to benefit, even though she had been thinking of leaving Buckton for brighter pastures.

It was Chad Scully who took the brunt of his wife's fury. And her aunt back in Buckton and ensconced in Don Whelan's cottage, rubbed it in by saying she could have got control of the hotel if she had just hung in there and that she had the brains of a chook. This went round town and came to the ears of Emma Doig.

She often went and had dinner with Jack Alexander of an evening. She knew Jack had always been keen on her and although she wasn't interested in re-marrying she always enjoyed his company. Jack toyed with the idea of selling his carpet and tile shop every so often but never got around to doing anything about it.

"You know they're saying that Pauline could've got control of the pub, don't you? That she tried to persuade Bill to give her part control, and it was only because Bill was a mean old cuss that she didn't get anything?"

"That's nonsense. And she knows it. She worked there for what? Two years?"

"Not quite that."

"And if she badmouths Bill in my hearing I'll give her a piece of my mind."

She couldn't really see Jack doing that. He rarely confronted people. But she said she thought a lot of people would feel the same.

"I remember Bill's dad," Jack went on more reminiscently. "The older boy, Geoff, was killed in the war. People always said he was the apple of his dad's eye and he was disappointed that it was Bill who would get the hotel. I think Bill took a long time getting over that feeling of being second best."

"I wonder if that's why he never married, that he didn't feel he had anything to offer?"

"Maybe, but it's easy to get in a rut as the years go by, and now the family is gone."

She wondered if he was thinking of himself as well as Bill …

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The disappearance of Shirlene Paton gave Dennis Walsh many moments of feeling that he had somehow failed, that there was something he should've seen and hadn't, that he should've done and didn't. It was partly the problems with his constable which had distracted him. But he couldn't dismiss the sense that he had failed someone in need.

No one had responded to Winville's Alert and they had contacted Toowoomba to contact the woman's mother and husband in the search for her present whereabouts. But with nothing to go on except her mother's certainty that Morgan Paton had somehow done something to his wife, the search had quietly faded. The only line of enquiry left seemed to be the woman's car and Reid Strohling and his assistant had gone over it meticulously. They had found a $10 note down behind the back seat and a slip of paper in the book from the glovebox which said 'Words don't always mean the things you think they mean'.

Reid had also got a local panelbeater to look at the car, front and back, and the man said he thought the car had been rear-ended twice. It suggested that someone had been playing a cat-and-mouse game on that road. But there was no sign of damage on the husband's car.

Reid rarely made suggestions but he advised Constable Hassan to check on garages for work done on a front bumper and possibly a grill. "He didn't mess around, that fellow, so I think he would've shown signs of being in an accident."

Sam Hassan had conscientiously contacted a large number of garages but without getting a helpful response. Like Dennis he felt they must be missing something. A woman couldn't simply disappear after a road accident. He got a photo of Mrs Paton from her mother and put it in the *Winville Courier* but either the right people didn't read the local paper or no one recognised her. When he asked Dennis if he'd heard anything more or had any ideas Dennis said, "Get it in more papers, particularly *The Chronicle*. And it might be worth tracking down her last school. Why did she resign? Was someone hassling her?"

It didn't seem very much. There must be more that they could do. But Dennis knew he was too strongly influenced by the feeling that the husband had something to do with his wife's disappearance and as he couldn't very well go to Toowoomba and give the man the third degree it just remained as a nagging intuition.

Hassan got back to him a few days later to say that when Mrs Paton resigned she gave as her reason that she would be leaving Toowoomba soon. Dennis said 'interesting' and that

it could be worth talking with some of her work colleagues. Sam said apologetically that he was finishing work on Friday so the case would go to Ben Waters. “Still, could be worth just asking Toowoomba to ask around. I can’t see a woman abandoning a nearly new car unless she was rolling in money and I thought it was the husband that had the dough.”

She might have saved from her salary, she might have inherited something, or there might be other money somewhere in the mix. But Dennis accepted that other people didn’t necessarily feel the same about waste as he did. Still, a car was more than an unwanted blouse … “Sam, it could be worth finding out how she paid for the car … did her husband buy it for her, did she borrow to pay for it.”

Sam could see that there might still be insights to be gleaned and said he would do what he could before he finished up. But he, like Dennis, was still inclined to be suspicious of the husband. And if the wife hoped to get right away from him would he have done something to stop her? And if he had not used his own car then did he have access to another vehicle? Reid had said the prints on the rear door were fairly small so probably not Morgan Paton. “Dennis, is it possible he came with someone and in someone else’s car?”

“Could be. Did he have someone else in his life?”

“I guess they can find out.”

Toowoomba was a lot bigger than Winville but not so big that its people were mere anonymous specks whirling in space …

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Fiona had taken the children to Winville and left Elise at the library while she went with Rob to meet Mr Sansom. He was a pleasant middle-aged man who sat down at the piano and played a few bars of the ‘The First Noel’ then sat back and asked Rob to sing. He nodded several times then asked the boy what he liked singing best. Rob said folk songs, carols and ‘funny songs’. Mr Sampson asked him to ‘la’ the scale several times while he thought on the best way forward.

It was a voice of captivating beauty but too delicate to be part of the hurly-burly of a children’s choir. Time and the right exercises would strengthen it but its delicacy was part of its beauty. He didn’t want to try to turn the boy into just another attractive boy soprano. Here, he felt with secret excitement, they had something unique.

At last he said, “Would you like to work towards making your own CD of your favourite songs?”

Rob said cautiously that he would. He was very thankful that the man had not said anything about ‘performing’. “Then I’ll give you some exercises to work on to help your breathing and when you come next month bring me a list of your favourite songs so we can develop an interesting program.”

He had vivid memories of working towards his piano examinations as a teenager and the set pieces which he had often hated. “Do you sing for anyone?”

“Only my animals.”

Mr Sansom smiled. He had been thinking of school or possibly Sunday School but Rob’s answer seemed to be a useful insight. “Then perhaps we could make a CD of mainly animal songs?”

Rob was glad Mr Sansom seemed to understand.

And Sansom when he got home went rooting in his boxes of old LPs. “What are you looking for?” his wife asked.

“I’m sure I’ve got a Donovan here somewhere. And what would you regard as a ‘funny song’?”

She was surprised by the question but finally said, “I remember there was a song when I was young called ‘The Pommy Jackaroo’ which I thought was hilarious. And then there’s

the song about the animals going into the ark and the unicorn gets left behind … and Beetle Bomb … and older things like 'There's a Hole in the Bucket'. Why do you ask?"

"This kid came to me this morning, his mum thought he might like a few lessons. And the most amazing voice. He said he liked funny songs so I wondered what would qualify as funny."

Diane Sansom knew something about mothers who believed their children had amazing voices but it was interesting to hear her husband say that about a child. "And you really think you've found your Aled Jones?"

"No-o-o … I think I've found a little boy with a wonderful voice but who doesn't want to be a singer. I saw the way his face lit up when I asked him about his animals. So I suggested we work towards making a CD once he has better control of his voice."

"But children can get over their shyness, their stage fright."

"They can. But they need to want to perform to work at it. That's not Rob Walsh or not as I read him." It would sound fanciful if he said there was something fey about the boy, that he perhaps lived in a little world of his own only entering other people's worlds as needed.

"Rob Walsh? So how did he come to you?"

"He's Sergeant Walsh's son, over at Buckton, his mum brought him."

"You're kidding? Sergeant Walsh? Surely he wouldn't be encouraging his son to sing?"

"I don't know him, or hardly at all, but I suspect there's a magnificent baritone hidden away there, though I wouldn't know how to get it to reveal itself … but I think they heard young Rob singing songs to his animals and thought he might enjoy some lessons." But he could understand his wife's surprise. Rob Walsh *was* an unexpected child to belong to Dennis Walsh.

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Dennis and Fiona were sorry that Sam Hassan and his family were leaving for Cunnamulla but it would be nice for them to live close to Ali's mother and it would broaden Sam's experience in the Force. Dennis made a point of meeting up with Ben Waters on his next day in Winville and sizing him up. They went over the case of the missing woman and young Waters said apologetically, "How much time do you think we should spend on it? Maybe she really did choose to disappear."

There was no simple answer to this. If she had chosen to disappear then she was no longer police business except for the matter of her car. If she had not chosen to disappear then they needed to find her.

"Good question. I wish I knew. But get her photo and a short piece in *The Chronicle* and talk to a couple of her work colleagues, see if she ever said she was worried or frightened about anyone. I don't see her just abandoning her car and it looked like someone'd been dragged from the driver's seat. But except that her husband probably didn't like her walking out on him we haven't got any villains in the piece."

"Some kids hooning?"

"The only pests out at Burleigh are the Evans' kids and I had a look at their car. Someone might've been cutting through that way … but it doesn't explain her disappearance."

Constable Waters didn't have any ideas to offer but said, "What should we do with her car then?"

"Get on to her mother and ask her what she wants done. The other thing is—has Mrs Paton accessed any of her bank accounts, has she used her credit card."

Waters said he could check that. And when he got back to Dennis he said cheerfully, "She has been using her credit card so I guess it looks like she's okay."

"Where did she use it?"

"Dalby."

This was a surprise and briefly Dennis wondered if she had been given a ride by someone going through to Dalby. Then he said, "Well, check with the businesses where her card was used, get them a photo of her and check identity. Easy enough for her card to get pinched or sold on."

Ben Waters said to his boss that he thought Dennis was making work and was it really worth going to all this trouble. Inspector Moss was inclined to believe that Dennis did at times make work. But he said, "Worth just checking. If it all checks out then you can close the file."

"And then we can charge her for towing her car?"

"Good thinking."

Ben Waters got on to police in Dalby and asked them to check out the three businesses where the card had been used, after faxing them a picture of the missing woman. All three said they didn't think it was the same woman although one hedged by saying they had been busy and he hadn't taken much notice.

"So we've probably got a stolen credit card," Jake said wryly. "But have we got anything worse?"

Waters didn't try to answer the question. "What should we do now?"

"I'm going to send you out to Dalby with all we've got. Ask around and see if you can get a good description of the imposter, whether she was seen in a car, I don't s'pose she was kind enough to leave us some prints. Check hotels, motels, garages. She might be long gone but it's worth a try. And was she with someone?"

"And we can't say the card was stolen if she hasn't listed it as stolen, can we?"

"No. Worse luck. I think I'll try and get her mother to list her as Missing. That'll make it easier to track whoever got hold of her handbag."

When he rang Shirlene Paton's mother, Annie Salter, she immediately said, "It's that man, isn't it? I always knew he was no good."

"Another woman has been using her credit card in Dalby. There's no chance she could have ever lent a friend a card, is there?"

"That's absurd! She would never do that. I always knew that man would wreck her life. I tried to dissuade her from marrying him. I don't think she could see what sort of louse he really was. And now she's dead—"

"We don't know that, Mrs Salter. At the moment we just want to find the woman using her card and find out how she got hold of it."

"I'll bet it's his latest girl, he always has girls, they go crazy over him and then they find out what he's really like. But I'll bet he's got one to go round and pretend she's Shirlene. You've got to put a stop to it, Mr Moss."

"Does your daughter know anyone in Dalby?"

"She might. She knows lots of people. But she never told me about anyone in Dalby. She didn't talk to me about her friends."

Moss had the furtive thought that Shirlene Paton might be wanting to get away from her mother as well as her husband. But he only said they would look into it further. And to Waters he said, "Get a list of all the schools where she's filled in. It's just possible she taught in Dalby some time."

The list, though, had her doing relief teaching only in and around Toowoomba.

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Ben Waters didn't mind to drive out to Dalby. It was a day away from Winville and no one watching over him. It wasn't that he had a problem with Jake or the work but he disliked Brad Merrill quite strongly. Jake, he knew, put up with him. But then Jake was unaware of just how often Merrill slid work on to him and the other constables, usually with a casual

'You'd best handle this' sometimes with 'I'm pretty busy today' tacked on. Ben was sometimes tempted to snort 'Busy! My fat foot!' He had never yet seen Merrill busy.

He checked in with a Sergeant Turner when he arrived, then went round the three businesses he had listed. One of the shopkeepers still said he wasn't sure. But interestingly the two other businesses gave different descriptions of the woman who had come in. One said she was a redhead, the other that she was an ash blonde. Mrs Paton had brown hair. Waters wasn't sure what to think. Were two women using the same card? Had one of the shops muddled her with someone else?

He asked if they had noticed anything else about her. One shop said she was freckled, the other that she was wearing heavy make-up. One said she had on a nice watch, the other that she didn't notice a watch but the woman was wearing both a wedding ring and an engagement ring.

Waters was reluctant to jump to any conclusions but the thought that the woman might be a quick-change artist did occur to him. The difficulty in going around possible places she might have stayed was in knowing what to ask. Nowhere recognised the photograph. But questions about a possible redhead or blondie were too vague to rely on. He got mentions of both a blonde and a woman of about forty with red hair. He got all the details he could. But he wondered if the exercise had been useful.

He might have returned to Winville in a despondent mood but the woman he had spoken to who remembered a blonde rang him and said she had mentioned his visit to a customer who thought, only thought, she had seen a woman like that getting into a sporty little white car with a shopping bag. The top was down and the woman had tied a red scarf over her hair. It struck Ben Waters as a very flamboyant way to carry out an impersonation and he was half-inclined to dismiss it. But he asked if there were any more details to add to the picture. The customer couldn't tell him what make of car but she said the car looked like it had been in a slight accident, the front bumper was a bit crumpled.

Constable Waters hurriedly changed his mind about the car's relevance and asked if the woman would be prepared to make a statement. She said she could if it would help. Turner was not wild about being drawn into the case. But if the woman was still going round in her white sports job ripping off businesses then the sooner she was found the better.

But the car, briefly seen outside that shop, then seemed to have disappeared. No one had seen it elsewhere round town or on the open road.

"A phantom woman in a phantom car," Waters said to Moss when he was back in Winville.

"Well, unless she was just an opportunistic thief and thought Dalby would not be on the lookout for stolen cards, then we now know there *is* another woman in the mix. Pity that woman didn't know the make of the car. But with luck someone else will come forward."

"So what should I do next?" As he said it he thought he had never yet heard Merrill say 'what can I do'; it was always about other people doing.

"Just let Toowoomba know about the car and the credit card."

"Okay. And … would there be any chance I could fill in in Buckton instead of Glen?"

Moss looked at him in surprise. "You're supposed to be handling Traffic here. Why do you want to go to Buckton?"

Moss had no objection to his young officers spending time in Buckton, he even thought it was probably good for them, but Waters had never before displayed any interest in Buckton.

Waters found the straightforward question a bit disconcerting and obviously thought of saying something vague like 'for the experience' but at last he seemed to decide to be frank. "It's Brad Merrill, I'm afraid. I'm not coping with him very well."

"Any particular reason?"

Jake was well aware that most of his constables believed Merrill didn't pull his weight, but none of them had been prepared to say so to their boss.

Waters hesitated before saying, "He said to me before I went to Dalby 'are you still on about that fucking dame? You'd be better to leave it' or something like that. He did call her a 'fucking dame' and I don't like to hear him talking like that."

Jake knew his constable came from a strict religious background which he thought was all to the good if it made a young man hard-working, honest, and conscientious. But it would be hard to find a station where no one ever used four-letter-words. He couldn't take Merrill to task for that. But he could understand why Waters found Merrill even harder to take than his other constables did …

"Is it his language or his lack of respect for a possible victim?"

"Both. Everyone we try to help he does down in some way." He thought of leaving it at that, dobbing would not make him popular in the station, but finally thought he had to go further. "I know it sounds bad but it's like he doesn't have to do anything for anybody because they're not worth worrying about."

"And you think you would be happier working with Walsh?" Jake said rather drily. He felt sure Walsh regularly used some choice words to refer to some of his local villains.

"It's because … well, when he comes here everything is important to him, even some little problem that Brad would ignore. I like it that he doesn't just dismiss people."

Jake wondered if Waters was building up an unrealistic picture of Walsh simply because he was seeing him in comparison with Merrill. But he had gained considerable respect for Walsh himself over the years. At last he said, "You're going to have to learn to work with Brad. You will meet similar people in every sizable station. But you can swop with Glen every Wednesday for the next couple of weeks."

Wednesdays were rarely filled with traffic accidents and he had hoped that Waters with his good mathematical skills would be the best man to take over from Constable Hassan. Waters said, "When do I start?"

"This Wednesday. I'll let Glen know. But you'll have to arrange with him about using the flat there."

*

Dennis Walsh ran into Sister Martin down town one day and asked after Nella Bowman. Sr Martin said she was still in Buckton but was planning to move back to Warwick to stay with her mother. "I know your young man has gone but I haven't heard any more about it."

"Not up to me. But I never like to see young ones go off the rails like that." It had made him wonder if Ford Bowman had managed to corrupt any other young men.

So far as he knew Troy Dann was still in Winville while Internal Investigations decided on the seriousness of his offence.

"So what will happen about those awful letters?"

"They've got on to Miles to get the story from Troy's mate there. And I'm hoping they can link Ford Bowman to the attempt to bribe two officers. It won't be the same as getting him for writing the letters but it is a serious charge. So I'm hoping there's texts or something to link him to the two constables."

The problem would probably be that it would come down to Bowman's word against young Craig Mello and Bowman was a popular local professional man. Or at least popular with some locals. He hoped the investigation would not be done by some old fossil who thought women made a fuss about 'nothing' or who refused to believe that men could send poison pen letters.

"I would like him to be publicly shown up as the writer of those letters. It still seems like a form of torture to me."

"If all else fails we can get George to do an article for the *Bugle*."

Jeannie Martin accepted this as a serious response, after all Dennis wasn't much in to jokes, but she privately doubted whether the *Buckton Bugle* ever made much impact on its readers.

"If you think that will help."

He would've liked the whole focus to be on Ford Bowman and the letters but he accepted that that wasn't the way it was going to happen. And the sad thing was that Troy Dann and Craig Mello, tempted off the straight and narrow, were going to end up without their careers while Bowman, as a dentist, would probably be seen as too valuable to lose.

*

As Mr Vic Brewster had been considerate enough to remain in Queensland in the years after leaving the Japana feed lots it was child's play for Jay Barron to find him and pass the details on to Carlton Payne.

Mr Brewster was partner in a popular sporting goods store in Ipswich going by the name of Rod & Gun. Payne took the information and pondered on the possibility of Mr Brewster telling him anything. He was certainly not going to admit to shooting anybody, regardless of what Dennis Walsh or anyone else believed, but he might be willing to share with police what he had done with Frank Obidini's papers.

"I think I'll take a little jaunt out west." Jay hardly regarded Ipswich as 'out west' but then Payne spoke of the Darling Downs as being next thing to the Outback even though, Jay privately thought, he actually enjoyed his country visits. "It probably doesn't matter how much more dirt we collect on Doug Towner, he's not going to do more time, but it just might lead us to another Plowman relative."

Jay had prepared a large family 'tree' for the Plowman family and had put beside various names aliases and nicknames as well as possible whereabouts. But even with this they knew there were probably aliases they didn't know and connections they had not uncovered.

Barron had a lot of respect for Payne, for the meticulous care he brought to his work, and he also enjoyed the feeling that he was privy to secret information. But there was a downside. There were almost certainly more police who had accepted money from a crime family. They both felt reasonably certain retired Superintendent Milward Dutton had been killed by the family for wanting more money from them—or, just possibly, threatening to blow the whistle on them. He was listed as Missing but no one had seen or heard from him in years.

Carlton Payne accepted guns as an unfortunate necessity in the police but he took no pleasure in going into a place where guns reigned supreme. It was a big shop and busy. Possibly quite a few locals were as obsessed with guns as the proprietors. He had seen several photos of Brewster though as a younger man and approached the one who looked most likely.

"Hullo. Are you Vic Brewster?"

The man said he was without looking terribly enthusiastic. Payne looked the sort of man who would rather play chess. Payne showed his identification and said, "Is there a quiet place where we can talk?"

"If any of our customers have done something crazy it isn't our fault. We jump through all the hoops."

"It's not about a customer."

Brewster led him through into a small office, sat down and waited. He might've been lean and lithe when he was a youthful champion but now he was over-weight with a florid face and a double chin.

"It's about the time you were in charge of the Japana feed lots near Dinawadding."

Brewster seemed to find it an effort to throw his mind back that far. “Yep. What of it?”

“A man called Frank Obidini was shot dead while you were there. Remember him?”

“Vaguely. Didn’t he go nuts and shoot himself?”

“Maybe. So what did you do with his documents?”

“What documents?”

“His passport, work permit, tax information, CV, everything.”

Brewster looked blank for a minute or two. Then he said, “I think there was an inquest so I must’ve handed over the documents to somebody.”

“Who?”

“How would I know?”

“You must’ve handed them to a specific person. Was it Arthur Leslie?”

“Never heard of him.”

He had asked one leading question. He tried another. “Was it Stephanie Pohl at the front desk in Winville?”

“Who’s she? And it wasn’t a bird.” He looked round the small office as though looking for inspiration. Finally he shook his head. “I’d only be guessing.”

“Well, while you’re thinking, tell me who asked you to turn that place into a gun club?”

“No one did. The fellas just liked to do a bit of shooting. Sometimes I gave them a few tips.”

“Did you check that all the guns were registered?”

“Not my job.”

“Whose job was it?”

“How would I know?”

“You were in charge. You must know.”

“I wasn’t really in charge.”

“Then who was?”

“Can’t remember.”

Payne was reminded for the umpteenth time what a useful asset a poor memory is. “Were you there when a man came from South Africa?”

Brewster considered another vague answer but Payne had seen the faintest of flickers when he said ‘South Africa’. At last he said, “I think you must mean that guy that came out with Sam Hoysted. Don’t remember his name. He walked all round the place. I can’t remember if he talked to me or not.”

“He was keen on guns.”

“Was he? I don’t remember him saying anything.”

“Admiral Henry Neumann.”

“No. Doesn’t ring a bell.”

“Did Doug Towner ever mention him?”

“Doug? No. Why should he?”

“You obviously knew Doug well. How well?”

“I didn’t know he was a crook if that’s what you want to know.”

“Did he come out to the feed lots?”

“I guess he did. Occasionally.”

“What did he do there?”

“Nothing much. We had a cup of tea one time.”

“Did you ever mention Frank Obidini to him?”

“No. Why should I?”

“Someone started a rumour that Frank Obidini was a troublemaker. Was that you?”

"Course not."

"Who do you think it was?"

"No idea."

"Did you think he was a troublemaker?"

"Bit of a wanker but you get all sorts in a place like that."

"So when you cleared out his bedroom what did you do with his things?"

"I don't remember."

"What would be the normal procedure in a case like that?"

"There wasn't any procedure. That place was a bit crazy. I guess the police came and checked, seeing it was suicide."

"Which police?"

"Someone from Winville, I guess."

"Well, was it a junior constable?"

"I don't remember. Not young, I don't think."

"Doug?"

"Doug wouldn't bother. It wasn't his business. Not police business. There was an inquest. Maybe the coroner came and took them."

"Mr Kelso? Mrs Vohland?" There had been a third magistrate in Winville then while Mrs Vohland only did a few hours a week.

"Look, I'm sorry not to be helpful but I don't remember who took the stuff." At the back of his mind was the ever-present knowledge that the owners of gun shops didn't want police regularly sniffing round.

"Frank Obidini's documents, including his passport, ended up in Townsville, they were never returned to his family or the Italian Embassy. They were then used by someone to hide his own identity. So I think you need to do some deep thinking, Mr Brewster, if you don't want to be connected to a case of identity theft."

"But-but—I don't know anything about it."

"Bad memories aren't seen as mitigating circumstances, Mr Brewster, but if you like we can arrange a session with a hypnotist to bring back those buried memories."

Vic Brewster stared at Payne. Then he shook his head vigorously. "No, I don't want you messing round in my head, thank you very much!"

"Why? What else might we find?"

"You won't find any bloody thing so don't even think about it."

Payne hadn't planned to trail the death of Obidini. But now he could see he'd rattled Brewster. "I'm always suspicious of anyone who doesn't want to be hypnotised. I always wonder what they're wanting to keep hidden. In this case I think you wouldn't want a hypnotist asking exactly how Frank Obidini died. It might throw new light on an apparent suicide."

"That's rubbish and you know it. That useless bod went crazy and shot himself. That's it."

"I wonder. But we'll leave it there for the moment. And the minute you remember who you gave those papers to let me know." He handed over his card which Brewster accepted reluctantly.

*

Next time Dennis Walsh ran into George Hickman downtown he said he'd like George to run a story in the *Bugle* about poison pen letters. Hickman ran the little paper as a hobby and a community service but it was sufficiently popular to have enough subscribers to pay its costs. Dennis always thought this was a tribute to George's ability to make a little newsletter lively and informative.

George looked dubious. “Is this about Jeannie Martin’s young cousin? She’s been telling people about it.”

“Jeannie has?” This was a surprise. Sr Martin was a quiet reserved person.

“She called it a form of mental torture and said it shouldn’t be allowed. She got quite hot under the collar when she was telling me about it.”

“We’re hoping to get Ford Bowman on bribing two young officers but I doubt if we’ll be able to get him on the letters. So what I’d like you to do is run a story but without mentioning either husband or wife but just saying it happened in Miles. And tell people if they ever get disgusting letters to bring them straight to us.”

Police might not be able to do anything but just having them on record could be a deterrence in itself. “That’ll keep you busy,” George said drily. “I’ll bet there’s quite a few go around that we never hear about.”

“Could be.”

“Did you hear Hamish MacLeod is getting married?”

“He’s taken his time.” Hamish was in his sixties. “Who’s the lucky woman?”

“She’s Julie Bogg, from over Southbrook way. She was a Hamilton. She’s a widow with three teenage children.”

“So Hamish is hoping for some free labour on the farm?”

George gave that a grin. The MacLeods had a big dairy farm and also reared some vealers. The parents were in their eighties so they might well be glad of some young people round the place. “She grew up on a dairy farm so she knows what she’s getting into. And there’ll be two kids at Buckton High so let’s hope it works out.”

George then said, “Any news on your mystery woman out at Burleigh?”

“Someone’s been using her credit card in Dalby. We’ve never had anyone come forward to say they saw something. But a woman in Dalby said she thought the imposter got into a little white sports car. Can’t be too many of them around.”

“There must be a bit of CCTV there surely? Isn’t that how you caught someone for dumping those Bulgarians?”

Dennis felt like saying ‘I wish’ but only shook his head. “Doesn’t seem to be anything happening with that case. I heard Gordon Bankes has put his farm up for sale.”

He had also heard from Greg Sullivan that they’d got permission to tap Bankes’ phone. He only hoped something would happen before Bankes packed up and left, possibly for somewhere he couldn’t easily be found.

“It still seems bizarre. I don’t think I’ve ever met a Bulgarian. Aren’t they keen on weightlifting over there?”

“It must’ve been Mrs Bankes who was the weightlifter to get those two bodies into and out of the car.”

“Well, there’s nothing like farming to build muscles,” George said cheerfully. “I’ll bet Freda Donnelly could arm-wrestle most of the men round town. And Ellie and Faye were pretty tough in their hey-day.”

*

Constable Archer seemed happy to go back to Winville and let Waters have a day in Buckton. Waters wasn’t wildly popular with his colleagues because Merrill had several times called him a ‘Bible basher’ and a ‘God botherer’; several of them thought this was a prelude to being asked if they ever went to church or whether they would like to attend a Bible study class. Dennis Walsh hadn’t heard any of this and just told Waters to go out and drive round Buckton to get his bearings. “And while you’re here we can have a blitz on cars.”

Brad Merrill had told Waters as soon as he heard he was going to be doing Wednesdays in Buckton, “that old bastard’ll chew you up and spit you out, you know they

call him the ‘Ogre’ don’t you? I’ll bet Troy Dann just manufactured an excuse to get away from him.”

If this had come from someone else Waters might’ve taken it seriously. But he had ceased to take any notice of the things Merrill said. And he thought he would like working in Buckton. It seemed quieter and friendlier than Buckton. Perhaps he was lucky in the first people he met there. And of course Wednesdays were usually quieter than Saturdays.

And in the late afternoon Elise and Robert on their way home from school called into the station. Their father had said something about a ‘new man’ coming so they were motivated by curiosity. Dennis introduced them and asked them what they had been doing in school. Elise immediately said “Fractions” though without tremendous enthusiasm.

Ben Waters immediately said, “Oh, fractions are great fun.”

“Are they? Not the way Mr Ellis teaches them.”

The children just back to school had found two new teachers. Evan Conroy had resigned and gone to live and work on his great-uncles’ property. It didn’t really surprise the principal, Nelson L’Estrange. He had always wondered why Evan had chosen to become a teacher. He was too shy and diffident to enjoy the interaction of a lively classroom. He had always tried hard but the offer from the Barretts had seemed like an escape from a world where he never quite coped.

The trouble, as Elise saw it, was that Mr Ellis was full of noise and bluster but he wasn’t a good teacher. Nothing was presented clearly and yet he seemed to expect instant comprehension from his pupils.

“Can you spare a minute,” Ben said to his boss. “I am interested to see what Elise is doing.”

“Go for it.” Dennis waved them into the interview room while he talked with Rob, then took a phone call. “Would you like to come with me?” he said to Rob. “Mr Binnie has a couple of missing calves.”

Rob, of course, jumped at the chance to go out with his father. He thought that going round the farms was an excitement in itself. Dennis put his head round the door and said to Waters, “Mind the shop. We’re just going out to see John Binnie about some calves.”

In the old days his first port of call would have been Dan Goodrick’s little farm. But moving into town had clipped Dan’s wings. A surburban back yard wasn’t the place to butcher calves. Still, he swung by Dan’s house for a quick look. The old man wasn’t home. But he walked round to the back yard for a look. Empty except for Dan’s dog. So unless he was keeping the calves in his laundry he was cleared of suspicion. But had someone taken over from where Dan had left off?

When he reached the Binnies’ farm John came over from the bails to say, “Sorry, Giles just rang me to say he’d found two calves on the road and put them in a pen for me. I’ll go along soon’s I finish here.”

Dennis felt like saying “You could’ve saved me a trip” but it wasn’t worth it and he always enjoyed driving out to farms. More than that, he had the secret hope that this might mean that no one had taken on Dan’s mantle as chief snitcher of other people’s livestock. And he enjoyed the chance to have Rob to himself. Rob never had much to say for himself at home but he seemed to enjoy chatting about little things alone in the car with his dad.

He conscientiously practised the exercises Mr Sansom had given him though not as something he particularly looked forward to doing. They had got him an unwanted kitten from the vet and the little creature he had named Button, Butty for short, seemed to like listening to him. This strengthened his idea that he liked singing to his pets and they liked listening to him.

It might also be that they expected nothing and never asked him awkward questions.

Dennis dropped Rob off at home and was surprised to find Elise and his occasional constable still covering pages with sums of some kind. Elise stood up and said, "I'd better go home but you know, Dad, Ben makes it seem so much more fun and much clearer than Mr Ellis does."

Ben Waters was not immune to secret pleasure in the compliment. But when Dennis asked him, after Elise had gone on home, why he had chosen the police over maths he said simply, "I didn't think I wanted to teach. I thought I could do the Lord's work in the police."

"Maybe you can. But you've obviously got a knack for teaching."

"No. It's your daughter who makes it seem easy. She is so interested. A lot of kids wouldn't be."

"True."

Dennis pondered over this after Ben had returned to Winville and he had Archer back. The force wasn't necessarily good at using the natural talents of young recruits. And there was certainly value in learning to do the donkey work. But he thought this young man would probably be a boon to someone like Carl Payne. Whereas the longer he stayed in Winville working under Brad Merrill the more he might be infected with that 'why bother' attitude. The one thing which might save him was Merrill's disparagement of his strongly held religious beliefs. But Archer did not have that protection and his lack of enthusiasm for tackling small problems was sometimes obvious.

The trouble was … how to get rid of Merrill? He couldn't be sacked, not unless he seriously blotted his copybook, and so far he had shown no interest in a transfer.

*

DI Carlton Payne was not enthusiastic about tackling Doug Towner again. He would undoubtedly have 'forgotten' who Vic Brewster, Frank Obidini, and everyone else even remotely connected were. But before he got round to organising another prison visit he had a ring from Mrs Johansen. She sounded pleased with herself when she said she had found the letter her sister Jill had sent her.

The letter, when he collected it and gave her a receipt, was not terribly informative. Jill wrote that 'Wayne' had told her the two men who were buying his farm were crooks, that they'd 'done' a man in north Queensland and were now lying low. She said she was sure they had something to do with Willy's disappearance and the plane's disappearance and she wished Willy had never had anything to do with them. Then she wrote 'If anything ever happens to me go to the police and ask them to investigate and tell them to check out those men on the farm because they would kill their own granny if there was money in it' and then she added 'This isn't just me being paranoid, this is me knowing things I wish I didn't'.

He couldn't help wondering if anything would have been different if Jill's sisters had immediately insisted that she leave Garramindi and come to stay with them in Brisbane. But there was no point in speculating. He immediately set Jay Barron on to checking deaths in north Queensland in that time frame. The trouble was that 'north Queensland' was a big area. The man could have been killed in Mt Isa or Thursday Island or Home Hill. And there was the further question: was Wayne Booth to be trusted on this?

"Do we want an unsolved homicide?" Jay said.

"No. Some poor old duffer might well have done time for it. I am more concerned that it might never have been reported or the body never found. Anyway do your best. Both Willy and Ruby were whacked on the head so it's possible that's their usual method."

Jay brought back a list a day later. While keeping an open mind, Payne thought there was one which stood out. A man's body had been found in a gully just outside Townsville. His body had been pushed head first into a culvert, its legs still protruding. A passing motorist had stopped to let his dog out for a run as he was getting antsy. And the dog had run down the bank and started barking.

The man had eventually been identified as a James McCormack living in Mareeba. He had been dead about two weeks. He had been a tobacco grower but had sold out and moved into town. His wife said he had come to Townsville for specialist treatment for skin cancer but that he had also been generally unwell. A neighbour had given him a lift to the coast and he had undergone treatment but while staying with an elderly aunt to convalesce for a few days he had rung someone and then said he was going out to see someone. He had apparently been picked up out the front of the house. The aunt thought it was a ute and a dark colour but she couldn't be certain.

That was the last time he had apparently been seen. The call he had made was to his specialist. The doctor's receptionist had made him an appointment for the next morning. So his call and the pick up were seen as not being related. He had made the arrangement at some other time and in some other way. The aunt was grilled in the hope that he had mentioned a name or a relationship but could only say he had been very quiet and rather gloomy while he was with her. She had put his low mood down to his medical treatment. She said he had said he wondered why he had bothered to have the surgery, that it might've made life simpler to just let it kill him. She had tried to cheer him up but she had wondered if it was something to do with his marriage, that he and his wife hadn't been getting along. But the wife had negated this, saying worries over his health had obviously been getting him down as he hadn't seemed himself for several months. If it hadn't been for him going out the possibility of suicide would have been trawled. And maybe the car like the telephone call was irrelevant. The aunt hadn't actually seen him get in the car. She had simply glanced out a front window and seen it drive off. And there the matter seemed to have stalled.

Payne said, "I like it. Just check on his farm and town neighbours, who he sold his farm to, any upsets with anyone, any money problems. And what happened to the wife? Is she still around?"

When Barron came back with answers, or some answers to these questions it was to say, "The wife sold up and left after someone shot out the windows in her house. It was blamed on hoons but the curious thing is that no one heard the shots. Either they were all deaf around there or a silencer was used. She got the wind up and went to stay with a friend in Brisbane. I haven't looked for the friend. But the thing you'll like is that their farm was bought by a company called the Nebo Agricultural Company and that is the same company which owned the property north of Meandara."

Payne looked at his junior in astonishment, then satisfaction. "Great work, Jay. So where do you go next?"

"I've found an Irene McCormack. I'll see if she's the right one."

"Let's hope."

Mrs McCormack, now living in Laidley in the Lockyer Valley, said cautiously that, yes, her husband had been James McCormack and, yes, she had lived in Mareeba. She then said she had moved from there because she was terrified she was going to be next on someone's list. She said she had sold her house for 'peanuts' and that she had never received all the money owed on the farm. "But I didn't feel up to fighting through lawyers to get it paid. I felt James had made a terrible mistake not listing it with an agent, just making a private agreement for a quick sale."

"Was that because he thought Nebo was a reputable company?"

She didn't sound very confident when she said, "Well, I suppose he did."

"Did he know the people running the company?"

"I'm not really sure about that."

"Do you know if he ever knew people called Plowman?" It was a leading question but he couldn't see her telling them someone was asking after them, that someone being the police.

"He did. There's quite a lot of Plowmans around there. They used to have big families. I think they were Catholics. They mostly married Italian women in the old days. But why do you ask?"

"Nebo is a Plowman company." He thought 'was' would be more correct. It was no longer listed. He hadn't yet checked its demise but possibly someone had not wanted it to pay its bills.

"And you think they had something to do with my husband's death?"

"At the moment, Mrs McCormack, we're looking at a possible financial angle." After all, most hitmen liked cash in the pocket. "Is your aunt in Townsville still alive?"

"She is. At least she was at Christmas because she sent me a card. But she was my husband's aunt."

"And—have you had any kind of trouble since you left Mareeba?"

"I bought a car when I came to Brisbane and it was stolen and found burnt out. I don't know who was responsible. The police just said it was hoons and that it was lucky I had it insured. I haven't had any trouble since I came here. At last I can just get up in the morning and not feel frightened."

"When did you start feeling frightened, Mrs McCormack?"

"At first I thought I was always worried because James was and I thought it was his health that was making him so down … and then when he went missing I started to wonder if something else was going on. I couldn't really believe that it was just a random thing, that someone murdered him for no reason. I felt that somehow things had gone wrong and that someone hated us. I know that sounds a bit crazy because why should someone hate us?"

"Do you know who bought your house?"

"It was someone called Harris. I just forget his first name. He was quite young."

"Was that also a private sale?"

"It was. I was going to list it but someone put notes in the letterboxes saying he was looking to buy a house in the area and to ring him if anyone knew of anything coming on the market. I hadn't got the windows fixed but I gave him a ring anyway. He came round and said it would suit him but I couldn't expect much when it was in that condition."

"Did you think the two things might be connected?"

"Not really. He looked and sounded quite a decent young man."

Jay thanked her for all her help and said he would be in touch if they had any news for her. And to Payne when he was next in, he said, "A man called Harris bought the house from her. I wonder if he was our James Harris just starting out as a lawyer?"

"Check. I wonder whether he then sold on the house, either to a family member or to make a quick profit?"

Jay said he would. "So you think we've found our hitmen?"

"Possibly. But I don't think hitmen is the right description. I think it was family being family. But I wonder if the hit on McCormack was just about money or had he ever done something to upset the clan?"

Case No. 4: Missing Believed Dead

Dennis Walsh with the fairly reliable Constable Archer in the station thought he would go to Toowoomba for the next start of his racehorse, Hansom Days, and combine it with quick social visits to see Mrs Salter and Mr Paton. He thought it was very unlikely they would give him useful information, in fact both of them appeared to know remarkably little about Shirlene Paton's life, which in itself might be suspicious, but he thought it might be helpful just to see the way they lived.

Fiona said they would probably all enjoy a day out if he would like company. Though whether she really wanted to spend most of it at Clifford Park was another matter. “What if we visit these people and then drop you off at the racetrack?”

“If you like. What d’you want to do?”

“We’ll see what’s on.”

In a way he might be glad to be around the track without his family because he hoped to see Barry Woodbridge and his entourage if he had horses running. “You don’t want to see Hans doing his stuff?” His horse had now been placed at his last five starts. Dave Hickman had suggested a Brisbane start, but only very tentatively, and Dennis had said he thought a couple more country starts would do for this preparation. It was partly that he enjoyed the chance to see his horse run but also he had doubts about trying him in the city. He could see Dave’s reasoning. The horse was gradually creeping up in the weights. But was he good enough? He was a game little horse but he was never going to be a world-beater.

Mrs Salter had a weatherboard house with a neat garden out towards Drayton. Dennis said to the family he wouldn’t be long. Annie Salter looked disconcerted to see a big man in uniform on her doorstep. “What’s happened? Is it about Shirlene?”

He introduced himself and asked if she’d heard from her daughter. She said she hadn’t.

“What we really need is the names of some friends and colleagues of hers, people she might’ve shared things with.”

“She didn’t have any friends, only the lady she was going to see, I don’t know her name.”

“Yes, I’ve met her but she hasn’t seen your daughter.” Strictly speaking she said she hadn’t seen … but he didn’t think it was worth a quibble. “Did your daughter have an address book, a diary, something to give us leads?”

“No. There’s nothing here. You can have a look in her room if you like.” She led the way through the house. She was a nondescript woman, brown hair going grey, fairly short and slight, wearing an unattractive summer frock.

He searched carefully but the room was spartan in its contents. Either Shirlene had taken a lot with her or she hadn’t brought much when she left her husband. He asked Mrs Salter about this.

“He kept everything, nearly everything, that’s the sort of man he is, nasty, mean, callous, not happy unless he’s having a go at someone. I told her she shouldn’t have married him but the silly girl didn’t listen—”

“When did you realise what he was like?”

“When I met him. Straightaway. The minute I met him I knew he was a nasty piece-o’-work.”

“When did your daughter decide to leave?”

“Dunno really. I mean she thought about it awhile. Then she just packed a few things.”

“What was it that made her leave? Was he violent?”

“Probably. He wanted her to do nasty things in bed. She was frightened of him. I always knew she’d made a terrible mistake. You can’t trust men like that.”

“Did he give her things, like, say, a car?”

“He was always giving her things! It was like him bribing her to stay, not to tell anyone what he was really like—”

“Was he involved in any criminal activities?”

“How would I know? He probably was but he wouldn’t tell someone like me. He thought I was just dirt, like he would get himself *contaminated* if he came inside my house,

not that I wanted him in here. And then when Shirl came I barred the door to him, he wasn't going to come in here after her, no way was I going to let him in." She stopped for breath.

"We've got a silver Honda Accord at the police station in Winville. Are you sure he bought it for her?"

"He probably stole it and then he put it in her name so no one would know what he'd done, that's what he was like."

"Did you know anything about him before your daughter met him?"

"He came to live here from somewhere else. I'll bet they were glad to see the back of him."

"What kind of business was he in?"

"He didn't work, he just lolled around, him and his pots of money, and never did a day's work in his life. I dunno where he got his money, probably something dishonest. You could see he was a crook from a mile off."

"So you have no idea where your daughter might be?"

"I'd tell you if I knew. I'll bet he's got rid of her."

"Another woman, a woman in a white sports car, was using your daughter's credit card. Did she ever have a friend with a car like that?"

"I told you she didn't have any friends, only that woman on a farm, I don't know her name."

"Was she not good at making friends?"

"He wouldn't let her, that's the sort of bastard he is, never wanting her out of his sight, mean as they make 'em, that's what he was like."

He thanked her for her insights and got away from the house. What had sparked her implacable hatred of Morgan Paton or was her hatred hiding a different emotion? And what were 'nasty things in bed'?

*

Morgan Paton lived in a house up on the Range. It looked like a number of large white cubes stuck together. There were red geraniums and poinsettias to set off the front, a curve of green lawn, and dark pines behind it to show up its stark whiteness. Walsh didn't doubt that Paton had money. But he thought that if he had money he would want a friendly livable sort of house, not these cold squares.

Paton came to the door but said immediately, "I'm just on my way out, sergeant, so make it snappy."

"Two things. Did you buy that car for your wife?"

"I did."

"Well, if you have that paperwork, and it's registered in your name, you can contact Winville and discuss getting it back." Strohling had searched, fingerprinted, photographed and otherwise gone over the car with meticulous care. There might be value in seeing what Paton chose to do with it.

"And you were told that someone had been using your wife's credit card, weren't you?"

"Was I? I don't think I was."

"A woman out at Dalby, driving a white sports car. Does that suggest anyone to you?"

Paton said, "No, it doesn't. I trust you've notified her bank."

Dennis was inclined to think he had been unnecessarily vehement. Maybe he was reading more into it than it warranted. He was just about to remind the abandoned husband to let them know if he heard anything when his phone rang. "Excuse me." He answered it and heard Ben Waters say quickly, "We got another sighting of that car. A man has just told us it was a white Mercedes coupé. Not guaranteed yet but we're checking."

"Good man. So you'll soon be able to get the identity of the woman who stole the credit card. Keep me posted." He killed the call. Of course the car could be borrowed, stolen, 'liberated', but if that sighting was of the same woman …

He turned back to Paton. "Good news. We should soon be able to lay our hands on the person who stole your wife's credit card."

He wasn't sure that Paton felt the same degree of relief but the man said, "Well, that is good news. I wonder how she got hold of it?"

"With luck, we'll soon know the answer to that."

"Well, I'd best be on my way." He glanced at his watch, then picked up a small briefcase. Dennis went out to rejoin his long-suffering family.

Fiona said they were going to a 'singalong' in the park, which had also been advertised with 'children's activities' so they would drop him off at the races then get a late lunch. It didn't really surprise anyone when Elise said she would rather go to the races. Both Dennis and Fiona thought it was probably the mention of 'children's activities' which had put her off. She didn't regard herself as a child and thought things like face-painting were for toddlers.

Fiona smiled to herself as she watched them both get out of the car. Elise might still look little beside Dennis but in another couple of years she would be taller than many grown women. And possibly the horses were an added attraction …

Dennis got Dave Hickman to point out Barry Woodbridge when they went round to the horse stalls. It didn't surprise Dennis to find that he was a big blustery man, with an incipient spare tyre. He undoubtedly didn't ride his own trackwork. "And that's his nephew with him. He's got four starters today."

The nephew was shorter and slighter. He seemed to know he was being looked at because he turned round and stared at them. Something about them, or perhaps about Dennis, seemed to disconcert him because he turned back again and moved away.

"I wonder if he's got a record," Dennis said half to himself. But he put the Woodbridges out of mind and asked Elise if she would like him to put a bit on Hans for her. "I want to bet on every race," Elise said firmly.

"Do you now? But you don't know anything about their form."

"Yes, I do, dada, I've been studying the racebook. I know what everything means."

"Well, okay, but don't get too keen on gambling. Some silly people have had to go home from the races with no clothes, they bet everything they had."

Elise laughed at that. "It's called scientific betting. You weigh everything up and then you add in a bit for unlucky things, and then you know what will win."

"Did Ben tell you that?"

"Of course not! He doesn't bet. I worked it out for myself."

"You seem to know a lot about that young man."

"We talked a lot. I told him I'd read the Bible twice but I'd only read Joshua once. He told me his father was a pastor and very strict. I said 'how strict?' and he said they got into big trouble if they ever said a swear word. Anyway, Dada, here are my selections for each race. I put Hans in but I think Purple Patch is going to beat him."

"We'll see."

Though he kept a casual eye out for Woodbridge through the afternoon he didn't see him with a woman, not even to have a quick exchange in passing. But as he said to Fiona in the late evening, "We're going to have to watch that kid and her scientific tipping—"

"Her what?"

"She thinks science is what was behind her success this afternoon, not luck, and she was right about Purple Patch beating Hans by a whisker. Next thing we'll have to be taking her to Gamblers Anonymous. But I told her not to tell young Waters she'd been betting."

Fiona shook with laughter. “Oh dear, and I don’t think my mother would approve, not because she’s against betting but she would think Ellie is too young.”

“She is. But sometimes it’s hard to remember how young she really is.”

“I know. I couldn’t help noticing how tall she’s getting. She keeps telling me she needs a bigger horse. I suppose she does.”

But it was his ‘chats’ with the two people in Shirlene Paton’s life which were on his mind in the shadowy zone between waking and sleep. He felt certain that Morgan Paton *did* know who was using that stolen credit card. And he found Mrs Salter a puzzle. Did she really believe her daughter had no friends? And was her vehemence about Paton actually to hide a different emotion?

*

Glen Archer was late out to Buckton on Monday morning. Dennis had first thought of sending him out to Burleigh for their monthly stint there then decided to go himself in the hope of getting something more on Mrs Paton’s accident. And he wanted to be on the road. When Archer finally got in Dennis pointed to the clock then said, “Kyrie Adams will be in at 11 to get something witnessed. And tidy up the interview room. I’ll be back from Burleigh by 1.30.”

He was glad he had chosen to go to Burleigh when Boyd Singleton pulled in by the store and came over to say, “I’ve got something for you, sergeant.”

Walsh didn’t have much time for Singleton who lived on a big grain property north-west of Burleigh. There was something sneering in the way he related to people and Dennis found him vaguely creepy though he had never tried to pin down the reason for this. Singleton had come to their attention years ago for stalking his ex-girlfriend. That probably had something to do with it.

“What sort of thing, Mr Singleton?”

“You’re looking for a dame in a white sports coupé I heard?” Dennis agreed though he wondered how Singleton had heard; possibly Winville had put something about the car over the radio.

“Well, I saw her that night. After the storm. I was coming home late and a car turned out on to the road. It didn’t dip its headlights. I was nearly going to turn round and go after the bloody dame and give her a blast.”

“Her?”

“I’m certain it was some bloody dame. But only one in the car unless she had someone in the boot or under the seat.”

“You got a good look at the car?”

“It wasn’t going fast. White. I don’t know if it had a hood but it was open. That’s how I saw the dame.”

“What time would this have been?”

“I’d been over at Garra and I waited for the storm to go over. So around half past ten, maybe a bit later.”

“Was there any other traffic on the road?”

“After I’d passed the turn-off something else turned out there, I just saw the lights briefly in my mirror then it turned right.”

“No idea what sort of car?”

“No.”

“Well, that could be helpful. Thanks.”

“Never say I don’t help you bods.”

The trouble was, it was very hard to feel grateful to Singleton. “Well, let us know if you think of anything more, or hear anything.”

After Singleton had gone back to his car and then into the store Dennis started a house-to-house in the little hamlet. Had anyone heard a vehicle go by the night the car ran into a tree? Time had passed and people had put the accident out of their minds. Mrs Evans said there were cars on the road that night but she hadn't taken any notice. Old Mrs Jarvis agreed that several cars had gone past but she hadn't looked out. "I don't sleep well these hot nights, Mr Walsh, but I couldn't really tell you what sort of cars, not noisy cars. Not the Evans kids, they always make a racket."

"Do you have any idea what the time was?"

"Oh dear, I couldn't really say. After ten, probably."

It struck Dennis that the woman in the white coupé had taken a risk. It only needed one person to look out or to go out to check on something after the storm. And yet, would anyone immediately associate her with the accident? If she hadn't been tempted to use Mrs Paton's credit card …

He rang Winville and passed on what Singleton had told him then went into the store to tell the Mitchells about the white car and a possible other car following on behind. Both Wendy and her father were very interested and said they would keep an ear out.

The white car had slowly hardened into a certainty but was the following vehicle also connected or just happened by?

*

It seemed enough to do the work of trying to pinpoint a suitable car. Constable Archer took the initial parameters, white Mercedes coupé, owned in Toowoomba or nearby, but they left the sex of the owner in limbo. The female driver was not necessarily the owner. The car might even have been borrowed or stolen.

Dennis had gone to Winville to do one of his days for Jake and Archer got busy in Buckton with a minor accident and several people coming by with complaints. He knew perfectly well that Brad Merrill would have echoed Joh Bjelke-Petersen and told them something like 'don't you worry about that'. But Dennis had taken him to task over one small thing he hadn't thought worth bothering about.

"We're paid to look after the community. An old lady's lost cat mightn't bother you but it means a lot to her, so you give her what help you can. Brad's a loafer so don't let him influence you."

"But I have to work with him."

"You do. But Moss is our boss, so take your cue from him. You don't want to end up some sort of useless slob like Merrill with people criticising you behind your back. And if you nip small problems in the bud they don't usually turn into big problems down the track."

Glen didn't know if people really did criticise Merrill behind his back but he seemed to take Walsh's words to heart. The immediate result, though, was that he hadn't had time to even think about following up on the white sports cars he'd found and the list was sitting by the computer when Ben turned up next morning. He said to Dennis, "Should I contact these women first?"

His boss ran down the list then said, "That's odd. Would The Oriel Trading Company be using a sports car as a company vehicle? Or was it a demonstration model and they lent it to someone? See what you can find out about the company."

Waters could see that this might be a useful lead. And he came back to Dennis a while later to say, "It's a car dealership in Brisbane, imports high-end European cars, and I think it's what we want. The directors are John Eveleigh and Morgan Paton."

Dennis was pleased that his hunch was proving useful. "But I think he's making money from other things too." Selling cars couldn't be all that lucrative surely for Morgan Paton to 'loll' around, doing nothing. "Good work." He considered a next step. "I was nearly sure when I met him that the coupé did mean something to him … so he must know who was

driving it unless it was stolen. Just check that it's not listed. Then we'll have to get Toowoomba to follow up." This might be difficult as there were still some assumptions in there. He remembered working with a Sergeant Avery at one time and wondered if he was still around. "Do a list of times and facts and then list the possible and we'll pass that on."

Ben Waters made a neat list and they got it off to Toowoomba and heard back several days later that, yes, Paton agreed that he was a 'sleeping partner' in Oriel and, yes, the company dealt in Mercedes cars. But he had then said he had nothing to do with the day-to-day running of the company and he couldn't say who might've bought or borrowed a coupé. They said they would contact the manager in Brisbane.

Glen Archer when brought up to speed on the case could see that persistence might pay off and he said enthusiastically, "Do you think there might've been some sort of internal struggle going on to control the company? Maybe this John Eveleigh objected to doing the work while Paton just took his share of the profits?"

"Possible. Did Mrs Paton know what was going on behind the scenes?"

"Maybe she was keen on Eveleigh and this mystery woman in the white car is Eveleigh's wife?"

"You know, you could be on to something there, Glen, because she told the schools she would be leaving Toowoomba soon. Maybe she was planning to head to Brisbane. See what you can find out about Eveleigh, if he's married."

Glen, infected by the excitement of following up leads, if not by Walsh's sense of getting somewhere, was able to come back later and say, "There's two people on the electoral roll at the same address. John Standen Eveleigh and Dana Peta Eveleigh."

"So wife, sister, mother. It shouldn't be hard to find out."

"She's too young to be a mother. But I'll look for a marriage."

And he was able to get back to Dennis eventually to say, "Yep, she's his wife. Married three years ago. And I've even got a photo of her. She seems to get into the social pages."

"Good man. Get on to Jake and see if he can get it shown round those shops in Dalby. Even if she was wearing a wig some of the time they might still recognise her."

It seemed easy and straightforward when Dennis passed it on and Jake said he would follow up. "There is one other thing," Archer said to Dennis. "This Dana has three sisters. Maybe one of them was helping her."

"And does her family have money?"

"Her father is down as a Professor of Surgery. So there might be some money there, mightn't there?"

But even if they were on the right track it didn't seem to get them much closer to the central mystery: where was Shirlene Paton?

*

DS Barron also felt he was getting somewhere. Although he was only working on the McCormack case in spare moments he hadn't taken long to find that it was a James Harris who had bought Mrs McCormack's house in Mareeba and that he had sold or otherwise got rid of it to a Don Pellegrini only eight months later. Pellegrini wasn't a name which had come up in connection with the Plowman family and their plethora of aliases. So rather than a family deal it was probably James Harris making a quick profit once they'd seen the back of Irene McCormack.

He had then gone on to document what was listed about the Nebo Agricultural Company which had owned ten properties around Queensland and said it specialised in 'tobacco, grain and cattle'. Jay wondered if it had also specialised in the disappearance of bodies. But Mr McCormack had to be found well away from home or his wife would probably agitate for a search and that might turn the spotlight on to Nebo. And that was

another thing. Had the culvert given ideas to Doug Towner? He wanted a body found but not too quickly when it had come time to dispose of Sandra Hoysted. But that would imply that Doug had known about James McCormack … and if the Fergusons were going to lie low under other names they might well have told Doug something about it … how they wanted the focus to be turned well away from that farm.

But they hadn't counted on Jill Jackson spiriting that container of yellowcake away.

They hadn't counted on Dennis Walsh being sent to Buckton.

And the property at Meandara had been the nearest Nebo-owned property to Prickly Creek?

But the curious thing about Nebo was that it had neither closed nor gone bankrupt. It had been taken over by the Townsville-based company which had a Frank Obidini as a director and had therefore ceased to exist under its own name. It had also sold some of its properties.

'Got you,' Barron said under his breath. And the next question was: had James McCormack known that something wasn't quite right with the company he had sold his farm to … and if so, had he said something unwise, had he queried something, had he passed something on?

To Payne he said, "I wonder if the old lady kept any papers from the sale or whether he ever said anything to his wife that made her wonder? I think I should pay her a visit."

"Have you got time?" Jay was getting married in a couple of weeks' time. He and his wife were planning a honeymoon on a Barrier Reef island.

"I could whip out to Laidley on Sunday."

"Go for it then."

But Mrs McCormack, when Barron turned up on her doorstep, said she didn't really think she had kept anything useful. "It was awful. Everything seemed to have gone wrong. Our daughter came back from overseas to help me pack up but I told her I didn't want to keep reminders of our life up north. So I gave a lot of things away. But I can show you what I've kept."

She looked rather tired and faded, as though she didn't trust life to treat her well, and he wondered if it was the unsolved murder of her husband which had undermined her life. She was in her late sixties but she looked older. She brought out a small cardboard box, a little larger than a shoebox, and said, "You're welcome to look."

He took everything out carefully and sorted the papers into piles. There were some letters from her husband's father and a couple of people Irene said were friends from his school days. There were several paid bills, a few from when they had the farm, a couple of photographs of the farm, copies of his birth and marriage certificates and a partly-filled-in application for a passport. There were also some old share certificates, all of small mining companies.

He showed them to her and asked if her husband had done much investing himself.

"I sold everything that was saleable when I bought the Brisbane house. These are all lemons. He started doing it maybe forty years ago, I think when there was all that fuss about Poseidon and those other companies that went wild. Someone told him it was worth buying these small wildcat companies because they were so cheap and you could buy thousands of shares for next-to-nothing and then they only had to go up a few cents and you could make a profit. I suppose it worked sometimes. But quite a lot of them went broke or just disappeared. Like this." She pointed to a certificate for 10,000 shares in Hall's Creek Mining.

"Do you know who it was who advised him?"

"I've still got a few of the old farm diaries. I was going to throw them away once I gave up on hoping Nebo would pay me what they owed."

"You didn't approach a lawyer?"

"No. You see James took the documents with him when he went to Townsville for the operation, about the sale of the farm I mean. He was unhappy about something and he was going to talk to a lawyer there. And when he was found there weren't any documents on him and he hadn't left them with Aunt Nancy."

"So the person who picked him up from his aunt maybe took the documents? That sounds like a very good motive for murder. Did you tell the police that the documents were missing?"

"No. Not then. I didn't realise immediately. It was only much later that I realised he hadn't left them at home or in the hospital or with his aunt. I told the police then but they didn't seem to be interested. They had decided it was a hit and run and someone getting rid of the evidence."

"So how much do you think Nebo still owed you?"

"Oh … at least four hundred thousand. The other problem was that James sort of felt that money was men's business and he didn't discuss much with me. I suppose I should have asked but I let things go."

"Do you know the name of the lawyer he was going to visit in Townsville?"

"I think he asked someone in Mareeba to recommend someone because he didn't know people in Townsville … except for his aunt. Maybe he asked his GP, our GP."

"What was his name?"

"It was a new man. Our GP retired and moved to the coast. He said he would be glad to be away from the Tableland, I don't know why, I think to do with his health. The man who took over, I think, came from Townsville. His name was … gosh, Hardy, I think. It's a long time ago now but I still think there were things I should have seen. I thought it was his skin he was worrying about but I think he was worrying about more than his health."

The worry was a nebulous possibility but the simple fact of James McCormack's death was that Nebo gained a lot of money, or didn't have to pay out a lot of money. Mrs McCormack could have got replicas of documents with the help of a decent lawyer.

"And … were you worried about more than your husband's health?"

"I think I was. But it was easier to blame his health than think that maybe there was something else wrong. And then, when my windows were shot out, and the police just said it was vandals I knew it wasn't but I couldn't prove it wasn't. It seemed to bring things to a head and I realised how much I wanted to get away. I sold the house, I sold up all James' shares after I got probate, but I think there should've been more money in his account. But I couldn't prove that either. I think I really wasn't thinking very clearly."

"Do you think your husband had ever had any sort of trouble with one of the Plowmans? They use a lot of aliases, like Ferguson, Massey, Harris, Ford, and Smith."

"I don't know but I think they were quite easy to upset, I sometimes heard stories, and they gave the teachers at school quite a lot of trouble. Our daughter went to school with several of their kids but she avoided them as much as she could."

Barron thanked her for her help and asked if he could borrow the farm diaries she still had.

*

Jake Moss had thought of faxing the not-very-clear pictures of Dana Eveleigh to Dalby but finally decided to send Constable Waters out again. It was just possible he might be able to unearth something more. And one shop said cautiously that they thought the picture was 'very like'. It wasn't the same as saying 'that's her!' but then they'd had no reason to look closely at the customer. The man who had come forward later to say it was a Mercedes coupé also reiterated the slight damage to the front of the car. "Ran up the back of someone, I s'pose, probably driving too fast. It was almost like the dame driving was a show-off, know what I mean?"

Which made it odder that more people hadn't noticed her. Or perhaps they had but hadn't come forward.

Waters shared with Dalby what he had and Sergeant Turner, originally content to leave it with Winville, now said, "Well, I guess we need to know if this dame tried to rip any other business off. Her husband must know if she was away for a few days, you'd think."

Waters agreed with this.

Turner checked the number for the dealership in Brisbane and put through a call. He got a very young-sounding girl in the office who said Mr Eveleigh was with a potential customer. Turner told her to go and get Eveleigh and she said, rather nervously, that she would. A couple of minutes later Eveleigh said rather breathlessly, "John Eveleigh here. What's the problem?"

"Was your wife away from home," and Turner gave what police thought were the relevant dates. Eveleigh said he would have to check his work diary. Turner wondered if he would put down his wife's activities in his work diary—unless she also worked for the business. A moment later Eveleigh said, "She went up to the Sunshine Coast for a few days, round then. Why?"

"Can you tell us where she was staying. We'll need to check."

"She just said she was going to stay a few days with her friend Emma who had rented a cabin for a few days. Why does that matter?"

"What sort of car was she driving?"

"She borrowed a white coupé we had used as a demonstration model."

"Did it have any damage to it when she borrowed it?"

"No, of course not."

"And did it have any damage when she returned it?"

"She didn't return it. She said she had sold it."

"Who did she sell it to?"

"I don't know. The sale details haven't gone through yet. She said Morgan Paton was arranging the sale for her. He's my partner. But, look, what's all this about?"

"A woman who was probably your wife and driving your car used a credit card belonging to Shirlene Paton round Dalby. Mrs Paton was in an accident and is now missing. It seems likely your wife had something to do with her disappearance. When we've checked with this Emma we'll need to interview your wife. So if you would let us know Emma's contact details."

"Well, look, I'm sorry but I don't know anything about Emma, just that Dana was going to stay a couple of days with her up the coast."

"Where is your wife now?"

"I don't know. I can give you her mobile."

Turner took it down then said, "Do you know Shirlene Paton?"

"Well, I do, but not all that well."

"You knew she'd left Morgan Paton?"

"He said it was only temporary, that her mother wasn't well or something."

Turner said they'd be in touch again, killed the call, and immediately rang Mrs Eveleigh's mobile. It might all be above board but he was beginning to doubt it. The problem was that it might all have to do with internal quarrels between the partners and Mrs Paton might either have hoped that she could bring something to a head or had hoped to opt completely out of the internal dissension.

A woman answered and Turner said, "Mrs Eveleigh?"

"Yes. And if you're selling something I'm not interested."

"I'm Sergeant Mark Turner from Dalby Police."

"And what's that got to do with me?"

"We'd just like to get the name of the friend you stayed with between these dates." He put it to her and she suddenly laughed. "No, I didn't stay with Emma. I just wanted an excuse to get away from John for a few days. I drove up the coast and stayed here and there along the way."

"You'll need to tell us exactly where you stayed."

"That's just being silly. I didn't take any notice of the names of the motels."

"We can check your credit card use."

"Look, would you mind telling me what all this silly carry-on is about?"

"A woman answering your description and driving a white Mercedes coupé used Shirlene Paton's credit card around Dalby. So now, if you don't want police on your doorstep you might like to tell us where Shirlene Paton is and why you stole her card."

"I didn't steal her card. I wasn't in Dalby. I don't know where Shirlene is but I suppose she's run away with someone. She told me she'd met someone."

"And the name of this person?"

"She didn't tell me. Just that she'd met someone."

"When was this?"

"Just before Christmas."

"How did you get in touch with her."

"We came to visit her and Morgan, we had lunch with them."

"Except Shirlene had already left Morgan and was living with her mum."

"She came back for the day."

"So she was sitting over lunch with her husband and you and she said to you she'd met someone?"

"No. She told me when we were out in the garden later."

"Well, we'll be in touch, Mrs Eveleigh."

"If it gives you a buzz but I do *not* know where Shirlene is."

Turner said to Ben Waters, "She's decided on her position and she'll stick to it now."

"I wonder if Morgan Paton would back her up?"

"I'll leave that to you and Moss. Unless we can prove she stole that card she hasn't committed an offence here."

"But she did lie about never being here?"

"Suspicious but not necessarily criminal. So what d'you think is going on?"

Ben Waters always felt slightly awkward talking about other people's sex lives. "I'm not sure but perhaps John Eveleigh fancied Shirlene and Dana wasn't having any of it."

"Possible."

It was all inconclusive but when Ben Waters shared it all with Dennis Walsh his temporary boss sounded quite upbeat as he said, "Well, you and Turner have rattled their cages so someone might now do or say something."

Waters wasn't as hopeful. "I wonder if Shirlene's mother would know if Shirlene really did go back to have lunch with her husband?"

"Ask her. And check the names of Dana's sisters."

Waters wasn't sure why they mattered but he hoped Dennis had seen something he had missed. Mrs Salter scorned the idea her daughter had gone back to have lunch with her husband 'just before Christmas'. "Who told you such a stupid thing?"

"Mrs Eveleigh."

"John Eveleigh's wife? That bitch? Shirl always said she was sorry for the husband, that he did all the work and the others were just parasites, living off him."

"Do you think she felt more than pity for him? Might she have been fond of him?"

"Well, maybe she was, but you don't think his wife was going to give him up, do you?"

"Do you think Dana Eveleigh was very fond of her husband?"

"Of course not! But she liked the money."

"Would they really have made a lot of money from importing cars?"

"They had other businesses, lots of businesses, but Morgan never did any of the work."

"I see." Ben Waters wasn't sure exactly what he did see. But he felt vaguely that the answers might lie in those 'lots of businesses'. He passed on what Annie Salter had said then went to see if he could find Dana's sisters. They proved to be Sara, Emma and Freya.

"You think she might've meant this Emma when she said she was going to stay with her?"

"I think it's possible Turner caught her on the hop. She had told her husband Emma but that was just to keep him unsuspicious. She didn't want Turner wanting chapter and verse. I wonder whether she'll now tell Morgan anything, get him to back her up about that lunch maybe."

"Do you think we should try to find out something about those other businesses?"

"It could be worth a look. Why would Eveleigh do all the work, if that part is true, while Paton does nothing? Do they pay him well? Have they got some hold over him?"

Ben couldn't answer this but he said he would do his best to find any sort of business connected to Morgan Paton and/or John Eveleigh.

*

Jay Barron put everything together and sent it to Townsville, just leaving out Mrs McCormack's help. The involvement of Richard and Simon Ferguson in the killing of James McCormack was problematical in terms of both hard evidence and whether they were still alive. "How do we link the death of McCormack to Prickly Creek and the death of Willy Jackson?"

'They were both hit on the back of the head. But you've also got fingerprints."

"What fingerprints? There's no sign they got any for McCormack."

"Walsh got prints out at that farm. Check that they haven't lost them. You've got the letter Jill Jackson wrote to her sister. You've got the burial of Ruby Jackson on that farm. You've got James Harris transferring a dead woman's property. Go and find him, see if he'll talk. We haven't got anything to offer him … or have we? See where's he working now. He might not want his new boss to know about his past."

James Harris, no longer able to work as a lawyer, was now working for a travel company. He didn't at first recognise Barron and then he said, "You're not going to fit me up again."

"No. We'd just like some information. Just tell your boss you're going out to lunch with an old schoolmate or something and meet me at the café on the corner at 12.30."

Harris looked as though he would like to rubbish the idea that anyone in the police could be an old mate but he merely nodded.

When they found a quiet table and ordered Barron said, "Did you ever live up north?"

"For a while. Why?"

"Did you live in Mareeba?"

"No."

"So why did you buy a house there?"

Harris looked at him in surprise then said non-committally, "I bought a house there for someone else."

"Who?"

"I don't remember."

"It was in your name."

"I still didn't live there."

"You lived in Townsville?"

"For a while."

"From when?"

"I don't remember. Eighty-five, eighty-six, maybe. Then I came to Brisbane."

"So you just started out up north. What firm were you with?"

"Harmer and Vercelli."

"Did you ever meet a man called James McCormack?"

"I met a lot of people there but it doesn't ring a bell."

"He was the man found murdered and stuffed in a culvert just west of Townsville."

"I don't think I ever heard his name."

"But you bought his widow's house."

"Did I? But I bought it for someone else."

"Then you'd do best to remember who wanted her house. She sold out after someone using a gun with a silencer shot out her windows. You just happened to be sniffing round for a house to buy. So who your client was matters, Mr Harris."

"I really don't remember."

"A family member perhaps? You had quite a lot of rellies round there."

"Maybe."

"Mr McCormack brought his documents from the sale of his farm with him to Townsville. They then disappeared. He was going to get a lawyer to look at them because he was worried about something. Was that lawyer you?"

"Of course not."

"Now, the company which bought his farm was called the Nebo Agricultural Company. They also owned the property where Willy Jackson's murdered body was found. He was Ruby Jackson's son and you sold her house to some of your relatives even though she was dead and couldn't sign anything."

"I didn't know she was dead. The papers looked in order."

"Well, you've paid for that. But you can see how it all links up. James McCormack, Nebo, two men called Richard and Simon Ferguson turning up on the farm at Prickly Creek and lying low there, Willy and Ruby Jackson both murdered on that property. So you might like to think about telling us which of your Plowman relatives Richard and Simon were."

"I don't know who you're talking about."

"Your sister very wisely spilled some beans and then made herself scarce. You might like to do the same."

"What would be the point? They would find me."

"Who would find you?"

"I've told you all I know."

"No, Mr Harris, you've told us next to nothing. So we'll have to keep coming back in the hope that you've decided to tell us more."

"I really don't know anything. I don't know who the Fergusons are. Anyway that's a long time ago."

"It is. But not so long that you can use that plea."

Harris sat back and looked around. Barron just sat and waited. He wasn't hopeful of getting anything. But there was the small possibility that looking into that law firm might bear fruit.

At last Harris said, "It's no good. I can't help you."

"It would probably be a good idea for you to be subpoenaed to appear at the inquest on Ruby Jackson. I'll set that in motion."

So far as he knew James Harris had not been called to provide evidence. Now that seemed an important oversight. But the inquest was in the hands of the coroner and he might have already finalised things.

Barron stood up. “Take care, Mr Harris.” He handed his card over. “If you change your mind about anything give me a ring.”

Back at his desk he looked for Harmer and Vercelli and found there was now a firm called Harmer and Madden but no sign of any Vercelli practising as a lawyer there. And to Carl Payne later he said, “Should James Harris be called as a witness to the inquest?”

“Probably not. He can say he acted in good faith and only found out later. It didn’t do him any good in front of the Board but they use a lower standard. Still, the thought might make him sweat.”

“He said, if he spilled any beans, or he implied that if he did, they would find him. Do you think that means they found his sister?”

“It’s possible.”

“So he’s never going to talk?”

“Maybe a different kind of carrot would work.”

“I don’t think we’ve got any more carrots to offer.”

Payne said thoughtfully, “Who in the family is still calling the shots? If we could neutralise them … ” It was a useful premise but so far they had only nibbled round the edges. “I wonder if Doug Towner knows … ”

*

The situation with Troy Dann and Craig Mello was out of his hands but Dennis Walsh thought he would just like to run things past Ford Bowman before his wife left Buckton and his former constable went off to Brisbane to face whatever disciplinary decisions Internal Investigations made. He set it up to record his call, not in the unlikely event of a court case, but just in case there was anything which might help Nella Bowman deal with the sense of trauma and betrayal the letters had caused her.

He rang in late morning. He wanted to catch Bowman at work and hoped he would be finishing up for lunch. He got a brisk receptionist who asked him if he wanted an appointment. He said no, he was ringing from the police and when would Mr Bowman be free.

“His last patient for the morning has just left. I’ll see if he can come to the phone.” And when he answered Dennis heard a big cheerful voice, the voice of a man with not a care in the world. The unfortunate thing, if Bowman had hoped to make a good impression, was that his breezy manner brought back memories of Lester Moody. Moody had behaved like someone without a care in the world.

“Your wife, Mr Bowman? She isn’t my business. Only those dozens and dozens of disgusting letters she received. What actions did you take to help her?”

“I told her to chuck them away.”

“Why?”

“What d’you mean—why? What was the point of keeping them to worry over?”

“Given that they turned up every week for more than two years what good would throwing them away do? Did you ever take them to the police?”

“Of course not. That’d just be wasting their time.”

“It’s the thing a decent man would do when he saw his wife being persecuted.”

“Nonsense. They were just rubbish.”

“Well, they’ve gone to Forensics to get any DNA and fingerprints on them. So that should help to tie them to you.”

“What do you mean—tie them to me? They’re nothing to do with me.”

"So why did you ask two young constables to wreck their careers to get those letters back to you?"

"I did nothing of the sort! And if they're saying that they're liars."

"So they both decided to wreck their careers over those letters you didn't want back? That's even harder to believe."

"Look, I don't even know who you're talking about."

"Tampering with evidence is a very serious offence. No young officer would do it without some incentive. But don't worry, the investigation will use those letters as part of its research. You'll be famous as the most persistent poison pen on record. It may not be the sort of fame you want but I'm sure you'll cope, even if your poor wife didn't."

Ford Bowman started to say something then changed his mind and slammed the phone down. Though the receptionist had discreetly turned away to sort the mail while he was on the phone she couldn't help hearing everything he said. She had also caught some of what Walsh had said.

Her face was studiously bland as she said, "Any sort of trouble for the practice?"

"No. Just the police behaving like bastards."

"I thought you got along very well with all the police here." She knew he gave them cut-rate dental service. He always said cheerful things like, 'Glad to help out the boys in blue—I know police pay isn't wonderful', and she had never given it very much thought. But now she felt an unease in him and a corresponding unease in herself.

"Here is one thing. That was that useless bastard from Buckton. People hate him and it isn't hard to see why."

Maybe it wasn't but she thought there was a different puzzle in there. "Why would someone from Buckton be ringing you?"

"Because he sticks his bloody great big nose into everyone else's business. That's why."

She didn't think it explained very much but she just said a non-committal, "I see."

Case No. 5: Love Is ...

When Walsh played the tape to Nella Bowman and Jeannie Martin they both listened carefully. After a moment's silence, Nella said, "Thank you for doing all that for me. I think I can now put it all behind me. I hope I can. You and Jeannie have got me back to normal, or near as."

"So what are you going to do now?"

"I'm going to go down to Warwick to spend a bit of time with my mum and then I'm coming back here."

This was a surprise. And if she couldn't get work in Miles then where could she hope to find work in Buckton? "To do what here?"

"I was working in Brisbane for five years. I was at a florist and giftware place and when the manager broke his leg the owner put me on as manager and then he said I was so good he'd like to keep me on but he didn't want to do anything to undermine Gary when he came back to work. He said I was much better at knowing what customers wanted. But I had already met Ford and I finally gave up the job and went to Miles. It was a big mistake but I didn't know that then."

He nodded. "So you want to start a shop here?"

"No. I am going to take over from Jack Alexander. He wants to take life easier. But first I have to learn more about carpets and tiles."

Alexander had been vaguely talking of selling the shop and taking life easier for quite a while but this might be a better solution. If she really wanted to learn the business. It wasn't that Jack Alexander was immensely knowledgeable but he enjoyed helping people find the right carpet or fitting and people came from quite a wide area, even from Winville and Oakey to get a rug from him. And although the business wasn't a gold mine it was a living. Or it was a living for someone with modest aspirations and tastes.

"Well, good luck with it."

He was pleased with that side of things. It still left two constables in limbo. But he felt that if it made more police take this kind of persecution seriously it would be a good thing. He said he still thought it would be a worthwhile idea to get something into the *Bugle* to suggest that the police station rather than the waste paper basket was the best place if anyone was being persecuted by anonymous letters.

What neither he nor the women knew was that a strange kind of retribution was creeping up on Ford Bowman. His receptionist at the practice was a quiet pleasant efficient woman who would not normally talk about phonecalls to the boss but she mentioned it to her husband and her sister and her sister told a couple of friends and in a few days it was wandering round town that Ford had been sending horrible letters to his wife. A lot of people didn't take the story seriously or didn't see such letters as more than a nuisance.

But several people thought they would prefer another dentist. He was sufficiently popular that a few cancellations didn't matter. But he made the mistake of asking a woman who'd been a long time patient why she had cancelled. And he made the mistake of asking her out on the street.

She said, "I no longer feel comfortable coming to you after I heard that it was you sending disgusting letters to your wife. I always wondered why Nella was getting more and more nervy and worried, like she was scared of her own shadow. I heard she had been getting nasty letters regularly and I wondered what sort of person would do that to her instead of making her feel welcome."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, they were only letters! I don't know what the bloody woman thought they were."

She didn't look happy about his response. "I got an anonymous letter once. I worried about it for weeks, wondering who hated me enough to send it, so I can understand how upset your wife must have been to keep getting them."

"I really don't see what all the fuss is about—"

"Don't you? Well, I think some of your patients might understand better."

Other people had overheard this conversation. Other people mentioned it to family and friends …

*

Sergeant Walsh left Constable Archer to mind the station while he went over to the Council pool in the late afternoon to see his children swim. On the hot afternoons they would happily stay splashing around until it grew dark but they needed to come home in good time for homework, baths, and dinner. He didn't say it aloud but he always enjoyed watching them having fun.

As he paid at the gate and went in he saw DC Forman from Winville sitting on a seat in the shade and went over to her. Though she was wearing a smart one-piece she obviously hadn't been in the water yet. He sat down beside her and said "Rui not here yet?"

Jenny Forman grinned. "I'll give him another five minutes then I'm going in."

"Any news about … well, Bankes or the missing woman?"

"They did get a hit with the phone tap. Someone rang Bankes and said he was Damien and Bankes said no, he wasn't, and the man said, don't you remember me, I really am

Damien, and Bankes said, you're no son of mine. Something like that. They went on a bit but Bankes sounded pretty angry."

"You're no son of mine," Dennis repeated. "Did he mean it wasn't Damien or that he had washed his hands of his son?"

"That's what we've been wondering. It was an overseas call. I don't know if they've pinned it down to anywhere. They didn't want to tip Bankes off that he's being monitored so I don't suppose he's been asked anything about the call."

"Maybe a more general visit? Just to remind him he's still on our radar?"

"Maybe." She thought Greg was very glad Brisbane had finally accepted that it was their case but a watching brief did make sense. Brisbane was supposed to be getting a second post mortem done on Mrs Bankes but she hadn't heard whether it had thrown up anything useful.

"Don't know if you've got the time to do something for me," Dennis said and told her about the mysterious women who had come and told him they were married to Barry Woodbridge. "Still doesn't make sense. Woodbridge said he'd been married to a woman called Serena but they had divorced and he doesn't seem to have a woman in his life now. So what these women were playing at … and Peter Darcy said he didn't know them." Peter Darcy had been as close as an oyster so he hadn't precisely said that.

"I can have a look. And Barry Woodbridge has been in Toowoomba all that time?"

"So far as I know."

Jenny Forman looked past him and said, "Oh! Here's Rui. But I'll see what I can do for you." At least looking for people in Toowoomba should be much easier than looking for people in Bulgaria.

She got up and walked away and he looked around to see where his children were.

When Jenny Forman got back to him a week later she said, "It's pretty straightforward, Dennis. Estelle was Serena's sister, so she isn't a Woodbridge, she is Estelle Crosbie. Serena had a daughter Caroline. She is probably your Kari. But it seems Barry Woodbridge refused to accept her as his daughter. There was a notice in *The Chronicle* to say Barry and Serena welcomed their daughter Caroline Lucinda but her birth certificate has no father so possibly Serena put the notice in the paper and then Barry cut up rough."

"Well, that's a turn-up for the books. And no mention of Peter Darcy in there?"

"Not that I can see."

Dennis was very grateful to Forman but it left questions dangling. Was Kari Woodbridge still angry with her putative father all these years later for not recognising her as his daughter? Had he known his wife had someone else? And why had Estelle claimed to be a wife and why had she urged him to look in a different direction? Was she afraid that someone would get away with something if he only looked at Barry Woodbridge? It all seemed pretty bizarre but he thought he could now leave it. So far as he could see they had committed no crime unless he counted wasting police time. And he could only hope that whatever game those women were playing would now be played somewhere well away from Buckton.

When he shared Jenny Forman's information with Fiona she gave it some thought before saying, "I wonder if the daughter didn't actually know that her father had refused to officially acknowledge her as his daughter? And then she applied to get a birth certificate so as to get a passport or something and found she had no father listed. So she asked her aunt who told her that Barry said she wasn't his. And so this was part of a campaign of payback? Something like that."

"And Estelle, afraid that whoever had really bashed Peter Darcy would get away with it came out here but didn't want to drop Kari in it? It's possible. But how did either of them know that Peter Darcy had been bashed?"

"I guess quite a lot of people actually knew about Mr Darcy. The hospital, the ambulance, anyone they told. Or maybe there's someone here who has some relationship with Estelle or Kari, a relative, someone who went to school … what about the woman you think was friends with Peter Darcy?"

"That's a thought."

*

Townsville did not thank Payne and Barron effusively for their information on James McCormack. There might be kudos in bringing a very cold case to a resolution. But it was too vague to point to some likely perps. "What are we s'posed to do with this?" DSS Dowdall said to several colleagues. His lack of enthusiasm was obvious.

"There's a couple of things that could be followed up." DS Griffin said cautiously.

"Such as?"

"Well, that business with Nebo … and we can see if the aunt is still alive … and check with Mareeba."

Dowdall looked round the room to see if anyone else had ideas. No one offered anything. "Okay, Paul, haul out the McCormack file."

And after Paul Griffin had gone through the slim file with little more than the photos taken at that culvert and some background on McCormack he said, "Shouldn't there be more? The post mortem report? Forensics?"

"You're sure they're not there?"

"Definitely not."

"Could there be a second file?"

It was hard to see why. This old paper file was hardly bulging. "I'll look."

But by the end of the day he hadn't come up with anything more. He felt uneasy. There must be more somewhere. There must surely have been an inquest. And he didn't fancy telling Brisbane that the case hadn't been touched in years and in the interim things seemed to have gone missing. He said tentatively that it might be better to ask for help from the Cold Case people.

That would imply … he thought it would imply that Townsville was not up to doing a proper re-investigation. But after sleeping on the problem he said next morning that he would just like to look into the company which had bought or in some way absorbed the Nebo Agricultural Company. He knew nothing about Northern Agricultural Supplies which suggested it was small. Smaller than Nebo? And there was Brisbane's take on its two owners. Were they correct in linking things up?

He e-mailed Brisbane. It would not make him popular telling DI Payne that there didn't seem to be much in their file. But he felt it would be better to say so straight off rather than pretend there might be another file they just hadn't located. Barron got back to him to say they had probably had mice in, for mice read someone like Milward Dutton who had taken a backhander from the Plowman family, and that the man calling himself Francisco Obidini in Northern Agricultural Supplies was probably a Plowman.

Griffin went round to the warehouse which had an office on the premises and said, "Can you tell me anything about the Nebo Agricultural Company?"

The man in the office said he was Frank Stewart and that he wasn't the right person to ask. "So Mr Obidini? Is he around?"

"No. He's not involved with the day-to-day running of the business."

"Mr Vercelli then?"

"No. Same thing. I haven't seen either of them in months."

"So how did this business manage to buy a much larger business?"

"You'll have to ask someone else, mate, I just do the day-to-day stuff."

"D'you know who are their lawyers?"

The man looked blank and then said, “I’ll have a squizz in their records.”

“Thanks.”

A few minutes later Stewart said, “Looks like someone called Madden.”

“Okay. I’ll see what he has to say.”

But the woman in the office of Garth Madden said she didn’t think they would be able to help as they couldn’t give out details of a business they had done some legal work for. “So how did a little tinpot business like Northern Agricultural Supplies manage to buy the much larger Nebo Agricultural Company?”

“Maybe it was a merger and they kept one name. Why do you want to know?”

“Nebo is as crooked as a dog’s hind leg. That’s probably a very good reason for someone to want to make it disappear.”

She seemed non-plussed by this blunt statement and finally said, “I’m afraid I can’t help you.”

“So where would I find Mr Vercelli?”

“I don’t know. I think he moved down south.”

“He made Townsville too hot to hold him, did he?”

“He was a very respectable accountant—“

“So an accountant, not a lawyer?”

“I think, Sergeant, that you should go away and do your homework before you take up any more of our time.”

“So Garth Madden—where can I find him?”

“He’s visiting a client.”

“Here in town?”

“No.”

“You sure he’s a reputable lawyer?”

“Of course he’s a reputable lawyer.”

“Then where is he?”

“As I said—he’s visiting a client.”

“And the client is someone you don’t want the police to know about, like one of the Plowmans.”

Her eyes widened but she didn’t respond. As he went back to his desk he had the unworthy thought that he would much rather that James McCormack had stayed dead and forgotten. But he was experienced enough to know that all that stonewalling was unnecessary. Not just unnecessary but suspicious. And it did raise the question: was Garth Madden exactly who he said he was or had he changed his name or was he on the payroll of the Plowman family? And then he went back to thinking on that skimpy file. That wasn’t just sloppy record-keeping.

He rang the Coroner’s office to ask if there had ever been an inquest on James McCormack. A brisk young man said “Of course. But the police got nowhere with their investigation.”

“Would you have supplied a copy of your report to Police?”

“Certainly.”

“It’s gone missing in that case. Can you send us a copy—or I can come in and pick it up.”

The brisk young man said he would have a copy ready within an hour. Griffin thanked him and looked again at the web of relationships Payne and Barron had prepared. He hesitated then ran off a copy of everything they had received. He might be jumping to conclusions but if there was someone here who had truncated that file, for whatever reason, then it might be that the Coroner’s office was a safer place to keep things …

The brisk young man, Luke Birmingham, said he would read over the material but "Mr McCormack is out of our hands".

"I know. But Mr McCormack's death meant that the Nebo Agricultural Company got out of paying him nearly half a million dollars. That seems like a pretty good motive."

Birmingham whistled softly. "Yes, I hadn't heard that."

"And do you think anything could've been given to your office that isn't in the final report?"

"I'll have a look but I can't promise anything. What about the post mortem? Doctor Slater died last year but he must have had someone helping him. I doubt if they would have returned the clothes to the family as he had been dead about two weeks and they didn't find a wallet or car keys or anything like that."

"There was one thing odd. His fly was undone like he'd walked down to relieve himself … or that was what someone wanted us to think … but his belt had also been undone. So I wonder what happened to his belt?"

"You think someone planned to take it and was interrupted?"

"I'm only guessing. But even if his clothes were taken and burnt or thrown away … the belt should have been fingerprinted."

Birmingham nodded. If it hadn't been McCormack undoing it then someone else's prints might well have shown up. "I'll have another look but get on to the morgue."

It would not have been a nice job dealing with a decomposing body. So after it had been photographed and clothing and shoes removed everything might well have been disposed of.

Griffin didn't look forward to telling Dowdall that the original investigation might have been pretty sloppy. It had been seen first as a hit-and-run and someone panicking and hiding the body and only later, when the man was identified, been posited as a deliberate killing. He thought he would take up Birmingham's suggestion and look for the morgue attendant on that day.

*

Sergeant Walsh would happily have put everything about the bashing of Peter Darcy on a back-burner but he had a ring from Barbara Landy from the store in Norwilla. She said immediately, "You wanted to know about Peter Robey, didn't you?"

Walsh said, "Sure, what've you got?"

Mrs Landy sounded rather pleased with herself so he hoped it was something he could be grateful for.

"He does come over, usually stays the night and goes home early. About once a week."

"Who does he come to see?"

"It's Maya Brown, just on the south road. She's a widow. She stayed on here after her husband died. He worked for the Council. But she's got some money of her own as well. And I asked about that Kari and it turns out she's no relation to Tom Lewis, just a friend, that sort of friend, and he has a couple of horses he owns trained in Toowoomba. I don't know if they're any good."

And he might spell them with Peter Darcy … except it would be simpler to bring them home to the Lewis farm …

"Do you think Robey and Mrs Brown are serious?"

"Well, I wondered. It's a business trying to have an affair when you've got cows to milk."

"True. And you think this Kari who comes to see Tom Lewis might come from Toowoomba?"

"She's certainly not local. She would stand out by a mile here. But I can ask around."

"Take it quietly and see if you can find out who trains Lewis's horses in Toowoomba. Thanks."

He wasn't sure if this got him anywhere but he jotted it down. Maybe it was Tom Lewis and Barry Woodbridge who had once discussed trying a ring-in? And then maybe that was more of Kari Woodbridge's spite against her father.

*

It was DSS Greg Sullivan who rang a couple of mornings later to say gloomily, "We were behind the bloody eight-ball again. It's Bankes. He did himself in."

"What d'you mean?" Walsh couldn't picture Gordon Bankes doing himself in.

"Just that. They've found Gordon Bankes. He'd been dead a couple of days. He'd gassed himself in his car. No note."

"So why are you so sure it's suicide?"

"He had another phonecall from the man calling himself Damien, same sort of thing, Bankes saying it wasn't Damien. And then the man sort of laughed and said, what's wrong with you, old man, that you don't know your own son. We think that Bankes knew for certain it wasn't his son then. And maybe he just sort of gave up. He'd killed his wife … well, for nothing … it hadn't brought his son safely out of … well, if he thought his son was being held hostage maybe this convinced him his son was dead. We're only guessing."

"Mmmm, hard to believe. He came over as pretty thick-skinned. But maybe he cared more for his wife than he realised … until it was too late. And with no son and heir—why go on."

But it was all conjecture. "There was one thing though," Greg went on. "When they went through the house they found an atlas on the kitchen table and he'd drawn a ring around a place in Bulgaria. Not the capital, a smaller town. We don't know if it's significant. Anyway, definitely suicide, only his prints on everything."

"It all got too much for him. I guess it can happen to anyone, even a callous-sounding bugger like Bankes."

Sullivan agreed gloomily. "But the central question is—where is Damien and is he still alive?"

"Well, if Bankes left the farm to his son his lawyers can help you look."

"That'll be the day," Greg showed no let-up in his gloom. Dennis had some sympathy. Winville had been handed a doozy of a problem and they couldn't know it would end up with everyone relevant here dead.

"Either way," Dennis said calmly, "it's out of your hands." If that was comfort Greg didn't sound comforted as he rang off.

*

Some things might have become clearer, Walsh thought as he sat back, but he still didn't have a clue what had happened to Shirlene Paton and she was still his problem in a way that Damien Bankes wasn't. And he saw Shirlene as vulnerable in ways that Damien probably wasn't. You didn't drive long-haul trucks as a career without getting to be pretty tough, mentally and physically. Long-haul trucks … he went off into a brief reverie. Was that why the Bulgarians had targeted him? They wanted to smuggle … smuggle what? … into Britain, out of Britain … and Damien as a cheery tough adventurous 'outsider' might have appealed to them … and so they held out a carrot … and Damien was curious enough to say he would go to Bulgaria to 'have a look'?

But Shirlene knew what she was leaving … He tapped his teeth with a biro for a half-minute then checked the number for Shirlene's mother. He might as well do the rounds again. But Annie Salter was adamant that she had not seen or heard from her daughter and "I don't think you're doing enough to find her, sergeant".

"True. I think you should officially list her as Missing. That makes it easier for us to put resources into the search for her."

She didn't sound enthusiastic, perhaps seeing it as the Police weaseling their way out of things, but she said she would.

"There is one other thing, Mrs Salter. You said something about your son-in-law asking your daughter to do and I quote 'nasty things in bed'." Fiona had made several suggestions but whether he should ask for chapter and verse—"I wondered what you had in mind. Did he hurt her, tie her up, hit her?"

"I don't like to talk about such things, sergeant, but he never wanted normal sex, he was such a creep, it was only the back way, you know, never like a decent man."

"Are you saying Morgan Paton only liked sodomy?"

"What's that?"

Dennis Walsh hesitated then said bluntly, "Buggery."

Annie Salter might take such conversations in her stride, though he doubted it, but he felt supremely uncomfortable.

"Oh that! Yes, I didn't like to say it to a copper."

"So that's what he wanted?"

"All the time! How can you have children if you don't do it properly?"

"Maybe he didn't want children?" Somehow it was difficult to picture Morgan Paton playing cricket in the back yard with his kids.

She declined to speculate, just saying he should give Morgan Paton the third degree if he wanted to know where her daughter really was. Then she added tartly, "That's what the police are for, isn't it?"

He rang Morgan Paton although he doubted whether anyone had ever succeeded in giving Paton the third degree. It would be mere water off the duck's back …

Paton said immediately, "Sergeant! I was thinking of ringing you, just to put your mind at rest. I had a postcard from my wife, she's in Brisbane, so you can stop worrying about her."

"A postcard!" Dennis said in surprise. "No one sends postcards these days." Unless they're on holiday, but he didn't tack that on. "So what did she say?"

"Just that no one was to worry. She was having a bit of time to herself."

"Did she say what she wanted done with her car?"

There was a hesitation then Paton said, "No, 'fraid not."

"Did she give an address?"

"No. But the postmark was Brisbane, definitely. So you can stop worrying, sergeant, and I don't expect to hear from you again."

"Not so fast, mate. Why did she write to you rather than her mother?"

"Because, sergeant, she has had enough time away from that awful mother of hers to realise she made a mistake in leaving me."

"Well, hold on to that card and I'll get someone to come by and pick it up. We'll need to fingerprint and check it."

"That's nonsense, sergeant. And you won't get her prints after it's been through the post."

"Just do as I ask. Hold on to it. And we will eventually have to charge Mrs Paton with wasting police time so we need to find her."

"Oh really, sergeant, talk about making mountains out of molehills!"

It wasn't the best way to try and get Dennis Walsh on side. But after he'd hung up on Paton he rang his boss Jake Moss in Winville to see if anyone from Winville was likely to be in Toowoomba in the next few days. Moss said he and Susan planned to go to Toowoomba on Saturday. "What do you want, Dennis?"

After Walsh had shared his conversation with the husband Moss said, “You think the card is bogus?”

“Sure to be. I think he just wanted to get us off his back, once and for all. I’m just surprised he didn’t tell us his wife had told him to go and pick up the car. I think he hadn’t decided what line would be best to take about the car.”

“Okay. Can do. If he’s responsible for her disappearance it might put the wind up him.”

The trouble with this was that Morgan Paton was not the sort of man to be put the wind up—but it was worth a try. And Moss coming round might be seen as more important than a station sergeant.

Dennis then pondered on who else he might contact and finally tried John Eveleigh. A faint idea had begun to wander round his mind. He could try to pin down every business Paton had an interest in. Or hustle Waters to get a list though if they were only partnerships this could be tricky. But maybe Eveleigh could provide a short-cut. And not for the first time he regretted there was no central registry of partnerships.

When Eveleigh was called to the phone he didn’t sound best pleased. Possibly someone had been just about to say yes to the latest Mercedes or Porsche. But when Walsh told him what Morgan Paton had just told him Eveleigh said in surprise, “You mean, Shirlene is here somewhere?”

“No. I think Morgan was lying through his teeth. So I wonder if you know what other businesses he has interests in.”

“Oh, there’s lots. I really can’t say I know everything he has. He is the sleeping partner in most of his business interests. That way he doesn’t need to do the hands-on work.” There was no mistaking the faint tinge of bitterness.

“Anything at all might give us a line.”

“You think—he’s responsible for Shirlene going missing?”

“I’m sure he is.” He had no proof. But he thought if he could get Eveleigh on side he might well know useful things about his sleeping partner.

“I know he’s a partner in a chain of dry-cleaning shops. And a beach resort. And a construction company.”

“Is there any chance he might have an interest in a brothel, massage parlour, escort agency, that kind of thing.”

“Now that you mention it, I’m pretty sure he mentioned a couple of places he’s got on the Gold Coast, little Asian girls doing massages—and other things.”

“Do you have any ideas on the names of his parlours?” It struck Dennis later that parlour was an odd word to use to describe such places. Parlours were traditionally distanced from any sexual activity …

“Mmmm, there you’ve got me, but I have an idea they’ve got the sort of names that give no hint of their real purpose. You know, the Cherry Blossom Rooms, or The Bridge over Tomorrow. Things like that. Nothing so crude as talk about love or happy hands or the perfect massage.”

“And you think these parlours are fronts for prostitution?”

It wasn’t an area Dennis Walsh had ever needed to delve into, to his relief, and he felt he probably sounded like the proverbial sledgehammer. Cherry Morton providing ‘services’ round Buckton had not been in the same league.

“It would be pretty normal, I would think.”

“Well, thanks for that, Mr Eveleigh, and if you can pin anything down let us know. If she’s still alive she has to be somewhere.”

After he’d agreed and hung up it stayed in Eveleigh’s mind, ‘if she’s still alive’, and he went to the Gold Coast phone books and spent some time pondering on the names he

turned up. He had only met Shirlene in Morgan's company but he had several times found himself comparing her to Dana. Of course Dana was very good-looking, clever, well-off, with lots of connections. But he had lived with her long enough to realise there was little beyond the obvious. She was greedy, manipulative, shallow, and he had seen her sort of light up in Morgan's presence. By contrast, Shirlene with her gentle sympathetic nature had begun to seem extraordinarily attractive.

He jotted down the names and addresses of the two places which seemed to ring faint bells. Morgan had talked about them, he seemed to remember, because Dana had expressed interest. But he had sat back and let them talk without taking very much notice. The whole thing had seemed vaguely tacky. Morgan had indecent amounts of money. Why did he need to make more out of simple semi-literate little girls from Thailand and the Philippines?

But should he simply pass all this on to the police? And would they get anywhere by raiding those places? Or would they find the girls had quietly disappeared out some secret back door?

At last he left a message for his wife to say he had to go and see a client and wouldn't be home till late. Then he set out to drive south. He was tired after a long day at work but after a couple of strong coffees and sprucing himself up in a service station toilet he reached the first place he had marked. The night life in Surfers was just starting to buzz but he hoped the business he had pinpointed would still be quiet. He had never been into such a place and he looked at their discreet list of services, wondering if an old hand would know what to ask for. But the pretty heavily-made-up girl he approached had obviously dealt with bumbling red-faced men, unsure what to ask for, and how to ask, before now. She asked him what sort of girl he would like as a masseur and she started giving him names and details. For a moment he was distracted by her thick false eyelashes. How hard were they to put on and take off?

"No," his embarrassment was not feigned, "what I would really like is a white Australian girl with a gorgeous bum."

For a moment the helpful young woman seemed a little taken aback and he wondered if his wish list was somehow unacceptable. Then she said briskly, "Yes, Mr Brown, I think we have just the girl you are looking for."

He went through the brief formalities and paid for an hour with 'Suzie'. It would be a waste of his time and money if 'Suzie' proved to be a large woman with iron wrists and whose only claim to a gorgeous rear-end was in its size. He steeled himself for disappointment. And at least each time he went in somewhere and asked it would get less embarrassing simply by familiarity with the routine … And at the end of his search he would be very thoroughly massaged …

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John Eveleigh still sounded disbelieving when he rang Dennis Walsh at close to midnight to say, "Sergeant, I've found Shirlene! You were right to think she had been kidnapped after the accident and kept a prisoner in one of Morgan's sex parlours. I've taken her to a place in South Brisbane. What should I do now?"

For a moment Dennis had the disconcerting thought that Eveleigh had been in on it all the way through and had finally told Morgan that the police weren't going to give up so he might as well 'cut his losses'. "Is she okay?" It was the simplest thing he could think of while he wondered what to do next. And if she had been held there against her will then how had Eveleigh got her out? Or had the staff been unwilling to make a scene potentially in front of other customers?

"No. Not really. She's had a terrible time. Not allowed outside. Fed drugs. Asked to do horrible things with … if I get my hands on Morgan he won't know what's hit him!"

"No. Don't do anything. Put her on the bus and send her up to her mum and tell her to get a medical check-up in Toowoomba."

"Do you think that mum of hers really will look after her?"

This suggested Eveleigh had met or at least heard something about Annie Salter, possibly from Morgan Paton, who undoubtedly had no time for Annie Salter.

"I'm sure she will. Now make a time for you and your wife to come up to Toowoomba to visit Morgan Paton and let me know what time you'll be there."

Dennis wasn't sure if he should try to involve Jake Moss or anyone in Toowoomba. Then he thought he might as well wait to hear back from either John Eveleigh or Annie Salter. And it might be better if Jake didn't know Shirlene had been found when he called in on Mr Paton.

Jake when he dropped in on Dennis on his way back from Toowoomba, leaving Susan to sit in the car, said immediately, "No luck. He said he couldn't think where he'd put the postcard. I told him to go on looking and to let me know when he'd found it. That was what you expected, isn't it?"

"Seemed likely."

"So what next?"

"I'm waiting to hear back from John Eveleigh. He thinks he's found Shirlene."

For a moment Jake didn't take in this laconic statement then he said, "You mean you know where she is?"

"I don't. But he said he would arrange for her to come back to Toowoomba to her mum and then he and his wife will come up to visit Morgan Paton. I thought I should go along to the grand reunion. Try to resolve everything. What d'you think?"

Inspector Moss wasn't the only person to have occasional qualms about letting Dennis Walsh loose on the warpath. On the other hand, Winville hadn't exactly done much to help, apart from giving Shirlene Paton's car garage space and sending Constable Waters out to Dalby. "You will take it quietly, won't you? Morgan Paton seems to have some clout."

"I will have to arrest him, Jake, so clout be blowed."

Jake, understandably, looked a little worried. "So why do you think he's involved?"

"Morgan Paton prefers sodomy to the normal. His wife didn't. She left him because of that and other things. He had another woman keen on him. Dana Eveleigh. But of course she couldn't have Morgan while Shirlene was still around so she agreed to help Morgan. She couldn't resist taking Shirlene's credit card and going on a bit of a spree with it. Only what Shirlene deserved, walking out on the gorgeous Morgan. But Morgan had a different fate lined up for his wife."

"How much of this is speculation, Dennis?"

"About thirty per cent. When I rang Eveleigh he told me Morgan is partner in a couple of Gold Coast massage parlours. I was trying to think how to get them checked out. But Eveleigh seems to have had the same idea. I just hope he's on the up and up." It was always a little nerve-wracking when a member of the public decided to take a hand. It could end in a gigantic mess. It could muddy the waters, get in the way of a potential court case. And sometimes it could succeed brilliantly. It was a risk police took every time they offered a reward …

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Morgan Paton seemed perfectly relaxed as he stood with a drink and looked out on to his sweeping lawn. John Eveleigh seemed far less relaxed and Dana had several times asked why they needed to come to Toowoomba to see Morgan. Her husband had said only, "Important things to discuss" and to her question "about the business?" he had said "wait and see". It had got tiring on the drive up as she had found 'wait and see' an unacceptable response. Though she wasn't a partner in the business she seemed to feel that it was her

business as much as it was his—and more so each time she wanted to borrow a posh car for some reason …

Now she said, "I am waiting, and I want to know why John won't tell me anything. Morgan, do you know what's going on?"

"Just that John said he had something to share with us. So we're waiting, John."

Eveleigh looked at his watch, hoping there had been no hold-up, and said as calmly as he could, "It *is* important, it's about Shirlene."

"Shirlene?" Paton did not try to hide his surprise. "So the police have found her. I told them she was in Brisbane but I couldn't help beyond that."

"No. She wasn't in Brisbane, as you knew perfectly well."

"Me? No, I haven't seen or heard from Shirlene in months, all except that postcard she sent me."

John Eveleigh had been impressed by Morgan Paton when he'd first met him; impressed with his success, his style, his way of doing business. He had at times felt like the poor relation. But he had gradually come to see that it wasn't a success he would want to emulate. And it was built on other people's hard work. This greater clarity helped him now. In the past he had always deferred to Morgan as being the more successful man.

"The postcard from Dana? You knew perfectly well that wasn't from Shirlene so why tell lies to the police?"

"The police, in case you have never noticed, John, are a lot of bumbling idiots. I've talked with that Mr Plod from Hicksville and I could see from a mile off that he was all bluster and wanting things set down in black-and-white in front of him."

"Maybe." Eveleigh had never met Dennis Walsh, if this was who Morgan had in mind, but he had caught that hint of grim determination in his voice. No matter who else might give up on searching for Shirlene Paton it wasn't Dennis Walsh. "But he knows about your massage parlours and he knows that you prefer anal intercourse and he knows that you both have lied to him and he knows that Dana stole Shirlene's credit card after she'd rammed her into a tree. So don't go kidding yourselves."

His wife had turned to stare at him. Paton, though, just said easily, "John, John, you've been working too hard. Take a couple of weeks off. You don't want to believe any thing some country copper tells you."

"I don't. But I've been talking with Shirlene and I do believe what she tells me."

"That lying little baggage? You *have* got it bad, John."

Eveleigh, to his secret relief, heard a car pull up outside and hoped that Shirlene had been prepared to come and confront her estranged husband. It could be a hard thing for a woman to do and more so for a fairly self-effacing one. There was something heartening in the sound of heavy footsteps and he strained to try and hear softer ones. "I think you've got visitors, Morgan." He went over to the nearest sofa and sat down. His wife, still looking puzzled, also chose an armchair.

Morgan went to the front door and opened it. Sergeant Walsh said calmly, "A few minutes of your time, Mr Paton. I won't keep you from your visitors."

"That's all right," Morgan turned back and Walsh followed him in. Not for the first time Dennis Walsh wondered why anyone would want to live in something that looked more like a laboratory without the Bunsen burners than a comfortable place to spend their time. A moment later, Walsh stepped into the sitting room and John Eveleigh rose from his sofa. Maybe Paton was right to dismiss this man as being irrelevant but he now began to doubt it. He came over and shook hands. "Nice to meet you, Mr Walsh."

"And I think you all know Mrs Paton." To the surprise of three of them Shirlene stepped out from behind the bulk of Dennis Walsh and said a nervous "Hello".

"Shirl!" Morgan hid his astonishment well and came over as though to give her a hug or a kiss. She retreated. Dana was also astonished and hid it less well. "Shirlene! Whatever are you doing here?"

"Just to tell you—" She looked up to Sergeant Walsh as though for guidance. "Well, to tell you that I'm safe now."

"That's wonderful, darling," Morgan gave her what she had once found a heart-stopping smile. Now she only saw the cold and callous man behind it.

"Wonderful for Shirlene certainly," Walsh said grimly. "Not so wonderful for you, Mr Paton." He looked over at Dana Eveleigh and thought she had probably enjoyed swanning round Dalby wearing different wigs.

It may have been that she suddenly felt that nothing more could go wrong in her life now that she had Dennis Walsh by her side but Shirlene interposed to say hurriedly, "Why did you do that to me? Why did you hate me so much that you would put me through that torture!"

Paton opened his mouth then closed it again. But Dana saw no reason to prefer silence. "Because you walked out on him, you little bitch! You treated him like shit and now you start whining and carrying on—"

Dennis Walsh turned from Dana Eveleigh's flushed face and passionate defence of Paton to the man himself and said grimly, "Morgan Paton, I am arresting you on a charge of deprivation of liberty. They will probably bump it up to kidnap." He went on to caution him. Paton started to say "but that's ridiculous" as he turned to Mrs Eveleigh. "Dana Eveleigh, I am arresting you as an accessory to the deprivation of liberty charge. There again it will probably become an accessory to kidnap. And in the meantime you might like to give Mrs Paton back the credit card you stole from her."

Morgan Paton had probably always looked down on people who yelled and blustered and swore as beneath his notice. But now his calm façade showed the first faint cracks and he said, "You haven't heard the end of this, you oaf! You just wait till my lawyer gets stuck into you and your cowboy methods—" Dennis had heard worse over the years and he said without much interest, "You'll have to come down to the station while we do the paperwork. You are quite entitled to have your lawyer present. You too, Mrs Eveleigh."

He turned to John Eveleigh who was standing with an expression of pleased surprise on his face. "You'll need to take Shirlene somewhere safe."

"You don't think it would be safe at her mum's?"

"It might be but I think she needs somewhere more private." He had at first wondered if Mrs Salter had a thing for Morgan Paton but he had gradually come to see it as something different. It was not every day that a wealthy good-looking man wanted to marry her daughter and she had probably pushed Shirlene into seeing him, probably telling her she would never get such a wonderful chance again, and reminding her that she was a nobody and Paton a somebody with houses and cars and all the rest. And now she was consumed with guilt. No wonder she had been so vehement when she said she had urged her daughter not to marry Morgan Paton. She was trying to convince herself she had.

He pulled two pairs of handcuffs from one over-stuffed pocket and clipped them on to Morgan and Dana. "It's only temporary. I'll take you both down, then it's out of my hands. Oh, and by the way, Mrs Paton, your car is still in Winville and you owe Noel Barnard seventy dollars for towing it. I think Mrs Eveleigh will be happy to give you the seventy."

Morgan Paton stared at Dennis as though he couldn't believe his ears. "You've just arrested the wrong woman, you useless moron, and you're carrying on about towing charges! I just don't believe it!"

"If there's any morons around here I think I am looking at them. But I don't like to see decent little businesses in a country town cheated by people like you."

As Walsh shepherded Paton and Dana Eveleigh out to his car and got them strapped in, John Eveleigh came over to him and said, “Thanks for coming and I’ll see your Mr Barnard gets paid.”

By the time Dennis finally got on the road home he felt it had been a very long day but it had its satisfactions. One of them, he told Fiona later, was the look on Morgan Paton’s face when he was ushered into a cell. “In his world no one matters except him and suddenly he didn’t seem to matter to anyone any more.”

“And Dana? What about her? And do you think it really was just spite—that Shirlene had dared leave the great man?”

“Seems likely. And I think Shirlene might be brave enough to try marriage again but somehow I don’t see Dana waiting for Morgan to finish his stretch … and I just hope they give him the longest one on the books … twenty years would suit me fine.”

In the end Morgan Paton got three, out in fifteen months.

Book Sixty-Nine

Case No. 1: A Wandering Neddy

It had stayed warm even though it was definitely autumn on the Darling Downs and several late thunderstorms had greened the paddocks and verges around the small town of Buckton. It was mid-morning when a stranger rang Sergeant Dennis Walsh in Buckton’s small station to tell him he had nearly hit a stray horse wandering along the road just north of the Caritas Centre near Dinawadding. “Someone needs to catch it and get it off the road!” The man still sounded shaken and angry.

Walsh said he would see what he could do. He got on to the Council pound but only got a recorded message. As it was a Saturday morning he said to his two children who had come to the station with him, Elise and Robert, “I guess we can take some apples and see if we can catch this wandering horse before it gets run over by a car.”

They naturally couldn’t wait to leap into the car to go and find this mysterious horse. And he wasn’t hard to find. He was nervously cropping grass by the road to the north of the Caritas Centre. A bay of just over 14 hands but in a very neglected condition; his ribs jutting, a long tangled burry mane and tail, over-grown cracked hoofs.

The horse obviously needed some vet care but would it allow itself to be caught?

He ran the car off the road and got out carrying a halter and a piece of apple. “Okay, mate, come and have a treat.”

But the horse after looking at him cautiously turned and jogged away towards the distant bridge. Dennis walked after him still trying to cajole him. But after several minutes he decided there was no point in driving the horse this way. He turned and began to walk back towards the car. He would need to call for help. But the horse stopped, stood undecided, then began to follow him slowly. Dennis stopped and again tried to encourage the animal to see him as not dangerous. He stood still and waited, talking quietly to the creature. The children

waiting beside the car also held their collective breath, willing the horse to come up and let himself be caught.

The animal reached out and sniffed the apple, then seemed to take his courage in hand and snaffled it. Dennis continued to stand still, saying "I really need to catch you, neddy, and get you away from the road." He extended a hand slowly and put a rope over the animal's neck. He waited. Perhaps at some stage far back the animal had been handled because it finally let Dennis slip the halter on.

The next difficulty was how to get him back to Buckton and some care. The simplest thing seemed to be to try and lead him into Caritas and keep him there while he rang the vet. The animal consented to be led back to the entrance to Caritas where Dennis undid the gate beside the grid and took the horse through.

Caritas had been through various makeovers but now looked rather neglected. Only the swimming pool with its loungers seemed to be cared for. As he took the horse over to the gate to the house a man came out, a big man with hair growing low on his forehead and big biceps bursting from his t-shirt. He said, "What's going on?"

Dennis explained, introduced himself, and asked if he had any idea where the horse had come from.

"Nup. Never seen him before. And I don't want him here."

"And you are?"

"Marcus Green. So what're you going to do with him?"

It struck Dennis that the man was probably from southern Africa but he said only, "I'll ring the vet in Buckton but I'll need to keep him here till they can pick him up."

The man just shrugged while Dennis pulled out his phone and put in a call to the vet surgery. He knew Leila Burkett was away and a locum was looking after the place but he hadn't met him. He got Justin Castley and explained that he needed the horse picked up a.s.a.p. Justin was not known for his confidence and he said nervously, "You mean you want me to bring a horse float?"

"Yep. Soon as you can."

Dennis turned back to Green and said, "We'll wait for him to come and get this fella loaded." Green gave the horse a look of distaste and turned to walk away. But Dennis stopped him by saying, "Are you needing to sink more bores?" He could see a big drilling rig beyond the bunkhouse accommodation.

"Not your business."

"Of course not. But it's all round the district that your bores are running dry."

"Then you can tell 'em they've got it wrong." This time the man walked towards the gate without looking back.

"Not Mr Helpful," Dennis said loudly and Elise gave a little giggle.

Mr Green showed no sign of hearing. Dennis turned back to the horse and went over him carefully, making a mental note of his problems. And where might he have come from? There was no farm in the vicinity which kept horses, so far as he knew, so had he come all the way from Dinawadding where someone might have bought him in or rescued him or something. There were a couple of people there with horses. But as the station there was not now manned he couldn't ask a colleague to check.

It seemed a very long wait till Mrs Burkett's Landrover turned in the grid with a float on behind. Justin parked and came over, his curiosity taking over from his normal apprehension about dealing with Dennis Walsh.

"Okay, let's hope we can load him. Then I want you to feed him but don't do anything about his condition until I can come round and photograph him. I'd like to get someone for neglect."

Justin avoided people as much as he could but he was good with animals. They seemed to find his quiet presence safe and soothing. Even so, the horse didn't go into the float without making a fuss. He seemed to find the enclosed space frightening but at last he was loaded in and Justin drove away. "We'll duck into Dinna and just ask if anyone's seen him around."

This also involved getting a snack at the general store but they came up blank around the little hamlet. A half hour later he had dropped his children off then called into the station back in Buckton and found a message from Sister O'Brien for him to say Albert Smithies was back in hospital and not looking good and someone had told her there were strangers in his house and she hoped it was all okay. Dennis couldn't see that Smithies was really his business but he supposed he could drop by the hospital later and see what Smithies had to say for himself, if he was up to talking.

After taking pictures of the horse in case they could find an owner to be charged with neglect he went round to the hospital.

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Albert Smithies had just turned up out of the blue and settled in Buckton where he had eventually bought a bungalow built by John Goodrick and spent his afternoons and evenings usually on a stool at the Coolibah Hotel. He had made no friends unless he counted the barman George Johnson as a friend but presumably he could get himself a couple of tenants if he wanted people in his house.

As Walsh came into the hospital carpark Sister Martin came out and said, "He might be up to talking, I'm not sure, he drifts in and out of consciousness. We will probably send him to Winville as we don't have ICU equipment here."

Walsh nodded and came with her along the corridor to be ushered into a small single room. Smithies was lying, eyes closed, and for a moment his very stillness suggested he had already passed on. But Sr Martin went over briskly and said, "Mr Smithies, you've got a visitor."

The old man slowly opened his eyes but his gaze was unfocussed. "It's Sergeant Walsh, Mr Smithies, he was just a little worried about the people who've moved into your house."

This wasn't correct. Dennis couldn't really rustle up much concern for Mr Smithies and his house. But he sat down and waited.

Finally Smithies said in a wheezing voice, "Nah, it's okay. Friends of mine."

Dennis Walsh was under the impression that Smithies didn't have any real friends and certainly not the sort he would invite into his home. But he only said, "Well, that's okay then. Sister O'Brien was a little worried that someone was taking advantage of you."

"Nah." The old man closed his eyes again.

"So anything else you would like to tell me about the Hoysteds and their dodgy dealings?"

It was just as well that Sr Martin had gone out, leaving Buckton's police sergeant to talk with her patient.

There was a long silence then the old man said, "Nothing. But you can ask Sam. He knows more than he's ever let on."

Dennis said, "In what way?" but the old man had closed his eyes again and his long dragging breaths seemed to get longer. Dennis waited but the old man seemed to be asleep. After sitting in silence for several minutes Dennis stood up. Albert Smithies might well have lots of useful information still tucked away but there didn't seem to be much point in waiting round in hope. He went out and drove away. After he'd gone Smithies opened an eye then closed it again.

Should he visit the house and just check? It wasn't police business but he didn't mind to divert briefly and knock on the door of Smithies' house. The house looked quiet and peaceful. He knocked. After a long wait a woman came and opened it and said politely, "Can I help you?"

She had grey hair and was dressed in a cardigan and skirt and slippers. "Sorry to bother you. I'm Sergeant Walsh. Just wanted to check that you had Mr Smithies' permission to be here. People have been talking."

"Oh! I didn't know. But John and I know Mr Smithies. So it is quite all right, you know."

"That's okay then. And if you need any information on local services just drop into the op-shop, they have a leaflet to let you know what Buckton can offer."

"That is very kind of you."

He wasn't going to say 'all part of the service' because he didn't see himself as a Welcome to Buckton service. "That's okay." He turned and went back to his car. She and the man who had come to stand in the doorway at the back of the room without being introduced had seemed like quiet inoffensive people. He couldn't see them giving him any trouble. And yet there was something … he mused on it as he drove back to the station. It was almost as though they were trying to look older than they really were.

Men mightn't care but women usually wanted to look younger than they actually were. It was a puzzle. But he finally decided that he was jumping to a conclusion and the woman who had given her name as Anne Richards might only be having a dreary day.

He mentioned it to his wife Fiona later then put the couple out of his mind. And if he had ever hoped that Smithies would provide some last-minute revelation before he died that was probably whistling in the wind. Smithies had been hospitalised before now but it hadn't led him to make any revelations.

But a couple of days later Anne Richards did call into the op-shop to ask for the leaflet. It was Fiona's afternoon to be on with Karen Dalton and she was immediately welcoming. Her first thought was that Dennis was right: this woman did want to look older than her real age. But then something else struck her and she said politely, "I wonder if you'd mind me asking but I wonder if you ever studied ballet?"

The woman stared at her than she said almost curtly, "I learnt for a little while when I was a child. Did you?"

"Yes, I did. And it was just something about the way you move, I think. Did you enjoy having lessons?"

The woman seemed to have relaxed a little because she said quite cheerfully, "I did. But then other things … you know how it is with teenage girls."

Fiona smiled. "Yes, boys, studies, work. But I still remember it with a sort of nostalgia. Anyway, I hope you will enjoy your time living in Buckton."

The woman bought a couple of small items of kitchenware, smiled at Fiona and Karen and went out. After she'd gone, Karen said, "Why did you ask her about ballet?"

"Oh, I was sure she was a dancer, the way she held herself, the way she moved. So I wondered why she obviously didn't want to talk about it."

"Probably her parents pushed her when she wanted to do something else."

Fiona agreed. It didn't seem to be a happy memory. And parents were not always wise when it came to their children and their ambitions. And yet … she was sure Ms Richards had gone beyond a few lessons as a child. Still, it wasn't her business and she turned back to Karen to talk about other things.

She had sometimes wondered why her friendship with Karen had never ripened into something closer and she had gradually realised it was nothing to do with Karen. It was her own attitude. She had been reluctant to let any woman come as close as Raelene Perry had

been to her. And Raelene had betrayed her confidences and finally sold up and left Buckton. But the hurt remained.

Now she had come to the decision: it was time to truly put all that behind her, to forget Raelene, and allow herself to have close and warm relationships with other women.

*

After Sergeant Walsh had taken photos of the unwanted horse from every angle he'd told Justin Castley and his temporary boss, locum Justin Stirling, that they could go ahead and give the unfortunate horse some TLC.

Stirling was a lanky young man with bad skin and blondie-brown hair in a pony tail. Buckton had not taken him to its collective heart but various people took the position that if Leila Burkett had entrusted her business to him he must know *something*.

"So what will happen to him?" Stirling indicated the horse. He felt a little nervous in the company of Dennis Walsh but the business with the stray horse seemed non-contentious.

"Let the pound know. But he must've come from somewhere near Caritas. I wouldn't think he would of traveled far, not in that state."

Stirling nodded without hazarding any thoughts. He had made a couple of trips to Dinawadding to treat animals but he didn't claim to know any of the people around there. Rather it was Dennis who took that thought away with him. Not traveled far, but how far did he have in mind?

And back at the station he put in a call to the office at Japana. His feelings about the giant feed lots had changed slightly since Rui Lopes had moved in as manager. He still thought it was a shockingly badly run business but he had some small hopes that Lopes could improve things. Some things.

He said he had one small question when he got on to Lopes. "Are there ever any horses mixed in with the cattle on the trucks?"

Lopes gave this careful thought before saying he had never seen any but he supposed it was possible. "Why do you want to know?"

"We found a horse out on the road by Caritas and no one seems to own it. Wondered if it might've come from Japana."

"Well, it wouldn't be any use to us. We don't use horses here. Someone might've let one out on to the road. Do you want me to ask around?"

"It could be handy to know where the horse came from. Can you ask if anyone saw it?"

"I'll see what I can find out. But I'm leaving here in a fortnight."

Dennis was surprised and said so. Lopes said grimly that he had done his best to improve things "but it's hopeless. All those trees I put in—someone's pulled most of them out and thrown them away. I bought many of them myself. It's like no one here wants to see things done better."

"Did you tell the Hoysted boys?" Not that they were still boys but Dennis thought of them as boys.

"They aren't interested. So I'm leaving."

"So where are you going?" Dennis was disappointed but he could understand that one man could not stand up to the callous slipshod atmosphere at the feed lots.

"I've got the job as manager of the Sports Centre in Winville."

"Well, good luck. And let me know if you can find out anything about a horse."

He had never been to the Sports Centre in Winville but he knew people there were very proud of the facility. It included a swimming pool, tennis courts, basketball courts, volleyball, clock golf, badminton, ping-pong, squash, all in pleasant surroundings. Rui Lopes with his pleasant friendly style would probably be good at running it. And DC Jenny Forman would undoubtedly be delighted to have Rui in Winville.

But there was another aspect to it. Who would take over from Lopes? Dennis thought back to the taciturn Marcus Green and wondered if he would be given the job.

*

Sergeant Walsh had been trying to refresh his memory over everything to do with the Jacksons, or at least the finding of Ruby Jackson, before he went to Brisbane for the double inquest. He knew he needed to put aside all local issues and just think back to the details he would need to present. He had got on to Lindsay Holt at the Council about the stray horse going to the pound and Lindsay had ummed and ahhed and sounded reluctant to take the horse over. Dennis had told him it was likely the horse had got mixed in with a load of cattle and Japana, not wanting him, had simply opened a gate and let him out on to the road. But if the Council now sold him, if he was saleable, they would also be expected to pay his vet bills so there wouldn't be much left for the Council coffers. The chance of Japana admitting to the horse wasn't high.

"Dennis, just find a home for him. We don't want him."

"Okay. But you'd best advertise first." And an obvious home didn't immediately spring to mind. Elise had thrown out some hints but he didn't think the horse was suitable—and if he took the horse people would be sure to say something critical—not least because he wasn't a particularly attractive horse and the size of his hoofs suggested a bit of carthorse in his ancestry. He wouldn't make a hack and it was very unlikely he would make a jumper. If he was broken in it was most likely he'd been used with stock.

At last he suggested to Justin Castley that he might like to have him if he was rideable. "Do you good to learn to ride."

Grant had tried to get Justin to try out for a cricket team but Justin had not been able to bring himself to contact anyone and Grant hadn't pushed him. But now Justin didn't feel able to ignore Dennis. "I don't know anything about horses."

"Of course you do. But first we need to get Lyn Harding to come round and see if the horse has been broken in. What's he like to handle?"

Given a straightforward question Justin felt a little more confident. "He's okay."

"Fair enough. Get your boss to saddle him up and see if he's okay with harness."

He didn't see his mission in life as being to bolster Justin Castley's self-esteem and it didn't occur to him that his calm statements pushed the young man to get things done rather than tell himself they were too difficult. And he needed to get home and pack for two or three days in Brisbane.

After he'd gone Justin said diffidently to his temporary boss, "He wants you to try saddling him up and he'll get Lyn Harding to come and see if he's broken in."

But Justin Stirling immediately felt affronted. Why did they need someone else? "I could ride him. Does he think I can't ride a horse?"

Castley was tempted to say 'I don't s'pose he knows' but he just nodded. Except that if the horse bucked his boss off and hurt him he wasn't sure what he would then do. Mrs Burkett wouldn't be back for more than a month and he couldn't picture himself ringing her in England to tell her her locum was in hospital.

He watched rather nervously as Stirling went away and came back with a saddle and a bridle. "Okay. Let's see."

And the horse seemed not to mind being saddled though not exactly happy. "So far so good." Stirling tightened the girths and adjusted the bridle. Then he looked around the complex to decide where best to take the horse for his first ride. "What say I try him in the big yard?" The horse stood there with his big head drooping and looking the picture of dozy calm. He consented to be led through the gate and Castley followed a little apprehensively. Maybe his boss was a good rider but he still thought it might've been better to do what Walsh had suggested …

Justin Stirling was a confident young man and so far Buckton had not given him anything he couldn't handle with aplomb. He gathered up the reins and vaulted up. He landed in the saddle lightly and turned to his assistant. He was just about to say 'so far so good' when the horse exploded.

He leaped forward, fishtailed around the yard, leaped forward again, reared, came down hard, reared again and went over backwards. Castley watched in horror as Justin came down and the horse fell on him. He ran forward as the horse thrashed himself back on to his feet. Justin continued to lie in the dust and Castley bent over him, unsure whether to try and help him up or let him lie there. Then he realised his boss was out to it.

For a moment he hesitated, trying to decide what to do next. Then he opened the gate and the horse walked peacefully through into the smaller yard and Justin ran towards the house to ring the ambulance.

By the time Jim Phelps and Darren Binnie arrived Justin had gone back to the yard with a glass of water and a wet washer and hovered over his unconscious boss. "What happened?" Jim and Darren came through with a light stretcher.

"He tried to ride that horse." Justin still felt agonisingly guilty. He should've said something. But he didn't know what he could have said and Justin *was* his boss.

Phelps nodded and ran his hands down the unconscious locum. "I can't feel anything broken so we'll lift him. He probably hit his head." He and Darren gently and carefully lifted the man on to the stretcher and hoisted it. The horse now dozed in the sun with his reins trailing. It was hard to believe anyone could ever have fallen off him. He wondered if Stirling was a novice rider.

A couple of minutes later the ambulance drove away and Castley went nervously into the yard and managed to unsaddle the horse and remove the bridle. The horse made no objection and unexpectedly gave Justin what seemed like a friendly nudge. Justin didn't know if this meant the horse was hungry or whether it was a kind of satisfaction that he had just got rid of his unwanted rider.

He left the horse and went inside and made himself a coffee. He wasn't sure whether he should tell Sergeant Walsh or ring Lyn Harding or maybe wait to hear from the hospital. He wished he was a decisive sort of person. In the end he did nothing and he was still agonising when Jim Phelps came round an hour later to ask for more details on the accident.

"He bucked," Justin said simply.

"What? That old fella?"

"He must be a buckjumper." Justin had had plenty of time to think about the morning's events and the horse.

"He looks too small," Jim said critically. The horse had come in at 14.2 which was small for a bucking bronc. But Justin could now attest to the ferocity of the horse's response to a rider.

"I know," Justin said diffidently. "But he just went crazy. I think, maybe, that's why … well, that no one wanted him." Then he said, though with some misgivings, "Sergeant Walsh said to call Lyn Harding but Justin said he could ride okay."

"So he just saddled up and got on?" Jim had ridden a pony when he was a kid.

Justin nodded. In a way Jim could understand. He stood there thinking on it and finally said, "Well, best to ring Lyn, she'll know what to do."

Justin gave him a dying duck look but couldn't bring himself to say that Lyn Harding terrified him. Jim would think him a total wimp if he said that. And he would need to do his rounds of the animals in their pens soon. Several of them would need their treatments.

*

Dennis had finished packing for his early start in the morning when he had a ring and a nervous Justin Castley told him his boss was in hospital. "So what happened?" Dennis

couldn't see that Justin Stirling's problems were anything to do with him. Justin explained about the horse bucking Stirling off.

"You mean he just got on the horse and went off?"

"Yeah, yeah, he did."

"He didn't contact Lyn Harding?"

"No. He-he said he could ride."

"Okay. Well, I'll ring Lyn and ask her to come round tomorrow. But you'll have to ask Dave Gurney or someone in Winville to take any serious cases. And you'll have to carry on there."

Justin thought of asking Dennis if he could come around. He was always nervous with Dennis Walsh and yet he also saw him as a kind of bulwark. Now he said, "I'm not sure if I can … if I can cope."

"Of course you can. Mrs Burkett said you were good with animals. Just follow the instructions on treatment and contact the owners if you've got any problems."

Dennis might make it sound simple and Justin was certain it wouldn't be simple but he said he would and hung up. Then he agonised over whether he should send an e-mail to Mrs Burkett. It seemed too difficult to explain and he finally went back out to the animals and went round his patients again and his slow walk around, stopping to talk softly to them as he went, was soothing. When he finally went home he felt a little more confident. At least he thought he could cope with the animals in his care.

Walsh was glad to get to bed too. Fiona had asked him if he wanted to stay with her mother while he was in Brisbane and he had said, with a sense of relief, "No, I'm going down with Greg. We'll stay somewhere close to the court." Greg was going off on his long-service-leave later in the month so Dennis hoped he would have his mind on the case of Ruby Jackson. Originally Greg had planned to go in January but had decided when he knew he was being called to the inquest to wait and go immediately afterwards.

He had said gloomily that the case of Willy Jackson would once again show up his failings, that he should have seen way back then what a turd Doug Towner really was. "I should of asked, shouldn't I, when I could see that Doug was doing nothing about Willy's disappearance—and I just sat there like a useless lump and never said a word."

Maybe. But Doug had probably been very plausible. And without a body …

And without a plane …

It wasn't all that hard to believe Willy Jackson had chosen to do his own disappearing.

As he lay in bed he told Fiona what had happened and Fiona said, "But surely—that poor horse couldn't be very dangerous? And he seemed so quiet."

After a couple of weeks of feeding up the horse was no longer 'poor'. "Most buckjumpers are quiet to handle. You wouldn't want them wasting their energy outside the ring. But I doubt if he was ever a part of a buckjump team. I think some morons on a property were using him for their own fun, see if they could ride him after they'd stirred him up."

"And you think Lyn could turn him back into an ordinary riding horse?"

Whether the horse had ever been an 'ordinary riding horse' was a moot point.

"She might like the challenge," he said drily. And it didn't seem the moment to say to tender-hearted Fiona that the horse would probably make better dogmeat than riding horse.

Case No. 2: Stone Walls

Both Walsh and Sullivan were allowed to sit in on the inquest into the death of Harold William Jackson as they weren't being called as witnesses. Dennis Walsh had not even been in Buckton when Willy Jackson disappeared. Sullivan wished he too had been nowhere near.

The Coroner, Grayden Finch, was elderly but his voice still boomed and his eyes still watched over his court room with a shrewd gaze. He had asked for a closed court because information might be divulged that would have a bearing on other cases. What arguments had gone on behind the scenes Walsh and Sullivan could not guess at. And Sullivan, due to go off on his long-service-leave planning to drive down through NSW to Canberra and then round the Snowy and the south coast, was having difficulty in giving his full attention to anything happening here.

Finch with Derryn Palmer assisting him began with Detective Sergeant Adam Lilley who had been part of the team which had found the body of Willy Jackson buried in a crate on a property north of Meandara owned by the Nebo Agricultural Company. He had brought photos and an overhead projector and worked his way through all stages of the operation. The Coroner had not asked for a jury, not least because the pictures of the corpse were not pleasant, and also because there were aspects of the case which might need to be suppressed.

Lilley showed the clothes salvaged, and the hair bagged up. He said calmly, "DNA tests were done using DNA from his father Raymond Jackson and the tests conclusively showed that this was the body of Harold William Jackson."

After he had stepped down the pathologist who had done the post-mortem on the remains said the cause of death was almost certainly a blow to the skull. He too showed detailed photographs of the injury and described the impact such a powerful blow would have done to the brain. "You can see that the blow broke the skull and we found three fragments of skull which had been dislodged."

The Coroner asked him what kind of implement was likely to have caused the damage. The government pathologist talked of the circumference of the injury, the impact, and said thoughtfully, "I would suggest a sledgehammer except that it seems an unlikely thing for anyone to have handy. But some type of hammer certainly seems most likely."

Dennis listening carefully thought the instrument probably wasn't the key point. It was the intention and Finch seemed to read his mind because he said, "Could this have happened by accident?"

"If he had fallen backwards on to something but I think he would have had to have fallen from a considerable height to cause that level of impact. Skulls are not easy to break even in quite severe accidents. And the position of the injury would make a fall on that exact spot rather awkward."

When he stepped aside the court called Samuel Hoysted. Dennis guessed Hoysted would be called. His Appeal would begin next week and Hoysted was confident he would walk free. The pleasure this thought had given him after he'd heard Doug Towner had been found guilty of Sandra Hoysted's murder had since been dulled by the knowledge that the police now wanted to charge him with disposing of Willy Jackson's body.

There was a stubborn set to his mouth as he sat down and waited to be grilled. But he had been over and over that long-past day and felt reasonably confident he could convince the court he had been Doug Towner's patsy. He said Towner had rung him to say there had been an accident and he needed a pilot. "So I went out to the property."

"What incentive did he offer?"

"Nothing. We used to be mates."

"What were you doing when you took the call?"

For a moment Hoysted looked blank. "I was at the races, in Dalby."

This was the first Walsh or Sullivan had heard of this. Sullivan had always believed Sam was at home when he got the call.

"How did he contact you?"

"I don't remember."

"How did you get to the property?"

"I drove back down the back way. It must've taken me, I don't know, forty minutes maybe."

"And who was there when you got there?"

"I think I saw the man who owned the property down by the house and Doug Towner came over to me. The plane was down near the dam and Doug asked me to get it up to the runway. They had bulldozed a runway across the property. I said I wasn't familiar with the plane. It was a Cessna. Doug said I just needed time to familiarise myself. Then he said we needed to deliver something and he would get me to help him load it. It seemed to be a crate wrapped up in canvas and tied with rope. It was very heavy. I said we needed to get someone to give us a hand. Doug wasn't what you'd call muscular. But he said no, I just needed to put my back into it. I said there must be other people around but he said there wasn't, and what was I whingeing about. I said I couldn't see the point of getting a hernia and he said he'd make it worth my while." Sam might be on a roll but Walsh looked at Sullivan with raised eyebrows. Greg Sullivan gave him a wry nod. There seemed to be a gaping hole waiting to be filled in.

"I got the plane back up on the runway. The crate was there by a tree. I don't know how long it took us to load up. I asked Doug what was in the crate and he said it was veterinary supplies. I asked him what had happened to the pilot and he said he'd had an accident and had had to go to hospital. I recognised the plane as belonging to Willy Jackson because I'd seen it on the aerodrome in Winville. I said how come his mate couldn't fly the plane and he said 'what mate?' then he said Willy didn't have any mates but I knew he and Wayne Booth were secret mates and Wayne had a pilot's licence. I was sure I had seen Wayne down near the house. But Doug got cranky with me. I don't think he'd known about Wayne Booth. If he'd told me what was really going on I would've refused to come and help him. He could've asked Wayne."

"Did he speak with Wayne Booth?"

"How would I know? He just kept on at me so I said, okay, we could head off. It was pretty hairy getting off that short runway. And we had trouble finding the place at Meandara. I was scared we would run out of fuel. He told me the drum of aviation fuel at the farm had blown up. I don't know how that happened."

Finch had a slightly bemused expression but only said, "Go on, Mr Hoysted."

"I was very nervous about getting the plane down. It was dark by then and someone had put some lights along the runway. I got the plane down and taxied back towards the sheds. A man came out and waited for us and then he said there was some food over at the house and he said I might like to go over and help myself."

"Did Mr Towner introduce him to you?"

"No. I don't know who he was. I didn't see any animals around but it was dark. Still it looked more like a grain farm. I went in to the kitchen and there was a plate of potatoes and things on the table and a couple of stubbies so I sat down and got stuck in. I was still a bit shaky and it was a long time since lunch. Doug came over about half an hour later and said was I ready to go. I said I wasn't going to fly that bloody plane anywhere and Doug said, no, we would drive back to Winville. I went out with him. There was no sign of the plane. But there was a ute by the garden gate and Doug said he would drive. I didn't mind because I was pretty tired. I kept yawning and almost as soon as I got in I went to sleep. Then Doug woke me up and said we were nearly home. He dropped me off and I just went in and went to bed and slept till nearly ten next morning."

Finch said, "What about your car?"

"Doug came round, he had a young fella with him, I don't know who, and we drove out to Prickly Creek and I got my car."

"Who did you see at the farm?"

"No one. I just got in my car and drove home."

"And how were you remunerated for the help you had provided to Douglas Towner?"

"He paid me."

"How much?"

"I don't know. I didn't count it."

The Coroner looked surprised. "This was income. You were a businessman. I find it hard to believe that you would not count the amount you were paid." Obviously the Coroner did not know how Sam Hoysted did business.

"It was just Doug giving me something for my time. I didn't see it as income."

"So—what? A hundred dollars? Two hundred?"

"I don't remember."

"So when did you hear that both Mr Jackson and his plane were missing?"

"I didn't."

"You didn't see Mr Jackson at the aerodrome?"

"Someone said he'd sold his plane and gone to Brisbane."

"Who told you that?"

"I don't remember."

"Was it Douglas Towner?"

"I don't think so."

"You knew his plane had been taken to Meandara. Did you ask Doug Towner what had happened to it?"

"No."

"You had been told that Mr Jackson had had an accident. Did you ask about him?"

"No."

"Did you see any of his belongings in his plane?"

"I didn't look."

"When you heard that Mr Jackson's body had been found in a crate on that farm near Meandara you knew you had been party to the illegal disposal of a body—"

"I never heard anything."

"You're sure about that?"

"Quite sure."

The Coroner turned to Palmer then back to Hoysted and said, "You may step down, Mr Hoysted."

Dennis turned to Greg and said "the three wise monkeys rolled into one". Palmer looked over at him before turning back to Sam Hoysted who couldn't hide his relief at being finished. Was this velvet glove approach part of a strategy or was this always the way Finch ran his court? Neither Dennis nor Greg felt like hazarding a guess.

*

Lyn Harding felt she had better things to be doing than going round to look at a horse which had bucked someone off. She was always busy and she couldn't see the point of spending a lot of time on a naughty horse unless it had some special qualities. She drew in by the vet's surgery and got out. Justin Castley came out trying to decide how to explain the situation.

"What happened?" Lyn said bluntly.

"It's the horse that they found on the roads and Justin thought he would try and ride him." Justin spoke slowly and diffidently.

"And he fell off," Lyn said impatiently.

"No, no, the horse went crazy and bucked and bucked and threw himself over backwards."

"Then send him for dogmeat."

But as she spoke she was walking towards the yards. Justin joined her and pointed out the horse. It was hard to associate the animal now dozing in the morning sun with a rogue animal or a professional bronc. "Him?" she said surprise.

Justin nodded. "So what should I do with him?"

"Send the useless bugger to the abattoir. He's an ugly brute so I can't see anyone wanting him even if he could be sorted out."

But as she dismissed the horse, and Lyn was rarely anything but practical when it came to horses, Justin felt an unexpected sympathy for the animal welling up. He wasn't sure but he thought the horse liked being with him.

"Should I put him down in the bottom paddock?" He waved a hand towards the big paddock Leila Burkett now used for bigger patients as they recuperated.

"Do what you like. Just don't try riding him." Lyn Harding turned and walked back to her car. She couldn't see anyone wanting to buy the animal even if she could get him to give up his bad habits.

But after she'd gone Justin stood quietly trying to think what was best to do. He wasn't good at making decisions for himself but now there was no one to make them for him. They had taken his boss by ambulance to Winville for x-rays and other treatment and he now had this place to himself. Dennis Walsh had gone to Brisbane and he didn't know who best to ask for advice.

As he stood there the horse came over and gave him a gentle nudge. "Sorry, mate, I haven't got anything." But he reached out to stroke the horse's nose. "I guess you need a name. I think I'll call you … " He stood there thinking. Had the horse ever had a name? Benny? Bertie? Sammy? Charlie? Kenny? Alfie? After running through a dozen names he finally said aloud, "I think I'll call you Kenny. My grandpa was Kenny."

He went away and got a halter and tied the horse to a fencepost and brought a couple of brushes to give him a good grooming. When he had finished he thought the horse looked a bit better. It was his ewe neck which made his head look heavier. 'If I could build up his neck somehow … ' He lifted all the horse's feet and gave them another go with the rasp. "There, Kenny, you look a bit smarter. And tomorrow I'll just put a saddle on you and see what happens."

When he started his rounds for his patients he felt a little more confident. And somewhere far down was the vague thought: 'I would like to show Lyn Harding she doesn't know everything about horses.' Except that commonsense told him she knew a great deal more than he did.

*

Doug Towner too had been brought from prison. He had put on weight and now sat calmly after being helped out of his wheelchair and on to a chair. He looked relaxed and confident. And it was soon obvious that he had chosen his position and was now going to stick to it.

"Mr Towner, how did you hear about the problem at the farm?"

"I don't remember."

"Who rang you?"

"I don't remember."

"What were you told when you arrived at the farm?"

"I don't remember."

"Why did you ring Sam Hoysted when Wayne Booth could fly that plane?"

Doug showed a flicker of surprise but said again, "I don't remember."

"How did you get on to Mr Hoysted at the Dalby races?"
"At the Dalby races?"
"That's what he said. So how did you contact him?"
"I don't remember."
"What did you do while you waited for him to arrive?"
"I don't remember."
"Did you put Mr Jackson's body in a crate?"
"No."
"Who did?"
"How would I know?"
"Why did you tell Mr Hoysted it contained veterinary supplies?"
"I don't remember."
"But you do remember being at that farm?"
"No."
"How did you know about the Meandara property?"
"I didn't."
"So why did you need Mr Hoysted to come and fly you there?"
"I didn't."
"We have two people who saw you there, Mr Towner, so I will you ask again why you needed to go there?"
"I don't remember."

If Finch and Palmer were feeling a degree of frustration Dennis Walsh was enjoying himself. Doug looking around as though to take the court into his confidence encountered Walsh's grin and turned back abruptly to the Coroner who said, "Do you know how Mr Jackson died?"

"I didn't know he was dead."
"So who asked you to deliver that crate to the Nebo Agricultural Company."
"No one did."
"It was your decision?"
"Of course not. I don't know what you're talking about."

Both Greg and Dennis thought it was a tactical error for the court to have dismissed Hoysted and let him leave. His presence might have undermined Doug's confidence.

"Did you know the people on that farm?"
"No."
"Did you know who had arrived on that plane?"
"No."
"So who asked you to drive all the way there from Winville?"
"I don't remember."

To the surprise of several people, including Walsh who wanted Towner to be grilled until he finally admitted something, the Coroner allowed Towner to 'step down' and asked that Alvin Massey be called. This was another surprise and both Dennis and Greg wondered how Carlton Payne had tracked him down. But it had one immediate advantage. Greg as soon as he saw him knew he wasn't the man they'd interviewed who had been calling himself Dean Rounds and who had been charged with discharging a firearm in a public place but had walked free.

Towner now had his back to Walsh who would've liked to see his response to Massey. But Doug was an old hand. He had probably sat there without expression. The Coroner asked Massey to talk the court through that day.

Alvin Massey was probably in his fifties, a nondescript man with thinning brown hair and long grooves turning his mouth down. He seemed to consider the invitation carefully

before saying, “Doug Towner rang me and asked me to get the runway lit up as they wouldn’t get there till dark and he asked me to put out some food for the pilot bringing him and he told me to put sleeping tablets in the food.”

The listeners were too few to set up an audible sigh or gasp but Dennis looked at Greg and said under his breath “Protected Witness?” Greg nodded. But later it occurred to him to wonder how Doug had rung Massey in the days before mobile phones. Had he gone down to the house to use Wayne Booth’s phone or was Massey lying?

“I ran the plane behind the tractor shed and Doug and I unloaded a crate. He asked me for a crowbar and spade and started digging. I said did it matter and he said he had valuables in the crate that had to stay hidden for a while, he said the family had asked him to look after them.” If the Coroner was tempted to say “Family?” he stayed silent and Massey went on, looking over at Doug and then back to the Coroner, “I helped him get the crate into the hole and covered over and then I said, “What about the plane and he said he had in mind a man to come and pick it up. Then he said he’d have to take the ute. It didn’t bother me, I had the truck, but I said I’d like it back and he said ‘no problem’ and I backed it out of the shed. Then he said I would have to refuel the plane but that he’d be back in a few days. Then he went over to the house and the other guy came out and I watched them drive away. I didn’t hear any more but about three days later Doug came back and he had a man with him he said would deliver the plane. I didn’t ask any questions and I helped him refuel and the guy sat in the plane awhile before taking off. I saw Doug load in a carton but I didn’t ask him what was in it. Then the plane took off and Doug went over to his car and I reminded him I wanted the ute back and he said he’d get it organised.”

“Did you get your utility back?”

“Eventually. The young fella that brought it back stayed with me a few days.”

“Do you know his name?”

“Jeff Harris.”

“And why did you make a runway on your farm? Did you own a plane yourself?”

“No. But my father did at one stage. He’s dead now. He gave up flying quite awhile ago.”

“What happened about the crate you’d buried?”

“Nothing. I was told Nebo was selling the property and I asked them about the crate.”

“When you say ‘them’ who did you mean?”

“My uncle, Simon Massey. He said he didn’t know anything about a crate and asked me what was in it. I told him Doug had stored it for someone so he said, ‘in that case, leave it there’, so I did. I rang Doug about it and he asked me if there was any subsidence in the soil visible and I said no, so he told me to leave it. So I packed up and left the property.”

“So you never looked in the crate?”

“No. No reason.”

A normal man would have been highly suspicious but Dennis thought anyone in the Plowman family had probably been raised to ask no questions. Instead of curiosity killing the cat the children had probably frequently been told ‘curiosity kills little boys’.

“Were you aware that Mr Jackson and his Cessna were missing?”

“No.”

“Were you paid for storing the crate?”

“No.”

Carlton Payne and his assistant Jay Barron were still investigating the internal workings of Nebo but whether the Coroner had been fully briefed on that investigation Dennis and Greg had no idea. Nevertheless, the Coroner moved on to a further puzzle.

“Why do you think Mr Towner was content to leave a crate of valuables buried on that property?”

"Well, I don't think they were that kind of valuables."

"What kind of valuables do you mean?"

Alvin Massey looked over at Doug and seemed to weigh up his answer. "Something that was important to someone in the family but not to anyone else."

"When did you hear that the body of a man had been found in that crate?"

"I think I read something in the paper. That's what I mean—only important to someone, not to me."

"You didn't know Mr Jackson?"

"No."

"So why was he important to your family?"

"I heard he double-crossed someone."

"You'll need to be more specific, Mr Massey. Who was the someone?"

"Well, someone in the Nebo company."

"You've given us the name of a Simon Massey but there is no one of that name listed as owner or employee of the company."

"That's because you didn't look hard enough."

Both Finch and Palmer looked faintly puzzled. Dennis said aloud "Ferguson, Harris, Plowman, they're all the same people."

Finch started to say something but it was Doug Towner who swung around and said "What's that bastard doing here!"

"Listening to you lie your head off, Doug." Dennis knew he should not have interjected but hearing Doug's endless stonewalling had irritated him as well as amused him.

Doug swung back to the Coroner and said loudly, "Why're you letting that big oaf get away with—"

"Mr Towner! This is my court, not yours."

"Then tell the bastard—what's he doing in here anyway? He never even knew Willy Jackson."

"Neither did you, according to you, you lying hound!" Dennis knew it was only a matter of time before he was shown the door.

"Gentlemen!" Palmer was tempted to let the two men battle it out in the interests of possible information but court decorum won out. "I would ask you not to interject, Sergeant Walsh."

"I won't but ask them both about the Richard and Simon Ferguson who took over Wayne Booth's farm. Ask them about the dog the Fergusons killed by driving a stake through its head."

He sat back.

Towner had grown red and angry. "Don't listen to that useless bastard! He doesn't know his arse from his elbow!"

Greg wondered what it was about Dennis Walsh which always seemed to get Towner's goat.

"Mr Massey," Finch was understandably reluctant to appear to give support to any part of the interchange, "were either Richard or Simon Ferguson involved with the Nebo Agricultural Company."

"I guess so."

"You guess so?'

"He's right, what that bloke just said. They use various names. None of my business, I just ran things till they sold out."

"So you were aware that the property at Prickly Creek had been bought by two of your relatives?"

"I guess so."

"Why did they buy it? Was it a Nebo property?"

Massey shrugged and said, "I don't know."

"Of course you bloody well know," Dennis Walsh said loudly.

Massey turned to him and his calm I'm-being-helpful expression slipped. "You bloody well shut up! If it hadn't been for you—my dad'd still be alive!"

"So he was the useless nong who ran into Ryan's Bridge? Well, that's one mystery solved."

Greg stared at Dennis then at Massey and couldn't help himself saying, "You mean—that was his dad?"

Carlton Payne hadn't been free to attend the inquest. Instead he had sent a junior, DC Powers, to keep a watching brief, particularly if anything came up about Nebo. Now Sandy Powers looked over to Sullivan and jotted a note. He could get a transcript but they would undoubtedly edit out these interjections. He felt a little sorry for Grayden Finch who had a reputation for running a calm and orderly court. Now he was in danger of presiding over a farce.

Finch exerted himself to say loudly, "I will have this courtroom cleared if I don't have complete silence. Now, Mr Massey, perhaps you would tell us exactly what you know about the farm at Prickly Creek."

"I don't know anything. I don't know what they were doing there."

"So they were on that plane with Mr Jackson?"

"That's what I heard."

"So why did they call Mr Towner to come there?"

"I don't think they did."

"He just turned up out of the blue?"

"I wouldn't think so."

"Mr Booth called him?"

"I wouldn't think so."

"Why wouldn't you think so, Mr Massey?"

"I think it was all planned before they got there."

"By whom?"

"By the company."

"You mean the Nebo Agricultural Company was a party to the murder of Harold William Jackson?"

There was a long silence then Alvin Massey said simply, "Yes."

*

Mr Finch called time for lunch at that point. It risked losing any momentum the proceedings might have but he felt he needed a few quiet moments to himself. Inquests were usually staid technical affairs even if they did sometimes act as precursors to more dramatic trials. But this time he didn't feel he had ever been in control except at the beginning, listening to the pathologist. He sat in a brown study for some five minutes trying to decide how much of Alvin Massey's evidence he actually believed. And should he have ejected those two men at their first interruption? And were the police in any way involved in the death of Alvin Massey's father? And probably the key point: what was Doug Towner's connection to Nebo, to the family, to Alvin Massey, to Harold William Jackson, to Wayne Booth, and perhaps too, given the animosity Towner had displayed, to Dennis Walsh?

'I feel like the mouse that fell in the crocodile pool,' Finch thought wearily. But like that unfortunate mouse there was nothing for it but to swim on. Perhaps the second inquest would throw some light into the dark chasms of the first.

When the small court re-convened he asked Alvin Massey whether the father he had lost was either Simon or Richard Ferguson.

"I don't know. I didn't see much of him. But he got me the job with Nebo."

"So when you suggested that the police had something to do with his death you were obviously very upset. You must have known your father."

This seemed to put Massey into a cleft stick. "I know the police chased him and he crashed. What's that got to do with what he called himself?"

Greg turned to Dennis and said, "That couldn't have been his dad that crashed. That girl in Winville said he was her dad."

Finch gave him a stern look and Greg subsided.

"Where did police chase your father and cause him to crash?" It was getting away from the real issue but it might be something checkable.

"Winville."

Greg turned again to Dennis and said, "Could he be their grandfather?"

Dennis nodded.

Finch said, "Thank you, Mr Massey. Did you put in a complaint about police?"

"No."

"Did you attend the funeral of your father?" Funerals usually got space in country media.

"No."

"Why not?"

Massey hesitated then said, "I was busy." Winville Police had tried for months to find a next-of-kin for the dead man …

"Your father was a director of the Nebo Company?"

"At some stage."

"Under what name?"

"I don't remember."

Grayden Finch had come across some bizarre families in his long life on the bench but he was beginning to find this family quite frankly bewildering. He finally said, "You may step down, Mr Massey, and we will get a list of the directors of the Company which might refresh your memory. In the meantime, I will recall Mr Towner as all this may have jogged his memory."

He jotted a note which Derryn Palmer gave to a court official who went out. Dennis hoped the list would eventually be read to the court. Doug Towner said loudly, "I'm tired. I don't want anything more to do with this business."

"We won't keep you long, Mr Towner. Now when Mr Jackson's wife came to you and said her husband had disappeared what action did you take?"

"She never did, come to me I mean."

"Yes, she did. She is recorded as coming into Winville station and asking specifically for you."

"Well, she never spoke to me."

"A complaint about a missing person would be recorded. Who would handle it if you were unavailable?"

"I don't remember. DS Sullivan maybe."

"But you would be informed?"

"Not necessarily, not if it didn't sound like a real disappearance. Men leave their wives. It usually isn't police business."

"So you are saying that you didn't know that Mr Jackson had disappeared and wouldn't have done anything if you had known?"

"I didn't know. So the rest of your question is irrelevant."

"So who asked you to carry the crate carrying Jackson's body out to Meandara and bury it?"

"I don't remember."

"Wayne Booth was on that farm and two men who called themselves Richard and Simon Ferguson. Which one was it?"

"You don't know that there weren't other people there."

"You were there. Who were these other people?"

"How would I know?"

Dennis wondered if anyone would ever give a straight answer to what exactly had happened at that farm that day. But there were undoubtedly two other people there at some stage of the day. Edwin Morton and Jill Jackson. And they, like Willy Jackson and Wayne Booth, were now dead. He steepled his big fingers. In fact the only people left alive were probably Doug Towner and one of the Fergusons.

"As you can't remember anyone else being involved we must take it that you were the one to place Mr Jackson's body in a crate, wrap it and tie it up with canvas and rope, call Mr Hoysted to come and help, then take it to Meandara and bury it on a property owned by the Nebo Agricultural Company. You must take the main responsibility for the illegal disposal of that body."

"Here! That's rubbish! I had nothing to do with the useless bugger!"

"As you cannot provide us with any other name you must take that responsibility."

The Coroner spoke with unexpected sternness. Dennis Walsh said loud enough to be heard by everyone "Good one".

Doug Towner turned to Dennis and shouted, "That's the useless oaf you should be going after! If it hadn't been for him—"

"If it hadn't been for him—what, Mr Towner?"

"Nothing."

"You mean—if it hadn't been for him we would not now be holding this inquest?"

"It still doesn't mean I had anything to do with Willy Jackson's death!" Doug seemed to want to vent some anger in all directions.

"But you know who killed him and that person asked you to come and tidy up the mess they had made by killing him. So who was it?"

"You're crazy! I've never killed anyone in my life!"

The court received this claim in stunned silence. Given that Towner was serving life for murder—

"As you haven't been able to provide us with any other names then there were four people on that farm who could have murdered Mr Jackson. Mr Booth. Simon Ferguson. Richard Ferguson. And yourself. Did you know Mr Booth?"

"No."

"So he certainly would not have been ringing you as a stranger to come and help him. That leaves Simon and Richard Ferguson and yourself. So which one was it or was it a joint crime?"

"It was nothing to do with me."

"So Mr Jackson was killed by Simon and Richard Ferguson."

Doug gave this a shrug but declined to endorse the statement.

Mr Finch made notes for a long moment then raised his head to say, "This inquest will now adjourn and we will look at the death of Ruby Jane Jackson tomorrow morning at 9.30 am. I would ask you all to attend." As they went out Dennis said to Greg, "Well, I s'pose that was better than nothing." And had that instruction been aimed at Alvin Massey?

"But you could see he didn't know what to make of the Plowmans."

"Yeah, but who does, Greg?"

*

DI Carlton Payne listened intently to DC Powers. Powers had started out by studying accountancy but had looked for something more exciting and like Jay Barron he had found that working with Payne, trained as a forensic accountant, brought some very interesting cases his way. But he didn't pretend to really understand just where Nebo came into the death of Willy Jackson.

"And old Finch got annoyed with those two country cops for talking aloud during the case."

"They being? Sullivan and Walsh?"

"I think so. And you could see that Towner didn't like them being there."

Carl Payne grinned at that. "No, he blames Walsh for getting him convicted for murder. But the key question is still there. Who killed Willy Jackson. And why."

"I think," Powers said cautiously, "that he will ask for further investigation into the Fergusons."

"I wonder if he realises just how difficult they are to investigate." But Payne was speaking partly to himself.

"He asked for a list of the people involved with Nebo."

"And he thinks he'll get an honest and correct list? Well, here's hoping."

"As a listed company it must have produced annual reports, surely?"

"Pull the Nebo file and see if anything resonates."

One of the problems, Payne had found, was that there was no mention of Nebo in connection with the purchase of the McCormacks' farm near Mareeba even though both Irene McCormack and Nancy Crawford were sure Nebo had bought it. The farm was now apparently owned by John and Alice Pater in partnership with Ellis Graham. So he had set Powers on to checking to see if someone had sneaked Nebo's ownership through, either under another name or very briefly between the McCormacks and the Pater/Graham purchase. And there was another question in there: they needed to check for McCormack's will because there seemed to be some sloppy bureaucracy when it came to granting probate when the property was only half paid for …

"And when you say why was Willy Jackson killed, sir, I thought he was killed so they wouldn't need to pay him?"

"There is a complicating factor. There was a box of mineral samples apparently on that plane. Did they belong to the Fergusons or was Willy carrying them for someone else?"

"What sort of samples?"

"Scheelite." His junior didn't pick up on the touch of irony in the way this was put to him and only said, "So where did the samples go?"

"Well, that's the thing. Dennis Walsh found the box hidden in a disused abattoir about thirty ks north-east of the farm. He believed Willy's wife, Jill Jackson, put them there. But it's possible someone else put them there and Jill planned to take them away and put them somewhere else."

"You mean—Doug Towner put them there?"

Carlton Payne considered this before saying, "Probably not. But it's possible someone believed the samples were more valuable than they really were. But it's almost certain the Fergusons owned the samples and that's why they bought that farm—because they believed the samples were still hidden somewhere on the farm. They were apparently seen at various times hunting round the farm." He saw no need to say that the Fergusons were apparently doing their hunting with a geiger counter.

"So where are the samples now?"

"They were delivered to the government assay office, I believe, for testing. What they did with them I don't know."

"So someone could now claim them back?"

"If they didn't mind being linked to Willy Jackson's disappearance. And would the office tell us … because they weren't delivered until at least eight years after Willy disappeared." He spent a moment musing: were those samples still under lock and key?

"Should we check to see if they ever asked to get them back?" Powers still believed there might be straightforward ways to deal with the whole problem.

"Not yet. But the key to the whole thing seems to be—was it an unscheduled stop or did everyone know that Willy would land on that farm?"

"You mean—Doug Towner could not have set up all that business with Sam Hoysted if he didn't know the plane was going to land there?"

"Exactly. So he must've had some warning."

But that brought him back to that central puzzle. What happened after Willy brought the plane down on that farm? And then an odder question came to him: did any of the Fergusons-cum-Plowmans have a pilot's licence?

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Dennis and Greg looked keener to enter the court next morning than almost anyone else. Alvin Massey came in and sat down and was handed several sheets of paper. His shoulders said he would rather be somewhere else. Doug Towner came in in his wheelchair. Grayden Finch came in and sat down, his face expressionless.

He began by asking Mr Massey to tell the court which of the Nebo directors, as supplied by the Companies Office, were related to him.

"Well, I guess they all might have been."

"And which one was your father?"

"Well, I guess Richard Massey was."

"You said he was Simon Massey yesterday. So which was he?" He had actually said Simon was his uncle.

"Probably both."

"You mean—your father called himself both Richard Massey and Simon Massey?"

"Yeah. And other things."

"Such as?"

"I don't remember."

"So all these people listed as directors could all have been the same person?"

"How would I know?"

"They were your relatives."

"I didn't have much to do with them."

"Is it likely that a company would be registered with all the directors being aliases of the one person?" Grayden Finch seemed to be carefully schooling his face to show nothing.

"It could happen, I guess."

"In your family?"

"Who knows."

Rather than pursue what was obviously an unproductive line, Mr Finch said they would move on to the death of Mrs Jackson. Her skeleton had first been examined by Dr Watling in Winville who was currently unavailable and then by a pathologist Dr Rendell in Brisbane. He endorsed Watling's finding that she had almost certainly been killed by a heavy blow to the head.

He showed pictures of the skeleton and the skull with its damage. "You can see that it would be a difficult place to hit if someone fell backwards but would be the obvious place for someone standing behind her and somewhat taller."

He suggested a hammer but said it could have been anything of a similar nature. "You can see the depression in the skull actually broke right through so it was delivered with considerable force. Though she was not young the bone was still strong and showed no sign

of osteoporosis or any other condition which could have weakened it." He showed how the bone had shattered and embedded fragments into the unfortunate woman's brain. The fragments had been found inside the skull after time and small creatures had cleaned out her brain.

"Could the damage have been done after she was already dead from some other cause?"

"If it was done very close to her death. There was no sign of any poison in any part of the residues collected. But that isn't definitive, given the time which had elapsed. The small hyoid bone in her throat was not damaged. But, yes, it is possible." He went on to give some technical details on the state of the bones including the impact that burial directly into soil would have caused. Finch listened carefully before asking that Dr Rendell be shown pictures of the skull of Willy Jackson. When pictures of both skulls were shown side-by-side they could be seen to show virtually identical damage.

Dr Rendell when asked for his professional opinion said he felt reasonably sure both people had been killed with the same or a very similar instrument. Everyone in court except possibly Towner and Massey concurred. He also said that he couldn't say how long the body had been buried but probably between eight and twelve years.

Dennis Walsh was then called. He had given a great deal of thought on how to present it. Should he say he had hoped to find Ruby Jackson or should he present it as purely fortuitous?

He said he had been called out in the early hours of the morning by a man who had seen two people butchering an animal in a paddock over near Prickly Creek and that they were almost certainly there illegally.

"I called my constable, Grant Schroeder, and we drove out. We found John and Dan Goodrick from Buckton in a paddock with a partly-butchered cow. I rang the Long Hitch Pastoral Company as they had recently bought the property and asked whether they wanted the two men charged. They said no, that they accepted a degree of 'wastage', but Dan Goodrick ran away when he saw us coming. I went after him but he tripped on something and fell down and struck himself on a rock. I caught up with him and helped him up and told him he could take the meat but had to bury the remains and not to do it again.

"There was something odd about the rock, the way it had obviously been planted carefully in an open space." Winville had later re-created the place and taken photographs. "I wondered if they had been burying offal at other times. If they were doing it regularly it might encourage foxes to breed there. My constable and I moved the rock and found what looked like part of a woman's frock. It seemed very unlikely that the owners' of the property would be burying female clothing. So far as I knew there had not been any women living there for many years."

"Did you have any knowledge of local women missing?"

"We knew that Ruby Jackson had gone missing about six months after her son had disappeared. But it needed the experts to take over so I rang Winville and asked them to come out."

The court was then read an affidavit done by Ruby Jackson's next door neighbour, Ellie Watkins, with Sergeant Applegarth's help, which chronicled Ruby's regular visits to the farm and that she had said she might need to go to Brisbane to find her son. Then that her house had apparently been sold with all her belongings still in it. The neighbour didn't know what had happened to Ruby's car but said there was no way that Ruby would have driven to Brisbane because she had never been further afield than Garramindi and Dalby and Winville.

It wasn't conclusive. Desperation might have driven a loving mother to try something she would not otherwise have contemplated doing. But she certainly would not have abandoned her cat. Her neighbour wrote, 'She loved her cat, sometimes calling him her best

friend, and she always arranged with me if her son invited her to go with him to Winville. He had a house there.'

She then went on to say that the people who moved into Ruby's house were very rude and unneighbourly when she'd asked after Ruby, but as they were rarely there she couldn't say much about them, only that their name was Dawkins. The value of her affidavit was probably that she could give the date when Ruby had driven away, telling her she was going over to the farm again, and hadn't come home.

This led on to information about Willy's house in Winville but as it had only been rented Jill had come and removed Willy's belongings at some stage and let the agent know that her husband had disappeared. It was Ruby's house which had been transferred by James Harris in Brisbane, an action which had led to him losing his licence to practise as a lawyer.

Dennis and Greg half-expected Harris to be called but instead Greg was called to tell the court what had happened when Winville had been contacted.

"We applied for a search warrant for the farm and called the office of the Long Hitch Company and asked them to be present when we arrived. They said we could go wherever we wanted and search the whole farm. The excavation was overseen by Reid Strohling from the forensics lab in Winville with Dr Mason Watling from Winville District Hospital present." Watling had been called once bones started to show up.

He had had his section prepare photos of all stages of the excavation which showed the handbag which had contained the remnants of a handkerchief with 'Ruby' embroidered on it. "It seemed very likely that we were looking at the remains of Ruby Jackson but detailed tests were carried out on the remains. Both Ruby's parents and her sister were buried in Dalby and her husband was buried in Garramindi so it was possible to get samples for DNA testing. This showed that the body was that of Ruby Jackson or a very close relative such as a twin sister. As no other close relative was known to exist it seemed certain that this was the body of Ruby Jackson."

The court was then handed an affidavit from George Stadler who had been the sergeant in charge of Garramindi at the time both Willy and Ruby disappeared. He wrote that both Jill Jackson and Ruby Jackson had come in to see him regularly, "at least once a week and probably more often" to ask him to search for Willy. "As DI Towner had been at the farm when I arrived and he told me as soon as I got out of my car that he had the situation under control and I wasn't needed so I rang him a number of times to ask him about Mr Jackson. I also told him at least five times that neither Willy's wife nor his mother had seen him since the day his plane had landed there on Wayne Booth's farm and that he needed to be listed as a missing person. Every time I rang DI Towner said I could leave it to him, that he knew that Mr Jackson had gone to Brisbane to take some assay samples and that he would undoubtedly be in touch when he had finished his work in Brisbane. I asked him how he knew this and he said he had spoken to Mr Jackson at the farm that day."

"I hope George's got life insurance," Dennis said under his breath.

George Stadler went on to write, "This went on for months and I felt very embarrassed as both Jill and Ruby obviously didn't believe me. Jill asked me about her husband's plane and I said it must be in Brisbane and she said she had checked all the airfields there and it wasn't. So why was I telling her lies. I said that was what DI Towner had told me and he must know because he said he had been on to both police and Civil Aviation in Brisbane.

"When Ruby disappeared her neighbour came to see me to say that Ruby would not have driven to Brisbane on her own as she was terrified of heights and certainly would not have driven down the Toowoomba Range herself. I put out an Alert for her car in case she had left it somewhere and then taken a bus or train but it was never found.

"I don't know what happened to Ruby but I feel sure she would not have disappeared without making arrangements about her house and her cat. I feel that I let her down by not going myself to try and find what had happened to her son but at that stage I trusted DI Towner to do the right thing."

As Derryn Palmer laid down the sheets he said, "We can arrange to have Mr Stadler called but I think you might be able to tell us just what you and Mr Jackson talked about at that farm that day, Mr Towner."

Grayden Finch had presided over a number of inquests with one witness following another in an orderly fashion and now it had been suggested that the ten names provided for the Nebo Company might all be the same person. The mind boggled. But like Palmer he felt sure Doug Towner was the key to it all.

All eyes turned to Doug Towner who said, "I never even saw Willy Jackson there. I certainly didn't speak to him."

"So why did you tell Sergeant Stadler you had spoken with Willy Jackson who'd told you he was going to take assay samples to Brisbane?"

"I didn't. The old fool wouldn't know what day it was. Why do you think they encouraged him to take early retirement?"

"When you say 'early retirement' how early are we looking at?"

"How would I know?"

"Then I think you need to re-think your answer about him taking early retirement. So what did you actually tell Sergeant Stadler?"

"I didn't tell him anything."

"Even though he regularly rang you to ask for information?"

"He didn't ring me."

"Are you certain about that?"

"Absolutely."

"Then we will need to call Mr Stadler to clarify these points."

Both Finch and Palmer could see that Towner wasn't wild about this. They conferred briefly then Finch said calmly, "We have established that both Harold William Jackson and Ruby Jane Jackson died on the farm called 'Wilcannia' at Prickly Creek on the Darling Downs. We have established that Douglas Towner, Simon Ferguson, Richard Ferguson, and possibly Samuel Hoysted were present when Harold Jackson was killed. We have established that Ruby Jackson was buried on a farm belonging to Simon and Richard Ferguson. But in the hope of refining these broad statements we will reconvene on Thursday at 9.30 am. I would ask you all to be present."

"Bloody hell," Greg said gloomily. "I thought I'd be on my way home tonight instead of hanging round Brisbane."

"Doug's probably thinking the same. I'll bet he never thought he'd have to face George Stadler." He had had occasional postcards from Stadler when he and Patsy Browne set off in their campervan but he hadn't heard from George in several years and had no idea where he might now be living.

"Yeah, but that's one excitement I'd rather do without. We're s'posed to be heading off on Saturday."

Case No. 3: More Puzzles

Both Dennis and Greg rang home to say they would be delayed. Dennis left a message on the station phone for Ben Waters when he came in to do his Wednesday stint. But to Fiona he said, "You wouldn't happen to have heard any news about Albert Smithies, would you?"

"No-o-o, but I think he's still in the hospital here."

Was there still a chance that Smithies could provide any more insights—and would those insights be truthful? Dennis still had mixed feelings about Smithies. The man had created his own make-believe background so how much of anything else he said could be relied upon?

But he finally thought 'here goes' and rang Buckton Hospital and asked Sister Martin whether there was any chance of speaking with Smithies. She said cautiously, "Well, you can try but he's getting very weak. We may send him to Winville. But I'll take the phone around." He listened to her saying something to Smithies then a faint voice to say "What do you want?"

"Mr Smithies, I've got two questions for you. I'm here at the inquest into Willy and Ruby Jacksons' deaths. Do you know who owned the uranium samples that were on Willy Jackson's plane?"

There was a long expensive silence then Smithies said faintly, "Probably the Hoysteds. They found something on a property. Don't ask me what."

"Okay, thanks. And Sam Hoysted told the court that Doug Towner paid him a couple of hundred dollars for flying that plane but you said Doug paid him fifteen thousand. How d'you know that?" Strictly speaking Sam had not repudiated the suggestion of hundreds rather than thousands of dollars.

"Henley told me." His voice seemed to fade away as he went on, "Sam was in Sydney at the races with Henley and Sam was throwing money round like it grew on trees," Dennis struggled to hear, "and Henley told him to stop wasting money and Sam said Doug gave him fifteen thousand and the sooner he spent it the better because he didn't trust Doug."

Dennis hoped he had heard this correctly. Any minute Smithies might fade away to nothing … "Why did you think he said that about Doug?"

"How would I know? Ask Henley."

"Is Henley still in Sydney?"

"S'pose so."

"Do you keep in touch with him?"

"Not since Sam went to jail … once or twice … "

Dennis wondered if Henley Hoysted had had doubts about the discretion of his brother. He was probably right to worry. But Dennis didn't think Henley was a shining example of probity in his public or private life either.

He thanked Smithies who said, "Who are they going after?"

"The Fergusons that lived at Prickly Creek that were really Plowmans."

"Don't know them … "

Sister Martin took the phone and said "Is there anything I can help with, Dennis?"

"If he knows more about Henley Hoysted that might be helpful."

"Henley Hoysted?" She sounded slightly puzzled but said she would ask him in the morning. "He's having quite strong medication so he may not be very with it sometimes but his mind still seems fairly clear."

"Okay thanks."

He said to Greg, "I'd best ring Carl Payne and tell him."

"Henley Hoysted," Greg had been listening though not very carefully to Dennis's end of the conversation, "what's he got to do with anything?"

Rather than repeat it to Greg Dennis rang Carlton Payne at home. Payne said though not very enthusiastically as he had friends around, "What did you think of the day?"

"Not much but I've got two things for you from Albert Smithies. He thinks the uranium samples came from a Hoysted property—"

"There were no uranium samples, Dennis, so don't go telling anyone there were." Payne was unexpectedly sharp.

As Dennis had just spoken of uranium to Albert Smithies he decided not to sound apologetic. "And he said it was Henley Hoysted that Sam told. Henley complained about Sam throwing money at the bookies in Sydney and Sam said he'd got fifteen thousand from Doug Towner and he thought he'd better spend it fast because he didn't trust Doug."

"So what does that mean?"

"I think you should talk to Henley. He's in Sydney."

"And you think he's going to repeat that to the police?"

"It's worth a try."

"Okay. But I never want the word 'uranium' to pass your lips ever again, Dennis."

Payne reluctantly left his guests to try and track down Henley Hoysted.

*

Dennis and Greg, given an unexpected day off in Brisbane, debated on how to spend it. In the end they decided to drive out to the Lone Pine sanctuary then go to a pub. Dennis sometimes felt that the only thing that made Brisbane bearable was the riot of tropical flowering shrubs along the streets but Lone Pine with its koalas was pleasant. In the late afternoon, feeling mellow, Greg said "What was that about uranium?"

"Who knows, Greg. S'posed to be scheelite but you wouldn't know with those bods. And I don't know how valuable scheelite is. Don't they use it in light bulbs—or is that titanium?"

"Don't ask me. So where does Albert Smithies come into things?"

"He was mates with Denton Hoysted, they were in the war together, and I reckon one of the family wanted him to keep a bit of an eye on Sam and maybe Bryce Hoysted. Who knows?"

"And you think this Smithies is reliable?"

"No. But he's all I've got. And he's going to die any day soon so it seemed worth a last try to see if he knows anything."

"And does he know what happened the day Willy Jackson was killed?"

"I doubt it. Or only secondhand. But you know what Sam said about being at Dalby races—I don't believe that. He wouldn't of had a mobile back then and I can't see Doug wanting to broadcast something all over the course. I reckon Sam was at home."

"And you reckon he lied about that for some reason?"

"I'd say so. But I reckon he said it to cast doubt on Doug's story of ringing him to come out and fly Willy's plane. Now he hates Doug like poison."

"I s'pose we could check whether there were races at Dalby that day. They'd be in the paper."

"Mmmm." They could show up both Sam and Doug as liars without too much effort but would it help with the key questions of when, where, how, and why Willy and Ruby were killed? "We could pass it on to Carl, I guess. He wasn't too keen on me ringing him last night … or we could ask the court tomorrow to check."

"Payne had someone in court, didn't he? Maybe he's passed it on."

"That young fella that made a lot of notes? Yeah, I'd say so."

"Okay, let's leave it. So where to next?"

*

George Stadler looked slightly apprehensive when he came into court next morning. He looked over to Walsh and Sullivan without showing great pleasure in seeing them again. He gave his name and an address in Maroochydore and agreed that he had been station sergeant in Garramindi for ten years. The memory didn't seem to give him any pleasure.

He then agreed that he had gone to the property at Prickly Creek after a person on the next farm told him a plane had come down and twenty to thirty minutes later they had heard a loud bang and saw smoke rising. When he drove in he had been met by DI Towner who told him he wasn't needed as everything was under control and the fire was out. He said he had glimpsed a plane down by the farm dam but he wasn't sure if it was in the dam or beside it. "I thought there had been a fire on it and they had run it into the dam but there were signs of grass burnt up on the runway. I didn't see anyone except Towner so I can't tell you who else was there or what had happened to the pilot."

"So what did you do?"

"I went back to the station in Garramindi. Prickly Creek was actually on Buckton's patch so I rang Buckton and told Sergeant Bosch about the plane coming down. He said if Towner was in control there was nothing for him to do. But he rang me a couple of days later to say that the wrecked plane had been taken away on a long loader by the Civil Aviation people. I said the plane didn't seem to be wrecked and he said that was what he had been told. I haven't got my station log so I can't tell you the exact dates for anything but both Jill Jackson and Ruby Jackson kept coming in to see me and ask me if I had found Willy Jackson or his plane. I said I'd been told the plane had been taken to Brisbane but Jill said she knew that wasn't true as Wayne Booth had told her he had heard the plane take off."

He looked over at Doug Towner then back to Mr Finch. "I kept ringing DI Towner in Winville and he kept telling me they were trying to check on Mr Jackson's whereabouts after he'd gone to Brisbane. Jill Jackson also said to me that the drum of aviation fuel at the farm had blown up so the plane would not have had sufficient fuel to fly to Brisbane. She also told me she had contacted Rushton's in Winville as her husband owned a share of their company. She asked them to contact police about the plane. You could ask them for the details. I heard later that as the plane could not be found the police had advised them to get on to their insurance company. I understand the insurers did their own search but eventually paid out. You could get the details from them."

"Thank you, Mr Stadler. Did you get any other response from Mr Towner other than that he was looking for Mr Jackson?"

"No. I rang him when Mrs Watkins came and told me Ruby was missing and she had had to feed her cat which was hungry. She had a key to her house but the place wasn't locked as Ruby had only been planning to be out for an hour or two. But then, about two weeks later, some strange people, a man and a woman, moved in, packed up all Ruby's belongings and told Mrs Watkins to keep the cat. I went round and asked them what was going on. They said they had just bought the house. He said he was Paul Dawkins but he didn't introduce the woman. I asked them where Ruby was and they said she was in Brisbane and she had asked them to send her belongings on to her. I asked them for Ruby's address in Brisbane and they said they couldn't give it out without Ruby's permission. I reminded them that this was a request from police and they said they would get back to me. But then, every time I went around, there was nobody there. I told DI Towner what had happened and he told me not to worry, that obviously Mrs Jackson had met up with her son in Brisbane and they were planning a new life there.

"I reminded him that we hadn't found the plane and Jill Jackson was still searching for her husband. Mr Towner just laughed and said, didn't I know that Willy Jackson preferred men to women and was glad to leave his bitch of a wife in the dark."

"What further actions did you take?"

"I kept going round to try and catch up with the Dawkinses but they were never there. I got the Council to serve a notice on them because their yard was becoming a fire hazard and I heard from a local man that he had been rung by Mr Dawkins who said he was held up in Rockhampton and couldn't get home so could he go round and mow and David Lawson later

told me he had received a money order postmarked Meara Bight. I tried to find a Dawkins listed for Meara Bight but there was no one there on the electoral roll and the Post Office couldn't help me."

It struck Dennis that George Stadler had been far more proactive than Doug Towner had allowed for. And he wondered if the Dawkinses were never there simply because they were on the farm over the other side of Prickly Creek.

"Now, Mr Towner has told us that you took early retirement. Is that true?"

"Not really. I was sixty-four. DI Towner asked me what I wanted to do as they wanted to get a younger man into the station. I said I was happy to see my time out there rather than go to another station for a short stint. DI Towner said if I'd like to leave a bit sooner he was sure it wouldn't be a problem. But by the time I actually left Garramindi I was only three months off sixty-five." Police could retire as early as fifty-five but George probably hadn't regarded Garramindi as a particularly stressful posting.

"You had done some searching for both Mr Jackson and his mother Ruby. What did you think had happened to them?"

"I felt sure that something had happened to them but I didn't know what. They were both polite and decent people. I couldn't see them both leaving their friends and neighbours and relatives just like that. If they were still alive I felt sure they would be in touch. But nobody else seemed to be interested. It wasn't until Dennis Walsh moved into the station in Buckton and tried to find what had happened to Willy Jackson's plane and the uranium samples that were s'posed to be on board that I knew it wasn't just me worrying for no reason."

DI Payne wasn't there to blow his top. Dennis and Greg looked at each other. Mr Finch said, "This is the first we've heard about uranium samples being on board. Where were they coming from?"

Young DC Powers hadn't been briefed about this and merely made a note about uranium samples.

"I don't know but there was a rumour that they had gone walkabout from Mary Kathleen."

"And you were sure you were actually dealing with uranium, not something else?"

"Someone might have wanted to make it all sound more exciting. So I can't be sure. But neighbours reported that the Fergusons were always going round their farm with a geiger counter. I never saw that. So it might be another story. But I have always wondered if it somehow connects with Willy Jackson's death."

"When did you hear that Willy Jackson's body had been found?"

"I read it in the paper."

"What did you think when you read that?"

"I wondered if he had been killed because of what he was transporting on the plane. But you would have to ask Mr Towner. He was at the farm that day. He must know what was going on there."

"And when did you hear that the body of Ruby Jackson had been found?"

"I didn't know that she had been found until my wife was talking with a friend who had heard it from her cousin. I felt very depressed about it all. I should have tried harder to find them. But I was a fool. I trusted Doug Towner. And now I wouldn't trust him with my morning newspaper."

Doug had been sitting listening with a bored expression on his face. But he had slowly tightened up and now he shot Stadler a venomous look.

Mr Finch said George Stadler could take a seat in the court. Stadler chose to sit on the opposite side of the court to Greg and Dennis. Then Finch asked Mr Towner to respond to the new information.

"You have admitted being at that farm on the day the plane came down, Mr Towner, so you must know what happened."

Doug sat there in silence.

"So I will ask you to tell the court how you came to be there. And what happened while you were there."

"I'm sorry, but I have no memory of ever being on that farm."

"Who asked you to go to the farm?"

"I don't remember being asked to go anywhere."

"Were you told that there were uranium samples on the plane?"

"I don't remember."

"Who told you that the pilot had been killed and a substitute needed to be found?"

"No one did."

"You didn't need to be told?"

"I have no idea."

"When did you discover the uranium samples were missing?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

He slumped back and went on, "I'm tired."

Grayden Finch had faced some unhelpful witnesses in his career but he had the unworthy thought that he would like to set some very large copper with an unrequited desire to rough up a suspect on to Doug Towner. And there was a pointlessness to all this stonewalling. Doug would likely die in prison. So a further charge would not affect that. So was his unhelpfulness merely a habit or was he more worried about dobbing in a relative? Finch couldn't decide.

"Very well, we will leave it there for the moment, Mr Towner."

Doug sat back and closed his eyes.

"We do have another witness," Finch said, turning to Derryn Palmer and saying something the court didn't catch. A minute later, Henley Hoysted walked into the court and said without any introduction, "I am a busy man and I can't see why you'd want me here, so let's get this show on the road."

Both Walsh and Sullivan looked at him with interest and compared him with his brother. He was a well-set-up man with brown hair and blue eyes and broad shoulders but his whole stance suggested a bumptious pushy type which detracted from the Marlboro Man image.

He agreed to his name and address and gave Doug Towner a long considering look.

"Thank you for coming at such short notice," Finch sounded polite. "Firstly, I would just ask you if you knew anything about Harold William Jackson."

"I'd met him, I'd been to the aerodrome at Winville and Sam introduced us, and Sam said Willy used to go up to Wayne Booth's property which was on the west of a Hoysted property north-east of Longreach. I don't think Wayne was the sole owner and of course it was only leasehold—but he had a manager there and about six Murris and Sam said one of the kids there was Wayne's but I don't know if Willy had any connection to them. I knew his wife lived in Garramindi and my son told me Willy seemed to prefer to be out west with Wayne—"

"Your son is?"

"Bryce. His ex-wife lives in Garramindi."

"Did you ever do any mining on your property? Sink test bores, do any fossicking?"

"No. Never. But the people that had the place north of us must've been doing something because they were dumping stuff in the creek. I told our manager to test the water regularly as I didn't want our stock keeling over."

"Who were these people?"

"S'far as I know they were Richard and Simon Harris but I never met them. I put in a complaint to the government but I never heard anything. I rang Wayne's manager, think he was called Brad Pickett, and told him the creek was contaminated. It wasn't a major problem as we used the artesian water. But you can't keep stock away from a creek when it's running."

"Do you know what the mineral was the Harrises were looking for?"

"Someone said it was something I'd never heard of but when I mentioned it to Sam he said it was uranium and I got our manager to send a water sample to Brisbane and I think they said there were traces of cesium but I don't remember the details. I sent a copy of the report to those environment bods but I don't know what they did. I put it to the family that we should sell that property before any gossip leaked out about radioactive contamination, like they've got in other places."

Walsh looked at Sullivan and it was very clear that Carlton Payne would never get this cat back into the bag.

"Did you hear anything about Mr Jackson landing on Wayne Booth's farm at Prickly Creek?"

"Well, I don't know. But Sam said they never found the samples that were on the plane and he reckoned it was Doug Towner who stole that plane but maybe something had leaked and it was radioactive." Grayden Finch thought Henley Hoysted was actually enjoying being the centre of attention and trolling this idea.

"I saw Sam in Sydney and we went to the races at Rosehill and he was chucking money at the bookies like nobody's business and I told him to pull his head in and he said Doug had given him a wad of money for flying Willy Jackson's plane and he wanted to get rid of it, quick smart, and the funny thing is, you know Sam was a lousy punter, worse than some old dame with a pin, but he won big there, I'd say he went home with fifty thousand."

"Did he tell you how much he had been paid?"

"He said fifteen thousand. He said he reckoned Doug Towner was going to sell the plane on so he would probably make a good profit on it."

"Did he say why Mr Towner had paid him so much for a few hours work?"

"Well, to keep his big mouth shut probably. Towner," here he turned and looked squarely at Doug Towner, "was in the police so who do you complain to? Towner ran Winville so where do you go? Anyway, Sam reckoned it was the hairiest flight he ever made and he deserved every penny and he kept it up in his loft and he put all his winnings there and his wife found it and said why didn't he keep his money in the bank and he said this was his stash just for betting. I don't know what she thought but she was an accountant so I'll bet she counted it."

"So the Tax Office was unaware he had been paid fifteen thousand dollars?"

Henley shrugged. "You can ask them."

"And where do you think Mr Towner got fifteen thousand dollars?"

Of course all this was hearsay but all the court except for Doug Towner was avid for more hearsay.

"Oh, I'd reckon he got it from his crook rellies. He was always minding out for them."

"What do you mean by 'crook rellies'?"

"Look, I'm a successful businessman. You don't get there by putting your head in the sand. I wanted to know more about the people Sam was taking money from—and I found Towner had been the man to let two suspects go in Mt Isa after a big payroll robbery. He banged up some old drunk who couldn't scare an old lady let alone a couple of security guards. So I reckon some of that payroll money came Doug's way and then he needed to pass it on and who better than my stupid brother. I'll bet he knew Sam would immediately head

for the races. And who knows—maybe Sam thought the money was radioactive and he'd better get rid of it fast before his fingers turned black." He gave way to a long chortle at what he saw as his own wit. "But I reckon he was scared someone had listed the serial numbers of all the missing money, Doug, I mean."

"Were you aware of who these suspects were?"

"Oh, I'd reckon they were Simon and Richard Harris. People said they'd won the Golden Casket but why would you get land if you didn't know the first thing about running stock but later on our manager told us the Nebo Agricultural Company had taken the place over. I never checked that but you can if you want to."

"So coming back to the key question. What do you know about the death of Harold William Jackson?"

"Well, how do you get a bloke's plane? People said Willy loved his plane so he wouldn't just hand it over. Someone must've clobbered him but I don't know who."

"Thank you, Mr Hoysted. You may take a seat."

"Yeah, well, you look for those Harrises. I don't reckon they'd let those samples out of their sight so they must've been on that plane with them."

Grayden Finch again thanked him and then adjourned for lunch.

As Sullivan went out he said to Walsh, "I reckon Finch didn't know what had hit him when Henley got going."

"And what happens when that young fella gets back and tells Carl what went on this morning?"

"Yeah, but you know Henley did a good job with linking things up—if you believe him. But I don't reckon Sam'll be any too happy."

Dennis grinned. "Yeah, Sam may be thick but he can't be that thick."

"So what next?"

"Some lunch."

*

The afternoon was an anti-climax. Towner was asked if he would like to respond to anything said during the morning session and said coldly, "I always knew all the Hoysteds were liars but it looks like Henley tops the lot."

"Are you disagreeing with anything specific, Mr Towner?"

"Everything. The bloke's off in la-la-land."

"Now is your chance to set the record straight about the death of Mr Jackson and your commandeering of his aircraft, Mr Towner."

"It's all a lot of hooey but I'm a sick old man stuck in jail for something I didn't do so what's the point of anything."

"There are still people out there, Mr Towner, who got away with murder. We would like to see them brought to account."

But Towner merely repeated that he knew nothing and was a sick old man.

It didn't really surprise anyone when Finch said both Willy Jackson and Ruby Jackson died as the result of foul play but that the two cases would now go back to the police for further investigation.

"S'pose we're getting somewhere," Dennis said, "but I wonder about that bit about Wayne having a kid up near Longreach. Fiona thought he'd said something about a son at Longreach but then we thought she'd misheard 'a run at Long Hitch' so it might be worth checking. If he did have a son I reckon the kid deserves to get something."

"Well, I'm off, Dennis, you can do all the checking you want while we go and enjoy ourselves."

"No. Seeing we're here let's see if we can find the title to that property. Won't take us more than half an hour. There was no mention in Wayne Booth's will of any property at Longreach so had he already given up his lease or passed it to someone else?"

Greg grumbled and said he wanted to be on the road home before they struck the worst of the rush hour traffic but Dennis prevailed, as he usually did. And they finally turned up something interesting.

The station, at one stage named Boothby Downs, was now officially leased in the name of Dairo and Anja Booth. "So who the heck are they?" Greg said. "I didn't think he had a wife."

"I'd say they're Murris."

"Even so."

"His wife and son?"

"You're kidding?"

"No. I always thought there was something odd about him and women, you know, sort of half-hearted, like he didn't really want them to say 'yes'."

"Because he was already married?"

"I'd say so. And then there was the complication of him and Willy. So who did he really care about?"

"I guess we're never going to know. But I've always wondered what Wayne was doing when Doug went off with Willy's plane and Willy's corpse."

Dennis shook his head slowly. "Doug must know … something. What was he doing in all that time while he waited for Sam Hoysted to arrive? But a ring to these people should tell us if he had another family he kept tucked away out there."

"I wonder … have we got it wrong and both Wayne and Willy had women up there, that it wasn't each other they were cavorting with."

"And they didn't mind what people assumed about them—because they were like those men who didn't want anyone to know they had some black kids?"

"And don't forget that Willy had Jill."

But neither of them could hazard a guess at what Jill Jackson might have known, guessed, thought, felt …

*

Buckton suggested a place of perfect peace when Greg Sullivan dropped Dennis off on his way home to Winville. As he went up the stairs Dennis thought back to his homecomings before he had Fiona and the children in his life. Now the house seemed to radiate light and energy and welcome.

But he said after he'd dropped his bag, "Just got to duck over to the station to check on something. Won't be long."

Fiona was tempted to say something wry but there was no point in trying to dissuade Dennis. They had got a set of all the Queensland phone books one time when they were looking for someone and now he went searching in them. Of course the property might be too remote for a connection and they depended on short wave radio. Or maybe didn't communicate at all. But he found a B. A. Plunkett listed for Boothby Downs.

'Plunkett, not Pickett? Could be.'

He rang and waited and a not very welcoming voice said "What d'you want?"

Dennis introduced himself and asked if he was talking with Brad Plunkett who used to be manager for Wayne Booth. The voice didn't sound much more pleasant but the man agreed that he was. Dennis explained that he'd just been to the inquest on Willy Jackson and that he'd heard that Willy and Wayne used to fly up regularly and what did they do when they got there.

"You've got it a bit wrong, mate. Willy would drop Wayne off and keep on going."

"So do you know where he was going?"

"Nah. He never told me anything." Gossip said Wayne had given his manager time off whenever he went. And Dennis hadn't thought about the Murris being there too, though they might be on an outstation or something … but now he rethought that.

"So Willy never stayed there?"

"Well, maybe a night here and there."

"So Wayne had a wife up there?"

"Yeah. Anja. And they had a kid. He transferred the lease to them about two years before he died but he still used to come up after Willy disappeared."

Dennis was glad the man had decided to become more talkative. And how did Wayne get there without Willy and his plane but that wasn't the key question.

"Which direction did Willy go when he dropped Wayne off?"

"North-east, I think."

"So would he have known any of your neighbours?"

"Well, we used to have the Hoysteds on our east and there was some company to the north. They were the ones the Hoysteds reckoned were looking for uranium on their land."

"Do you think Willy Jackson knew them?"

"No idea."

"Did you ever meet them?"

"Nah. But Willy did jobs for people, took them places and carted stuff, so maybe he was just getting some work while Wayne was here."

"So did you ever hear if they ever found uranium there?"

"Well, I reckon they did because one of the Hoysteds put in a complaint about them, said there was radioactive stuff going into the creek. Don't know if that ever got checked."

"So who owns that property with the uranium now?"

"Heard it was some company based in Townsville."

"Nebo Agricultural Company?"

"Rings a bell but I don't think that's them now. Some other name like Northern but you can check."

"You've been very helpful, Mr Plunkett. So how old is Wayne Booth's son now?"

"Dairo? Yeah, he'd be about twenty-four, I'd say."

After Dennis had killed the call he sat for a moment, thinking. Had Wayne Booth ever seriously considered committing bigamy? Or was the marriage to Anja more in the way of a de facto relationship. And there was a bigger question in there. Had there ever been anything between Wayne and Willy or they were simply friends, business partners, co-conspirators …

As he walked home he was still pondering. Was Plunkett trustworthy? And why was he listed if he was only the manager? Did the Murris there not speak English? And where might Willy Jackson have been going if he flew away to the north-east?

Then he determinedly put his questions away and went home to his family.

*

Dennis set Glen Archer on to several minor problems next morning before walking downtown to the post office. As he rounded the corner by Mercers he saw George Hickman coming towards him with his little mongrel dog Billy on the lead. "Ah, the much-traveled man," George said cheerily. He put out a small local news sheet and was always interested in what was going on.

"Well, they only said what we already knew, that someone killed both Willy and Ruby, but at least it'll now get the resources. So what's been happening here?"

"You heard about young Stirling getting bucked off the horse you found? He's back home but none too happy the Council didn't take the horse away. Seems they have to

advertise for an owner first before they can do anything but I don't reckon anyone'll put their hand up."

It didn't seem likely. And Dennis felt fairly sure the horse had been brought in to the feed lots with a load of store bullocks. "Any other excitement?"

"They've taken Smithies to Winville. I reckon they might as well have left him here to die in peace but maybe they wanted to give him a last chance. I met up with that fella that's living in his house. He comes down to the pub now and then. Seems very pleasant. I asked him how he knew Smithies seeing as he isn't exactly the life of the party and he said his dad was mates with him in Townsville in the war and they'd kept in touch since. But I s'pose the house'll get sold now."

So even though Albert Smithies had not made friends in Buckton he seemed to have maintained links with his past.

"I got the impression," George went on more slowly, "that his wife'd had a breakdown or something and he wanted a bit of peace and quiet for her … but I might be wrong."

Dennis nodded. It might fit with the image the couple projected. And Fiona had suggested Mrs Richards also gave the impression of someone who wanted to appear poorer than she really was. Might this too be the result of a breakdown?

Both Elise and Robert came into the station on their way home from school and Dennis said he was just going to duck round to the vet surgery to check on things and would they like to come. It wasn't his business to go telling young Stirling to be more careful but he felt partly responsible seeing he had foisted the stray horse on to them.

"He doesn't look like a buckjumper, does he?" Elise said consideringly as they got out and walked over to the main barn.

"Buckjumpers rarely look like buckjumpers," her father said.

Justin Stirling came out but didn't look pleased to see Dennis and his children. "You should've warned me."

"Didn't know you could ride. Anyway, the Council's advertising so if no one comes forward he can be sold on."

"No one'd want him."

"Then he can go for petmeat."

Justin Castley, standing quietly in the background, thought of saying something but couldn't decide what. After all, they were only saying what he knew to be true and he couldn't find the words to say he liked the horse and the horse seemed to like him.

Dennis walked out and over to the small bottom paddock to look over the horse. Castley hesitated then came and joined Dennis and the children. His boss had done nothing but mouth off about the horse ever since he'd returned to the practice and couldn't wait to see the back of the animal.

But Dennis said quietly to young Castley as the horse came up and gave Justin a gentle nudge, "You feel sorry for him, don't you?"

Justin gave him a dying duck look. He had never spoken of his feelings to anyone and certainly not the local police sergeant. At last he said, "I guess so. He hasn't had much of a life."

"Well, keep rasping his feet, they're still too long, and try him with a saddle and put something on it, a bag of chaff maybe, to see if he'll calm down under a weight. And Elise can show you how to lunge him if you'd like."

Justin had never asked a girl out and he found teenage girls slightly threatening. They always seemed to have confidence. Elise Walsh certainly had confidence but she wasn't threatening in that way. And he divined in her a shared sympathy for the unwanted horse.

"I don't know much about horses."

"Well, he's not the ideal horse to start with but you'll learn something along the way."

"I've called him Kenny."

Dennis nodded. "Well, just take it quietly." He turned to go and the children reluctantly followed him. A horse that really bucked rather than the occasional pigroot had never come their way before.

Dennis said he just needed to call into the newsagency for a couple of items before he dropped them home. Mrs Wilson came over to him as soon as they walked in. "Can you spare a minute, Dennis?"

The children wandered off to look at the small collection of comics and books and jigsaws and Dennis said, "Problems?"

"It was very odd. A man came in at lunchtime and said he was looking for a ballet dancer called Anthea Rush and did I know where she was living. I said I'd never heard of anyone of that name here. The only ballet dancer I knew was Megan McPhee and she'd left Buckton. He said the woman might have a connection to an Albert Smithies. And I said, oh, poor old Mr Smithies has just gone to the hospital in Winville and you could go and visit him there and I told him how to get on to the road to Winville. He said he would but he said, and you're quite sure you've never heard of a ballet dancer called Anthea Rush, and I said ballet dancers don't usually come to Buckton, and he sort of agreed and went out. So what do you think is going on?"

Dennis thought of Fiona's strong belief that Mrs Richards might have been a dancer and George's idea that she'd had a nervous breakdown. But who was this man? "What did he look like?"

"Oh, forties. Smart. Looked like a well-off businessman. I might be imagining things but I didn't really take to him. I sort of felt I would only do business with him after I'd read the fine print. But I might be wrong."

Dennis wasn't sure if the man might really be in search of Anne Richards and it probably wasn't police business but he thought a quick check with Winville might be worth it. If Smithies was being hounded by a creditor … no, it was more likely someone wanting to serve something on the Richards … a debt collector …

He went into the station and rang Winville District Hospital. The front desk told him that Mr Smithies had just died. "When did he die?"

"About two o'clock, just before. The funeral people said they would be here in half an hour."

"Did someone come in looking for him?"

"A man did come, I think, but he was told he couldn't see Mr Smithies. I can check if you'd like."

"D'you know what time that was?"

"Hold on a tick." A minute later the woman said, "It was about half past one. He was told to check with Doctor Davis. He went into the waiting room and Katy paged Doctor Davis but I didn't see the man after that."

"Did he give a name?"

"No. Not to me."

Dennis thanked her and asked Archer to hold the fort for another half hour or so. "If I'm not back by five just pack up and go."

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He dropped the children home and told Fiona he was going out to see the people in Smithies' house. "Would you like me to come? I've talked with Anne several times."

"If you like."

He told the kids to do their homework and feed the chooks then drove away.

"Don't know what's going on but I'd trust Karen's take on this guy that's looking for the Richards."

"But if they came here to be quiet and private—"

"S'far as we know they haven't done anything wrong but they might like to tell us if someone is hassling them."

At the front door John Richards asked them in politely, if slightly warily, and said, "How can we help you, Sergeant?"

"There's a man just arrived in town says he's looking for an Anthea Rush. I wondered if your wife might've been her—and if you'd like to tell us what's going on."

Richards hesitated then waved them to a sofa in the rather spartan room and said, "What sort of man?"

"Haven't seen him myself. Mrs Wilson said he was forties, suave type, some sort of businessman. He's gone to Winville to see Smithies but Smithies died at about 2 pm."

"Oh dear, the poor old man." Mrs Richards sounded sad.

"So."

Anne Richards was not the first person to find Dennis Walsh's requests the sort of things which can't be safely ignored. She said quietly, "You are right. I was Anthea Rush. Well, I still am. I am with a ballet company. Or at least I was. I took extended leave when my parents were in a very bad car accident. I wanted to care for them till the end."

Dennis nodded.

"I … I was very upset. We had always been very close. They wanted to be together right till the last … and I helped them … it was all so terrible … watching them die and being unable to do anything to save them … and then, a couple of days later a man turned up, an American, and he said he was my half-brother and that he had been hunting for his father for many years. I don't know exactly what I said, it was such a shock—and I didn't believe him, I didn't know what he was really wanting. And he had no sympathy, he just sort of sounded annoyed that my father had died. And then my uncle, Dad's brother, said he always knew my Dad had been a gay old dog and he wasn't surprised and he said this man, who was calling himself Dean Rush, was the result and I should invite him to stay. I didn't want to. I had so much to do and I just wanted to be on my own to cry for my parents. I loved them so much and they were gone." Tears came to her eyes. "I-I said he could take a DNA test but he said they weren't reliable but he could show me my Dad had met his mum in Vienna in 1960 and had a brief affair. He pretended to tell me about it and I knew he was lying to me. My Dad had kept a diary all his life, not only when he was a diplomat, and … and I knew he hadn't had had an affair in Vienna. My mother was a dancer, she was Swedish, they met in Rome when my Dad was at the Embassy there and he was coming home so they went to Sweden to see her family before coming home and they were in Vienna for one night."

She sounded despairing as though she had had to face other people's disbelief and couldn't cope with it. "They loved each other so much, they wanted to be together every spare moment, they did things together, they went everywhere together … and the times were wrong anyway. Dad was in Vienna in January, this man said he was born in June the same year." She looked over to John Richards who gave her a small encouraging smile.

"My Uncle Halsey supported this man, he said he was sure he was genuine, he pressured me to let him move into my house, then he said my Dad had promised to leave him one hundred thousand dollars and he expected me to come good on my Dad's promise. I knew this wasn't right. My Dad had given his brother money now and then because Halsey was always making messes with his businesses and Dad had bailed him out several times but he had said to me months before that Halsey had three sons to work for him so he couldn't expect any more help."

She had sounded fairly calm but now it seemed to grow harder to stay calm. “It wasn’t just this man, this stranger, moving in, it was Halsey and his sons always coming round. Things went missing from my house, I couldn’t find who had taken them, things which had belonged to my mother, her jewellery, family things, and they got narky with me saying I was making it up and why couldn’t I see how nice it would be to have a half-brother to help me through. He—that man—he sort of took over my house, changing things, moving things, telling me what to do, I-I couldn’t cope, I just didn’t know what to do … and Uncle was always on at me about wanting his money … and I was getting very afraid of them all—”

John Richards intervened quietly, “They never let up on her. They took everything over, I finally said, let’s remove everything and store it, and change the locks and then you need to come away for a few weeks to have a break from the pressure. And Anne agreed. I arranged a removalist and a storage space and when Dean was out I got everything out that Anne wanted to keep and a locksmith to change the locks. She knew Mr Smithies because he had known her dad when they were in Townsville in the war and her dad was like that, very kind and sympathetic, and he’d been in touch with Mr Smithies when he got sick and Anne had written to him to tell him about her dad dying and Mr Smithies said he would like to meet Anne before he died because her father had been the best man he’d ever met.”

Anne had sat forward clutching and unclutching her hands and Fiona thought it was probably Buckton which had saved her from a full-blown breakdown.

“I said she needed a couple of weeks away from that relentless pressure and maybe that conman would give up and go away instead of constantly telling her he deserved to benefit from her father’s estate and Halsey and his greedy sons on at her day and night. So we came here. It doesn’t solve the problems but it gave Anne a breathing space … and people here have been very kind to us … and no one wanted anything from us. You don’t know how much that has meant to her.”

“So this bloke looking for her—who might he be?”

“Probably one of her cousins. Halsey’s got three boys, Otway, Neville and Barham. They always said it wasn’t fair her getting everything. Greedy lazy little gits in my opinion.”

Dennis was about to ask how they might have tracked her to Buckton when there was the sound of a car drawing in at the front gate. “Go in the kitchen,” he included them all in the sweep of his arm, “don’t turn on a light, stay quiet, and I’ll see who this is.”

He went to the front door, stepped out and closed it behind him. Did he believe everything he’d just been told? She was certainly in a parlous mental state but it still seemed slightly bizarre that ‘they’ should have come to Buckton, been hunted down in Buckton …

A good-looking man got out of a BMW and came in the front gate. He looked startled to see a large policeman standing on the path. “Christ! What’s happened?”

“You are?”

“Neville Rush. Look, what’s going on?”

“You know Mr Smithies?”

“I do. I’ve just been to see him in Winville. He told me he’s got an Anthea Rush living here. She’s wanted for theft. I need to talk to her. If she won’t give back the money she stole then it’ll have to become a police matter.”

“In that case you’d best come down to the station and give me the details.”

“Is that really necessary, Sergeant?”

“Are you a process server?”

“No, the family is still trying to keep this nasty business under wraps if they can.”

“A private investigator?”

“No, but—”

“Then let’s get down to the station and I’ll get the details from you.”

“I don’t suppose she’s done anything wrong here—”

"Doesn't matter where she's done anything, I need to know. So you can follow me down if you don't know where the station is."

"I've seen it," the man said rather sourly.

"Okay, let's go."

The man might take advantage and nip off but Dennis thought he would probably do as he'd been told. A couple of minutes later they drew in by the station. Archer's car was gone which Dennis thought was a pity; he would've liked to have a witness. He already knew Rush was a liar but just how much of his story was nonsense … had the family sent him after his cousin because they thought he could persuade her …

He took the man into the interview room and got an incident form and noted name and address. "Okay, so what's the crime you're talking about?"

"My Uncle Vivian died recently. He had promised to leave my father a hundred thousand dollars. But then Viv's daughter Anthea said that was nonsense and he'd never done any such thing. She's a lying little minx. But we didn't want the family's dirty linen to be aired in public so that's why I came up here to try and talk sense into her."

"So—when did Viv Rush die?"

"January."

"He left a will?"

"He did. But he didn't put it in his will. He said brothers didn't need anything so formal, it was just their private agreement."

Neville Rush, apparently being believed, had relaxed a little.

"And has probate been finalised?"

"No."

"So you can't do anything until it is?"

"Probably not. But we want to be sure she doesn't pull a swifty."

"And what about her mother? Did she inherit from her husband? Which one died first?"

"Her dad."

"So did her dad leave his estate to her mum?"

"No. Her mum was rich. She didn't need it."

"So her mum was rich but you can't get that money so what about the dad? Was he rich?"

"He was very well off."

"This was family money or he earned it himself? What about your dad—did he inherit anything from their dad?"

"Not a lot. But Viv was a diplomat and they get well paid."

"Well, they're public servants—like me—but it wouldn't be huge." There would undoubtedly be some perks …

"He only had the one child and she had a good job—"

"She worked hard?"

"Well, nothing special, just arty-farty stuff."

Dennis was inclined to think that ballet dancers did work hard, or they did if they wanted to get to the top.

"So your dad chose to have three kids?"

"Why not?"

"And all three of his kids work hard?"

"Of course."

"So why does your dad need money from his brother when he's got three hard-working sons?"

For a moment Neville Rush seemed slightly annoyed then he said angrily, “That’s not the point! It’s the principle of the thing. A promise was made and she says she won’t abide by that promise—”

“So we come back to the matter of evidence. You say there was nothing written down. So was Viv Rush’s lawyer informed?”

“He says not.”

“Okay. Were there any witnesses?”

“No. It was an agreement between her dad and mine. Why should there be witnesses?”

“So where was the money to come from? Did you expect her to sell the family home?”

“He had money put away.”

“How d’you know that?”

“It’s the way he was. Tight-fisted.”

“That’s not evidence.”

Neville Rush leaned forward and said viciously, “You know something? None of this is your business, mate, so how about you butt out and tell me where the bitch is and I’ll get this problem sorted and be off your patch.”

“I’d like you off my patch,” Dennis said calmly. “But instead of you hounding a woman who’s just lost both parents I would suggest you ask your lawyer to mount a case if he thinks you’ve got something to run with. Your dad’s word isn’t good enough.”

“That’s what you think! Everyone knows my dad is an honest man and she isn’t to be trusted with—”

“So he’s more honest than you? That isn’t saying much. I know you’re a liar, Mr Rush, you know as well as I do that Albert Smithies died this afternoon and he was in a coma for twenty-four hours before he died so he didn’t tell you anything. So stop lying to me and pack up and get off my patch.”

Rush hid his surprise reasonably well. “You know something! I always knew redneck cops didn’t know what day it was and you’ve just proved it! Albert Smithies wasn’t in a coma and we had a chat before he died. So put that in your pipe and smoke it!” He stood up. “And I’ll be putting in a complaint about your behaviour towards a member of the public.”

“Go for it—if you want the world to know what you’re up to.”

It struck Dennis that this man didn’t really know how to handle the situation he had created.

“Don’t worry! I’ll see you’re reprimanded—and I’ll get the money out of that fucking little bitch if it’s the last thing I do.”

“So it’s you who’s after the money—not your dad?”

“Don’t you try to twist my words, you cretin!”

“You’ve just made a threat in front of an official witness so I would suggest that you calm down and get on the road.”

Rush started on an angry reply then seemed to think better of it and slammed out of the station. Dennis followed him out and saw him gun the car. He wasn’t worried about any threat to complain but he was worried that Anthea Rush might not be safe from him. She couldn’t stay hidden away in Buckton for ever. He watched the car reach the T-junction and turn right. That was a relief. He had half expected Rush to head back out to Smithies’ bungalow.

He went back in and rang Fiona’s mobile and was profoundly relieved when she answered immediately. “Are you still at Smithies?”

“No. I’ve brought them to the Prendergasts’ B and B for the night.”

"Thanks, sweetheart. It's the best thing you could have done. Tell them Neville Rush has gone but I don't completely trust him not to come back. So if they could stay a couple of days. I'll come over in the morning. I'll need to get some details from them if we're going to make it safe enough for her to go home."

Fiona had had a chance to hear some more from Anthea Rush after Dennis and the visitor had driven off and she wondered if Anthea would be safe if she went home. Because as well as her uncle and cousins there was still the problem of the conman who had taken over her house. How could he be 'encouraged' to move on? Or could he be charged with … she wasn't sure what the charge would be … but something to do with the mental anguish he had caused … or his hope to benefit by his imposture … and how had he got in after the locks had been changed …

But the most pressing need was to get home and cook some dinner.

Case No 4: The Tall Trees

"She and John plan to get married once things have settled down—if they settle down—and I think he will be a sort of rock for her to lean on, I hope so anyway," Fiona said over breakfast. "He's a builder." Of course there were builders and builders and they didn't always love ballet or believe it had a place in the nation's culture but she had got the impression that John Richards loved and admired Anthea. She hoped her intuition was right.

"And what sort of money d'you think she has?"

There surely had to be money around for all this to be worth someone's while. The imposter of a half-brother. The greedy relatives.

"I think, and I might be wrong, but from what John said as we drove in, it was her mother who was wealthy. But they had no legal way to get at that money—"

"So if they drove her to a breakdown then her uncle might be appointed as her guardian? I wonder if they knew about John?"

"She told me that her parents longed for children and they had finally given up hoping and started to plan to adopt when she turned up. I think it made for a very close and intense family life … and maybe it was hard for her to contemplate an independent life of her own … and she said they were so proud of her and never missed a first night … and of course children of her own would be hard, and to take time away when her career was going upwards … I think the relatives saw this very focused and dedicated woman and not the possibility that she might have any private life. But I wonder if they hired that conman or whether him turning up gave them ideas … "

"Well, I'd best get over and make sure they're still there. And it's ponies this afternoon?" He turned to Elise for confirmation.

"It's Pony Club," his daughter agreed cheerfully, "but we're going down this morning to teach Kenny to lunge. Justin doesn't know anything about horses, except looking after their feet and feeding them." Then she reconsidered that and said as though trying to be scrupulously fair, "But Kenny likes him so that must mean something. You can see it a mile away, can't you? But maybe, instead of riding him, we could teach him to pull a cart. He could pull a little buggy around, couldn't he, and he could go to the show and then Lyn wouldn't talk about sending him for dogmeat. I know dogs have to eat but I don't want them to eat him."

"Well, take it easy," Dennis said mildly, "and I'll see you later."

He walked round to the big house the Prendergasts had turned into a Bed and Breakfast place and although people weren't knocking down their door for the fun of staying overnight in Buckton they had a gentle stream of guests. Rhonda Prendergast met him at the

front door and said, “Come in, Dennis, I’ve just taken them up some breakfast.” She dropped her voice. “I looked her up on the internet and she’s very well known in Sydney. I didn’t like to ask what had brought her to Buckton.”

“No. Think she’s had her troubles.”

“But—wouldn’t it be wonderful to see her dance here?” She sounded wistful.

It wasn’t something which Dennis had ever considered. “So is it okay if I go up?”

“Oh yes, of course, first on the right.”

The Prendergasts had altered and decorated very sympathetically and he could understand someone preferring to stay here rather than at the Coolibah or round at the motel. He made his ponderous way upstairs and knocked on the door. Richards said “Come in” and Walsh walked in. Richards was sitting at the small table and half-way through eggs and bacon but the other plate sat untasted and Anthea Rush was still in bed. She sat up slowly and looked at him with dilated eyes. “What is it?”

“Neville Rush drove away last night but I can’t be sure he won’t come back so I need some details from you if we’re going to get to the bottom of everything.”

This was meant to be comforting but he felt she would need more than this before her brittle apprehension might melt.

“Okay,” maybe it was best to just pitch in, “how did he know to come to Buckton?”

“I’m not sure.” John Richards took a sip of coffee. “Both Viv and Halsey were in Townsville during the war. Viv had just qualified as an engineer. I’m not sure if Halsey was qualified though he was older. That’s where they met Albert and I know Viv kept in touch but I’m not sure how Neville knew about this place. He might’ve seen a letter. He might’ve hacked in to something. We don’t know if he’d been to other places as well as Buckton.”

“I thought Viv Rush was a diplomat.”

“He was. After the war he applied and was accepted and he was—what was it, Anne?—second secretary in Rome when he met Anneke—I think it was Soderström,” he looked over to Anthea but when she didn’t look up he went on quickly, “and then I think he was being transferred to Canada and he took his leave to go and visit her family in Stockholm. She had married him in Rome and I think she was worried that her family might not approve.”

“So when did they stop over in Vienna?”

Anthea looked up but left John to answer. “They spent a day and a night there in January 1960.”

“So how do you know when this Dean Rush says he was born?”

“He showed Anne a birth certificate. It had him born in Los Angeles in June 1960. I think, maybe, he hoped that she wouldn’t know or couldn’t prove her father’s dates more than forty years ago. She asked him to take a DNA test—”

“Was her father cremated?”

“He was. But his brother could have provided a sample.”

“Would he have agreed to that?”

John Richards looked over to the bed then back to Buckton’s sergeant. “For a consideration, yes, I’m sure he would. But I find it very suspicious that that Dean Rush turned up the morning after the funeral.”

“He thought there’d be nothing to check with?”

“I don’t know but the thought occurred to me.”

“Okay, so did—” it seemed strange to talk about Anthea in the third person while she was two metres away, “you or your wife go to the police?” She wasn’t his wife but somehow it sounded more suitable than ‘girlfriend’.

"She did. She asked them to investigate him and to stop him harassing her. They didn't take her seriously. I think because Halsey or one of his boys said how wonderful it would be for her to have a brother."

"So which police? Who did she speak with? When was it?" He took out his notebook and waited. He wrote down Anthea's Woollahra address and the other details before sitting a minute to consider what other information he needed. Anthea wasn't sure but thought she'd spoken with a Sergeant Freund or Friend. "And there's the other thing. I assume Albert Smithies left a will so it might be good if we keep an eye on the house until we know if he's left it to anyone or it's to be sold."

"Of course. We owe the old man something for his kindness so we'll get someone in to tidy the garden and clean the windows—"

"But not today. I'll check with Buckton's solicitor to see if she's got his will."

"It's very good of you to help us. But d'you think there's any way we can get police in Sydney to get that man to move out?"

"I'll see what I can do." Dennis, as he went back to the station, thought he'd probably sounded more confident than he felt. And it was a hassle to get a phone number. And being Saturday morning he didn't really expect that Sergeant Freund to be in.

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He checked his own phone for messages then rang Sydney to try and explain the problem. He got a Constable Deverill who sounded very young. It probably helped that Dennis over the years had acquired a voice and presentation which suggested authority and not someone to be fobbed off.

When Deverill tried to say it didn't sound like police business Dennis reminded him calmly that police had a responsibility to deal with the people who tried to con members of the public. "I'd like you to go round and see if he's still in the house. If he's gone then it should be safe for her to come home. If he's still there then we'll have to look at how to get him out."

"So how do you know he's a conman?"

Dennis calmly went over the reasons for believing the man hoped to lay claim to part of the family estate including the family home. "I would suggest you take the man's details and fingerprint him. He may've tried a con job on other bereaved women."

He felt the other's reluctance and said, "I'll check back this afternoon to hear what you've been able to find out about this Dean Rush character."

Deverill said reluctantly he'd see what he could do. Somehow he felt certain Dennis Walsh would keep ringing to check until the problem, if it was a problem, had been resolved. And when he checked to see if any complaints had been made about or from that address he found several complaints from neighbours about noise and rubbish. He wondered why a conman, if he was a conman, would provoke complaints from neighbours. Surely the essence of being a confidence trickster was discretion, suavity, and apparent friendliness. But as the noise had stopped by the time a patrol car had come by no one had been approached or cautioned.

The house when he found it and got out to go over to the paved drive suggested a wrecking site. Broken windows, piles of builders' waste which included pipes, taps, mirrors, built-ins. He stared at the place for several minutes. Then rather than confront the wrecker he went next door to see if the neighbours knew what was going on.

The elderly lady who answered his ring said immediately, "Thank goodness you've come. That man is wrecking that place and the Council hasn't done a thing about it."

"What man?"

"I don't know who he is. Some American."

"Has he bought the place?"

"You could ask him."

"And do you know where Ms Rush is?"

"No, I don't. And heaven knows what she'll think when she comes home and finds that mess. You know the poor thing lost both her parents. Someone said she'd had a nervous breakdown and I wouldn't be surprised. She's probably gone to some place to recover."

Deverill accepted that it wouldn't get any easier to confront the wrecker. He thanked the neighbour and went into No 82 with a sinking heart. But although he knocked and rang no one came. There was no sign of a car. He walked round peering in windows. The linings of the walls as well as the ceilings all seemed to have been bashed down with a sledgehammer. No wonder the neighbours had complained. Even the telephone wires seemed to have been pulled out. The garden round the other side of the house had been smashed down and urns broken. From being sceptical he had come round to a righteous anger.

But he wasn't sure what to do. Had the man gone or was he just out for the day?

Back at the station he looked at all the details he had so unenthusiastically taken down. The uncle. Would he know what was going on? He rang the number Dennis Walsh had passed on. When a man answered he asked if he was Halsey Rush.

"I am. Why?"

Constable Deverill explained why he was ringing and said, "The house where Anthea Rush has been living is completely trashed. We need to contact a Dean Rush. Do you know where he is?"

"Of course not. But did you say the house has been wrecked by Anthea Rush?"

"No. Anthea Rush has been in Queensland for the past month. I am looking for the Dean Rush who has been living in that house."

"Never heard of him. It's probably vandals."

"The neighbours say he is an American."

"Still doesn't ring a bell."

"He's done hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of damage. We do need to find him."

"Sorry. Can't help you."

"Would your sons be able to help?"

"No. I'm sure they never met him. Where did you say Anthea is?"

Deverill was about to say "Buckton in Queensland" then he thought better of it. "I'm sorry you can't help us, sir, but we'll keep looking for that Dean Rush."

An American. Could he have already left the country? Nervously, he asked the duty sergeant how he would go about checking. They might not want to help on a Saturday but at last he got the information he wanted. A Dean Rush had flown out of Sydney only this morning, bound for New Zealand. He felt he had missed the boat but commonsense told him it wasn't his fault. He thought on it for several minutes before putting a ring through to Queensland. He said regretfully that the house had been completely trashed but that a Dean Rush had flown out of Mascot only three hours ago.

"Can't be helped. But go round to that house and see if he's left any fingerprints, any DNA, any clues to his home address. He's clearly a nasty piece-o'-work."

Deverill could see the value in this but he couldn't see Rush being extradited back to Australia for damaging someone's house. And why would a conman do that? Where was the benefit in it? And then he rethought that. If the man had been accepted as a long lost relative he probably would have moved in and milked the lone woman for everything he could get out of her. But she had gone away leaving him high and dry. Hence the spite and the damage.

It was another hour before he could find the time to go back. And when he drove in he saw a man probably in his seventies standing looking at the house. He walked over. "You are, sir?"

Halsey Rush turned around and said, apparently without regret, “What a mess.”

“Your name, sir.”

“You spoke to me on the phone. I had no idea she had left the house in such a mess.”

“She?”

“My niece, Anthea.”

“You are suggesting your niece wrecked her own home?”

“Of course. She’s mental.”

“And Mr Dean Rush?”

“No such person.”

“There is, sir, but now I will have to ask you to vacate these premises as this is a potential crime scene.” Deverill surprised himself by the firmness with which he said this.

“Don’t be silly. My niece lives here. Why shouldn’t I come round?”

Deverill thought of asking but he wasn’t sure he could out-argue this apparently brash and confident man. Instead he went back to his car and took out a roll of crime scene tape. “Now, if you will excuse me, Mr Rush, I have work to do.”

Halsey Rush eyed the tape and said, “You’re going over the top with this, young man, I’ve got a good idea I should contact your superior and tell him what’s going on here.”

“That, of course, is your right, sir, but I would ask you to move out of this yard.”

Halsey looked at him in a considering way then shrugged and turned away. Deverill watched him go before going in the unlocked front door. He wished he could call in a Forensics team but of course they would not come unless he could show that a crime had likely been committed here. There might be clues everywhere but the things he thought might repay taking were several American magazines and a copy of *The Los Angeles Times*. Did that mean that Rush was a native of LA? Or was it the only American newspaper he could find here? He bagged them all up carefully and went back to the station to ask for some guidance on what he might do next. “Can we fingerprint these and send the prints to the FBI?”

“You’ve been reading too many thrillers,” Sergeant Franklin said.

“That Sergeant Walsh in Queensland seemed to think we’ve got a problem.”

“And you think he knows more than us?” Franklin sounded sarcastic.

Deverill was tempted to say ‘we did nothing while a nice house was wrecked’ but he didn’t feel he could accuse a more senior officer of … “He has obviously taken a lot of interest in this case.”

“Nothing better to do.”

“I’d better tell him what I’ve found.”

Franklin was tempted to tell him to stop wasting his time but finally shrugged and left his junior to make the call. Dennis was just sitting down to a late lunch when Deverill rang and he listened carefully. “Okay, good. Can you print those magazines?”

“My boss wasn’t sympathetic.”

“He’s not interested in tracking down this piece of shit that calls himself Dean Rush?”

“He doesn’t think the matter is serious. And Rush has left Australia.”

“Well, leave up your crime scene tape. Take photos of all the damage. If you can’t get that material printed there send it up to me and I’ll get on to Brisbane. And Halsey Rush is lying through his teeth when he says he’s never met Dean Rush. He sent his son Neville all the way to Queensland to try and hunt down Anthea Rush and force her to give him a hundred thousand dollars. I’d like to know if Halsey Rush and Dean Rush were in cahoots.”

“A hundred thousand?” Deverill couldn’t hide his surprise. A straightforward case of a damaged house, well, fairly straightforward, seemed to be becoming more complex. “But how would we prove that?”

“Is your boss there? I can have a chat.”

But Sergeant Franklin negatived the need to 'have a chat'. "Leave it. It's up to the owner of that house to tell us what she wants done."

Constable Deverill could see his point. He could also see that they had hardly been proactive. "If you say so."

"I do." Franklin couldn't see the point in wasting resources on a situation which suggested a family's in-fighting.

*

Dennis shared what he had found out with John Richards and Anthea Rush at the Prendergasts'. Anthea burst into tears when he told her her house had been wrecked. John Richards put an arm round her and said, "I think I should go back to Sydney and see what needs to be done."

"Can you act for Ms Rush?"

"Not legally but I can at least look at what needs to be done."

"Would it help if you had authority to act?"

Richards looked at Anthea but didn't ask her anything. She wiped her eyes. "How would we do that?"

"We can try to catch Mrs Lockwood if she's not away for the weekend."

He was also curious about Smithies' will though, strictly speaking, that wasn't police business. He checked to see if he had a phone number for her. Only her office number. With luck she might be dedicated to duty and not out with the family. The answering machine kicked in. He went downstairs and looked in the phone book in the front hall but no home number was listed for the Lockwoods. He checked for the old man who had previously owned her house. And finally he got Mrs Lockwood saying, "Hullo, Sonia Lockwood speaking."

He explained as best he could and she said, "I'm sorry. We're just off to Winville. Would this evening be soon enough?" Dennis said it would and told Richards where to go with Anthea and took himself home again.

He felt he had done what he could for them. He would like to take it further and try to stop Dean Rush if he made a career of battening on to vulnerable women. But he didn't have the resources here and it would be better for Sydney to do the follow-up. And there was Halsey Rush and his sons and his importuning. They were liars. They were greedy. But would they actually do anything to hurt Anthea?

In the afternoon he went out to the showgrounds for a while. The grass was unexpectedly green and the sun shone down on children and milling ponies. For several minutes he simply sat and relaxed as he watched Elise cantering a figure of eight. He knew it wasn't up to him to set the world to rights but sometimes it was hard to let something go. He suspected that nothing more would be done to track Dean Rush down or put Halsey Rush in the hot seat. And telling himself that John Richards was a sensible man and he would see that they got some answers didn't really convince him. Richards might have a good manager for his business but sooner or later the boss had to take over again. Then he re-thought that. Maybe the Rush family knew about John Richards and had simply gone to the manager and said they urgently needed to get in touch with Richards?

Then his mind was diverted from the Rushes by Justin Castley coming to the bottom of the small grandstand and looking around. "You'll get a better view from up here," Dennis said loudly. Justin started then looked upwards. He wasn't sure if it was an order or an invitation or something he was free to ignore.

He hesitated then came slowly up to where Dennis was sitting and sat down three seats away.

"They make it look easy," Dennis said conversationally. "You should learn to ride."

He always had the vague feeling that he was toying with a small frightened creature when he had any interaction with Justin. And yet—why should he? The Castleys might not socialise but they were well-liked round town. They annoyed nobody. If they had any enemies he had never heard of them. There might be a bit of anti-Aboriginal feeling with some of the old goats like Dan Goodrick but it wasn't the sort of thing which would make anyone miserable. After all, there was more anti-Dan feeling round the place but Dan had always just shrugged it off. There were times when he felt like using his authority to tell Justin to get out there and do things. He would feel better about himself. He would grow in confidence and become more articulate.

Justin gave him a quick glance then turned away and said in a mumble that he'd like to learn to ride.

"Then what's stopping you? Not that I want you riding buckjumpers. But a quiet pony." He pointed down to the ring where his son Rob was saddling and unsaddling Benbow while George Hickman went over the parts of the saddle and how to look after them with a group of children. "Rob's like you. He sees his pony as his friend and he's quite happy just chatting with him, telling him what he did through the day." Rob came to Pony Club but Dennis suspected that if he didn't have Elise urging him on he would be quite happy to just wander down to the paddock and have a one-sided conversation with Benbow.

"I couldn't ask Lyn Harding," Justin suddenly blurted out.

Freda Donnelly still had horses but Dennis wasn't sure if she was taking riding pupils at the moment. But even George Hickman could probably get Justin riding.

Though there was the question of finding a suitable mount for Justin with his long stringy arms and legs.

"No. She's a bit fierce. So who would you feel comfortable with?"

Dennis continued to watch Elise and Rob without looking at Justin.

"Would Elise teach me?" Justin sounded embarrassed.

"She'd probably jump at the chance. But who knows? She might be just as fierce as Lyn Harding?"

Justin wasn't sure if this was meant as a joke or as a statement of fact. After considering it for a long moment he said nervously, "Would you ask her for me?"

"Okay. Come down to the paddock at about four tomorrow. She can put you up on Freddie. She's bugging me to get her a bigger pony. But I think he can carry you for the time being."

Justin had the secret unworthy thought that if he could ride Justin Stirling might be more respectful. But he only said, "I can do that." He avoided tacking on an 'I think'.

And a moment later he got up without another word and went down to the side entrance and disappeared through it. Dennis sat back. Justin might or might not turn up but at least he hadn't said he couldn't. Dennis didn't see his mission in life to give Justin Castley (or anyone else) confidence but an unacknowledged part of him always wanted the best for young people. He felt he had failed his young Aboriginal wife all those years ago and he was determined he wouldn't fail any other young person and perhaps more so if they were Murris.

*

Sonia Lockwood rang Walsh in the evening. "I've fixed up the couple you sent to me but there is one thing, if you wouldn't mind to keep it confidential for the moment. It is that Albert Smithies changed his will only two weeks ago. He has left his house and land to Anthea Rush. He said her father had been a prince among men and this was his way of paying back an old debt."

"Did he say what he meant by that?"

"No. And I didn't realise that the woman living in his house *was* the Anthea Rush he wanted to benefit."

"Have you told her?"

"No. I invited her to come to my office on Monday morning."

"Fair enough. I hope she'll be pleased."

Probably the last thing Anthea Rush wanted was a house in Buckton but it wouldn't be hard to sell. It was quite new.

The more important question was: had she decided to return to Sydney with Richards or was she content to stay on here alone?

He was just about to go back to watching TV when the phone rang again. It was Mrs Landy from the little general store in Norwilla. "That you, Mr Walsh? I've just been chatting with Tom Lewis and I asked him about his horses and he says he has three with a Barry Woodbridge in Toowoomba. Is that what you wanted to know?"

"Thanks for that. Tom Lewis isn't married, is he?"

"No. Not now. I believe his wife was Annette but she's been gone for more than five years and I think the children would be grown up by now. Tom's at least in his forties."

"So what's he like?"

Mrs Landy seemed to think over this request. What could she say about him. "We-ell, early forties, quite a good-looking man, you know, tanned, sort of like Paul Hogan, but as a person … that's harder to say … he's always polite when he comes in but I've heard of him having arguments with neighbours, and I know he accused the Stricklands on his south side of 'sticking their nose into his business' but I'm not sure what that was about, animals getting through a fence I think."

"So he sort of keeps himself to himself?"

"He goes away quite a lot so I s'pose he has friends, maybe rellies, somewhere else. I've never seen him come to anything at the Community Centre but maybe our little activities just don't appeal to him."

"He goes to see his horses race?"

"Well, I s'pose he would—or what's the point?"

He thanked her and hung up and returned to the lounge where Elise and Robbie were playing Chinese checkers and Fiona was watching the 7 o'clock news. She put an arm round him as he sat down beside her. "What has happened to Anthea? Is she still here?"

"Assume so. But she might not want to stay without him."

"Yes, I felt she had become rather dependent on him."

"But she must be a pretty tough cookie if she's got to the top—"

"Oh, I think she was physically fit and very dedicated but I think she lived in that little magical circle with her parents, that she felt so safe and loved and precious and then she was suddenly thrust out of that lovely world when her parents both died. I got the impression that it was only after that that she really *saw* him, that he was more than the nice person she had occasionally gone out for dinner with. I think she still hasn't come to terms, mentally I mean, with being thrust out into a very unpleasant world. And you have to be dedicated to your career if you want to get to be prima ballerina."

"How d'you know she was famous?"

"I looked on the internet. There was quite a lot about her career, productions she had been in, and I found pictures of her parents. Her mother was beautiful, so was she, so it might explain why she chose to look so dowdy here. No one would connect her with anything."

"Except you?"

"I felt certain she had danced seriously, not just a few lessons as a child, just the way she held herself, the way she moved, but I never would have made the connection."

"No. It's still a bit hard to believe. But my main worry is whether that Neville Rush is still hanging round, hoping to find her."

"I could invite her to come round here tomorrow?"

He thought it might take Ms Rush's mind off her troubles even if he couldn't make the troubles go away. "And remind Ellie that Justin's coming down about four to have a riding lesson tomorrow."

Fiona gave that a smile. Her daughter would probably love bossing the young man around. Whether Justin would enjoy …

But while Fiona went over to see Anthea Rush next morning and invite her over Dennis was called out to a break-in at the little store in Burleigh and Neville Rush drove into his father's house at Coogee and got out stiffly. He knew his father would say he'd failed in a simple 'job' but then his father had not had to face Dennis Walsh. He had called him a redneck cop but that was only part of it. And he didn't think he could explain Dennis Walsh to his father.

"He knew I hadn't talked with Smithies so I don't suppose he believed anything else I said."

His father looked dubious. "Yeah, but did you find her?"

"She'd been there but I never got a chance to look around his house. That cop was there and he told me to come down to the station so I could report a crime."

"You told him she'd stolen from us?"

"He asked me about Viv's will and probate and whose money it was and how it had been earned and whether Anthea would need to sell the family home. Then he said he knew I was a liar and I threatened to complain about him and he said 'go for it' and I could see I wasn't getting anywhere. So I came home. But if her house's been trashed there isn't going to be any money anyway. There's no guarantee the insurance people will pay out if you've told the cops she trashed it herself. I think we should back off."

Halsey considered this suggestion with a sour mouth. "You think? So you want the bitch to get away with everything?"

"So how're you going to prove that Viv promised you a hundred thousand?"

"I'm alive. He's dead. My words count for more. And she can't prove Viv didn't promise."

Neville rarely argued with his father but now he said, "But he didn't promise, did he?"

"Are you doubting me?" Halsey Rush's face darkened.

"No. But I still don't think you're going to get anything just on your say-so. And it's going to look very bad if you keep hassling her when that man wrecked her house."

"I told the cops I didn't know who they were talking about."

"Are you sure no one ever saw the two of you together?"

"No one's going to know who he was. And I'll bet that wasn't his real name."

"How do you know?"

"I don't." He snapped it off. "But the cops'll never catch up with him. I'll bet they don't even try."

Neville Rush thought of Dennis Walsh and then he reminded himself that Walsh *was* a redneck cop. "No, I don't reckon they will."

"So stop worrying. And when she comes home she'll have me to deal with."

"But what about probate? It was still her parent's house. Won't that raise questions?"

"I said—stop worrying."

*

Dennis had a blunt message for his boss, Jake Moss, when he arrived in Winville to do his Monday stint there. "I need a permanent junior. This business of Archer and Waters coming and going isn't good enough. I was out all day Sunday at Burleigh. I'm getting too old to be on call 24/7. I need someone there permanently."

It had been on Moss's mind but it was easy to overlook that Dennis *was* in his fifties. He got through more work than several juniors combined.

"I'll see what I can do. D'you want Glen or Ben as a permanent?"

"If they're prepared to work hard."

"Okay, I'll give you Ben for six months, see how he shapes up."

"Fair enough. And I've done you a report on that business with Neville Rush. It'd help if you gave those bods in Sydney a push. She's too afraid to go home. But they've trashed her house and probably stolen anything saleable. If we can chase that Mafia bod to Victoria surely we can find this Dean Rush?"

"It's not that simple, Dennis, and you should've checked with me before you rang."

"And you would've said?"

Jake Moss gave that a slight grin. "Go for it."

"So tell them to fingerprint the material they took from her house and send it to the FBI. The bloke might've kept his head down but there's a chance he's battened on to other women just when they've lost someone."

"Doesn't mean they've reported it."

"No. But worth a try."

That was the trouble with Dennis. He made things sound simple. But Inspector Moss was a conscientious man and after reading through Dennis's report on the situation and the actions he'd taken he put a call through and asked to speak to the officer who had gone to the Rush home.

Deverill wasn't there but a Sergeant Freund said he was aware of the situation but that it wasn't police business. "Looks like the family likes to go at each other. So they can sort it out themselves."

Jake was a mild man but he said coldly, "Doesn't matter who they are. You still need to do a proper investigation."

"The dame wrecked her own house. End of story."

"Anthea Rush has been in Queensland for the past month. Any damage done over the last month is malicious damage and you need to investigate."

"The guy's gone and we haven't got the time or resources to go after him for a bit of damage."

"Then we'll have to go public. Famous ballet dancer targeted by con man and her home wrecked. It'll be front page in all your newspapers." Moss wasn't sure if it would but he could see Dennis whacking out something and sending it off.

"That's nonsense. You don't even know that this man exists or whether he's any sort of con artist. You don't know what goes on in families—"

"I don't but you do seeing as you checked him leaving Sydney. Where was he booked through to? You can check all this."

"Don't you tell me what to do."

Jake understood this. He had probably fobbed off people down the years with 'not police business' and suchlike. And he could hear the prickliness in Freund's voice. Who was this unknown Queensland cop to be telling him how to do his job?

"Look, Anthea Rush put in a complaint to you about Dean Rush at least two months ago. I don't know why you didn't follow up—"

"Because her uncle told us that it was wonderful for her to find a half-brother and she just needed time to get used to it."

But as he said that Freund had the disconcerting thought that Halsey Rush had told Craig Deverill there was no such person as Dean Rush.

"Did you make a note of him saying that?"

"Probably." Had they simply noted 'No action required' or had they put something more specific. He would need to check.

"I'll fax you our report but I think there's a good chance that Halsey Rush was in league with Dean Rush in the hope of defrauding the young woman when she'd just lost both parents."

"If you want." Freund managed to sound non-committal. However he looked at it it probably meant work and a messy case. But when he checked the file he was upset to find that Halsey Rush had been recorded as telling them Dean Rush was Anthea's half-brother. No ifs and buts or need to have a DNA test or anything. So how did Halsey know the man was genuine when his niece was certain he wasn't?

At last he accepted that he did need to pay Halsey a visit. He was currently listed as an import-export broker. Exactly what that meant Freund couldn't guess but he thought he might as well go round to his office in Bondi Junction and just have a chat.

The place looked very smart and the attractive young woman at the front desk said she could give him ten minutes with Mr Rush. "He's a very busy man you know."

"So the business is doing very well?"

The young woman did not know a lot about the firm's past though she did know it wasn't very profitable. "I think so but you could ask Mr Rush. I'm not in a position to give out that sort of information."

"And his three sons. They all work here?"

"They do."

"So is Neville in today?"

"I'll just check." She rang someone then turned back to Freund to say, "Yes, he is."

"Then ask him to join his father. He's been involved in the same case."

She longed to ask what the case was but didn't think Halsey would like it. He had a reputation as a bit of a bully and she didn't think she would like to get on his wrong side.

Several minutes later he was shown into a pleasant office with an oatmeal carpet and a large ficus in a pot. Halsey and Neville came in. The father looked supremely confident but it struck Freund that Neville would much rather be somewhere else.

"So what's this all about, sergeant?" Halsey waved him to a chair and sat down behind his desk.

"It's about Dean Rush. Or the man calling himself Dean Rush. I see that you told us that he was Anthea Rush's half-brother but then you told us there was no such person."

"She's off in la-la-land, that poor woman."

"Doesn't matter where she is. I am interested in your relationship with Dean Rush. Why did you tell us that he was her half-brother?"

"That's what she told me. I never met him so I only had her word for it that her half-brother had turned up. For all I know she just had a fantasy about finding a half-brother."

Freund deeply regretted that he hadn't checked when Rush had entered Australia or on what sort of visa. "Are you sure you never met him?"

"Quite sure."

"You never went round to her house?"

"No."

"But you went yesterday?"

"Because your man rang me."

"So the neighbours will never have seen you or your car there?"

"Of course not."

"Did you go there before her parents died?"

"I went to see my brother Viv a couple of times."

"Did you offer her any help?"

"Just to ring me if she needed anything."

"So why did you send your son to Queensland to try and find her?"

"Because she was obviously in need of help."

"Your son lied to police there. Why did he do that?"

"You'll have to be more specific."

"He told police there he had visited and talked to an Albert Smithies just before he died. The hospital says he did not get to see Mr Smithies. Then he told police he had come to Queensland because your niece owed you a hundred thousand dollars. That doesn't sound like you offering any help. Would you care to explain."

"No. That is between her and me and my lawyer."

Freund turned to Neville Rush and said, "According to police you said Ms Rush would probably pull a swifty and you were there to make sure she didn't and that you called her 'a fucking bitch'. Why did you do that?"

"I didn't. They're lying."

"Police there noted down your words. Did they tape you?"

He saw Neville Rush's swift look of dismay then his robust comeback. "No, of course he didn't. That old redneck cop wouldn't even know what day it is."

"You came home without contacting Ms Rush?"

"It didn't seem worth staying on. It's a job for our lawyer."

"Well, we will follow up. No doubt the FBI can find Dean Rush for us."

Halsey Rush merely raised an eyebrow but Neville Rush looked definitely worried.

"So if you know anything at all about this man now is the time to tell me." Freund waited a little longer. Then Neville said, "There really is no such person, sergeant."

"How d'you know that?"

"Well, I don't. But she would have told us if she was having trouble."

Halsey shot his son a look which clearly said 'why didn't you keep your big mouth shut?'

"That's not the same thing. But we'll run his fingerprints through the system and see what else he's been up to. Thank you for your time."

He went out and pulled the door nearly closed. But Halsey wasn't to be caught saying anything unwise with Freund still in the building. Freund went over to the receptionist and said cheerfully, "We're looking for a man called Dean Rush. Have you ever heard of him?"

Halsey had not seen a need to prep the young woman and she said thoughtfully, "I'm sure I heard the boss talking about someone of that name. I'm not really sure. Something about him being a relative from America, I think."

"And have you ever heard of Anthea Rush?"

"Oh yes, she's the boss's niece. She's very beautiful, isn't she, sort of like a fairy person from another world."

Freund was slightly taken aback. He wasn't sure he would want to try and deal with a 'sort of fairy person from another world'.

And back at the station he went to the internet to see if he could get a picture of Ms Rush. To his surprise there was quite a lot and he could see what that young lady meant. There was something ethereal about Anthea Rush and for the first time he felt a twinge of sympathy. She didn't look the sort of person who would recognise and know how to deal with an American con man.

And when he managed to pin down Rush's entry into Australia he found he had another thing that didn't quite jibe. Rush had been in the country at least three months before the Rush parents died. So what had he been doing all that time? And where? Would he have come here to research the family before moving in on her? But that raised the question: how could he know they would be in a car accident and die?

It suggested he had another victim in mind. Or did he target women surnamed Rush. He put that thought aside and considered how best to find where Dean Rush had gone when he first arrived in Sydney.

And if Halsey Rush thought he'd seen off Sergeant Freund he hadn't taken John Richards into account. Richards steamed in to the station next morning and said immediately, "What are you going to do about the man who wrecked Anthea's home?"

Freund when he had his details said, "Where is Ms Rush now?"

"In Queensland. I don't want her to even see the house until I can get something done to it."

"Dean Rush has left Australia. It will be difficult to get him back—"

"So? Halsey and those greedy sons of his knew what was going on. They knew about Dean Rush and they never let up on her, telling her she should be pleased to have a half-brother. They wouldn't even listen when she said he wasn't."

"Do you know if they actually met with Dean Rush?"

"Of course they did. I found them all together in her house when she wasn't there. Halsey pressured her into giving that Dean Rush a key. I wouldn't let the guy into my front yard but Halsey kept on and on at her about sharing everything with this guy. She didn't know what to do when her own family wouldn't support her. I arranged to store the things she really wanted to keep because I was sure that man would steal things as soon as she had her back turned. She simply couldn't cope with everything coming on top of losing both her parents in a very horrible way."

"Halsey Rush says there's no such person as Dean Rush."

"And you believed him?"

John Richards took out his phone. "I got some pictures of Dean Rush. I wasn't sure but I thought there was a good chance he was a crook." He handed his phone to Freund. "That's Halsey's car in the front drive of her house and that's Dean Rush in the background. There's a couple more. He isn't all that clear but you could get them blown up."

When they'd downloaded every picture with Dean Rush in it as well as a couple with Halsey's car parked there, Freund thanked him. It proved Halsey Rush was a liar but it didn't make the tracking down of Dean Rush any easier. Then he rethought that. Just when had the men met and how well did they know each other?

He couldn't see Halsey changing his position. He would probably prefer to go down with the ship.

*

The day Fiona spent with Anthea Rush had begun in a rather stilted and formal way, not least because Anthea was still mourning the ruining of her house and couldn't really bring herself to be sociable but by lunchtime she had begun to relax and she seemed to warm to Robbie more than Elise, perhaps because she seemed to find in him some sort of kindred spirit and when she heard that he was learning ballet she became more animated and cheerful. She wanted to know all the details.

If she was surprised that a little dusty town like Buckton should have a boy with a shared interest in ballet she kept her surprise to herself and was full of gentle encouragement. To Fiona she said, "My dancing was everything to me. Practising, touring, performing. There didn't seem to be room for anything else. I never thought of romance or children. I think John would have liked something but I was always too busy."

"Where did you meet him?"

"He mainly restores heritage buildings. It's a very specialised field. A friend of my father's hired him and we all went round to see the work when it was finished. He would invite me out but so often I would excuse myself. Now I am so glad he didn't give up and go away."

Fiona with her tactful sympathy was undoubtedly the right person to get Anthea talking and relaxing. In the afternoon they made up a picnic tea to take across the creek so they could sit at the table there while Elise tried to teach Justin. If he turned up.

As they sat down in the autumn sunshine with the creek on one side and the horse paddock on the other, Anthea said, "Do you like your life here?"

"Sometimes it seems restricted and I miss things but at other times I think I wouldn't change it for anything. But it isn't Buckton that's the draw, it's Dennis and the children."

"How did you come to meet him?"

"He came to the station here when I'd just arrived as the new manager of the Bank of the Darling Downs. But it wasn't always easy. We were very different people and he gets … perhaps obsessed is too strong a word … about cases … which doesn't always make him easy to live with. He tracked down an American mafia hit man who'd come here then gone to ground outside Melbourne. I don't know if he can do anything about this Dean Rush as it all happened in Sydney. But he'll get his boss, Inspector Moss, in Winville to ring police in Sydney to push them to be proactive."

As she said it, Anthea turned to her and her eyes grew moist. "I will always be grateful."

Before Fiona could decide whether to say anything more on the subject she saw Justin coming down the lane to the gate. "We'll have a cup of tea while they saddle up the pony. He's a very shy young man so I won't go over and join them."

They went back to chatting about their lives while Elise showed Justin how to saddle and bridle Freddie and how to mount. By the time Justin had been led round at a walk and then a trot he felt unexpectedly exhilarated. And Anthea by the time she went back to the Prendergasts felt a little more confident about tackling the future.

But the information on Monday morning that she had just inherited Albert Smithies' house dismayed her. She couldn't think what she could do with a house here. "I … oh, I really can't have a house here … it's so far from home … and … "

"It will have to go for probate so there's no hurry about deciding what to do. You can sell it, rent it, give it away, make some arrangement … I can help you when you decide."

Anthea, to her dismay, burst into tears. Sonia Lockwood passed a box of tissues over and said quietly, "Just take your time."

"Oh, I know I should be happy … not crying … but it's partly that people here have been so kind to a stranger … not like … " She sniffled into a tissue.

Sonia smiled and said, not very seriously, "Well, of course we would be happy for you to stay on here."

Anthea gave her a watery smile. "I think it's … I can't really make any decisions until I see my house … you know we lived in various countries so I didn't have a permanent home until Dad bought that house and retired. So it is my … my castle, my place where I felt so … I know you don't want me to waffle on. So what do I need to do about the house here?"

"You just need to survive for twenty-eight days then I can look into transferring the title deeds. But I would suggest you look at moving back there and packing up Mr Smithies' personal papers and leaving them with me. He has given several small things to George Johnson at the pub and some money to the local hospital. But as he doesn't mention his furniture in his will I assume he meant it to go with the house."

"If you can sort everything out … I know I should go back to his house but I still feel a bit nervous about being there alone."

"Would you like me to find someone to stay there with you or for Sergeant Walsh to come by regularly?"

"Is there someone needing a home here? I think I would rather stay with the Prendergasts."

Mrs Lockwood wasn't sure if Anthea Rush had become nervous and indecisive since things had gone wrong in her life or whether she had always been like that. It might've made it easier for someone to assume she wasn't good with practical decision-making … money …

"I'll see what I can arrange."

*

On Thursday Dennis had a ring from Jake Moss to say, "I've just heard Sam Hoysted won his Appeal. He'll be a free man next week."

"And other charges?"

"Yep. He'll be charged with the illegal disposal of a body but even if he's convicted it's not likely to result in jail time."

"So those kids of his'll have to make a bed for their dad?"

Jake found that mildly amusing. He, like Dennis, didn't think that Neumann and Randall Hoysted had much time for their dad.

On Good Friday Dennis took his children out to see his farm and do some odd jobs and check the cattle. He liked coming out but he accepted that he didn't have the time to give it the attention it needed and it would probably be better to sell. And in the afternoon they went up to Dave Hickman's farm to see their racehorse Hansom Days.

Dave was interested to hear that Barry Woodbridge also trained for Tom Lewis over at Norwilla, "but I still don't see why you think they're planning a ring-in—or that they've got away with one, Dennis?"

"Wonder whether Tom Lewis's horses are all bays?"

"Well, I can check. If they're racing they'll be listed."

"Mmmm … it was that Kari Woodbridge that came to see me. I've found out she's his daughter but he claimed she wasn't … but she said he'd had a fight with a man who wanted to involve him in a ring-in. It seemed an odd thing to suddenly come out with. Not that I believed everything she said but why say that?"

Dave Hickman thought it would probably have just washed over him, not raised red flags, but then he didn't have the sort of suspicious mind … "Well, if you say so, but I've never heard of anything going on … but then I mightn't."

"All the horses, or all bar one, at Peter Darcy's were bays with virtually no white on them. I wondered if they were quietly doing little fiddles. The stewards aren't likely to get suspicious unless there's a big plunge."

"Yeah, if you don't get greedy … if you thought five thousand was worthwhile … I always wondered about that business that ruined Bill Waterhouse … I mean the aim of a ring-in is to cheat the bookies … "

"If you planned for the long haul … right from when you buy your horses at the yearling sales … or breed 'em yourself … and quietly swap them depending on how they're shaping up."

Dave nodded. "But you'd have to take someone else into your confidence and that's always risky, isn't it?"

"I wonder …" He wondered if Kari was the woman who went to see Tom Lewis and if that was a deliberate attempt to dig up some dirt on her putative father. "Don't know, Dave, but keep your ear to the ground."

"But why wouldn't that Kari just come and tell you what she thought was going on?"

"Maybe she's not sure … "

"Yeah, it could get nasty if you got it wrong."

*

Fiona and Anthea went to church with Elise and Rob on Easter morning and Anthea came back and had lunch with them. In the afternoon Dennis had a ring from Sergeant

Applegarth over at Garramindi. “I just thought you might have some ideas, Dennis. It’s some people who seem to have gone missing.”

He explained that the daughters of a Nanango family had gone to Brisbane to stay a few days with their Aunt Helen. “She was going to bring them up to stay with their cousin here and they were supposed to arrive yesterday but no sign of them. I’ve checked to see if there’s been an accident, I’m not sure what route they were taking but no reports. No hospital admissions. I told Anne not to start worrying, they could’ve just taken a little side trip to see something, but I’ve started worrying myself. Can you think of anything else I should be doing?”

“Get a phone number for this Helen’s neighbours and just make sure they’ve left Brisbane and whether she told her neighbours where she was going. And what about the parents? Have they heard anything?”

“Nothing apparently.”

And a couple of hours later John rang Dennis back to say he’d got on to a neighbour who said Helen Horton had talked of going bush, that her father had died in the bush many years ago and that Helen had been talking of doing some investigation. Obviously Ms Horton had done quite a lot of talking with her neighbour because the woman knew the father had been a fossicker and had been camped by a mountain creek when he died but as he hadn’t been found for several weeks it was assumed he had died of natural causes but for some reason Helen had started to doubt this. The neighbour didn’t know why she had got suspicious.

“So they took a side trip to where the dad died?” Dennis said thoughtfully. “Ask the parents where he died.”

A mountain creek? So rough country closer to the coast? And what was the man looking for in among the trees and scrub and running water? Gold?

Case No. 5: Half a Tragedy

Sonia Lockwood and Anthea Rush had gone round Albert Smithies’ house on Easter Monday packing up his papers and anything which looked very personal. It wasn’t a hard job as Smithies had lived a spartan life. “I’ve asked George Johnson to come by and take anything he can use.” Sonia closed the bag of papers and looked around the kitchen. It was unlikely that George would want much. He was more likely to be downsizing. But there were several pleasant pictures on the walls and having a spare kettle for when one went kaput was quite a good idea.

“I think there’d be no trouble in selling the house and I’m sure Mr Smithies understood that you probably wouldn’t want to stay in Buckton. But if there’s anything you’d like to have to remember him?”

Anthea had walked all around the house but couldn’t picture herself living here. Smithies had planted a few shrubs and a lemon tree but it was hardly a garden to be remembered with nostalgia.

“Yes, I think I will sell … unless Mr Johnson would like to live here?”

“No. George has a house in town. We can ask him but I doubt if he’d want to move.”

“Did you know Mr Smithies?”

“Not really. He kept to himself, pretty much, but I did hear that he created a fantasy background for himself.”

Ms Rush looked surprised. “A fantasy background?”

“He claimed he had been a commando in East Timor during the war, well, it was Portuguese Timor then—when really he had just been in Townsville.”

Anthea smiled at that. “How strange. But perhaps he thought his own life sounded dull.”

“He doesn’t seem to have ever married or had children so, yes, he probably did feel he had lived a quiet life.”

“I think he told my father he envied him his interesting life but I don’t see any reason why he didn’t travel or do things himself. But I didn’t know him myself.”

It was a puzzle. Mrs Lockwood didn’t think that Smithies had been shy and there didn’t seem to be any physical reason for him to need to live a quiet life. But when she got back to the office and unpacked all his paperwork she found he had kept some letters he’d received from Vivian Rush over the years. There seemed no reason not to read them. They could go to Rush’s daughter but they were still the property of her client for the moment. Over lunch she had a quick browse and there was a surprise in there. One letter from Vivian Rush said ‘I’m glad you got home safely from the US after the awful time you had there’. So what had happened to Albert Smithies in the US? There were no diaries or calendars and most of the other papers were to do with his house and utilities.

Then she came upon two letters which interested her. One was from Anthea to tell Smithies her father had died and which began ‘Dear Albert’ and the other was from Denton Hoysted who simply addressed him as ‘mate’. She didn’t know a lot about the Hoysteds but she had heard on the local news that Sam Hoysted had had his conviction for the murder of his wife quashed. And this letter said ‘Sam is a gullible idiot’ and ‘I thought he could run that side of the business from Winville but I would’ve been better to put him in the Brisbane office and kept an eye on him. He will rue the day he ever got pally with Doug Towner so I wonder if you could have a quiet look into Towner and his associates.’ She wondered why Hoysted would ask Smithies. What skills or networks did he have?

There was nothing more in the letter to give clues and she could find no other letters from Denton Hoysted. But then Albert Smithies obviously hadn’t kept much. She found an address book which included the local doctor’s surgery and her predecessor as Buckton’s only solicitor. It also included addresses and numbers for both Halsey and Vivian Rush but Denton Hoysted was crossed out. She wondered if she should show both letter and book to Dennis Walsh before she decided what to pass on to Anthea.

Walsh, when she rang him, said he could spare her a while tomorrow morning.

He had had another ring from John Applegarth to say he had found where Gus Horton died and when. “So do you think we should look there? That maybe something has happened?”

“Seems the best shot. But you’ll need to get on to—whose patch did he die on? Can you get them to check?”

“You don’t think I’ll sound like I’m worrying when they maybe just decided to camp a few days?” Some people were meticulous in keeping others in the loop but if the woman didn’t have a mobile phone and the children had begged to stay and camp a few more days … then maybe they hadn’t thought about the cousin worrying …

“Doesn’t matter. The main thing is to find them and make sure they’re okay.”

John could see Dennis was right. The aunt might simply be irresponsible but she might’ve fallen, hit a tree, had a stroke—and the children didn’t know what best to do.

He sounded sombre when he rang a day later to say they had all been found, all lying unconscious near a dead campfire. “They were taken to hospital but no one seems to know what happened, how they could all suddenly fall ill. But they think they will all recover.”

“That’s strange. Some sort of fumes from a—not sure what—or an attempt at mass suicide?”

“There’s an old bark hut up there, it’s falling down, and no one lives in the main house up there. It just didn’t pay to try and run cattle on that steep country, I guess.”

"Mmmm, but it wouldn't be the cattle anyway. What was the father prospecting for?"

"You think that might be the answer?"

"No idea. But if they were all sitting round a campfire when something happened then it sounds like it was something to do with the fire. Were they cooking on it? What sort of wood were they using? Were there rocks round the fire?"

John felt a secret embarrassment. He would never think of querying things, just content to leave it to the hospital to run tests. "The wood was burnt so I'm not sure if it was something poisonous like oleander and the rocks round the fire had got hot and some of them had cracked open by the look of it."

"Then that might be the answer. Get them analysed."

John was tempted to say 'It's not my patch' but he could see that this might be the answer. The ambulance which had taken the four of them away had been staffed by a driver and a paramedic who had asked about drugs. Of course the aunt might be an ageing hippy who had brought her nieces out into the bush to 'initiate' them but it didn't seem very likely.

"What do you think they'll find?"

"See if the father had a Miner's Right and if he ever told anyone what he was searching for."

"The parents said he was a hopeless derelict who said they would change their tune when he found gold in the hills."

"Well, I'm not an expert but if they never found how he died that might've been fumes too … so I'd look first for arsenic. It's often found with gold."

"So if the rocks that he put round the fireplace contained arsenic the heat would … I don't know, could that kill you?"

"Possible. But they need to check. And if the woman and kids survive they can tell you what happened."

It was potentially dangerous the way Dennis could make a possibility sound so likely. John was half-tempted to believe that was exactly what happened. But he accepted that it was only a theory and they needed to get Forensics into that site for a thorough investigation, not simply wait till one of that little party was in a fit state to explain. And after being unconscious for … he didn't know how long … their memories might not be very clear.

But next thing he had an angry ring from the Horton parents to demand to know what police had found out about 'that irresponsible sister of mine'. John said cautiously, "You mean you think your sister Helen was responsible for—well, for your children's hospitalisation?"

"Of course she was! She's always been banging on about finding out how dad really died. I said he was gone and good riddance but that wasn't enough for her."

"Your father didn't look after you?"

"He certainly didn't. He came back from the war but wouldn't settle down, he kept saying he wanted peace, even when he had little kids and responsibilities. And finally mum got fed up and left him and we never saw him again, he never sent any money, we heard he was camping somewhere trying to find gold, talk about useless, of course he never found any, and then they told mum he'd been found dead. She got the widow's pension but it wasn't much."

"And you're sure he never found gold?"

"Quite sure. Mum never got a penny out of him."

It didn't necessarily follow. And maybe a man seriously mentally disturbed by his war experiences should not then have married and had a family …

"So why do you think your sister was interested in finding out how he died?"

"Not enough to do, that's her trouble."

It might be an explanation. Just might. People as they got older sometimes decided the comforting explanations they had been given when they were young weren't good enough.

"It's possible. But I think we should wait until everything has been checked." He thought of trailing Dennis's idea but finally decided to leave it. "Did any of your father's belongings ever come to your mother after he died?"

"A few things. Why?"

"Was there a Miner's Right among them or was he just a sort of weekend fossicker?"

"Is that important?"

"Well, you had to pay to get a right so people only did it if they were fairly serious about looking for something." If the man simply wanted peace and quiet in the bush his looking for gold might have been offered up as an excuse.

"I'll check." And a bit later John received an e-mail to say 'found an old book called Queensland Mining Guide and in the front is written Issued 1959 Miner's Right 11207. That what you mean?'

It might be possible to find the people who had actually owned that land back then but if they'd been middle-aged or more … in the end he wrote back to say 'did he make any notes in the book?'

*

Dennis Walsh sat down in Sonia Lockwood's office and took the letters she handed him. It was the same office Charles Mather had presided over for many years but now it seemed lighter, more cheerful, more welcoming. It wasn't the office itself, he didn't think, as he couldn't see much different except for a couple of pictures of seashores on the walls but it was rather the atmosphere. Mather had looked down on his clients even while they provided him with a living. Mrs Lockwood was friendly and interested in people's lives.

"Could I get photocopies of everything?"

"Do you want *all* the letters?"

"If it wouldn't be a trouble."

"So what do you think Mr Smithies did for a living for him to be asked to do some investigating?"

"He told George he'd been in the public service. But that could mean anything. The thing is—when Henley Hoysted, Sam's brother, was called to the inquest in Brisbane he said the family had done some investigating of Doug Towner and they had found he'd been the investigating officer on a payroll robbery in Mt Isa. Now I know he wasn't in charge but I think he'd sidelined the real officer and run it himself. He was good at doing that. So the thing is who did Henley get to do his own private investigation?"

"You mean Albert Smithies was a private investigator?"

"Well, not if he always worked as a public servant but we should be able to check that. I never had any reason to check him seeing he lived such a quiet life except for his big argument with John Duarte. But I can see if he was ever charged with anything and there's electoral rolls and things."

"Do you think it really matters?"

"Hard to say. The only thing is—might it throw any light on what happened at Prickly Creek when Willy Jackson was killed."

Mrs Lockwood didn't know the ins and outs of this and she didn't really see it as part of tidying up the Smithies' estate. She said simply, "You could ask Henley Hoysted."

*

Walsh, in spare moments, hunted for something about Albert Smithies and asked Ben Waters to do the same. It was only the smallest chance that anything in Smithies' past would link to the Hoysteds, Doug Towner, Prickly Creek …

And John Applegarth was doing his own research in spare moments into gold and arsenic. And he thought Dennis could well be right when he put all his notes together. Arsenopyrite. Arsenical ores can carry gold. Grey or grayish white. Gives off a garlicky odour. And the key point. When roasted or burnt it gives off dense white poisonous fumes.

John sat back.

In his mind's eye he conjured up a man sitting on a stump by his campfire, the fire ringed by rocks to keep a smouldering fire contained, and those rocks contained arsenic. The man sitting there, perhaps content, as the sticks he'd collected up crackled and glowed and the surrounding rocks heated. It was a picture of peace but it had its waiting menace.

The aunt and the children might not have known much about rocks and minerals. But what of the father? Had he known, had he researched, had he read his *Mining Guide*, what had been his background before the war? Had he not given it a thought, was he too damaged to really think things through, or had he made a choice?

Did he not revel in the peace of the tall trees and the running creek but rather dwelt on his failures as a husband, a father, a provider?

John felt a sadness seep through him. However he looked at it there was a sense of a failed life and a family which had, perhaps understandably, cut him out of their memories. Until his daughter had begun to wonder if the things her mother had told her were quite correct. Because there would not have been a proper investigation. Just some poor old sod of a fossicker and the solitude and loneliness had got to him and he had never tried to seek help, just lying down and …

It might've been like that and Helen had come, perhaps after looking at his war record, his war experiences, to a degree of empathy. And then she had thought of going the extra mile and visiting the place where he had died …

Dennis, though, had come up against a different wall. Because Albert Smithies had never applied for a passport. So how did he get to the USA? Did he go on a boat and enter illegally? It didn't seem very likely. 'The old devil,' Dennis thought. 'I'll bet it was another of his fantasies! And even Viv Rush got sucked in by a sob story.' So how much else of Smithies' life was a fantasy?

But he *had* worked in the public service. That at least was true. And he had been an investigator with the tax office for at least ten years. Dennis wondered if he had ever looked at any Hoysted returns and told Denton the family needed to be more careful. But there was a more important query in there: had he ever investigated any of the Plowman family?

DI Carlton Payne probably knew all this but in the end Dennis whacked off an e-mail to him and included the key sentences in Denton Hoysted's letter to Smithies. Then he said to Constable Waters when he came back from a minor accident, "Think we'd best have a blitz on vehicles now you're here."

Not that he wanted to go out and listen to the sob stories some of the locals offered up whenever he told them to get things fixed but at least it would be relief from thinking about Smithies, Towner, Plowmans. Hadn't he used up one heck of a lot of time thinking about them already?

*

Sergeant Alan Freund put out a request for anyone who had had any contact with an American calling himself Dean Rush. Rush had not tried to keep a low profile when he moved in on Anthea Rush but had he kept a low profile before then? Freund, from being sceptical about the whole situation, had gradually come round to believing that Anthea Rush was the victim of a callous and clever conman. But where did the Rush relatives come into it?

His first step in a quiet investigation was to go round to see Vivian Rush's lawyer to get a better idea of what money was in the family and where Halsey Rush hoped to get $100,000 by means of importuning the daughter.

Peter Weatherell was part of a group of lawyers in Castlereagh Street. Freund went up in the lift and pressed a buzzer. He had given considerable thought to what were the key points he needed information on. He hoped Weatherell wasn't the sort to retreat into legal jargon or claim confidentiality.

Weatherell said he had acted for Vivian, Anneke, and Anthea and that he had known Vivian for forty years.

"So where does the family money come from?"

"Viv's father had a small business in Bathurst. He left each of the boys a couple of thousand. But he was ambitious. He sent all three boys to university but only Viv qualified. Dalton died when he was in his early twenties. Halsey tried several careers then went into the army. Viv decided to try for the diplomatic corps after the war. He just had his pay and perhaps a few thousand after his dad died in 1953."

"That doesn't make him sound wealthy in the way Halsey has suggested."

"No. But he met and married a Swedish woman whose mother, I understand, belonged to the Silverstorper family who were wealthy. She eventually inherited a sizable sum. She asked me for advice on investment and taxes."

"When you say wealthy—what are we talking about?"

"When she died her estate was valued at $4.3 million."

"And Vivian's estate?"

"Oh, much less. The family home was valued at $800,000 and he had around $60,000 in investments and savings and he had taken his superannuation and invested it in his daughter's name."

Freund nodded. This all seemed clear. "Now, Halsey Rush claims that Vivian promised to give him one hundred thousand when he died. So where did Halsey expect this to come from?"

"I am certain no such promise was made. Even if Vivian was completely befuddled by morphine in his last days he would not have promised anything to Halsey. He told me about five years ago that he was never going to lend any more money to his brother."

"Lend—not give?"

"Everything he lent his brother was effectively a gift because he never got anything repaid. He finally said 'enough's enough' and he asked me to prepare a letter to say that and it went to Halsey. I can check the date for you."

"Could I get a copy of the letter you sent?"

"If you think it is essential. But exactly what is your case, Sergeant?"

"There are two cases and I think they connect. A man called Dean Rush, and according to his passport details he was born in Los Angeles, turned up the day after the double funeral and said he was Anthea Rush's half-brother. With support from Halsey and his sons Anthea was pressured to let this conman move into her house. He has now wrecked it. But Halsey sent his son Neville to Queensland to try to persuade her that she owed his father a hundred thousand. We don't know yet whether Dean Rush and Halsey Rush are connected."

"I heard from Anthea about three weeks after the funeral. She told me there was an imposter living in her house and she didn't know how to get rid of him. I told her to go to the police and I understand she did."

"She did. But Halsey turned up and told us it was lovely for her to find her half-brother after all these years and she just needed time to accept him. Dean Rush has now left Australia. We are looking for what he did and where he went in Australia. But the thing is—where did Halsey hope to get one hundred thousand from? Do you think he believed Viv was wealthier than he really was?"

"No. He knew Anneke was wealthy. I had a letter from Halsey's lawyer, John Drinkwater, to say that Halsey had been promised the money once probate was finalised. So he wanted the money to come from the combined estate once probate was granted, would be my thinking."

"Can I get a copy of that letter?"

"I'll check. The thing about the letter is that Halsey gives the date on which he spoke with Viv. I have a copy of all the medical treatments Viv Rush was receiving. I do not see how he could have spoken with Viv that day because there was a nurse in the house all day and she says no one other than the doctor came to the house."

"So Halsey hasn't got a case?"

"I would doubt it."

"So the only way he could get access to that money was by putting extreme pressure on Anthea?"

"You mean—she could be persuaded to lend or give him money once probate was granted on both estates?"

"It might be worse than that. By driving Anthea to a nervous breakdown was there a chance that he would be appointed to mind her affairs?"

"He might have thought like that. But if she had been hospitalised I would have been the one to mind her affairs."

"Do you think he didn't realise that? Or would he have hoped to have family put before you?"

"You would have to ask him. But Vivian did worry about his daughter. He was very proud of her but he also felt that she was … I think he said 'up in the clouds' … and that he needed to be sure no one was taking advantage of her. It was partly that he knew she would become a wealthy woman when her mother died but also that there are unscrupulous agents and reporters and suchlike out in the world. He was afraid she might be pressured into signing things that weren't in her best interests."

Freund had a fleeting moment of wondering whether John Richards was in Anthea's best interests. Was he, too, interested because she was a potentially wealthy woman?

He said slowly, "I doubt if we can get Dean Rush extradited from the US." They might be able to turn up something more but the fact that she had allowed him to live in her home would make it harder to prove that he had no right to be there and no right to do anything to the house. "But we're planning to go public about him in the hope that any other victims he might have had will come forward." Weatherell nodded. "And," Freund went on, "if Halsey goes ahead with his civil case it just might flush something out. But we will advise her to go ahead with an insurance claim even though they may well knock her back because she allowed Dean Rush into her home and then went away, leaving him there."

"You think a civil case might bring up a connection between Halsey and this Dean Rush?" Weatherell sounded dubious. "I can, of course, ask for all relevant phone records—if Anthea wants me to act for her."

Freund said, "Halsey said there is no such person as Dean Rush but we have photos of Dean Rush in Anthea's yard standing beside Halsey's car."

"Then I would appreciate copies."

The trouble, they both understood, was that there were not clear lines drawn between potential civil and criminal cases. Freund wondered as he went back and wrote up his visit whether putting Anthea through a civil case was wise if her mental health was parlous. On the other hand, she obviously had Peter Weatherell very firmly in her corner.

Neither Freund nor Weatherell were present to hear John Drinkwater advise his client that he didn't think a civil case was winnable, given the material he had to show that Viv Rush had asked his lawyer to advise Halsey that no more money would be forthcoming.

Word of mouth against a written document was always dicey. And neither of them was there to hear Halsey say calmly, “Then I’ll have to find other ways to get it out of the bitch.”

“I think that was an unwise statement—”

“Then you didn’t hear it from me.”

*

Justin Castley found his new-found status as a horse-rider exhilarating. He could now trot around the paddock feeling comfortable and confident. That it was Elise somehow imparting her own abundant confidence didn’t occur to him and he only saw himself doing things he’d never thought he could do. But in all his spare minutes he went down to the paddock to do things with Kenny, bridle him, saddle him, lead him, put weights on his back, lunge him, tie him up, even try him with a pair of hobbles. And it didn’t matter what he did the horse took it calmly and looked forward to his visits. It was easy to believe that he wasn’t as fierce as Justin remembered, that perhaps his boss had done something to provoke him …

But Justin Stirling never failed to say it was about time the horse went to the slaughterhouse. No one had come forward and claimed him. “So we can’t keep feeding the brute,” he said regularly. Castley was never sure how to respond to these threats. And even if he asked if he could have the horse where could he keep him?

The Walshes’ ponies shared the paddock with his family’s house cow but he wasn’t sure if they would want another animal in there. At last he girded up his courage and came in to see Dennis Walsh. Ben Waters was there too and although not as daunting as Walsh he wasn’t sure he wanted anyone else to know his sentimental feelings about the unfortunate buckjumper.

“Justin says it’s time we sent him for dogmeat,” he blurted out.

“Well, put into the Council to have him, seeing no one came forward, then you can do what you like with him. Ben’ll help you.”

“I haven’t got anywhere to keep him.”

“Then you’ll have to dip into your pay to agist him somewhere.” He knew Justin was paying off an old ute so it probably didn’t leave much spare cash. He might or might not pay anything to his parents for living at home. “Talk to someone like Harry Kuhl. He’d probably find room for him.” Harry always had a soft spot for unfortunate animals and kept a veritable menagerie out at his farm, including his pet fox.

It was only a suggestion but Justin tended to see the things Dennis Walsh suggested as more in the nature of commands. He ducked his head and turned and went out again. But after agonising over how to talk to Mr Kuhl all afternoon he drove out in the evening and said Sergeant Walsh had suggested he might be able to agist a horse for him.

Harry Kuhl didn’t sit round listening to Buckton gossip but he had heard about the unwanted buckjumper. He invited Justin in and made a pot of tea. “So what are you going to do with him?”

“I’m-I’m not really sure but maybe some day I can ride him. Justin—I mean Mr Stirling says I’m mad and that he needs to go for dogmeat—but I sort of like him.”

“Well, they said I was mad as a cut snake to try and make a pet out of a fox,” Harry sat down and gave Benny, his fox, a tickle behind the ears, “but look at him now. He would even behave in a chookyard, I reckon.”

Justin gave this a small smile.

“So bring your bucking bronc out and we’ll see if we can tame him too.”

As easy as that! Justin realised he had been wound up tight with apprehension and now it seemed to flood out and leave him feeling happily light-headed. “I will, Mr Kuhl. Thank you.”

“Harry to you, young fella, and we’ll soon have this dangerous horse of yours as quiet as a lamb.” This might be optimistic but Justin understood that he had just jumped what had

seemed a very high hurdle and it had proved to be only a stick on two bricks. “So what do you call this man-eater of a horse?”

“Kenny.”

“Kenny and Benny!” Harry sat back and laughed and Benny looked up in surprise. “Well, that’s a good whatchamacallit, a good omen, so we’ll see how it goes, young man.”

Justin drove back towards the lights of Buckton appearing out of the dusk and almost without noticing he began to hum a song. Even if he never got to ride his horse the unwanted animal had somehow changed his life, made it somehow more interesting, more full of possibilities …

Note: The *Queensland Mining Guide* was put out by the Queensland Department of Mines.

Book Seventy
Case No. 1: Help is at Hand

The little town of Buckton on Queensland’s Darling Downs was not accustomed to hosting celebrities. A politician or a businessman usually arrived to open the Buckton Show. On one barely-remembered occasion a Russian pianist had given a recital in Buckton. And, better remembered by Buckton’s young people, a pop star had come to open the Dairy Festival. But it had only very slowly percolated through the town that they had a famous ballet dancer living here. It was partly that she had used the name Anne Richards rather than Anthea Rush and that she had kept a low prolfile, dressing dowdily and suggesting someone old and tired. But there was also the local reluctance to believe that any one famous would *choose* to live in Buckton.

Local woman, Fiona Greehan, was doing very well with her financial thriller but people knew Fiona and didn’t see her as a celebrity. Her husband, local police sergeant, was occasionally in the news but no one regarded him as a celebrity either. Several local riders did very well around the shows. Local trainer Dave Hickman won races now and then … but none of this really put Buckton on the map.

So it was a surprise to local people when they started to get calls from reporters to ask if Anthea Rush was still living in Buckton. No one knew who had gone to the media. But some people thought it might get Buckton some positive publicity and other people thought it might be some sort of hoax.

Sergeant Walsh had mixed feelings about Anthea coming to Buckton. If her friend John Richards had moved into her Sydney house he might have prevented an American conman calling himself Dean Rush from wrecking it. By bringing Anthea to Buckton for

some peace and quiet he had effectively left Dean Rush to do what he liked in Sydney. Richards had probably felt he was doing the best thing by Anthea and no one could have guessed that Dean Rush would set about systematically destroying Anthea's parents' home.

And there were a few people round Buckton who thought that it would be lovely if they could see Anthea dance. Local girl, Megan McPhee, had gone off to ballet school but that wasn't really the same thing. Megan was only a learner. Anthea was famous.

It was Fiona who invited Anthea to come with her to Winville when her son Rob went to his ballet class. And when Fiona let Rob's teacher, Simone Pratt, know that she would be bringing Anthea Rush with them Simone immediately asked if Anthea would speak to her ballet pupils. Fiona thought this would be a good way for Anthea to begin easing herself back into the world she knew so well and loved.

Winville was larger than Buckton but not a great deal more exciting. Anthea on the long drive looked out on the wide countryside and felt a sense of being far from everything she had known. She said something of this to Fiona who nodded understandingly. "I know, I still sometimes feel like I'm far away from everything but then I look around and think 'I know everyone who lives out here', every farm, and I only knew a couple of neighbours in Brisbane. It makes all this somehow seem more … friendly."

"Yes, I can see that." Though Anthea didn't really sound convinced. And Fiona rather than try to convince her started to tell her about Megan and how she had come through adversity to achieve the first part of her dream.

"That is a wonderful story. Is there anything I can do to help? My life is now a mess but I was … privileged."

Fiona said she thought that privileged or not ballet was still a tough taskmaster. "Yes," Anthea said thoughtfully, "but you don't think of it like that when you're doing the one thing in the world you love best."

Simone Pratt couldn't hide her excitement at meeting Anthea and her various pupils gave Anthea their undivided attention. Anthea herself looked a little awkward as she had obviously never spoken like this to a class but as she spoke she gradually relaxed. "It doesn't matter what you are dancing, a fairy princess, a wind-up doll, a swan, a lion, you have to have the technique so well practiced that you barely need to think about it. All your whole self is on being whatever it is you are dancing, you think yourself into it, a fairy … a doll … a swan … as you dance that is what you are … " And as she spoke her whole body seemed to change to fit the image. It was subtle but the changes were undeniable and Fiona found the little changes in posture and expression and words remarkable. Perhaps this was part of Anthea's magic. She was more than someone who was technically brilliant.

And the children, including Rob, seemed to respond.

Anthea looked tired when she came over and sat down beside Fiona and the children went to their classes. To Fiona's admiration she said, "It is an entrance to a world where you are yourself and yet you are not. It is a strange but wonderful feeling."

"I think the children had the understanding that it is more than learning steps and doing exercises."

"Yes, I want to dance again but I can't bring myself to go back to Sydney and face everything. I know I have to but I am afraid that I will be weak when Uncle and everyone comes round wanting things … "

"What about John? He will be there for you, surely?"

"He is a very kind man. I owe him such a lot. And yet … it is hard to explain … but if I have to make a choice between dancing and marriage … I would rather dance."

"Yes." Fiona wasn't sure whether she should sympathise or not. She had only had the vaguest inkling from the way John Richards had spoken about everything that he would like to look after Anthea and that Anthea out in her world and famous was someone who didn't

need him in the way he wanted to be needed. It wasn't that he would ever ask her to give up her career, nothing so blunt, but that he would faintly resent something, a world, a career, in which he wasn't required to be her bulwark. She thought he probably understood that this Anthea entered a world where he could not follow. It might not have mattered if she was just a brilliant technician. But he had probably felt that Anthea fully immersed in a role was no longer dependent on him in any way, that he no longer existed in her thoughts …

"I think you have had such a huge earthquake in your life that maybe more time here just quietly having time to yourself is worthwhile."

Anthea didn't agree or disagree but after a moment she said, "You have such a delightful little boy … I've never really wanted to have children … but when I watch him I wonder if I'm missing something."

*

DS Petra Moore took over in Winville with Greg and Narelle Sullivan gone. Years ago the sense of being in command would have pleased her but she had gradually been losing interest in her work over the years, sometimes it seemed a dreary succession of tedious people and tedious problems. And seeing the enthusiasm of Brent Kelly and Jenny Forman seemed to underline her own feeling of staleness. She had made her career everything and it was disconcerting that it now failed to excite her in the way it had done twenty years ago when she felt she was in a struggle against incompetent men to rise. She had the house she had bought in Winville and a patch of garden but she wasn't particularly attracted by domesticity. And the upsetting part of it all was that she felt she had nothing else in her life.

She had often been critical of Greg Sullivan and his indecision but there were times when she secretly envied him. He had a happy home life, children he cared about, many friends, some not very energetic hobbies, and the sense that he didn't ask for more from life.

She knew she had grown careless over the years. The meticulous care she had brought to everything in the beginning when she had something to prove had waned. She was in charge now and it brought with it no sense of satisfaction. She even at times found herself toying with the idea of retiring early and traveling, not because she desperately wanted to travel but rather that it might bring new life to a jaded old one.

She had the option of asking for someone else to be seconded to the small branch but at the moment their workload didn't seem to warrant an extra person. She hadn't heard more from DI Stimson in Brisbane on the case of the dead Bulgarians and she was content to leave it with his probably not-very-energetic care.

But the case came back to her one autumn afternoon with the arrival of two middle-aged women. They asked to see whoever was in charge of the 'Bankes' case'. Constable Archer called Petra and showed them into an interview room.

Petra came in briskly and said, "How can I help you?"

"We are Elaine Bankes' sisters," the older woman said briskly. "I'm Marcia Redpath and my sister Gillian Sloane." Both women were big, with freckled arms, and tough-looking. The frilly blouse Mrs Redpath had on seemed slightly incongruous. Greg had said Elaine Bankes was apparently a big strong woman when they had discussed whether she could have got two men into and out of the station wagon. Now, Petra had no difficulty in believing it.

She took down their addresses and said, "You know Brisbane is now in charge of the case."

"Oh, we're not interested in that side of things," Mrs Redpath had a deep decisive voice and Petra wondered fleetingly what sort of man she had married. "No, it's to do with the farm. Both Elaine and Gordon left everything to their son Damien. But the lawyers have now told us they haven't been able to find Damien."

"We understand Damien went to Bulgaria."

"Well, wherever he went—and heaven-only-knows why he would want to go to Bulgaria—he has disappeared and that farm can't be left just sitting there with everything going to pot. So the lawyers have told us we are the closest relatives and therefore the farm should come to us."

"Is that official?"

"It soon will be. Our lawyer has put forward our claim and says we have a very strong case. But the thing is—we would like to be able to go in and sort everything out. The lawyers took some papers but we don't like to think of Elaine's personal things just sitting there when anyone could find a way into that house."

"Did you go over often to see them?"

"Oh, quite often."

"So that would be—what? Once a month? Every six months?"

The two women communed. "We always went for lunch at Christmas, and Elaine would invite us at Easter but we often met up away from the farm because, well, I don't like to speak ill of the dead, but he was that much of an old grump. You wouldn't believe how rude he could be. I don't know why. He had everything he wanted. But you'd think life had dealt him a pretty miserable hand the way he would carry on. And of course we rang Elaine regularly, just for a natter. She told us how worried she was about Damien but we tried to reassure her. And now it looks like she was right to be worried."

"Do you know what steps the lawyers have taken to find Damien?"

"No. They just said they had had no success in finding him."

Petra thought she understood these women. They might have had some affection for their nephew but suddenly they had been presented with the chance to become not just comfortably off but modestly rich. They didn't really want to give that up.

"So what did you want to get from police?"

"Well, of course, once it comes to us we plan to sell. So we just wanted to know if there was still anything you were looking at, you know, in the way of investigation."

"I can check with DI Stimson for you. Do you have keys to the house?"

"Yes." Mrs Redpath took out a bunch of keys and slipped one off the ring. "We can let you have it if there's still anything you need to check."

Petra took it and thanked them for coming in, saying she would be in touch. She didn't really need a key, there was nothing she needed to do, it was no longer Winville's investigation. But after they had gone she thought she would go out for one last look around. She didn't know if there was still something to be found there, or if she was sufficiently sharp-eyed and zealous to find it if there was, but she thought it would give her an excuse to get away from Winville for a Saturday afternoon.

*

When DS Moore reached the Bankes' property she found some fading crime scene tape looped across the gate. She didn't know who had put it there and she couldn't see the point of it. Anyone could simply remove it and drive in, as she did, and replace the tape.

She drove up and parked by the gate. She had brought her old kelpie, Binkpin, with her and he was pleased to leap out of the car and run around. There were no animals or poultry here and except for a crow on a branch of a tree beyond the sheds the place was silent. She wandered round the house and sheds and then widened her 'circle' gradually. She could go inside but she decided to leave that till last.

A grassy track ran away to the south. It wasn't likely to lead anywhere special, just through the cultivation. There was no sign of a crop. The ploughed paddocks were now covered in a patchy cover of weeds. She wondered if this would affect the value of the property but she didn't doubt that those two sisters were quite capable of going out and ploughing and planting if they thought it worthwhile …

She continued walking, not because she expected to find anything but because she found the walk oddly soothing. Her dog ran in front of her occasionally veering to one side or the other to investigate something. It was a disconcerting thought that Binky was more of a companion to her than any human and he, though a friendly loyal dog, had his limitations.

After twenty minutes of walking she came to a small shed with a couple of stringy gums on its south side. The small building was padlocked. She walked around it, peering in a couple of window spaces, roughly covered with thick clear plastic. The interior appeared to be empty except for a couple of small drums. The hut was too small to have ever been accommodation for a hired hand so she assumed it had been simply a storage space. Or perhaps Gordon Bankes had come here for some peace and quiet … she smiled at the image as she walked around under the slight shade thrown by the trees.

The dog had gone on and was now interested in something in the ploughed land beyond the trees. She wondered if it was a dead bird or mouse as she walked out into the sun again. He looked up at her then back to whatever had interested him. She walked over but could see nothing except soil and some sprouting grass.

"What is it, Binks?" She went back among the trees and found a fallen branch and broke it, bringing a shorter stick back and scraping at the soil. As she roughly removed a bit of earth the dog got in on the act, leaping in and scrabbling with both front paws. She straightened up and watched him. Again she said, "What is it?"

He pushed his nose down into the small hole and tried to tug at something. She couldn't guess at what sort of rubbish might be buried out here. For all she knew they put household waste out in the far paddocks. But she wielded the stick again and caught something. She bent down gingerly and drew something from the earth. To her surprise it looked like a small book. Creatures, slaters, worms, beetles had eaten the pages but the spine and cover were still partly intact.

She held it up, brushing soil from it. "Cripies!" She was certain the booklet had been a passport. She put it down beside her carefully and dug a little more. There seemed to be more paper or cardboard in there. She stopped and put her stick to one side. She needed a proper investigation now, not this ad hoc poking about with a stick. She took out her mobile and rang Winville and asked Glen Archer to send Brent Kelly or Jenny Forman along with Reid Strohling to the Bankes' farm. When Archer said it might be hard to get Reid she said, "Doesn't matter, I need a proper search. I think I've found a Bulgarian passport."

This seemed to get Archer's full attention and he said he would see what he could do. She hoped he would hurry. She didn't really want to sit round waiting for hours.

"I think, Binky lad, we will leave it now and have a siesta."

She went over to the thin grass under the trees and sat down. It was peaceful and warm and she finally lay back and closed her eyes. Binkpin looked from the hole to his mistress and finally came over and lay down beside her. He gave her face a brief lick then put his head on his paws and closed his eyes.

She knew she had undoubtedly taken the investigation a small step forward. Of course they wouldn't be Bulgarian passports full of useful information. If they were genuinely stolen passports and not something old that Bankes was getting rid of then they must belong to Adam or Scott Smith and therefore be British. But it didn't matter. It would still be proof of something.

Then she put those thoughts aside and thought back to Winville. Brent Kelly had undoubtedly gone to a show so she hoped Archer could track down DC Forman. Winville with minimal resources had done a good job on the case. The thought should cheer her up but the initial flicker of excitement had faded. She tried to recreate that sense of achievement but it refused to re-ignite. Life these days seemed to be like that. Every day seemed a struggle to

get up and get through. She often told herself that she *was* achieving good things and she was entitled to bask in them but the feeling always fizzled out, leaving her feeling grey and down.

As she drifted in and out of thoughts and the shade moved over it came to her that maybe she needed Prozac rather than this continual effort to re-energise herself. But she had always looked down on people who popped pills and she banished the thought almost as soon as it surfaced. And yet, a memory wandered up, people could suffer imbalances in their brains just as they could suffer imbalances in their blood or their muscles or their endocrine system … There was no shame in having things checked.

She dozed for a little while and was woken by ants crawling up her arm. She sat up and shook them off. Binkpin also sat up and looked around. There was the sound of a vehicle in the distance and a few minutes later she had a call from Forman to say 'where are you?' She told her how to find her and walked back to the track.

A couple of minutes later a police car came bumping along the rough track. It pulled up beside her and Jenny Forman and Reid Strohling got out. They had brought cameras as well as a small shovel and a sieve. She nodded to them both and led the way over to her small hole. She showed them what she had found. Forman said "Wow!" but Reid just nodded and crouched down.

After a minute of contemplation he took up the small spade and marked out a wide circle round her hole. Other officers sometimes grew impatient with Strohling's extreme caution but Moore thought this find was too important to be rushed. She and Forman stood and watched as Strohling worked away. Binkpin at one stage tried to get in on the act and she caught him by the collar and apologised but Reid just said, "He's done a good job for us. Don't worry."

It was getting late by the time he had carefully lifted and photographed and packed everything he had found. It seemed to be two passports, "probably British", two smaller booklets he thought might be vaccination records, and a bundle of well-nibbled photographs glued into an earthy bundle.

He straightened his back and said, "I'll come back tomorrow for another look but I think we've got everything."

"So it's the photos … " Petra wondered if they would show whatever the two men had brought to show the Bankes about, she assumed, their son and his fate. Of course there was still some guesswork in the idea that they had brought something which would make the Bankes pay a ransom to save their son … but whatever they could rescue could be a step forward.

Petra gave Binkpin an extra special tin of turkey and tongue and told him he deserved a medal as she cooked for herself and sat down to her solitary meal. She had planned to go through the house and wondered if she should still do that. Perhaps she should go out with Reid tomorrow. She couldn't think what else might be worth finding but there was still the possibility of *something* … perhaps Gordon Bankes *had* written something down somewhere before he topped himself … but she couldn't make herself believe in two useful discoveries in a row …

*

Rhonda Prendergast rang Sergeant Walsh on Saturday to say that Anthea Rush had moved back to Albert Smithies' house and did he think she would be safe there? He had wondered if one of the Rush family might make another effort to find her but as nothing had happened he thought he could put that aside. But would any of the local hoons give her any annoyance? A woman on her own could be vulnerable. But he thought the house was too close to town for any of them to risk it. They knew by now, and if they didn't they were ninnies, that he took everything seriously. Annoying Ms Rush would be a quick way to bring him out steaming.

He said something of this to Mrs Prendergast who said, “Well, that is a relief.” But then she said, “I don’t want to put anything else on to you but my daughter has a colleague with a problem.” So far as Dennis knew her daughter worked in Toowoomba so he wondered what it could have to do with Buckton.

“I can’t give you all the details but a woman Louise works with fell down the stairs at school. She’s been off work with a couple of broken bones. But the thing is—she is convinced she was pushed and no one will take her seriously.”

He wasn’t sure that he would want to take it seriously either, not if other people had looked carefully at the incident. He wasn’t short of work here but he finally said, “S’pose she can come and talk but I can’t promise anything.”

“It’s very kind of you. I’ll suggest she comes out tomorrow—if she’s driving again.”

He didn’t really want to give up his Sunday to an unknown woman but he accepted that listening wouldn’t hurt him. “Tell her to be here by one. I’m taking the kids out for a ride later.”

When she talked with her daughter later she said, “He’s not promising anything but I know he’ll listen.”

“Thanks, Mum. It isn’t really my business but Jackie is so sure it was more than a fall … I don’t know if I completely trust her memory, she was unconscious for a while, and she’s a bit … ” She seemed to consider a description then give up. “I’ll tell her to be there before one.”

Walsh was prepared to listen although he thought she would’ve been better to keep pestering cops in Toowoomba about her fears. Jackie Truscott said bluntly, “I am absolutely certain I was pushed. I felt a hand in the small of my back. I wasn’t holding the banister as I had some folders in that hand. I did let them go but I couldn’t grab in time and then I was unconscious so I can’t say exactly what happened when I hit the floor at the bottom.”

“Right. So what sort of shoes were you wearing?”

“I wasn’t wearing heels, if that’s what you have in mind. Just comfortable slip-ons. Sometimes I wear trainers but I wasn’t that day.”

“And what sort of covering was on the steps?”

“There is carpet though it doesn’t go right to the edge. There’s about ten centimetres of wood each side. But I was going down on the carpeted part.”

“No holes or wrinkles or worn places?”

“No. I don’t remember ever seeing anything which might’ve worried me.”

“Okay, so just draw me a diagram of where you think you were when you fell.”

She took the pad and pencil he handed her. “There’s a broad landing along the top, then the stairs come down to the front hall. There’s offices and staff rooms and a cloak room,” she continued to sketch things in. “So I came along here and turned to go down.”

“Did you see anyone as you came along here?”

“No. But I’m sure there was someone behind me. I didn’t turn round but I could hear footsteps.”

She came round his side of the table and leaned over his shoulder. “See, there’s classrooms along here and if you keep going you get to some toilets then around here to the art room and there’s stairs down here—” He shifted his chair slightly but she didn’t seem to notice that she was crowding him. She went on drawing squares and saying what things were.

“Okay, so where were you when you think you felt a push?”

“I *did* feel a push, there’s no think about it! But I was here, about the second step down.”

“Mmmm. So why do you think any one there would want to push you?”

“Oh, I know who pushed me.”

“You do?”

"It was Reuben Godfrey. He had it in for me. You see, he asked me out several times and I always said no. Some of the women seem to like him, I don't know why, but I think he's a creep. And he didn't like it when I said no."

"So why do you think he wanted to take you out if you'd already said no?"

"Some men still don't accept that no means no. And I didn't feel like saying it politely when I'd already made it clear that I didn't want him around."

He wondered if she was telling him the full story. She was quite attractive in a dark mothy way with smouldering eyes and masses of deep brown hair. But there was something vaguely … he couldn't think of the right way to describe it … but later the word 'sticky' came to him. Yet it still left the indefinite feeling that he couldn't quite decide why he felt he wouldn't want a relationship with her, not even if he was twenty years younger.

Even so, if she had been pushed then a serious crime had been committed. The fall could have left her with more than concussion and a broken collar bone.

"The problem is—unless there was a witness—then it would be your word against his."

"But there must be *some* way—I mean, you can't just let him get away with it!"

"The landing—did many people go to and fro along it through the day?"

"Quite a few. You think there might've been someone else there?"

"It's possible, isn't it. So when are you back at work?"

"Tomorrow. I hate the thought but I don't want to give them any excuse to get rid of me."

He wasn't sure how to interpret this. "Why would they want to get rid of you?"

"Just because people are teachers it doesn't make them nice people."

"No. Well, just try to relax and your mind might bring up something more definite. And I can ask Toowoomba to have a chat with Mr Godfrey."

"He'll deny everything."

"For sure. But it puts him on notice."

She shrugged. "Okay, I'll see what I can do. Thanks for listening to me."

After she'd gone out he put the 'map' she had drawn and his notes away and noted her visit in the day book. He was still pondering on Ms Truscott as he walked home.

*

DS Moore went back out to the farm with Reid Strohling. She knew it would probably take the whole day after Reid had returned from church so she'd asked Jenny Forman to cover for her. She knew perfectly well that Forman would have liked to be at the farm too but she wasn't about to satisfy the younger woman's curiosity. And in a way she felt that Reid would rather be with her. She didn't think it was anything about liking her—it was very hard to know whether Reid really liked his colleagues or whether he simply accepted them as a small part of his life—but rather that he seemed more comfortable with older more experienced people who didn't need detailed explanations of anything.

The farm still suggested a place of peace. Reid dropped her at the house and then drove away along the grassy track. The house, when she went in, was beginning to smell slightly musty. She was tempted to open up all the windows and doors but finally just opened the back door and let a bit of a through draught in. She went into room after room, looking in all the obvious places. It seemed unlikely that the Bankes would have secret hidey-holes. So she didn't try to move the heavy furniture. She poked behind several things with a broom but came up blank.

Their lounge and dining room and kitchen all suggested a neat household. Someone had turned off the fridge and removed all the remaining food but the cupboards were still well-stocked with tins and packets. The laundry was bare of waiting clothes. Someone had obviously removed some papers from the small office. She assumed Bankes' lawyer had been

in. She hunted through the remaining piles but nothing seemed very recent. She flipped through the phone book in case he had marked anything.

When she went into their bedroom she had no better luck until she went to the mini chest-of-drawers which Elaine Bankes had used not only for some not-very-valuable jewellery but also some sewing items, safety-pins, hair-clips and bobbypins, a cheap watch, a packet of paper-clips, some rubber bands, and a small box of buttons. But in a bottom drawer were several photos. As she turned each one over she realised they were all of Damien, from him as a small boy to him as an adult. The earliest one was noted on the back 'My little boy's first day at school'. Several of them were of Damien on the farm. And then the most recent one was of Damien with a young woman and on the back it said 'Damien, Natalie, The girl I am planning to marry'. And interestingly it was dated October last year. So Gordon had been right to talk of Damien's 'bird' but he had been less than forthcoming when he had said he didn't know the girl's name or what his son was planning. And why would Elaine Bankes keep them hidden away like this? She had found an album with some wedding photos and other family photos in it.

She bagged up the pictures. It was a curious question: would Natalie on the basis of this message be entitled to anything from Damien's estate? Petra Moore was not a sentimental woman but she felt that she would like to put a small spike in those sisters' smug assumption that they would get everything. Unless there was a definite engagement, a ring, a plan for marriage, a date, then it would be hard to claim that Natalie was entitled to the property but Petra felt she should get *something*. After all, she was the one who had waited and worried, not Damien's aunts who didn't seem to have taken his disappearance very seriously.

She went through the pockets of all the clothes, hunted through Elaine's handbags, looked for a diary or letterpad. At length she left the room and went through the other bedrooms then out to the wing with its extra bedroom and bathroom. When she went outside to see if there was any sign of Reid she felt she had done the best she could. There might be things hidden away but unless Gordon Bankes had stolen something belonging to his 'guests' there didn't seem to be anything out of place. Certainly nothing which suggested a Bulgarian origin.

She began walking southward along the rough track. Reid Strohling had dug a wide circle around the spot where she'd found the chewed passport. He looked up as she came over to him and said "Nothing".

"We should've gone over the whole property, shouldn't we?" She had wondered if they had been too quick to assume that Gordon Bankes would have got rid of things well away from his property. But in a way this was more certain. A few more months and there would be nothing to find. And if she hadn't brought her dog she knew she would not have noticed anything. No disturbed soil, no footprints, no dropped matches, nothing to say 'dig here'.

"Doubt if you would've found it. And it's a big place." He gave a slight gesture to take in the spreading acres and she could see that he was offering comfort. It *was* a big farm. And, strictly speaking, the farm wasn't on their patch and any search wasn't their responsibility. And if she took that a step further, she couldn't see DI Stimson deserting Brisbane to search several thousand hectares of cotton farm.

When Reid finally straightened up and gathered his tools together she said, "I've found a photo in the house that just might be relevant."

"Two Bulgarians?" he said drily.

"No. But that is a thought. I didn't find a camera. I wonder what they did with it."

"You checked the car?"

"I haven't got the key—"

"Come on then." He got back into his station wagon and she joined him. The car. The truck. Could Gordon have hidden anything there? It didn't seem very likely, given that the truck was checked after Elaine's 'accident'. And then she re-thought that. Would he assume it was a safe place after the police had gone over it?

Reid calmly jiggled the driver's door on the truck open and left her to search while he went over to try the car. She went through all the obvious places. The back of the truck was a wire cage with cotton clinging to it. She opened the door at the back, got a box and climbed in. As she went over the wooden floor, looking for something suspicious, she began to sneeze. By the time she climbed down again her eyes were running. "Thank go-oodness—" she wasn't sure if Reid objected to people saying 'thank God', "I don't have to live with cotton."

"No. Industrial allergies are quite common."

He waved her towards the station wagon and she did another search. There were documents for the vehicle, a few rags, under the back seat was a scrap of newspaper, torn, she thought, from the paper Mrs Bankes had put under the bodies. She bagged it up. It just might provide a spot of DNA to confirm that this was the vehicle which carted the dead men.

Reid took the bag from her and said a noncommittal "Good".

And on the way back to Winville he said, "I started on those photos last night but I think I'm going to have to get an expert on to them. I don't want to risk damaging them further." In a way this was a disappointment in that she had hoped he would provide a clue to why the Bulgarians had come to the farm. But she accepted his decision. He was very good at what he did but he didn't claim to be an expert in any facet of his work.

"How long do you think it will take?"

"Not long. Two weeks max."

She gave that a slight smile. It didn't really surprise her that Strohling's 'not long' was a lot longer than her 'not long'.

*

DS Paul Griffin in Townsville, looking into the cold case of James McCormack, was increasingly depressed at what he had found—or, more importantly, not found. He had arranged a 'round table' with Dowdall and several others in the hope they could offer something, anything.

He began the discussion by displaying their file. "It's got some crime scene photos, several newspaper clippings, and part of an interview with James McCormack's aunt, Nancy Crawford. That's all. I've hunted for a second file but there's nothing there. Now according to the Coroner's Office we did a report for them and they sent us the Coroner's report on his findings. I haven't found it."

"It's been mis-filed," someone offered.

"Maybe." Griffin showed a copy of the report they had ostensibly done for the Coroner which listed as supporting evidence the post-mortem report, McCormack's specialist's report, an affidavit done by Nancy Crawford, crime scene photos, and a chronology from the report on finding the body to the current state-of-play. "So where is everything else?"

"Mis-filed?"

"Well, I've hunted through every file in a six-month time-frame and there's nothing. If it's been put into something later or earlier then we're looking at serious incompetence or a desire to mislead." Nobody responded to this straight talking. "Now, it was George Seaman in charge then, and the two other names I've found mentioned are Rod Appleby and Frank Costello."

Dowdall nodded non-committally. "Well, Seaman is retired but he's still living here. You could go and see him."

Griffin nodded. “Appleby was killed in a shooting accident. I haven’t looked for Costello yet. Does any one know where he went?”

“Mt Isa. I think.” Jon Merino had not been here then, nor had Griffin, but Merino had dealt with personnel.

“How soon after McCormack was found?”

“I can check.”

“So is anyone friends with Seaman?”

“He puts on a barbecue now and then. I’ve been to one of them,” Dowdall said without enthusiasm. “But I think it’s better that someone who doesn’t know him—”

“He was here when I came,” Griffin said. “He retired soon after.”

“That’s right. I remember him complaining that none of the younger detectives went by the book and were prepared to do the hard slog.” Dowdall gave that a glimmer of a smile. “I’m not sure that George was one for the hard slog either although he’s got a very nice house out on Sunnybank Drive.”

“I’ll go,” Griffin said. “And there’s two other things. I’ve teed up an interview with Rob Kenney. He was the one who assisted Dr Slater with the original post-mortem. He’s been away but due back next week. And I went to see Nancy Crawford. The interview Seaman did with her—we’ve only got one page here so where’s the rest?—and I asked her if she remembered that interview and she said, oh, yes, he talked to her for about an hour and she told him all McCormack’s documents had gone missing and she wondered if we had found them with the body. She also said she had gone into the station the morning after he disappeared because the specialist had rung to find out where he was. When she told the man that McCormack had gone out the night before and not returned the specialist had told her to go straight to the police so they could find if there’d been an accident as McCormack was in no fit state to be out all night. She said she had gone in to ask for help and started to talk to a young man and an older man had come out and said he would handle it. She said that although he didn’t introduce himself then she now knew he was Mr Seaman because he had come to see her after the body was found. Now I can’t find her visit logged in or any record of any action taken. So was nothing done—or has that gone missing too?”

“And what about the documents? Were they ever found?”

“No. Or if they were they were never recorded as being handed in.”

Dowdall stood up. He showed nothing of the secret dismay he felt. He was going to be seen as presiding over a section where things went missing, things didn’t get done, serious crimes were not taken seriously. After the others had returned to their morning duties Griffin came over to Dowdall and said quietly, “Do you think Seaman was squeaky clean?”

“No, and I think a couple of others who’ve moved on might also have been a bit suss. But how can I say anything? George Seaman was seen as the Grand Old Man who knew everything and everybody. If he didn’t get a result then no one could. But he looks like he didn’t even do the basics. What about the wife? Why wasn’t she interviewed? Things like that.”

*

Dennis Walsh had borrowed his daughter’s school atlas and looked at Central Queensland. It didn’t show stations so he could only guess at the exact location of Boothby Downs and the Hoysted property and the property ostensibly owned by Simon and Richard Harris and now by Northern Agricultural Supplies. But if Willy Jackson had flown up there, dropped Wayne Booth off, then gone on somewhere else—where the heck had he been heading for? And if Boothby Downs couldn’t supply him with aviation fuel then where had he gone to re-fuel? He could have circled round and returned to Longreach. But if he headed north-east then what was his destination? Nothing seemed to jump out of the map. If he kept on flying north-east he would get to Charters Towers eventually and there didn’t seem to be

anywhere obvious in-between either as a destination or to re-fuel unless he changed direction to go to somewhere like Aramac or Muttaburra …

Of course all this was based on the requirement that the manager of Boothby Downs was both observant and honest. But the more Dennis looked at the map the more he began to feel that that other station was in fact Willy Jackson's destination, that he had somehow got tangled up with the criminals who used the names Harris and Ferguson. Would this explain why Jill Jackson had become so afraid, 'scared of her own shadow' was how her parents had described her? And would it explain Willy Jackson's murder? That he had done what was required of him and was now expendable? But was his usefulness as a pilot their sole reason for involving him or had they got him to do something illegal? Or was Willy Jackson having an affair with Simon or Richard Harris? It was hard to imagine but there was no absolute reason why one of the Plowman family might not have homosexual leanings and this remote property might be seen as a place safe from prying family eyes.

In the end he put all this into a long e-mail and sent it to DI Carlton Payne in Brisbane. Payne passed it to his assistant DS Barron, saying, "Does this link to anything you've got?"

"It's that question. Why let McCormack be found when they could've made him disappear for ever."

"Better to have him found then stymie any investigation."

"Well, I think I've found what was going on with Nebo. Mrs McCormack was sure Nebo had bought their property and it would be easy to spread it around that Nebo had bought it but it was actually bought by a Donald Smith and an Alan Dawkins who sold it on only four months later—and with what they didn't pay to the McCormacks plus a profit they made six hundred thousand dollars in less than five months. Take off a bit for expenses and a bit for bribes and they came out of it very well. And if Mrs McCormack managed to get replacement documents then it wouldn't do any good to go after Nebo because it wasn't theirs and these two men had disappeared back into the shadows and the new owners would probably not be held liable for the debts the previous owners owed."

"So who are Smith and Dawkins?"

"Well, that's the thing. They don't seem to be anyone. The address they gave when they bought the property was care of The Black Rock Hotel. It has now been demolished. But although there's people with those names on the electoral rolls I can't get them to fit. I'm sure we're looking at names that were used and then discarded." Both Smith and Dawkins were names which had come up before but that knowledge didn't really seem to take them anywhere. It might be possible to see if people with those names had died and someone had simply 'liberated' their documents for re-use.

"Did Mrs McCormack ever actually meet them?"

"She says not. And there's another thing. She told us about getting her windows shot out. I asked if there had been any smaller annoyances prior to that and she gave me a long list. A dead rat lying on the front steps. Some paint sloshed on the garden gate. A lump of meat with maggots on it left in a corner of the front garden. Mail tampered with. Branches broken from a tree. And there's an interesting possibility. Her next-door-neighbour had his car stolen and burnt out. She said both cars were white sedans although different makes but the neighbour often left his car parked partly in front of her house. She wondered if his car had been taken by mistake. The police said it was hoons but they never got anybody."

"The case in Brisbane—are there similarities?"

"The case here was investigated more carefully than the one in Mareeba. So we can't be sure but it's suggestive. I wondered if they wanted to keep her always on edge, wondering when something else is going to happen, without them being large enough problems to be

worth calling in the police—and so when her windows were shot out she was just about at the end of her tether."

"So the last thing she was thinking about was the money still owed to her? Possible. And once they'd made their profit and disappeared she didn't matter any more."

"I'd like to see her get some of the money she was owed but I'm not sure how to go about it."

"Let Townsville know all this. And never forget that there's always a money trail. See if the ATO has ever heard of Donald Smith and Alan Dawkins."

*

George Seaman and his wife Marilyn had retired to a *very* nice house. DS Griffin wasn't sure how best to tackle the ex-DI. Seaman had always seemed like a back-slapping genial man with a fondness for beer and snooker and not a care in the world. When Griffin parked and got out the man who came over to him suggested that the liking for beer had continued and the geniality had not diminished.

"Paul!" George Seaman sounded both surprised and pleased. "Long time no see."

"Yeah, hi, George, how's things?"

"Couldn't be better, mate. And you?"

Seaman seemed to include everything, his house, his visitor, the distant view of sea, in a friendly sweep of his arms.

"Not bad, thanks. I've just come to have a chat about an old case, in case there's any help you can give us. It's a bit of a bummer."

"Sure, sure, come on round to the pool. The wife's out but I can rustle up a beer."

Griffin followed him around the big white Spanish-style house to a sizeable pool surrounded by small palms and loungers. "Take a pew." Seaman waved him to a cane chair beside a cane-and-glass table. Then his host went away and fiddled in the kitchen before bringing back a tray with two cans, glasses, and a packet of chips.

Seaman sat down and started talking about his life in retirement. He made it sound the best life any man could have.

But Griffin finally broke in to say, "Glad you're enjoying life but we'd best get on. It's the McCormack case—"

"McCormack?" Seaman looked at him blankly.

"You remember the man in the culvert?"

"Ah, yep, culverts, that's where they found those two little girls that were abducted and killed years ago. Seems to be something about culverts, dunno why, but it gets 'em going."

Griffin opened his briefcase and took out a file. It contained copies of the meagre contents of the one file they'd found. "This is all we found. But it can't be all the case generated. The report to the Coroner said you'd done fingerprints but we can't find them. Then where is the post-mortem report? And this interview with the aunt—there's only the first page. What's happened to the rest of it?"

Seaman reached over and took the file. "Well, that is a bummer, you're right there. And where's the tab to list the contents?"

"I don't know."

"And what's happened to the p.m. report? I can remember reading it. So it should be there."

"So how often did you re-visit the case?"

"Mmmm." Seaman tapped his forehead. "You'd have me there. Probably once a year. But other things got priority, missing kids, that sort o' thing. So why has McCormack come up again? We didn't get far, I know, that business of him not being found for weeks, we didn't get any hits when we put out a request for bods on that road—or not that I remember."

"New evidence." Griffin was in two minds about sharing the details.

"Ah, good. What sort of evidence?"

"We've now got the motive. But the other thing I wanted to ask you about—a couple of guys who've come up. I don't know if they ever worked with you on anything. Denham Giggs and Colin Barlow."

Seaman sat back and closed his eyes briefly. The sun glinted off the water and Griffin wished he'd thought to bring his sunnies.

"Yeah, Barlow. But he never worked on McCormack, don't think he was even around then. And Giggs, no, he was only here a year or two then he resigned from the force, don't remember why. Bit of a toady, I seem to remember, so I don't think he was much loss."

"Is he still here?"

"Haven't seen him in years. But he could be."

"So going back to McCormack. What did you think had happened?"

"At first we thought it'd been a hit-and-run and the driver'd panicked and tried to hide the body. But then we found McCormack didn't have a car so it was a bit hard to see how he got out there, not impossible if someone invited him to go out to see something. Don't remember the details but I think he was here to look for a house so he and the missus could retire."

"No. He was here for medical treatment. He had several melanomas removed but he was still pretty unwell."

"Same difference. He'd want to be near a good specialist."

"Now the other thing is his documents. He'd brought papers with him about the sale of his property but these were never found. Did you look into that side of things?"

"Don't remember anyone mentioning papers. He didn't have anything on him, no wallet, no driver's licence, not even a hanky. That's why we took a while to identify him."

"His aunt came in to say he was missing and she spoke with you. Did she give you a description of what he was wearing?"

"Don't remember now. It's a long time ago. She may have. Funny old biddy who kept repeating herself. I can't remember ever getting anything useful from her."

"But she did tell you his documents were missing?"

"She may have but I can't recall." He gave that a deprecating grin. "I'm not as sharp as I once was. So what's this new evidence?"

"Did you ever come across two men called Donald Smith and Alan Dawkins?"

"To do with this case? No, can't say I did. Don Smith was a barman at The Black Rock Hotel, I seem to think, but I might be mixing him up with someone else. How do they fit in with things?"

"We're not sure yet. But they definitely come into it somewhere."

"And they're your new evidence?"

"Not exactly. Brisbane is looking into it because McCormack's death almost certainly links up to several other crimes on the Tableland. People called Plowman. But it's early days."

"Plowman? No, I can't say that name ever came up."

"No. It probably wouldn't. They use a number of aliases. But the thing I was mainly worried about is the file. We can't find where the rest of its contents have gone. You never did any culling, did you? Time goes on, cases get cold, stuff gets dumped, that sort of thing."

"I doubt it. It was still an open case." There was something almost sanctimonious in the way Seaman said this; as though open case files were sacrosanct.

"Well, I've been through everything from that year and nothing has got into other files so it starts to get pretty suspicious. Did you have anyone working there at the time that you had any doubts about?"

"Well, let me think back." Seaman took a long swallow of his beer and finally said, "No, can't say I did. But I gather you're a bit iffy about Giggs. Can't remember if he was there then. There'd be a record."

When Griffin got up to go he could see that he was no match for Seaman. He hadn't wasted his time but he knew Seaman would always have an answer. And he would always be adept at sliding things back on to his interviewer. It might be worth checking whether a Don Smith had ever worked at The Black Rock but if one had he would probably be a perfectly blameless character who had never heard of Nebo or Alan Dawkins …

As he stood up there was the sound of a car and a minute later, footsteps. Mrs Seaman came through to say hello. Her hair was a bouncy blonde. She had spent far too long in the sun and her deep tan had withered and dried her skin. She wore a smart white pantsuit and some gold chains. He said hello and that they had just been talking over an old case.

"Oh? What case was that?" He wondered how much she knew about her husband's work. But there seemed no reason not to say "The McCormack case. Do you remember? The man in the culvert."

"Oh that, yes, it was on the news. Poor man. Did they ever find out—well," she turned to her husband, "it was a hit-and-run, wasn't it? They're the very devil to solve, aren't they?" She seemed to share her husband's sunny outlook on life. Even her sympathy didn't seem to impair her belief that life was a pretty good experience. But Griffin as he went out was thinking along different lines. Two nice cars, a large and stylish house, a decent-sized pool, some expensive-looking jewellery … and all on police pay?

'I think,' he mused as he drove, 'I would like to know where it all came from … and when … '

*

That Anthea Rush stayed on in Buckton surprised some people. Others couldn't care less. Fiona Greehan wasn't sure whether Anthea was nervous about going back to Sydney or still had things to organise about the house she had unexpectedly inherited here. She could ask but she had the intuition that Anthea herself was still trying to decide what she wanted for her future. Her dancing might beckon but Sydney still required difficult decisions about what to do with the family home—to sell as is, to repair, to go home and live in it—and what to do about John Richards. Anthea had said how grateful she was to him but she hadn't said she wanted to marry him. And Dennis had expressed doubts about Richards' wisdom in urging Anthea to abandon her house and come up to Queensland, leaving con man Dean Rush in occupation. He thought it would have been better for Richards to move into her home and act as a brake on Dean Rush's activities. He didn't know but he had wondered if Richards had wanted to have Anthea to himself for a while in the hopes of persuading her to … probably to marry but there might be more to it than that. Ever since he had found out that Anthea's mother had left her more than four million dollars he had wondered if Richards had thought a rich wife would be a nice addition. After all, his business wasn't large and not wildly profitable. That Richards was genuinely fond of Anthea he was reasonably sure but that didn't stop other considerations being part of the equation …

Anthea to her own amazement, since she'd moved back into Albert Smithies' old home, was enjoying 'playing house'. That nothing rode on her decisions seemed to make the whole thing more relaxing and more fun. The house was hers to sell, to change, to rent, to keep as a holiday home, and she enjoyed sorting through everything and going to the nursery to look at possible plants to add to the garden. And she enjoyed going into Jack Alexander's to look at carpets and tiles. And she enjoyed visiting the things which had never been part of her life and seemed curious and alien.

Old Johnny Wurth and Herb Wilkins moving stock around at the saleyards on what was still called Calf Sale Day even when there were hardly any calves for sale were

astonished to see a beautiful elegant woman walking round looking at the variety of animals there. As well as calves, cows, steers, a couple of horses, some store sheep and several crates of poultry there were two nanny goats with well-grown kids. As well as Dave Barry, the local butcher, and a sprinking of farmers and townspeople there were several men buying for the bigger abattoirs or feed lots.

Herb came over to her, raised his battered hat, and said, "You looking for anything, missus?"

"Oh no, I was just curious. I've never been to an animal sale before now."

"Well, we'll all be knockin' off for a cuppa in ten minutes, so come and join us." He pointed to the decrepit hut over near the front gate.

She wasn't sure that she really wanted to drink tea in amidst the dust and noise and old sweaty men but she gave him her lovely smile and Herb was smitten for the rest of his life. Even when he finally hung up his boots Anthea Rush still shone like a star in his memory. Now she overcame her nervousness to join them and ask some very basic questions about animals and sales. Rather than laughing at her ignorance they all, stockmen, auctioneer, and agent's clerk, all took time to tell her more about their work and life here.

When she walked on downtown an hour later she had the odd sensation that she felt at home here. But always at the back of her mind was the knowledge that she had to go back to Sydney and make many difficult decisions.

John had rung her to tell her he had done some basic repairs to her house so it was habitable again but he didn't know what she should do about an insurance claim. He also told her that the police had found that Dean Rush had taken advantage of an elderly woman called Amelia Rush up in Dungog and that after getting fifty thousand dollars out of her he had then disappeared, turning up later in Sydney and moving in on Anthea …

He didn't know what steps the police had taken to track down Dean Rush. He wasn't even sure that they were doing anything. But he chose not to say that.

Anthea had gone to Domenico's for dinner and walked home in the twilight. Several people had stopped and offered her lifts but she had said politely that she was enjoying the walk. As she sat a while in front of Smithies' TV and listened to crickets in the lawn and an occasional vehicle on the road past she increasingly felt that she didn't want her old life. She wanted a life full of ballet but she didn't want the pressures that came with it.

She had set up a makeshift barre and practiced hours every day but it was the movement itself, the world it created, that mattered. Not everything that came with it. But how could she keep one and ditch the other? She thought of Fiona saying things would become clearer with time and she thought Fiona probably did understand her dilemmas better than most people here.

And as she closed her eyes and let her thoughts wander she realised she didn't want to go back to that wrecked house. Dean Rush had taken it away from her, mentally if not physically, and she couldn't reclaim it. So it would be better to sell it. She thought she would give John first offer. Then she would make a more permanent arrangement to store the furniture she wanted to keep. Then she would find a place to rent in Sydney and she would find a tenant for this house. If a tenant was findable in Buckton. She felt pleased with herself for finally deciding something definite.

But as she was drifting off to sleep it came to her that it wasn't just that people here had been very kind and friendly towards her; *it was that she felt safe here*.

Safe not only from con men but safe from her relatives, from her uncle, from her cousins, from their families and connections … and it came to her that it was a long time since she had woken up and simply enjoyed the sound of birds singing and the sun shining in and nothing to be decided but whether to have toast or cereal—or both—for breakfast.

Case No. 2: Divided Loyalties

DS Paul Griffin in Townsville lived with a young Legal Aid lawyer Hayley Shelton. They shared many things but while he had mentioned their re-newed look into the McCormack case he had said nothing about his suspicions of George Seaman. He felt increasingly sure Seaman had taken a bribe, maybe many bribes, but he wasn't sure how to tackle it. He needed more than suspicion. And he knew that airing suspicions would not make him popular. George Seaman still had … 'fans' wasn't quite the right word but people who believed Townsville had been lucky to have DI George Seaman …

Maybe Rob Kenney would remember something useful from his time assisting at post mortems. But it was a long time ago. Probably one body didn't stand out from all the others. And Rob Kenney, now in his seventies, did seem a little vague when he sat down with Griffin. Griffin had brought a copy of the p.m. report he'd got from the Coroner's Office. He wasn't sure whether to tell Kenney their own file on McCormack was rather sparse.

Kenney took several minutes to go through the report before saying, "Yep. I remember. Poor guy had been stuffed into a culvert. Don't know why they left his legs sticking out. So his legs were more nibbled than his torso and there was no fly damage to his face. Not that that made it much nicer."

"You decided he had been whacked on the head."

"Yep. His skull at the back was caved in. There wasn't much blood but it had trickled down into his collar. So he had probably been dead a while before he was stuffed in, face up."

"When you say a while?"

"Anything from twenty minutes to an hour, maybe longer. It would depend how he was lying, or maybe he was propped up, in that period. I know police decided he had been brought there by car so he may have been belted in. But without a car to check for blood or hair … "

"His aunt thought he might've been taken away in a dark vehicle. She didn't commit herself but thought it might be a ute. The trouble was—there was no shortage of dark-coloured utes round town."

"For sure. But I don't think you, or your boss, tried very hard." Kenney was unexpectedly sharp.

"I wasn't here then. It was George Seaman. So why do you think we didn't try very hard?"

"If some poor old sod dies alone and unregretted I don't take any further notice once we've determined that his ticker gave out. But this was murder. So of course I took an interest in what was going on, and so did Slater, and we weren't impressed. Your lot put out a request for a car seen parked near that culvert but no time frame even though we had put down the death as between ten and fourteen days before he was found, and there was a good chance he was killed and dumped on the day he left his aunt's house. So of course nothing happened. We expected someone to come round and talk with us. We wondered why your lot didn't do a house-to-house in the street where he was staying. He'd gone out at about five o'clock or a bit after so it wasn't like everyone being inside with the curtains drawn."

"Was there anything beyond what you put in your report?"

"We had a bundle of clothes. When he was found his shoelaces were undone and his belt. Was someone planning to pinch them? They were quite good quality. Why weren't they taken and fingerprinted? And we needed to know if police wanted his clothes. After six weeks, or so, my boss rang to check and was told to bin everything. He said, 'don't you want to check them?' and he was told, no, get rid of them."

"And you got rid of them?"

"We got rid of the clothes but Slater said he thought the man's wife might like his belt and shoes back. So we kept them in case your lot changed your minds."

"So where are they now?"

"No one ever came for them so unless someone's done a clear-out they're probably still there in a cupboard at the morgue."

"Can we check?"

Kenney shrugged and heaved himself out of his comfortable chair. "Come on then and we'll see if there's someone there to let us in."

Griffin was prey to a variety of emotions as Kenney got in the passenger seat. Would the things still be there? And if they were was it possible to learn anything from them after all these years? Fingerprinting was much more sophisticated now but would it be enough? And then his thoughts drifted back to George Seaman. Why had Seaman not got the lab on to everything? And was that assumption—that someone had thought to steal the belt and shoes—correct? And if they had wanted his shoes why not take them off in the car. Then he rethought that. If the body had been carted in a ute maybe pulling him out first … but would a dead man's belt and shoes really be worth the effort? Even if they were 'quite good quality'. And if that assumption was correct then did it tell them something about the perp?

A 'waste not want not' mentality?

Kenney led the way in. An autopsy was under way. Kenney waved and said "We just need to check a cupboard". They went on into a storage space. Griffin simply stood and waited while Kenney burrowed into drawers and shelves. It was probably a very long chance. But after more than twenty minutes Kenney suddenly said "Bingo!" and held up a thick plastic bag containing two shoes and a coiled belt. The bag was labeled but the label had faded and was only just readable. But the date, Slater's initials, and a note 'John Doe found in culvert' was just readable. So the belongings had been stored (and not taken out again) before McCormack had been identified?

"Did the aunt, Nancy Crawford, come in here to do the ID?"

"Don't remember anyone coming in. She might've had the body and clothes described to her. He wasn't a pretty sight."

"What about his wife?"

"There was never a mention of a wife." Kenney looked down at the belt and shoes and went on, "We wondered about that. A local reporter did a piece on McCormack and apparently rang the wife to ask her about her husband. According to him she was not told her husband had definitely been found until more than a week after Mrs Crawford had identified him. And it was Mrs Crawford who contacted her not the police. She had assumed the police would contact the wife for information and she had written a condolence card and posted it off. I thought police always suspect the spouse, that they'd want to check that there wasn't any hankypanky going on. Anyway you can check all this. That reporter was just a young cub then but he's still around. He broke that story about gold bars on a station south of Charters Towers. They never got a peep out of the owners but they were charged with possession of stolen goods. You'll remember all that."

Griffin did. But the thought didn't give him any pleasure. He didn't want to think that any reporter might be more proactive than police.

He got the shoes and belt signed out to him. They could go straight to Forensics. But as he dropped Kenney home and thanked him a sudden thought came to him. "Did anyone ever come to the morgue to fingerprint anything?"

"Not that I remember. Why?"

"The report to the Coroner said fingerprints were included. I was wondering what fingerprints … and that was a bit odd because we don't usually send fingerprints unless there is some doubt over the body's identity."

"They may have tried to get fingerprints from the culvert. Someone might've put a hand on the concrete while they were pushing him in."

That was possible. But they would need to get prints from the body for elimination; difficult but not impossible, and it would make sense to try and get prints off any of his belongings with a suitable surface. Shoes. Belt.

When he took the bag to the lab, asking that they try to get prints off them "and DNA if there's the slightest chance something has survived" he knew he was probably whistling in the wind but he had to try everything. "And I need to check to see what was originally tested in the James McCormack case."

Braden Lester had not been in Townsville at the time McCormack was found but he said, "Okay, if you're not in a hurry, I'll see what we've got."

"The case's very cold but soon as you can."

"Has something come up?"

"Brisbane has come up with some new material."

Lester looked surprised. He'd heard the team here were having another look at the case but he'd assumed it was just a routine re-visiting. "And you don't want to admit that nothing's been done in years?"

The public, or some of it, might believe that Forensic Services was independent of the Police but they both knew that was a furphy. Still, Lester was an independent-minded man in his thirties who told everyone who wanted something a.s.a.p. that they would get it when it was ready. And he didn't mind to criticise police or take the mickey.

"Well, nothing has been done in years. But we finally have a motive for the killing. And we just might be able to link it to the Plowmans."

Lester had grown up in Gladstone, and been in Townsville six months, so he was not familiar with the name. But there was something in the way Griffin said it which suggested it might have some significance..

"So who are the Plowmans?"

"On the surface they are a perfectly respectable family up on the Tableland with lots of kids and grandkids and great-grandkids all over the place. But there are rumours that they use a number of aliases."

"Sounds like an old-fashioned mystery story. And it gets harder to set up aliases these days."

"I would like to think so. But not impossible—if you did your planning years, decades ago." He wasn't sure if they had. He wasn't even sure about the aliases.

*

Sergeant Walsh, downtown in Buckton to get some things at the newsagency, ran into Leon Gamble as he came out. He had only met the man a couple of times but local gossip had linked him to Mary Burchall, daughter of local grump Don Binnie, mother of a couple of annoying teenagers and a former acolyte of Lynnell Morton. Dennis thought it had probably been good for her to get involved with someone who seemed practical and down-to-earth.

Gamble said, "Got a minute, Sergeant?"

"Sure. What's the problem?"

"You heard I took Mary Burchall out a few times?"

"Yep."

"And I didn't want anything more to do with her?"

"Hadn't heard that."

"Well, I'd had enough. But the bitch won't leave me alone, rings me day and night, things in my mailbox."

"You told her you didn't want to see her any more?"

"No. I just didn't invite her out any more."

"So she's still hoping?"

"Don't see how. I haven't had any contact in six months. If she can't get the message—well, can I get her charged with something?"

It wasn't really police business, unless Mrs Burchall crossed the line, but Dennis said, "So why didn't you want to see her any more?"

"You ever have anything to do with her?"

"Mainly trouble with her kids."

"Yeah, those kids. And she just never let up whingeing. You'd think the whole world was out to make her life a misery. It just never stopped. Always other people, never her, it just went on and on. I'd finally had enough. Every time I'd try to talk about something else she'd bring it back to her and all her griping. I never want to see her again."

"Well, how about telling her just that."

"Nah, I just want her off my back. I slam the phone down each time I think it's someone else and it turns out to be her. If she can't get the message—well, she must be thicker than—old porridge."

Dennis gave that a bit of a grin. "Still, assuming she is, just tell her it's all over and you can't take her whingeing any more."

Leon shook his head. "Not my business to have to spell it out." He gave Dennis a nod and walked off to his parked ute. Dennis felt like saying 'then don't complain next time she rings you'. As he stood there watching Gamble drive off Kath O'Brien, a sister at Buckton Hospital, came up to him. "Who was that, Dennis?"

"Leon Gamble. He says Mary Burchall is annoying him with constant phonecalls."

"I did hear she was going out with someone."

"He says he got fed up with all her whingeing. Not my business. But I wish she'd have a good look at herself."

"I know. She does always sound like a bit of a miseryguts. And that might explain why I've seen her in the pub with Lynnell. What a pity she doesn't moan to Lynnell but she just seems to hang on Lynnell's every word, don't ask me why, but I s'pose it makes Lynnell feel like she's the bees' knees."

"Yep. Worse luck. So any problems out at the hospital. Did your cook stay on?"

"So far. Touch wood. And the new manager has turned up and I'm a bit uneasy, we all are."

"Why?"

"We all think he's been given instructions to find a way to close us down. He nitpicks about everything, not about running the place or looking after people, but just about costs. He seems to be always trying to prove that we are wasting money. And it's the way he does it, sort of sneaking round and looking over everyone's shoulders. He went through everything in Mrs Hall's office to try to find proof that some things were going over budget, at least, that's what it looked like. I know we've had our ups and downs but I've always liked to think that it's a place with a friendly atmosphere—and I worry that he's spoiling the … the *feel* of the place."

Big hospitals could be expected to have an impersonal sense of efficiency but small country hospitals made up for the lack of resources and equipment by being friendly and caring or doing their best to be. Every patient was more than 'the fracture in bed 3' and the homey atmosphere helped people to feel their problems really mattered to staff. And the person in charge did a lot to create that atmosphere. It wasn't that Matron Heidenreich or

even Susan Denby had been the soul of the party but no one doubted that they cared deeply about their patients and staff.

"Mmmm, but it's early days. Maybe just give him time to settle in. If it looks like you're right then we'll just have to run a Save Our Hospital campaign. After all, I'll bet he doesn't want to have to go all the way to Winville if he breaks his leg."

She gave that a weak smile. "He did say our steps are dangerous and that it would be a big expense bringing them up to standard. Jeannie told him no one had fallen on our steps in fifty years and he said 'there's always a first time'."

After she'd gone on into the shop he thought it wasn't really a surprise. Country towns were fair game. Big city accountants weren't happy unless they were putting costs before service. Bank branches, post offices, schools, hospitals, they all went, sooner or later. The thought depressed him.

*

Reid Strohling rarely came out of his lab to talk with anyone in Winville. They usually had to go to him. But he came up one late afternoon and left a package with DC Forman, saying, "It's the photos your boss wanted."

"Oh, great. Will they help, do you think?"

Strohling wasn't in the habit of giving his opinion. He simply handed over material and reports and left the CIB team to make their own evaluation. Now, he said coolly, "Don't expect much."

"Anything might help, thanks."

He nodded and went out and Jenny Forman hastily opened the package. But as she went through the six damaged pictures she began to think that Strohling was right. It was hard to see just how they could use them. All the photos appeared to be of Damien Bankes and an older man, a big man with blonde hair, a significant nose and a pugnacious chin. Forman thought he wouldn't be a man to argue with. But who was he?

And then a faint chill struck her. Surely this was the father of those two dead Bulgarians? Or if not a father then a close relative? She got a magnifying glass and went over what could be seen of the background, trying to find something to suggest the place where the photos had been taken.

Because there must be some significance in the venue as well as the man. It appeared to be an office. There was a desk with a phone and there seemed to be a wall chart in one photo. Could that be made clearer, somehow, and what sort of office would have a big chart like that. She thought of their own office then her thoughts went back to her idea that the Von Scheisser family were trafficking something. Did it show the movement of trucks, people, goods? She went through every photo with the same care. Then she sat back, deep in thought. Why would they bring these particular photos if they wanted to get money out of Gordon and Elaine Bankes? What would they prove about Damien? And if the two Bulgarians had come to Australia from the UK then how had they got the photos if they were taken in Bulgaria? Then she re-thought that. Because they had come through Immigration and Customs in Brisbane on UK passports … but where had they actually boarded their flight to Brisbane … Singapore? Rome? Cairo?

Both Petra and Brent were out. So should she wait till they returned? In the end she did an e-mail for DI Stimson telling him they had found six photos buried on the property, seriously damaged, but appearing to show the father of Anton and Georg Von Scheisser in an office, possibly in Bulgaria. And she had a question for him: where did the two men board the flight to Brisbane and when?

She wasn't there to see DI Stimson's reaction to her e-mail. He said 'bloody hell' under his breath. The last thing he wanted was for the case to rear its awkward head again, given that all possible victims and perps appeared to be dead. And he had no wish to try and

deal with police in Bulgaria. But he finally accepted that he might as well get an answer to her question. He asked a junior to check and by the end of the day he had the information that the two men had actually boarded that Qantas flight in Rome rather than London. So if they flew out of the UK where had they gone before Rome?

And then he thought that it was becoming a case for Interpol, not for Brisbane. Because if the key to it all lay in Bulgaria then it needed international investigation. He got back to Winville to let them know about the boarding and ask for copies of the photos. He thought he should really have the originals but Winville might say they'd done the hard yards … and it was true that he had never considered searching any more than the house …

Jenny and Brent felt vindicated in their belief that Winville should have kept the case longer but Petra was non-committal. She had no objection to DI Stimson having overall authority. He had the resources. But the thing which had disconcerted most was that after the first spurt of pleasure in her find she had drifted back into the sense of gloom which had become habitual. She found herself envying her juniors for their unalloyed excitement.

Then she told herself it didn't matter. She could still work effectively and sooner or later this grey cloud might lift and the world might look sunnier.

It was Jenny who said, "So if those two men went back to Bulgaria and got photos of Damien with their dad—why did they do that, what was it meant to show, and where is their camera?"

"There's a good chance there were more photos," Petra said thoughtfully. "Or they explained to the Bankes the significance of the pictures, that their father was a major player in drug-running or people-trafficking or something and that he wasn't a good guy to mess with."

"And Gordon Bankes looked at those photos and said I'm not going to pay you money for these, they don't show anything, only Damien chatting with some old geezer."

They all thought that was probably the sort of thing Bankes would've said. "So when and why did he decide to kill the two young men?" Jenny Forman said. "To make them simply disappear?"

"It seems likely." Petra thought it probably would have been an effective strategy. The father would not want to draw attention to his sons traveling on stolen passports; nor would he want to finger Damien's parents. "And then Elaine Bankes couldn't accept that. Did she just feel sorry for their mother never knowing what had happened or did she believe that by having the men found it would lead on to information on what had happened to her son?"

"Possibly both." Brent, like Jenny, had given the case hours of thought. "If she believed that Damien was still alive somewhere in Bulgaria then she would think we were best placed to find him."

They all considered this. Then Petra said more briskly, "Well, we need to send Brisbane photos of Damien as well and should we fax copies to that Jon Deeping?"

It might look like they didn't trust DI Stimson to follow through. But it was also possible that the photo of Damien and Natalie would spark new memories from his girlfriend and her children. It was also possible that UK police might already know something about Mr Von Scheisser if his name had ever come up in another context—and it might be easier for UK police to talk with Bulgarian police.

Petra Moore was rarely effusive but now she said, "I think we've done good work on this case. And as well as letting Deeping know I think it might be worth showing them to Mason Watling. I believe he's back at the hospital now."

*

Anthea Rush had asked John Goodrick to find her a tenant for the house she had inherited. She had agonised over this but commonsense told her she needed to go back and confront all her problems in Sydney. She had told John Richards that he could have her house

if he wanted it. He had asked her several times whether she was sure she wanted to sell the house. And several times she was tempted to weaken. But she had finally said firmly, "Yes, Dean Rush took it away from me and I can't think of it as home any more."

Whether or not he accepted her feelings he offered her a reasonable price and she asked her lawyer to finalise everything. But she knew she had to go back and go through the house and see if anything remained that she would like to keep. She couldn't hide away in Buckton for ever.

But she said to Fiona, "It isn't just my house, it's got something to do with my whole life there. I always thought that so long as I can dance nothing else matters. But being here and just feeling that people like me for myself … I'm not sure just what it is … but somehow that old life doesn't have the same attraction."

Fiona said thoughtfully, "Maybe it isn't just Dean Rush and all that. Maybe it is also that you haven't really had the chance to grieve for your parents and come to terms with all that means to you."

"Yes, perhaps. I thought it was just my career but perhaps it was that closeness. Sometimes I felt that I needed no one else in my life because we all loved … is it possible to love too much? I don't know. Maybe they should've urged me to fly the nest. I don't know."

"Perhaps your uncle and cousins envied that beautiful closeness?"

"I don't know. I think Halsey did resent my father. His marriage wasn't very happy. I quite liked my Aunt Sonya but she was always in the background."

"Did she die?"

"No. She left him. I don't know the details. He always said he threw her out but I think she met someone else. She went to Hong Kong and I've never heard anything more."

Fiona thought it might explain something. But it was also possible that Halsey had always resented his brother, that it went right back to childhood. "Well, you know you're always very welcome here. But you may find that your career draws you back and other things will seem less important as time goes on."

"John says the police there have found that that Dean Rush cheated an old lady out of her money but he doesn't think they're going to try and extradite him back here, that is if they can find him."

"I wonder why he wanted so much money?"

"Lots of people want money."

Fiona smiled at that. She felt sure Dean Rush was findable but whether the things he had stolen were … and she didn't want to re-involve Dennis or see him re-involve himself …

She invited half-a-dozen women around to give Anthea a little farewell party. But it was Rob who missed Anthea most when she left. He seemed to divine in her a special feeling for him which she would never say aloud but which was there for the intuiting. And it was Dennis who said, "I hope they go after that Halsey Rush as well. What he did was disgusting." But he knew as well as Fiona did that Halsey and his sons would walk away from their threats and their pressure on Anthea.

It was Fiona who could see that that kind of unworldliness did make Anthea vulnerable. She could see immediately that Dean Rush was an imposter but she didn't seem to know what to do with that knowledge. The obvious answer was for Anthea to marry someone down-to-earth like John Richards but Fiona thought that a better answer was for Anthea to gradually develop a sense of an independent life, not leaning on anyone, not a father, not a husband, not a friend …

*

Dennis Walsh got an unexpected call one evening. Sergeant O'Reilly said he was ringing from Toowoomba. "D'you know anything about a Reuben Godfrey?"

"Teacher in Toowoomba. A woman came to me and said he'd pushed her down the stairs. What's he done?"

"No. That dame went round to his place and shot up his car and then his front window. He told us it was sure to be her because she was a gold-plated bitch so we went to see her and she said you told her to go for him."

"No, I told her to do some more thinking to see if she remembered anything more than just her ideas on who pushed her. She's been in hospital with concussion."

"It wasn't more than that?"

"I don't tell people to take the law into their own hands."

O'Reilly didn't sound convinced when he said, "She was very definite."

"And you're sure she did the shooting? Fingerprints? Owns a gun? Eye witnesses?"

"You don't need to tell me my job, mate."

"No. But if you're dealing with a woman who's had head injuries I'd want to get some supporting evidence, not just her word."

"So she's lying when she says you told her to go and get him?"

"Don't know her well enough to know just what she thinks. And you might like to check with her doctor. But if she was pushed down the stairs then that is a serious attempt to hurt or kill her. So I think they both need to be interviewed in depth."

"I don't think we need to go into that. I just want to get this gun-waving dame out of the picture."

"Out of what picture?"

"I think you can leave that to us but if you did give her any encouragement you could be in trouble too."

O'Reilly hung up. Dennis was sorry he hadn't taped his chat with Ms Truscott if someone was going to get picky. His notes wouldn't be enough to prove he hadn't urged her to go out and make trouble for Mr Godfrey. But he thought he could leave it to Toowoomba to follow up. Ms Truscott might always have been flaky or she might still be suffering from landing on her head … if she had actually landed on her head …

And was Godfrey the sleazebag she had implied or was he simply an ordinary guy who had invited her out for a meal and didn't deserve to be accused of anything?

When he told Fiona about it he said, "Wonder if there was more going on between them than we've been told."

"And do you think—well, that they can make trouble for you?"

"Don't know this Ben O'Reilly but they'd have a job trying to prove I tell people to go out and commit crimes." That, she thought, was most definitely true.

"Do you think she misunderstood you?"

"Don't know. There was something about her—can't put my finger on it, but I wondered if she'd always been a bit flaky or whether it was just the accident."

"Well, I think you should tell Jake just in case. I'm sure he would support you."

And Jake when Dennis next saw him said "O'Reilly? Yeah, one of these ambitious young pups with more education than sense. He used to be in Chinchilla. He couldn't wait to get something bigger and better. But whether he's ever heard anything about you—don't know."

Jake privately thought that a lot of people had heard of Dennis Walsh. But even if they sounded off that wasn't the same as threatening trouble for him. Whatever happened he knew Dennis would wear it on the chin but he also knew there were police who believed Dennis should simply have given young Troy Dann a good talking-to rather than making it into a situation which reflected badly on the force. And he had had a ring from someone in the station at Miles complaining about Winville destroying the career of young Craig Mello.

Jake, usually easygoing, had said sharply, “You have no problems with a young officer taking a bribe to destroy evidence?”

“A few old letters. What planet are you on, mate? And for that a good dentist is losing half his practice? It just doesn’t add up.”

“You think upholding the law is just some nonsense some wanker in Brisbane thought up?”

That hadn’t gone down well. But now Jake wondered if O’Reilly had ever been mates with anyone in Miles. Even if there was no connection and it was only O’Reilly’s desire to throw his weight around he couldn’t see anyone believing that Dennis Walsh was telling anyone to go out and commit a crime.

*

To send DS Barron to Townsville was a nuisance but DI Payne knew Barron was almost as knowledgeable about the Plowman family as he was. The question now was: should they share everything they knew with Townsville? In theory it was what police did. But Payne had reservations. The possibility that some of the officers up north were compromised was always there.

“Jay, you’re going to have to play it by ear. There’s a good chance that the McCormack case never went anywhere because someone in Townsville made sure it didn’t. But was it actively working to that end or merely laziness or incompetence which meant that even the most obvious lines don’t seem to have been pursued? I think you can make all the links with Prickly Creek and Nebo and the family calling itself Harris. And you’ve now got the link to that property near Longreach. But see if they can also help us with some of the gaps.”

Jay had found that that station north of a Hoysted property had actually been leased by a Richard and Simon Bartell. They had apparently been known locally as Harris but had told people in Longreach that they were only looking after the property for a Brisbane businessman and they had employed a man called Josh Nottidge who had previously managed a property near Boulia. Barron had got a description of him as a surly loner. His previous employers said he knew his job but they hadn’t been sorry to see the back of him. Interestingly, he had no known connection to mining or even fossicking. Which suggested it was the Harrises who had done any prospecting and testing. Nottidge had merely kept his mouth closed.

They also knew that at least one of the Plowman family was a qualified geologist and had some experience of mining uranium commercially.

Jay had mused on the possible connection to Willy Jackson and finally said, “Was it just an ordinary commercial transaction? They employed Willy to take things, people, samples, to wherever they wanted. And they finally decided he knew too much about their activities. Or he asked questions or they knew he’d seen something they didn’t want him to see.”

“Any and all,” Carlton Payne agreed.

Jay as he was introduced to the team in Townsville had the vague sense that there was a sense of failure and apology in the room. That his very presence was not just the usual exchange of information but rather confirmation that something had gone wrong here.

Barron had come well-prepared with a wall chart, maps, photos, videos of several people identified as Plowmans, pictures of dark-green utilities, a graph showing what they knew of Nebo and Northern Agricultual Supplies. And he knew his material inside-out. He spoke fluently and compellingly for nearly two hours, being honest about the things they didn’t know but making connections where they had evidence.

Griffin and Dowdall could both see, as Barron spoke, that a proper investigation could almost certainly have given them a vehicle, a motive, and possibly even a witness to a parked

vehicle on the highway. But there was no point in being defensive. Dowdall said gloomily, "It looks like we've made a gigantic balls-up."

"No. It doesn't look like the obvious things were done but if you had found a vehicle and a sighting and even fingerprints you might still find your suspects melting away into a maze of aliases and confusing identities."

"Even so," Dowdall didn't find any comfort in that, "we're s'posed to do the obvious. Even if we can't turn it into a charge and a committal."

Jay nodded. "So why wasn't Irene McCormack interviewed?"

Dowdall said, "I wasn't in charge so I don't know why Seaman didn't. I don't remember it ever being discussed. And I can't find any notes from the case. I don't know what's happened to them."

"But notes would've been taken?"

"I'm sure they were. But it's a long time ago. I was very junior."

"And Seaman has been re-interviewed?"

"He has," Griffin put in. "He wasn't any help."

Jay Barron gave him a searching look. "Wouldn't or couldn't help?"

Griffin looked round the room and he wondered if he looked as hunted as he felt. "I think … that it was a bit of both. He kept reminding me it was a long time ago but that doesn't explain why the obvious wasn't done or where things have disappeared to. I had to get the coroner's office and the morgue to help me with material we should have. But I don't honestly know what to think. People say Seaman was a good detective so why did he make such a poor job with this case? I don't know. I don't think I can say anything derogatory about Seaman but I was surprised by the level at which he seems to be living now. There might be other explanations."

Dowdall didn't look happy to hear this veiled suggestion but said only, "So what now?"

"The chance of getting someone for McCormack's death is small but the family deserve a proper investigation and there are still two money issues. Half the money owed on the McCormack property has not been paid and Irene McCormack sold her house at below market value to James Harris because of the campaign of harassment she had been subjected to. At the very least both need to be followed up. Everything about the transfer of title from James McCormack to those two men to the next owners is being checked but you need to liaise with Mareeba—"

"So Richard and Simon Harris—d'you know where they are now?"

"We think one of them is dead. We have fingerprints from both of them. We have linked a print to a man calling himself Frederick Smith who died near Winville. We aren't sure whether he called himself Simon or Richard as they apparently swopped first names as well but his son thinks it was Richard. So you need to do your damnedest to get fingerprints off *something*." This wasn't certain as both Alvin Massey and Tanya Withers had claimed him as a father.

"We've got McCormack's shoes and belt. Both were partly undone."

"Then get them off to Brisbane and get the best technicians on to them."

One of the junior officers said, "Do you think they were using the name Smith?"

"The man called Frederick Smith had a fake licence in that name. Other names, like Dawkins, seem to link to family members or connections but Smith might've been chosen to blend in."

"We looked at The Black Rock Hotel. The licensee was a man called Richard Ferguson. There was a barman there called Donald Smith. He was quite elderly. He retired when the hotel closed down and was demolished."

"Is he still around?"

"He'd probably be in his eighties but one of the Don Smiths I found on the electoral rolls might be him."

"Or he just lent his name in return for a small consideration maybe?"

"Even so. Did anyone notice him with money to throw around?"

"If they did he probably said he'd got a nice payout when the pub closed."

Griffin made a note.

Dowdall said, still gloomy, "Well, you've certainly given us a hell of a lot to think about. And you're saying they all go back to this one family?"

"It looks like they're all related. But they do use documents from unrelated people."

"And they—what? Bribe? Blackmail other people?"

"Several people have suggested that it isn't just the money—it's getting back at anyone who might've offended the family—and they seem to use 'offended' very broadly, even just a nasty look. But we can't prove that that's always part of the equation. Several younger family members have told us they want to escape from the family—what you might call its ethos."

Jay Barron was inclined to think that everyone in the room was on-side and genuinely wanted to achieve a result. But could that be said of retired officers like Seaman? Paul Griffin offered him a quick tour of the city in the late afternoon and Barron accepted. He felt fairly sure Griffin had something he wanted to talk about and sure enough Griffin as they drove up past Castle Hill then looped inland and wandered through Townsville's suburbs, round past the university, before parking near the beach, said calmly, "It's about Seaman. I think he might've taken a backhander but I didn't want to drop him in without evidence. Can you quietly look at his finances—without linking it to any of us?"

"Possibly." Barron didn't commit himself to anything. "But is it just Seaman?"

"Two of the men who worked with Milward Dutton in Charters Towers later came here. But are you absolutely sure Dutton was corrupt?" He continued to hope that there were other explanations and that Barron would say "no, not sure" but the other man said, "Dutton received twenty-five thousand dollars for losing evidence in the death of an old prospector. We are reasonably sure that he was killed when a yacht blew up south of Rocky. We think he might've asked for another hand-out but that's not confirmed."

"I see. I wish I didn't. Because we all liked George Seaman."

"Liking or disliking is irrelevant, I'm afraid. And James McCormack seems to have been a decent man. He deserved a proper investigation. So did his wife and daughter."

"I know. So what do we do now?"

"You go over everything to do with that case. I would start with a house-to-house along the street where he was staying. People might remember."

"But it's a long time ago."

"I'll guarantee that Nancy Crawford talked about it with her neighbours."

Griffin looked over at Barron and nodded. The basics.

The tropical twilight deepened into night and Jay went on thoughtfully, "And there's the specialist McCormack came to see. Was he actually operated on here or in Mareeba? And where were the melanomas? Why is there no mention of dressings in the p.m. report?"

Griffin said simply, "I don't know." Yes, the basics.

*

Young Rob Walsh did his exercises for his singing teacher but the insight gradually came to his mother that he was just going through the motions. She said to him, "What if I practise with you?" And with the two of them working together Rob seemed to see that it could be fun rather than merely homework. And when he told Mr Sansom that "Mum sings with me" the teacher said thoughtfully, "Then maybe you would like her to come in with you?" And it grew from there. Fiona didn't want to intrude on Rob's time with his teacher but

Sansom could see that Rob was more comfortable with his mother there and together they tossed ideas for songs around. Then Sansom said, "What if you were to sing a song together?"

To make a CD Sansom had given thought to the types of 'animal' songs they could do. There were problems with copyright for songs like 'Puff the Magic Dragon' so it would be better to do nursery rhymes and ballads and he had put some time into working on arrangements for songs like 'Old Mother Hubbard' and 'The House that Jack Built'.

He couldn't quite pin down the dynamics of it, Rob Walsh certainly didn't come across as a boy who clung to his mother, but together Rob seemed to sing with greater confidence and strength. As they prepared to go out one day, Sansom mentioned this to Fiona who smiled and said, "I think it has a little to do with Rob's older sister. She tends to take over a bit at home whereas here he has your undivided attention."

"Possibly. But I think it's more than that. He still obviously thinks you are the most important person in his life."

Fiona pondered this on the long drive home. Rob had never made friends at school or Pony Club. He got on with the other children but he never invited anyone home or even spoke about them at home. Fiona had wondered if it was the close relationship between Elise and Rob which had made other children seem superfluous, and his own apparent contentment with his own company. No one had ever thought of him as a 'mummy's boy' but now she wondered if she had been missing something; perhaps out of her own modest belief that though her children loved her they didn't really *need* her as they grew older.

So she needed to open their singing, the choice of songs, talk about Mr Sansom, out to the family while enjoying this special time she and Rob could share …

*

Sergeant Walsh hadn't really expected to hear any more from Toowoomba so it came as an unpleasant shock to receive official notification that he was to be investigated for inciting one Jacqueline Truscott to commit a crime, in fact, several crimes. These included possession of an unlicensed firearm, discharging a firearm in a public place, and malicious damage.

He passed a copy on to Jake Moss as his boss who said, after reading it, "Someone's really got it in for you. But at the moment they're only wanting a meeting so I s'pose best get it over with—"

"Yeah, but I think we need to pin all this down more clearly. For starters, she hasn't been convicted of any offence so if they claim I encouraged her to commit an offence—"

"Or offences," Jake said drily.

"Then they may prejudice any case against her."

"Well, I can say that to them—or do you want to?"

"Think we need to nut out all our questions and queries. For instance, she didn't strike me as the sort of dame to have guns in the house. So was the gun licensed to someone else and she simply borrowed it? Did they find her fingerprints on it or someone else's? Was she seen at his house or in the street? Had she been heard to threaten him? She told me she believed he was responsible for pushing her down the stairs because she had refused to go out with him. But she didn't threaten him so far as we know and we don't know if her story is true. And then there is the medical side of it. How serious was her fall? Did it potentially do some long term damage?"

As Dennis spoke, Jake made notes. At the end, he said, "I'll get all this off to Toowoomba. But you'll probably have to have a meeting with them to get all this sorted out."

Dennis thanked him and went out. It was all a nuisance and he wondered if there was anything during his short interview with Ms Truscott that he should've picked up on. But he

didn't see any point in worrying about it. Even if that Ben O'Reilly had some other bone to pick it would hopefully come out in the wash.

Jake went into his office, shut the door, and sat down to put together a list of dot point questions, then added 'Sergeant Dennis Walsh is my most trusted officer. He has worked harder than anyone I know to prevent crime and make his area of responsibility safe and as crime-free as humanly possible.' He sat back and considered whether this needed any further endorsement. He had in the past criticised Dennis for 'making work' but now he thought that Walsh's willingness to go that extra mile deserved the highest praise. After all, that Dennis gave up his Sunday afternoon with his family to listen to Ms Truscott's story was typical. Another officer there would simply have told her to talk with someone in Toowoomba.

He sat on a few more minutes pondering on whether to say this …

Case No. 3: Open Wide, Come Inside

While DS Griffin in Townsville was debating whether to arrange a meeting with Alan Dudley of the *Townsville Bulletin* Dave Hickman was running two horses at Clifford Park in Toowoomba, Gretel Gunn and Hansom Days, and having a very successful day. He was sorry Dennis Walsh wasn't there to see Hansom Days get home by a whisker. And Gretel, his own horse, flew home to win by a length.

A reporter from *The Chronicle*, covering the afternoon, came up to Hickman and asked him for a comment. Dave, still flushed with happiness, said, "I am so lucky to have these two. They try their hearts out and I love them both."

"Do you own both of them?"

"Gretel, yeah, but Dennis Walsh has a half share in Hansom Days. He's the police sergeant in Buckton."

Chris Weaver made a note and asked if Walsh usually came to see his horse run.

"He likes to but something came up today, dunno what. And that reminds me—have you ever heard of anyone trying on a ring-in here?"

Dave as soon as he said it thought maybe he should've left the question alone.

"Can't say I have. You know of someone planning something?"

"Well, it was a bit odd but a woman came to see Dennis Walsh a while ago and claimed that Barry Woodbridge and another man had been having an argument which had something to do with planning a ring-in. He thought the woman probably had some private axe to grind but then we noticed that all the horses Barry Woodbridge trains are plain bays. It probably doesn't mean anything but it just seemed a bit odd."

Weaver made another note. "So what do you think?"

"Don't know that I thought much about it. But Dennis is like that. He's always trying to nip things in the bud. He gets suspicious when something seems a bit off. But he thought that woman wasn't someone he could really trust. So who knows?"

"The name of this woman?"

"I think he said she was Kari Woodbridge. Apparently she's Barry's daughter but he claims he doesn't have a daughter … so I don't know what's going on there."

"So you think it might just be sour grapes on her part?"

"I really don't know what to think. But I guess you could have a chat with Dennis."

Weaver didn't commit himself to any follow-up but asked if he could get a photo of Dave. Hickman wasn't really fussed on being photographed but he said cheerfully, "If you want. I've only got the two horses in training so it's been a really good day for me."

"So where to now with these two?"

"I'll probably start them at Dalby then give them a bit of a break."

"Not thinking of taking them to Brisbane then?"

"I considered it but it's a long drive and a bit of a hassle with everything."

Weaver was sympathetic to small country trainers and thanked Hickman for his time. But as he walked away he wondered if Hickman had been trying, rather clumsily, to tell him something illegal was being planned. He had talked to Woodbridge now and then but had never heard of him having a daughter so he thought he might just try and pin that down. He wrote up the day's racing and in the evening he rang Dennis Walsh in Buckton to pass on what Dave Hickman had told him. He asked Walsh if he would like to elaborate.

Walsh said, "If you've got the time I can tell you what I know."

Weaver said, "Sure," and turned on his tape recorder. Dennis ran briefly through Peter Darcy's bashing and the two women who'd come to see him and that they'd found out since that Kari was apparently his daughter and that there was a rumour that she sometimes went to see Tom Lewis at Norwilla who had horses, all nondescript bays, with Barry Woodbridge.

"Don't know if it adds up to anything but it seemed odd that a trainer would choose to only train horses that are virtually indistinguishable. So I hope stewards are checking brands, not being too trusting, but whether there's anything more going on I'm afraid I don't know."

"So who bashed Peter Darcy?"

"He says no one bashed him so that's the end of it so far as police are concerned but I think he annoyed a local farmer and there was some tit-for-tat stuff going on. I hope they'll now pull their heads in."

Weaver thanked him for his time. He didn't see any need to say he knew several of the local stewards and might just mention …

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The second meeting with Jay Barron turned to specifics.

The skin specialist at Townsville University Hospital, Dr Philip Coswell, said he had never been contacted by police. He said his only contact had been through Mrs Crawford and that he had advised her to go to the police and he understood she had. He had heard no more until there had been something in the paper about Mr McCormack's body being found.

Now Barron had a string of questions for the Townsville team; the first one being "How did you know it was James McCormack?"

"Well, he was missing and we had a description of what he'd been wearing." Dowdall sounded defensive.

"Nothing more? Dental records?"

"Mrs Crawford said it was her nephew—"

"But she never saw the body."

"Are you suggesting it *wasn't* McCormack?" Dowdall was frowning.

"What was done with the body?"

"It was cremated. I think they decided it wasn't realistic to send it back to Mareeba in that state. The ashes were returned to the wife eventually."

"There must have been something more definite? He wasn't wearing designer labels and clothes can be changed over. Was anyone else similar on the missing persons' list?"

"I don't remember us checking. Maybe Seaman did. Are you saying—well, that someone might've dressed him in McCormack's clothes?"

"You thought someone had been planning to take his shoes and belt. Could it have been the other way around, that they just hadn't bothered to do things up?"

"That sounds bizarre. Why would anyone do that?"

Jay was tempted to say "it probably would not strike the Plowmans as bizarre" but he said only, "He'd just had surgery to remove melanomas. Did you check that the dressings were in the right place?"

"He was in a right mess, mate, I'm not sure what they found. The flies had got to him … and other things. He was out in the open."

Jay agreed. "But before you talk to any journos I would go right back to that most basic question and check. If Seaman has more information that isn't in the file then it's about time he came in and went over the case right from the beginning. If he was given a tip off that it was McCormack you need to know who and where and when."

"But—I don't see how they could swap—well, swap bodies. Because if—and it's a big if—this isn't McCormack then where is he?"

"The where isn't the immediate issue. First, I would talk to his specialist. If his information gels with the p.m. that solves your fundamental question. If it doesn't—then you go back to the very beginning. And I think George Seaman needs to be called in and interviewed."

"He won't like that." Dowdall seemed to be growing gloomier by the minute.

"I don't think that what George Seaman likes or doesn't like is relevant." Barron's pleasant expression didn't change but everyone in the room felt they had been put on notice.

"Right." DS Griffin said briskly. "We need to talk with Coswell now. Do we see it as a routine re-investigation or new evidence or … doubts?"

"Routine. But I think," Barron turned to Dowdall, "you need to talk with Seaman. And if he says he doesn't remember remind him that his conduct of this case is under serious investigation. It doesn't take great intelligence to see that a junior constable could've done a better job."

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The excitement Winville had initially felt when they found and saw the photos from the Bankes' property had slowly diminished. The pictures might well be the key to Damien Bankes' whereabouts but they hadn't been able to pin down anything to suggest a place. Brisbane had tried to get the wall chart in the background clearer but without success. This had struck them as odd as the chart appeared to be just behind the two men. Their explanation was that the chart appeared to be covered in a sheet of thick clear plastic.

So if there were no clues in the chart it came back to the need to identify the man standing with Damien. Brent Kelly had gone round to the hospital to show copies of the pictures to Dr Watling who had immediately said, "There are definite similarities to the two bodies we had here but you will need more than similarities. May I fax these to my colleague in Sofia?"

Brent agreed. He still harboured secret hopes that Winville would crack the case while DI Stimson in Brisbane fiddle-faddled around. That the fax image that Watling's contact in Bulgaria received would not be very clear was a problem but Kelly hoped the man in the photos would still be sufficiently distinctive to incite an immediate 'oh yes, that's—'

Both Kelly and Forman had great confidence in Watling. And their confidence was not misplaced. Unexpectedly the station had a visit from Mason Watling next morning. After he'd been given a seat and a coffee they all crowded round in anticipation. So far as they knew it was the first time Watling had ever come to the station. That in itself seemed significant.

"When I stopped over a day in Bulgaria and spoke with my colleague Dr Markov there and gave him photos of both the young men who'd been through the morgue here, as well as their dental images and possible names, he said he would do some quiet investigation for me. When I faxed him those photos yesterday he said that though he would like to see the originals the man in them is almost certainly a Kurt Von Scheisser who runs the largest trucking company in Bulgaria. He had already done some quiet digging to find anyone called Von Scheisser and had found that Kurt and Hilde Von Scheisser had five sons including a set of twins. This isn't absolute proof and it doesn't tell you where Damien Bankes is—if he's

still alive—as the company has a number of offices. But I hope this will help you to get confirmation one way or another."

Petra, Brent and Jenny all said it made absolute sense. "Damien worked for a trucking company in England so being offered a chance to drive for a big company in Bulgaria would probably have appealed to his sense of adventure. So he would have gone there to see if the offer was genuine and if he thought he would find the job interesting and language wouldn't be a problem," Jenny Forman said quickly. "But what happened next? I wonder if the father knew and agreed with the sons to try and blackmail the Bankes' family here?"

"It seems likely," Petra said cautiously. "Someone provided the sons with those photos but I think there had to be something more definite for them to show to Gordon Bankes to prove that Damien was being held hostage. All these pictures are too vague for that."

"And you are absolutely sure you're looking at some kind of ransom?" Watling was less willing to jump to conclusions.

"No. Not absolutely sure of anything. But Gordon Bankes did get busy distilling some nicotine when those men arrived and did poison them. Then he cleaned that place thoroughly—"

"Do you know he distilled nicotine and gave it to them?"

Petra looked slightly put out but said, "No, we never found where he did the business with nicotine but he'd had weeks to tidy everything away."

Watling nodded. "Well, it looks like a case for Interpol so make sure everything is put together with as few assumptions as possible."

"It is actually DI Stimson's case—"

"But you deserve the kudos? Yes. But if there is a chance Damien Bankes is still alive somewhere there is a degree of delicacy needed."

"And," Brent Kelly and Jenny Forman had speculated on what kind of trafficking might be going on, "do you think this Kurt Von Scheisser is a crook?"

"What I think is irrelevant but you will probably find that some of the loads he brings in from Turkey and thereabouts contain drugs and possibly people."

"Has your colleague there ever heard any rumours about this man?" Petra tapped a photograph.

"Probably not. But that doesn't mean there aren't any. His laboratory is his world. I am just glad he sometimes reads newspapers and watches television when he goes home. So I will leave it all in your capable hands." Watling stood up, waved away their thanks, and went out.

There was a minute of silence then DS Moore said, "We'll need to pass this possible indentification on to Stimson."

The others agreed but without enthusiasm.

*

DI Dowdall knew it would look as though he didn't trust his subordinates but it would be his reputation which came under fire if they had been harbouring the wrong body all these years so he felt he needed to do the checking himself. He began with Coswell and Coswell's notes from when he removed two melanomas from James McCormack. "He had a large one in the middle of his back. He had obviously worked without a shirt at times. And he had a smaller one removed from his calf. I assume he worked in shorts most days." He showed Dowdall the notes he had retrieved. "He had dressings on both. I was quite happy with the way they had begun to heal but I wanted him to stay at least another week in Townsville. When he didn't come in for his Thursday morning appointment I thought he might just have been feeling too unwell to come in and rang the number he had given me. When I heard he had gone out and not come home I was worried. His general health wasn't good. He had

angina and some minor troubles and he had just had surgery. So I told his—was it his aunt?—to go straight to the police. I had told him to take things very quietly for a week. I didn't hear any more. I rang the aunt two or three days later and she said he seemed to be missing and that the police said they would look for him. There was nothing more I could do. And about two weeks later I heard his body had been found."

Dowdall asked for details of the dressings, their exact locations, what they would have been composed of. Then he decided to take Coswell partly into his confidence. "There is something odd. The body was wearing McCormack's clothes and belt and shoes," as he said that he realised even that wasn't proved; Mrs Crawford had never actually been shown anything, "but there didn't seem to be any dressings on the body. If they had been removed would the—the scars have been very noticeable?"

"If they were infested with maggots, no, probably not. But you would have the details of any maggot infestations, wouldn't you? They would go for the body's orifices or any broken skin first."

Dowdall agreed with that. "Did you notice anything about his teeth?"

"He had a plate at the top, I think his bottom teeth were his own. But you would have got dental records anyway."

Dowdall felt like a naughty boy facing a calm headmaster and wondering how to own up. But he merely nodded. "And—did you discuss anything with McCormack—other than his operation? Like, say, his plans, his private life, his hobbies?"

"He said his wife was a worrier, that she had been urging him to get his spots seen to for quite a while. I think he told me he'd sold his farm and was planning to take life a little easier. He said he and the wife were hoping to go to London some day to see their daughter. I got the impression of a close family but it is only an impression."

And his visit to Rob Kenney wasn't any more encouraging. He showed Kenney the places where McCormack still had dressings on when he was discharged from hospital. Kenney looked over the report they had done and said, "He was lying on his back so there was no fly damage to it. His legs were a mess. The sun and flies and time … we could see the bones of his ankles and calves. But there was no sign of a major wound on his back. He had bloated and begun to rot so I can't be categoric. But I would say that there should still have been some indication."

"And what teeth did he have when he was brought in?"

"Nothing up top. Either someone removed his plate or it had fallen out. His bottom teeth were his own. As we were told he had already been identified as James McCormack we didn't x-ray them for identification purposes." He considered his words then said, "Are you suggesting he *wasn't* James McCormack?"

"I'm sure he was but it is just a bit odd that there was no sign of the dressings."

"So how was he identified?"

"His aunt gave us a detailed description of him, his clothes and so on."

"So it all depends on the aunt? I would want something more before I mounted a court case and more so if the aunt was elderly—and she must have been as he was in his fifties. But I suppose you know your business." The way he said this suggested he had grave doubts on that score.

"We seem to be as far away from a court case as we were then."

"So if it wasn't McCormack … who was it?"

"I'm sure it was." This was hardly a ringing declaration and Dowdall carried his own doubts away with him as he drove round to see George Seaman.

Seaman was as cheerful, if not more so, with Dowdall as he had been with Griffin. "John! Good to see you. Come on round the back. We were just having coffee out on the terrace."

Dowdall, following Seaman round the house, was reminded that it was not only a big house but a very nice one too. And the pool was not some little thing squeezed into a backyard and only allowing six strokes from end to end. On the far side fan palms jostled with poinsettias and paw-paws and bougainvillea to give a sense of a little tropical paradise tucked away here. Seaman waved him to a seat and called out, "Visitor, love! Bring another mug!"

And a minute later Mrs Seaman came out with another coffee and some biscuits. "Is this a very private visit," she said with a smile, "or shall I join you?"

"I'm here about the McCormack case again. Sorry about that." As soon as he said it he wondered why he was apologising. If anyone should apologise surely it should be George Seaman.

"Oh well, perhaps you'd best leave us, after all, love," George said to his wife. "It wasn't a nice case. I remember when we got him out of the culvert some of his toes dropped off."

Marilyn Seaman made a moue of distaste. Dowdall said quickly, "No, it wasn't as bad as that. He was wearing shoes." But she had already stood up. Now she said, "Well, I will leave you to it then" and walked away.

"Still, it wasn't nice," Seaman said with a grin. "But not women's business."

"So how did you identify him?"

"It's all there in the file—"

"No. There's nothing in the file."

"Sorry, I'd forgotten that you'd lost some things."

"So what did you use? Dental records?"

"My memory's not the best but I think it was his aunt who identified him."

"She never saw the body."

"Didn't she? Well, she must've given us a good description."

"Man in his fifties with gray hair, wearing jeans and a blue cotton shirt. Could be almost anyone. You must have had something more specific?"

Seaman sat back and closed his eyes and appeared to be deep in thought. "His teeth were checked, had an upper plate, I seem to remember."

"Who was his dentist?"

"How would I know?"

"Was he in Townsville or Mareeba?"

"I probably put it back on to Forensics."

"So who would that have been?"

"You were there then, John, so you'd know as well as I do, probably better seeing the old gray matter is getting a bit unreliable these days."

"So when did Forensics let you know their results?"

"Couldn't say. In a week or so, maybe less."

"You went public the day after the body was found to say it was James McCormack."

"Did I? Well, they must've got back to us faster than usual."

Dowdall had desperately wanted the body to be James McCormack without the slightest doubt but now he had the sudden contrary feeling. Whatever happened they wouldn't look good but he wanted George Seaman to stop looking so genial and accept—

"There are strong indications that the body was *not* James McCormack. Did you ever have the slightest doubt?"

"Not? Oh, c'mon, John, what're you playing at? Of course it was James McCormack."

"We have absolutely nothing to prove it was McCormack. No dental records. No fingerprints. Nothing that we could now test for DNA. And the morgue saw a body which

was supposed to've just had surgery but had no dressings and no matching wounds. We've got a big problem and it will come back to you, George, because you were in charge then."

"Here, hold on, not so fast, John." It seemed amazing to Dowdall that, despite his words, Seaman still looked as though he was having a wonderful day. Dowdall wondered gloomily what his secret was. "I did the best job I could. And no one's going to say I didn't."

"Then I think you'd better come in. If you didn't ask that anyone throw anything away then maybe you can find things because we can't."

"Well, if it'll make you happy I'll drop by one day." Seaman took another biscuit.

Dowdall stood up and looked around. "All this on police pay and super? I can't wait to retire in that case."

"No, John, I've got quite good at investing. You should try it."

But as he went out to his car Dowdall found himself wondering how Seaman knew James McCormack had an upper plate when there had been no sign of one …

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When Dennis said to Fiona that he would need to go to Toowoomba for a meeting she said, "Would you like me to come with you?' he said "I'd love you to come with me but this's about that Truscott dame saying I told her to go out and get some guy." Jake Moss had told Toowoomba that both Jackie Truscott and Reuben Godfrey should be present so that any misunderstandings could be cleared up. Toowoomba had not been receptive to this.

"What time do you need to get there?"

"Ten." Fiona said in that case she would drop him off and go round the shops. She had learnt to be content with what Buckton and Winville had to offer but Toowoomba was considerably larger and could offer a lot more variety.

Dennis had been known to grumble about Toowoomba continuing to grow. "Don't know why there's all this promotion of the place when the Downs is going to run out of water. Look at all the places that have to buy in water or drill deeper or turn sewerage back into drinking water." Grumbles along those lines. He had told her several times that Japana was drilling deeper for water and she had wondered what would happen when all the underground water had been sucked up. "It'll be up to dams and tanks then," he had said gloomily, "maybe not in our time but in our kids' or grandkids'." She hadn't found any comfort in that. But she put these thoughts aside and made lists of things she would like to browse for.

Sergeant O'Reilly had, reluctantly, accepted Inspector Moss's suggestion that everyone involved should be present. He had also, reluctantly, spoken to the hospital about Ms Truscott's accident. That she might still be suffering brain damage, concussion, delayed trauma, was an annoyance in his view rather than a mitigating factor.

And when Fiona had dropped Dennis off, planning to visit several shops then have lunch up at Picnic Point unless he rang her before then, Sergeant O'Reilly had his own fleeting moment of panic. This man did not suggest someone who told young women to go out and commit crimes. But he stifled his first thoughts and said only, "Go on in."

He had bagged a small interview room and ushered Walsh in. "Take a seat. There's a couple of other people coming." The first one in was a young constable with a notebook. Dennis had brought his own but he regretted that he hadn't seen any need to tape the conversation. The young constable sat down and looked rather nervously in Walsh's direction. He wondered why a young woman would go to Walsh rather than someone who would be more friendly and approachable.

A minute later O'Reilly ushered in Ms Truscott and said, "You know Sergeant Walsh?" He didn't sound very interested. Jackie Truscott gave Dennis a blank look and said, "No, I don't know him."

Walsh sat there and looked her over without saying anything but O'Reilly said rather testily, "Of course you do. You told us about him."

"No. I'm sure I didn't."

The door opened again and O'Reilly said, "Ah, Mr Godfrey, come in. You'll know Ms Truscott and this is Sergeant Walsh." Godfrey hesitated then nodded. He came past Ms Truscott and gave her rather an unpleasant look and then held out a hand to Walsh who said merely, "Take a seat, Mr Godfrey. We just want to get a few things sorted out. The first and most obvious one is exactly what happened at your house."

Godfrey had understandably been under the impression that he would just be a bystander to Ms Truscott getting grilled. He looked slightly put out. He sat down and said, "Someone shot out the front window of my car and a front window of my house."

"Did you see the person with the gun?"

"No."

"So what happened next?"

"I called the police. When they came half-an-hour later I told them Jackie was blaming me for something so she had probably had a go at me."

"Did you have any evidence?"

"Her threats."

"What were these threats?"

"She kept saying she knew I'd pushed her down the stairs and she was going to make me pay."

"Did you push her down the stairs?"

As he watched Godfrey he had the sense of something faintly sleazy in the man. Hard to pin down but Dennis wondered if he liked to watch porn. This was only a faint intimation but it might explain why Jackie Truscott had not been keen to go out with him. She was now sitting staring at the far wall as though nothing which happened here was of any interest to her.

Godfrey stood up angrily and said, "Of course I didn't push her down any stairs! She's off with the birds."

"So what was your relationship with Ms Truscott?"

O'Reilly attempted to intervene. After all, it was his meeting and his interview but Walsh said, "Let Mr Godfrey answer."

"I didn't have any relationship with her. Absolutely zilch."

"You never invited her out?"

"Of course not."

"You never spoke to her at school?"

"No."

"Never?"

"I avoided her."

"We can check, you know."

"You can check all you like. You'll find everyone there knew I hated the bitch—"

"Why?"

"Because she's a lying scheming little bitch."

O'Reilly gave him a long look.

"So how did you know this if you never spoke with her?"

"You can see it a mile away."

"No. Mr Godfrey, I can't see it a mile away so you'll need to be more specific."

Young Constable Brewer thought Godfrey was very uncomfortable being grilled by a tough guy like Dennis Walsh, that he had expected to have a pleasant chat with O'Reilly and then be excused.

The silence lengthened and Walsh finally said, “I am waiting, Mr Godfrey.”

“Look,” O’Reilly finally decided to assert himself, “this meeting isn’t about what Mr Godfrey thought about Ms Truscott. It’s about—”

“It is, if there’s the slightest chance he pushed Ms Truscott. He could’ve killed her.”

As he said that both O’Reilly and Brewer saw an odd look cross Godfrey’s face; almost a smile. O’Reilly said quickly, “You are certain you didn’t push Ms Truscott, even if it was accidental?”

“Of course I didn’t.”

“Did you see her fall?” This was Dennis.

“Of course not.”

“Who found her unconscious at the bottom of the stairs?”

“How would I know?”

“You worked there.”

“So. I couldn’t care less who found the bitch.”

“That’s not the same thing. And you still haven’t told us why you hated Ms Truscott so much.”

Once again O’Reilly felt he should assert himself. “I think we should leave it here. This isn’t why you were asked to come in, Sergeant Walsh. You can go now, Mr Godfrey. We may want to talk to you again in the future.”

“Any time.” Godfrey gave O’Reilly a slight grin and got up and went out.

Dennis said to O’Reilly, “Why are you so sure he didn’t do anything to Ms Truscott?”

“He’s irrelevant to the question of whether you encouraged Ms Truscott to commit a crime.”

“Ms Truscott, it is your turn now to tell us what happened.” Dennis turned to Jackie Truscott who was still staring blankly at O’Reilly or the wall behind him.

“Nothing happened.” She spoke in a monotone and continued to stare blankly at Sergeant O’Reilly. Dennis was certain this was all a put-on. O’Reilly seemed puzzled by her.

Dennis sat back and waited for O’Reilly to take over the questioning. When the silence lengthened Dennis said grimly, “There are three questions, Ms Truscott.”

“Oh?”

“Did you take a gun around to Reuben Godfrey’s house? Did you shoot at his car and house? And if you did—where did you get the gun?”

“I never went to his house. I never had a gun.”

O’Reilly finally burst into speech. “Yes you did. You told us you did. You told us you were aiming for his computer.”

“No, I didn’t. I never saw you before now.”

“But you did say Mr Godfrey pushed you down the stairs?” O’Reilly had been determined not to give this story any credence.

“He pushed me down the stairs.” But she still spoke in that odd monotone. “You know he pushed me down the stairs. Why don’t you listen.”

“No, Ms Truscott, he didn’t push you down the stairs. No one pushed you. You fell.”

“Were you there to see me fall. Why didn’t you pick me up.”

“Of course I wasn’t there to see you fall. But Mr Godfrey has said he wasn’t there so I think you should stop blaming him.”

There was a long silence. She continued to look at him without emotion. O’Reilly began to feel disconcerted by her unwinking stare. Maybe she *was* a head case. In which case trying to get her convicted of anything might be a waste of time.

Dennis finally said, wondering if he was jumping to conclusions, “There was more to all this, wasn’t there? Why did he hate you so much? And why do you hate him?”

O'Reilly looked at Dennis then back to Jackie Truscott. There was another long silence. O'Reilly had no wish to be seen to support anything Dennis Walsh said. But now he could see that there had to be a reason behind that apparent hate. It appeared to be more than two people who simply didn't get on.

At last she said, "He's sick in the head."

O'Reilly looked surprised. He had been thinking that it was Ms Truscott who was sick in the head. "He's sick in the head? What do you mean by that?"

She sat there simply looking at him. He finally said crossly, "Well?"

She remained silent. Dennis Walsh said to O'Reilly, "Did you go inside Godfrey's house when he reported the damage to his windows?"

"No."

"Not even to look for the bullet?"

"We had Ms Truscott's gun."

"So how did you match the bullet to the gun?"

"We didn't. She admitted she had a gun."

The whole thing struck Walsh as profoundly unsatisfactory. "I think that a search of Godfrey's home could be worth the time." Dennis stood up. O'Reilly immediately waved him back to his seat. "The question isn't what Godfrey did or has. It's about this woman."

"Then I would suggest that you cover everything—and I mean everything. I don't know who did what but I think it's about time you did." He stood up again.

O'Reilly also got up. He followed Walsh out of the room. Ms Truscott and the young constable remained. Jackie Truscott dropped her head into her hands.

"Why did you tell that woman to go after Godfrey?" O'Reilly caught up with Dennis.

"I didn't." Dennis didn't feel like trying to convince O'Reilly. "I think you're looking at a sleazebag there but until you get into his house and have a look around—"

"You don't know that."

"No. But I think you might like to have a gander at his computer."

"So where does the dame come into it?"

"Talk to their colleagues. See what they know about bad blood between the two of them."

Dennis went out. He had no idea whether they would do any follow-up or just decide the whole thing was a mess and best dropped. And it was a relief to meet up with Fiona some twenty minutes later. Ben O'Reilly said to Constable Brewer, "I've heard they call him the Ogre of Buckton but I never asked what they meant."

Brewer said with some fervence, "I wouldn't want to get on his wrong side." And yet he had also felt that with Dennis Walsh you would know exactly where you stood. He wasn't someone out to make himself look good by whatever means might come to hand.

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While Dowdall and Griffin were gloomily comparing notes and giving vent to their private belief that they would have liked James McCormack to stay dead and forgotten—and wondering if DI Landman due back from Long Service Leave would have anything helpful to offer—Jay Barron had put his statement that it was the money which was always his brief into practice. He had found the Don Smith who had been employed at The Black Rock Hotel. Or at least found his trail. He had got access to his tax office details. Donald Smith had certainly existed, born in 1942, educated in Townsville, and employed in various hotels. A life-long bachelor with a reputation as a bit of a grump but good at his work. But then he disappeared from tax records. Barron looked for a death, a will, probate, but Smith simply disappeared. So what happened to his effects and had he ever been listed as missing?

Jay then widened his search and found that there was no record of someone called Alan Dawkins. Obviously Dawkins had another name although he couldn't make a guess at

it. Then he looked at The Black Rock Hotel and found it had been bought by someone called Richard Ferguson two years before it was closed but the licensee was listed as Garth Madden.

"So," Barron said aloud, "you are not an innocent bystander, Mr Madden."

And, interestingly, the old hotel had been listed for demolishing three weeks before McCormack sold his property, ostensibly to Nebo, and a plan for the redevelopment of the site had already been accepted by the Council. All of the relevant documents had been signed by Garth Madden.

Then he thought he needed to get an affidavit from Mrs McCormack to tie off some loose ends. He brought Carlton Payne up to date with everything who considered it all then said, "It seems to fit the pattern. Pay someone well then take the money back. But does this timeline fit with anything at Prickly Creek?"

"I think it does. But are you suggesting that Don Smith is the body they found? And McCormack was carted off somewhere in Willy Jackson's plane?"

"Would the dates we have fit?"

"I think they could. We need a last sighting for Don Smith. But is it possible McCormack was on the plane when it landed at Prickly Creek?"

"I was thinking more of that property out west but I need to know when the family acquired it."

"Well, I'll get Townsville on to Don Smith. With luck they can find his dentist. Perhaps they looked for someone with an upper plate and his own teeth down below and Smith fitted the bill," Jay said wryly. "And Smith knowing he was about to be made redundant said he didn't mind to sign some documents in return for twenty thousand. And if McCormack ever got twitchy, as he maybe did though we don't know just why, he would not be able to find Don Smith because he was dead and Dawkins was really Simon Massey?"

"Something along those lines. It would seem to fit with the way the family does business."

"Milward Dutton may have known who he was dealing with but I doubt if McCormack understood that it wasn't wise to query anything and certainly not to want to be paid what he was owed. But we still come back to the question—do they all act in much the same way or is there a controlling figure?"

"We got nothing when we raided several houses, only Cradock Downs, and I am beginning to believe that there isn't a godfather figure anywhere, that they were all brought up to believe in the same way of working and those seven brothers just gaily swop and swop and maybe they share notes and maybe they don't and they all enjoy the thought that they're running rings around most of the authority figures in the world."

"So we really need to pick them off one by one?"

"I think so. It sounds more difficult but it might be easier in the long run. Because the younger generations may be afraid of some of their elders but they don't necessarily feel any loyalty to what you might call The Family."

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Dennis when Fiona dropped him back at the station had gradually clarified in his mind that vague unease Reuben Godfrey had sparked. Godfrey reminded him a little of former high school principal Derek Coleman. Less confident, less sophisticated maybe, but that underlying sense of contempt for the people around him; a sense of 'I know things you don't know' and they were things other people would likely be disconcerted by. He wasn't sure if his intuitions were correct but it should be possible to find out. He was sorry, briefly, that Godfrey wasn't on his patch. It would make checking much easier.

On the other hand he had a clever young constable who might have ideas … He checked with Waters to see if anything had happened while he was away in Toowoomba. Then he said, "Go and get yourself some lunch and I'll tell you what happened."

Waters listened carefully to his boss's recital. At the end he said, "So they accepted you hadn't encouraged her to do anything?"

"Hard to say what they were thinking. They seem to think she is some sort of nut case and not worth worrying about. And she did act pretty strangely, said she'd never met me, so I am not sure what to think about her state of mind. Maybe she was always flaky, maybe it was her fall, maybe she was enjoying playing head games with them. I told 'em to go back over everything and do a proper investigation."

Ben Waters wondered how they had liked having Dennis tell them to do a proper job. Probably not a lot.

"The thing is—I might be jumping to conclusions but I'd like to see what that Godfrey bloke does on his computer of a night. So how could we get into it for a squizz?"

"What would you be looking for?"

"I might be off with the birds but I wondered if he was looking for stuff that maybe a school teacher should be giving a wide berth."

"I could see if he's got a Facebook page." And as he said that, Waters went to their computer and put in the name … "Yep, he has. But we would have to sign up to be one of his … friends."

"Mmmm … and I wouldn't even if he'd never heard of me. So is there another way to see what he's up to?"

"I think it would be better if I looked from my own computer so he doesn't pick up on anything."

"Okay. But don't do anything to get sucked in."

"So why are you suspicious of his—his on-line activities?"

Dennis didn't think his suspicions sounded compelling but equally they refused to go away. "I don't know much about his private life but there was something a bit … maybe sleazy is a bit strong … but I just wonder if she ever threatened to report him for something." As he said that he wondered if Rhonda Prendergast's daughter would be willing to give him some insights into both teachers. It would be worth asking.

And Mrs Prendergast when he asked her for her daughter's phone number said, "Is this about the lady Louise urged to come and see you?"

"It is. Did Louise ever say anything to you about her?"

"Well, I suppose she did but nothing which really struck me."

"Did she see her as a friend?"

"I'm not sure. She has friends she visits and goes to do things with. But I don't think Jackie was one of them. I think just someone she works with … and I think she felt sorry for her."

"And did she ever mention someone called Reuben Godfrey?"

Mrs Prendergast mulled this over and finally said, "He may have been the teacher she said tried to invite her out one time. I think she said he'd tried with all the female teachers and was annoyed that no one had said yes but I am only guessing."

"Do you know why your daughter turned him down?"

"I don't really. She has someone new in her life so I assume she just wasn't interested. Anyway I am sure she wouldn't mind telling you more. But why would you be interested?"

"Jackie Truscott said she believed he had pushed her down the stairs and she is supposed to have gone out and vandalised his car and house, possibly in retaliation. I just wondered if there was something going on behind the scenes that would be useful to know about."

He got on to Louise in the late evening and she said, yes, she'd heard about Reuben's house being shot at. "I guess I should have some sympathy but none of us like him."

"D'you know if he invited Jacke to go out with him?"

"Oh yes, a couple of times."

"She told you or you heard him?"

"My friend Kate told me. I think she'd heard him asking."

"He told police he'd never invited Jackie out. He said he hated her."

"Maybe he does … now. She's a bit … it's hard to describe but she's a bit strange, like, you never quite know where you're at with her. But I feel a bit sorry for her. That's why I suggested she talk with you."

"Why d'you feel sorry for her?"

"She told me once that she was abused as a child. I don't know the details but I think she had pretty awful parents. Did you want me to ask her anything?"

Dennis considered this and finally said, "No. Not unless she brings something up."

Ben Waters linked up to Godfrey's Facebook page, giving as his reasons that he often enjoyed contacting people to see if they had anything to share which would interest him. He didn't think there was anything on the site which could be called into question but he was intelligent enough to read the nuances which contained the faint suggestion that there might be things Godfrey knew but which he didn't share with all and sundry.

Waters wasn't sure whether he was right in thinking that. He could try to buddy up to Godfrey but he wasn't sure that that would be wise even if it led on to some insights. He didn't want to grow close to Godfrey but he knew there were things, in the police, that had to be done. He just didn't think this was one of them.

He had never shared his problems in Winville with Dennis. He could remember Senior Sergeant Merrill telling him with a smirk in the Men's that he was an atheist and he knew there was no God so why was Waters so gullible. He wanted to wipe that smirk off Merrill's face, even if he was only enjoying taking the mickey, but all he could think of to say was 'You'll find out I'm right when you die'. Merrill had laughed and said 'Sez you'. Ever since he had wondered how he might better have responded. But there was the great relief in being away from Merrill. Even in being away from Winville. He liked Jake Moss but didn't see him as a strong-minded man with real convictions. He liked Brent Kelly and Jenny Forman, but he found Petra Moore rather off-putting. Though he did once see her sitting by herself looking pretty miserable. Even so, he hadn't felt able to go up to her and ask if there was anything wrong.

But being in Buckton was so much better. Dennis might not talk about his beliefs but it was impossible to doubt his dedication. And Waters found that sense of dedication exhilarating. He had initially thought that it would be a fundamental part of police culture and it was disconcerting to find that to so many it was just a job.

He had enough insights into his own psyche to understand that it was not only the undertone of sex in the Reuben Godfrey situation but an underlying sense of contempt for others and more particularly for women that made him uneasy. He wasn't sure if he had read it all correctly and he wasn't sure where to go next.

While he was pondering, John Applegarth came into the station. John was the sergeant over at Garramindi and came to Buckton now and then to see his parents and some old friends. He said "Hi, Ben, is Dennis around?"

"He won't be back for an hour or so. Did you want to ring him or come back later?"

"I probably will. So how's things going here?"

Waters hesitated then said, "Do you know anything about Facebook browsing?"

"A bit. Why?"

He hadn't been sworn to secrecy and he felt sure he could trust John's discretion so he explained the situation as briefly as he could. He knew Dennis had a high opinion of Applegarth. John listened carefully before saying, "So you think there might be a public persona and a private one?"

"It's possible, isn't it?"

"But Dennis is worried that you might get compromised if you get more pally?"

"It isn't easy to talk about sex with Dennis—"

"No." John gave that a sympathetic grin. "I think it was the way he was brought up. I think he had a very strict religious mother. But I don't really know. Still, the thing is—what to do next. And I think it needs to be passed to the specialists to check this guy out. If he's clean as a whistle that's fine but they can check his on-line activities—"

"So how would we do that?"

In the end, John sat down with Ben and nutted out a letter for Dennis to check and sign later. They were both quite proud of the end result. It sounded businesslike and while not accusing Reuben Godfrey of anything it did stress that he worked in a responsible position with young people.

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John Applegarth actually wanted to catch up with Dennis to bring him up to date with the strange case of the woman and children who had apparently been overcome by fumes while they were camping in the bush.

"They are all okay again but they tested all those rocks that ringed the campfire and found a high arsenic content. So it looks like your suspicions were right. That aunt is now convinced that that was what killed her dad but the police on the case said it wouldn't be any point in digging up the old man's coffin and checking his skeleton because it was too long ago and no one knew if fumes would be … well, findable … because all known arsenic deaths had been by ingestion." Dennis nodded. "But then someone from the university got interested and said it would be useful to test anyway in the hope of advancing knowledge of pathology or something."

Again Dennis nodded. "Fair enough."

"But then some of the family said the whole thing was ridiculous, that the old guy simply hadn't looked after himself, and they certainly weren't going to give their permission or pay to find out anything. So now they're arguing over whether the whole family needs to give their permission or whether it only needs to be the aunt."

"But why would the family even be asked for permission if the death is seen as possible misadventure?"

"The trouble was—the original death wasn't checked, no post mortem, no inquest, no investigation, just some old guy karking it out in the bush. Not a case."

"Even so. It can become a police investigation retrospectively."

"I don't think they want to get that serious."

"Mmmm … but shouldn't the public be warned that if anyone goes camping to be careful?"

John Applegarth agreed. He could tell Dennis that it wasn't on his patch but of course Dennis would say 'doesn't matter' or 'if they don't want to do anything you can' or 'then tell them to get their finger out'. And he could see that people camping could do the same thing as that family had done: ring their campfire with rocks without giving the type of rocks they used a second thought. After all, most families going camping would never have heard of arsenopyrite and would not recognise it if they found it. They did need to be warned …

Case No. 4: Whatever Tool Comes to Hand

John Dowdall was not a cheerful optimistic person at the best of times. He was now suffering from deep melancholia. Because the mess that was the McCormack case would not

reflect badly on George Seaman—because Seaman had the skill to make sure he was never targeted—but rather on himself. And he didn't know how best to deal with the likely fallout.

But there was no way to push James McCormack back under the carpet where he had reposed peacefully for well over a decade. The team had to go on and try to resolve … something. He had received a long e-mail from Jay Barron and he could see there were avenues to be followed up.

He had given considerable thought to the possible lines of investigation and now he parceled out the jobs. To DC Pasquale he gave the job of checking for all reports on The Black Rock Hotel as well as contacting the Council about the application to demolish and re-build. To DC Joynton he gave the job of searching for any family, relations or friends of Donald Smith. He sent DC Boomberi round to the hospital to get copies of McCormack's medical records. They had a full current caseload but he felt this should take priority until they could lay it to rest again, preferably with some answers.

To Paul Griffin he said gloomily, "We're probably digging a big hole for ourselves and at the end of it—what hope of actually getting a result?"

"I was going over it last night and one thing which struck me was—it looks like they would've wanted McCormack found, or someone found as McCormack."

"Depends. It was probably just luck the body was found then. Maybe it would've washed down the gully at the first big downpour."

"But if he wasn't found then Mrs McCormack would not have been able to sell the house as it was in his name. He would be a missing person and she would have to wait—or try to get special permission to sell."

"Maybe."

"And they wouldn't want her hanging round year after year—or asking about the money they were owed. So I wondered about the man who said he'd found him, was he really just a passer-by with a restless dog. We don't know because there's no report of an interview in the file, not even his name or address. So I checked on the reports that were in the papers then. That's why I was a bit late in."

"And?"

"The odd thing is that he is never named, he's never anything but a 'passing motorist', 'a man who contacted police'. He may not have wanted to be named but it is a bit odd that there's absolutely nothing about him, not his vehicle, no hint as to his age or occupation, and there's no mention of a dog. Yet we were always told it was a man with a dog. Where did that come from?"

"George Seaman?"

Griffin nodded. "But he must've had something to base it on? Surely?"

Dowdall grimaced, hesitated, then reached for the phone. A minute later he said with unexpected grimness, "Is that you, Mrs Seaman? Is George at home?"

Then he said, "Gone to play golf, has he?" The temptation to bowl up to the golf club and demand to see Seaman came and went. "Does he take a mobile phone with him?"

She said he didn't have one.

"Well, ask him to come in as soon as you see him." She said she would. He thought of saying 'I won't hold my breath' but he just thanked her and said to Griffin, "playing golf".

"Nice for him. Well, we might be able to work around him. And for sure he will blame us for all the missing material. He seems to be good at it." He hesitated then went on, "I'd like to go public and try to get some help from the public but I s'pose we need something more definite?"

"Are we sure there was nothing kept from McCormack when he was in hospital? Blood? Cancer cells? Anything kept at the morgue?"

"I'll check." If only it had happened a few years later DNA would have been available. Still, he with Kenney's help finally came up with something which could help. Rob Kenney said, "The body was x-rayed when he came in because we had been told he'd been hit by a car. But there was no sign of recent trauma. I hunted in our records to see if the x-rays had been kept and I finally tracked them down. His teeth had not specifically been x-rayed but his head and neck had been checked so his teeth are certainly clearly visible. I was surprised that the x-rays hadn't been destroyed after he was identified and cremated."

"Can I get copies?"

And when he sat down with Kenney to look at the ghostly pictures of that long dead body he thought they might just have their breakthrough.

He finally laid everything they had collected out for a comparison. The x-rays, copies of the hospital's medical records, the dentist Boomberi had tracked down and got Donald Smith's records, and a relative for Donald Smith who said he believed his uncle had died at least twelve years ago.

Before they went on to the medical evidence Dowdall handed it over to Boomberi for more on the nephew. The young man didn't have a great deal of confidence in himself and said nervously, "He lives in Warwick. I rang him and he says he never had anything to do with his uncle. His mother had told him … um, well, that his uncle was a smelly old sod. I said how old was the uncle and he said he must've been sixty-something. And I asked him how he knew his uncle had died and he said he thought someone had sent his mum a death notice. I asked if his mum was still alive and he said she had remarried and gone to America after his dad died. So, um, I said did he know where his uncle had died and he said he didn't. So Ned and me tried to find something in the papers here." Ned was DC Joynton.

"Any luck?" Dowdall rarely believed in luck.

Joynton grinned and said, "Sort of. There was a death notice in the Mareeba *Express* to say a Donald Smith had died while visiting friends 'near Mareeba' and a funeral notice would follow. But we couldn't find a funeral notice. So we contacted police in Mareeba to find out about the death and they said they had no record of a death there and were we sure of our facts. We faxed the death notice and haven't heard back."

"Well, we need a file on Donald Smith and we need a back-up copy of everything. So now the other evidence."

"We haven't found any bits of either at the hospital or the morgue but we have the x-rays and Donald Smith went to Andrew Casey to get his dentures made so we have both the moulds and the x-rays he still had and we have asked him to come in and cross-check for us. But—it's looking pretty good, isn't it?" Joynton had a breezy confidence Boomberi lacked. Casey had said he didn't realise Smith was dead; he had just thought of him as a normal man who avoided dentists like the plague unless the pain was unbearable.

They all looked at the morgue's picture side-by-side with the copies the dentist had provided. It might be looking 'pretty good', Dowdall thought, but everything was pushing them to the conclusion that a gigantic cock-up had been made when the body had so casually been written off as James McCormack. The knowledge that he had bright young DCs warred with the knowledge that some very bad publicity was waiting for him.

"Good work. So get back on to Mareeba about the death. If they haven't got anything then I think we're looking at a planted notice. It sounds like someone wanted to lead the trail away from Townsville."

"I did get something else, sir," Boomberi said carefully. He opened his notebook. "I did find a man who remembered Smith. He said he drank regularly at The Black Rock and he would always have a yarn with Smith. He said they went to the races a couple of times. He said Smith lived at the hotel so he was cheesed off that he was going to lose both his job and his … well, his home. This guy said he never saw Smith after the hotel closed and he

wondered why he'd gone without ever getting in touch again and, um, well, he asked around a bit but no one knew and then someone told him Don had died. He couldn't remember who had told him but he thought it might've been the man who had the hotel, he couldn't remember his name, and when I said 'Ferguson' he said, yeah, that might be it."

"So odds on we've got Smith in that culvert and McCormack who knows where." Griffin had the unworthy thought that they could perhaps leave McCormack in the culvert and say Donald Smith was missing. The impulse passed. "We can try for McCormack's dentist, see if he's still in business. But we are looking at a very well organised plan, don't you think? Someone had a lot to gain by getting rid of both McCormack and Smith and making sure the investigation into the culvert death went nowhere."

"Well, we know they got out of paying McCormack the half million they still owed but what about Smith? We need his bank account details. And it's possible he was promised money but died before he received anything."

Both Joynton and Boomberi said they would get on to it. Dowdall turned to DC Pasquale, "Anything your end?"

"It all looks above board. Garth Madden did all the submissions to Council. He claimed the hotel was old and repairs were constant so they had finally decided it would be better to demolish and build and he put in an application to build a block of ten flats on the site. The Council approved the plan. I checked with the Licensing Board and they gave me the date when Madden applied to become licensee. And I found Richard Ferguson bought the hotel from the Jessup family. They said he went over it with a fine tooth comb and found so many things wrong with it they ended up practically giving it away. He told them he would need to do a major upgrade to make it worthwhile but then they heard it was going to be demolished. They put in a complaint to council to say that the hotel was part of the city's heritage and should not be demolished. But the council … they say the council ignored them. They say they approached Ferguson and offered to buy it back for what Ferguson had paid but he knocked them back. And they said there was one odd thing. They had met with Ferguson several times before he bought it but when they went to offer to buy it back they said the man calling himself Richard Ferguson seemed different. I said in what way different and they said he seemed younger and they said the original Ferguson had a scar on his ear but this guy didn't. They thought it was all a bit odd but in the end they let it go."

"Okay, so we need formal interviews with everyone and I mean everyone. All this is suggestive but we need more than that."

"Did they happen to get any photos of either Ferguson?"

"I'll check."

Griffin said slowly, "The men who came down on that plane on the Darling Downs were calling themselves Richard and Simon Ferguson. Can we get details? Barron said Winville had fingerprints."

"So we need to open files on them. But I am going to go and see Mr Madden and see what he has to say about them. You'd best come with me, Enrico, and if by any chance Seaman comes in ask him to wait till we get back." And then he changed his mind; not because Madden was off-limits but because he couldn't decide how to tackle the lawyer. "No, tomorrow maybe."

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DC Brent Kelly in Winville had got himself a Bulgarian phrasebook in the hope that he and possibly Mr Kreisky could nut out letters to useful people in Bulgaria. But as he said to Jenny Forman, "I didn't actually realise they use a different alphabet. I mean I thought that was only for … special occasions." She gave that a grin. But it was a problem. They would need to learn the Cyrillic alphabet before they sent off any letters. Or ask Mr Kreisky how to turn … she wondered if there were special Cyrillic typewriters or could they get a computer

program … and then she said, “Have we missed something? We weren’t looking for these kind of letters. Maybe we overlooked something in that house because we just thought they were doodles or something?”

When they suggested doing another search to Petra she said, “Go for it.” She had had those two aunts back in the station asking when they could move in and get the place ready to sell. She had told them firmly that the place couldn’t be sold while Damien Bankes’ status was that of a missing person. “He is still the owner under the terms of both his parents’ wills. Until we can be sure he is dead the farm cannot be sold.”

“That isn’t what we’ve been told. And all the time it sits there neglected it will go down in value.” Mrs Redpath sounded sharp.

Moore agreed with that. “You can apply to the court to be allowed to live there and look after it or possibly to rent it out but you won’t be able to sell it.”

“But that’s not good enough.” The women looked annoyed. “We are too old to farm that sort of acreage. And how can we rent it or lease it if we don’t own it.”

“As I say, you can apply to the court.” But she could see that that might turn into a slow and expensive process. In a way she would prefer to have them on the property. Left sitting empty it might well encourage thieves or vandals and would make more work for police. “You could ask someone like Graham Kelso for advice.” As they didn’t know the local magistrate they didn’t look impressed. And again she had the feeling that they in late middle age had suddenly scented a large windfall and didn’t want anyone to whisk it away, using the law as it applied to missing persons to get in the way.

“There is another thing,” Moore went on slowly. “Damien was planning to marry. Even if he didn’t have a will himself a court might see his fiancée as having some claim on his estate.”

“Nonsense. We’ve never heard of a fiancée and Elaine would have told us.”

“Well, we have a photograph of Damien with her and on the back he has written ‘my fiancee’. So I think a court would see that the intention to marry was there.”

Again Mrs Redpath said briskly, “That is all nonsense. We know perfectly well that he was single and planning to come back here. So that woman can say anything she likes and it won’t change the law.”

Petra said she was busy. She was getting rather tired of two women wanting something they had never done anything to deserve. They might have loved and wanted the best for their sister but police had found nothing in that house to suggest a close relationship.

Brent Kelly said he thought they should take a dog when they went. He felt a bit nervous asking Petra to lend hers so he had asked Glen Archer if he would like to come with them on the weekend and bring his beagle. And as he and Glen drove up the long lane to the deserted farmhouse he felt again a sense of being lost in this land that rolled away to the flat horizons. Maybe if he lived in Winville long enough he would come to terms with this sense of space and loneliness. But it wasn’t guaranteed. He unlocked the house but it soon became clear that someone had been in. They found a window in the kitchen had been forced. Though they walked around carefully they couldn’t decide whether anything was missing. Nothing obvious anyway. At last he said, “I think we’d best get on. Would you and Sam like to go round outside and I’ll go through the cupboards and drawers again.”

Glen nodded and took Sam out to run around the sheds. Brent went once again through everything, this time taking drawers right out and moving several lo-boys and chests-of-drawers out from the walls.

Archer went through the garage without seeing anything unusual. He took the lead off Sam and let him run free while he went over to the machinery shed. But the dog seemed more interested in the chook house on the far side of the back yard. He squeezed in the half open gate and went through the wired-in space to the small hut up on low stumps. Archer went to

call him back then wondered if there was any significance in the dog's curiosity. Quite likely a fox or stray dog had been in, drawn by the smell of the hens, but disappointed at finding nothing actually edible. He looked around the small space with three boxes for the hens to lay in and roosts along the back of the hut.

There might be some reason for the dog's sniffing round the rough plank floor with its scattering of straw and manure but he couldn't see anything. He went out again and got down and tried to peer under the hut. There was nothing to see in the tangle of nettles and other weeds. He went round, getting down and trying to see whether anything had ever been pushed underneath. Sam came out and followed him around, pushing in beside him but reluctant to tackle the thicket of nettles. He suddenly looked up at Glen then back to the nettles. Glen reluctantly decided he had to investigate further. He went away and found a shovel and tried to bash down the weeds in that narrow space.

And there it was, what looked like a wrecked backpack. He gingerly hooked it out and lifted it with the shovel. He pulled the gate wide open and walked back towards the house, carrying the sad item by the shovel handle through the straps. He called out to Brent who left his frustrating search and came out.

For a moment Brent stared. Then he said "Wow!"

Glen laid it down carefully on the front step and they gazed at it. Then Brent turned it over and they could see the dirty patch sewn on the back. It said 'Made in England'.

For a moment Brent was aware of a swift pang of disappointment then common sense told him that men traveling as Adam and Scott Smith would not be carrying backpacks to say 'Made in Bulgaria'. He said, "I'll bag it up and we'll see what Reid can find."

Glen gave Sam's ears a tickle and Brent said, "If we ever get to the end of all this I think it'll be due to the dogs, not us … "

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Nobody was really surprised when there was no sign of George Seaman. It might be that his wife hadn't passed the message on or that he had been held up for some reason but Dowdall was certain that Seaman wasn't going to put himself out to assist them. He found a secret anger boiling up inside him. They wouldn't be in this mess now if George had done his job properly. But each time he felt that, an uneasy sense that it was more than laziness or incompetence got in the way. George Seaman was a crook.

And when he got to that point he felt the bile rise and his chest tighten.

'Bastard.' And his frustration was heightened by this sense of muddling round without the forensics they needed. He thought of driving out to Seaman's house and telling him to get in the car. But he had the secret intuition that Seaman would enjoy seeing him behaving in such a desperate way.

So they would need to keep plugging away, a bit here, a bit there. Then he thought 'is there any way to go round all this?' What about the Richard Ferguson who had supposedly ended up on the Darling Downs? Could anyone give him an insight? He took out the information which Jay Barron had given them about that plane which had come down at a place called Prickly Creek with apparently Richard and Simon Ferguson on board along with a box of yellowcake samples, alleged samples. He read through the précis, timeline, and points, then looked at the people who had been involved in the case. Then he took a copy of the contacts and went home. He could ring from work, which would certainly be cheaper, but he had the uncomfortable feeling that he couldn't be absolutely certain George Seaman didn't have a 'friend', someone who met him socially or otherwise, and passed things on. He didn't like the thought but he knew Seaman with his cheerful genial manner probably did get things passed on, shared over a beer, spoken of at the golf club. And ringing from home meant that if he got nowhere …

He told his wife he was going to try a long shot. His teenage son took no interest in his father's work and went away to his room to listen to music and play computer games. His lack of interest possibly had something to do with his father's pessimistic view of his workload. "What kind of long shot?" Chris Dowdall was used to her husband looking on the gloomy side of things. She wasn't a terribly optimistic person herself. Or perhaps they had both grown more pessimistic over the years. So she said nothing about a long shot always being worthwhile.

He went into his den after dinner and rang Buckton. He might be wrong in thinking that Buckton would be more willing to help than Winville. He had picked up on Jay Barron's apparent belief that Dennis Walsh would go out of his way to help. He got a young man to say that Dennis had gone home. "Would you like me to connect you to his home number?"

"I would. Thank you."

And a minute later he got a deep resonant voice saying hello. He introduced himself and explained that he was interested in a man calling himself Richard Ferguson and could Walsh give him any insights into the man.

"Well, first off, they don't only change surnames, they seem to swop first names as well. Two men calling themselves Simon and Richard Ferguson took over a farm at Prickly Creek. We have linked them to the deaths of Harold William Jackson and Ruby Jackson. But we think Richard Ferguson is dead. A man calling himself Frederick Smith was in a car accident and died near Winville. A girl called Tanya Harris said he was her father. She's got a brother James Harris in Brisbane and a Jonathon Harris in Charters Towers."

"Did you think Frederick Smith was a Ferguson?"

"It looks like it. I saw the two men when they were masquerading as old farmers. But a woman called Pearl Braidwood said Richard Ferguson had a scar on his ear lobe and the man at Winville also did. We can't be absolutely sure. I wouldn't trust any of the Plowman family."

"That's interesting. A man calling himself Richard Ferguson owned a hotel here. We have a witness who says he had a scar on his ear. But it looks like the man who was identified as James McCormack was actually Donald Smith who worked at the hotel Ferguson owned."

"So you're talking about the man you found in a culvert?"

"Yep. And the case is an absolute bummer."

"Anything to do with the Plowmans is a mess. It's the way they work. But there's something you might like to look into. Jackson had a plane and he used to go up to a property north-east of Longreach. It was leased by Simon and Richard Bartell who are almost certainly Plowmans. And it looks like they gave Jackson some charter work. If the times add up that might be the place to look for McCormack's body."

"And how big is this property?" Dowdall had spent his working life in cities.

"A few square kilometres." Dennis didn't know but it would be sizable.

"Are you suggesting we search the property?"

"No." Dennis had given some thought to that property and what might be there. The chance of a body buried there being found was small but the thought had come to him that the house and sheds and whatever was on the property in the way of storage could be an ideal place for the Plowmans to keep some items they preferred to keep hidden. "But the house and sheds might well be worth checking. When two Plowman properties were searched on the Tableland nothing was found. But there is a chance that they do have a depository somewhere."

"And how d'you think anyone could get in to have a good look around? How could we, well, not us, but Longreach maybe, justify a search warrant?"

"The cases of Willy Jackson and Ruby Jackson are still open. If you can link your case to the Willy Jackson case—the place only has a manager on it—and there's been talk of them searching and digging for uranium there—but I think you need to work with Carlton Payne and Jay Barron. They've been looking into when the Bartells moved on to the property. It was said to be a Nebo property but that doesn't mean it actually is."

"No. It begins to seem like smoke and mirrors. And we're going to look like a mob of idiots when we go public with a wrong identification."

"Happens. Who was in charge?"

"George Seaman."

"And he took money to lose evidence?"

"I don't know."

"It happened in Winville with a low life called Doug Towner. It looks like he got paid from that big payroll robbery in Mt Isa years ago. They might've sent a bit of it George Seaman's way."

"Maybe. But how did you prove he was corrupt?"

"Doug Towner killed a woman and hid her body in a culvert. That was the start of it but it took years to finally get the bastard into court."

"In a culvert? Who found the body?"

"A passing motorist. Saw birds, crows, and went down to investigate."

Dowdall thanked him. His thoughts had taken a slight detour. Why had there been no talk of crows, carrion birds, something which might suggest something dead? And a culvert. Just as he was about to ring off he suddenly said, "How long d'you think that body had been in the culvert?"

"About two weeks. But we think the body had been stuffed right in on a piece of canvas or something and then pulled partly out when he wanted the body found."

"I see. That might make sense here too. Thanks for that."

Yes. Why had no one seen birds circling—or had they seen and not thought anything of it? Just some wildlife hit on the road?

Except … it wasn't on the road … but people still would not necessarily think of a corpse down there …

In the morning he rang Rob Kenney and said, "Did you think the amount of animal damage done to that body from the culvert suggested a body which had been exposed for two weeks?"

"No. But the body was half inside."

"The amount of damage done to the legs—were they pretty well pecked to bits?"

"No. No, I wouldn't say that. He was wearing jeans and socks and shoes."

"So there wasn't any bird damage?"

"Not a lot. No, it was natural decay predominantly. There was some insect damage but I don't remember noticing much bird damage, just a bit around his ankles."

"Don't you think that was a bit odd?"

"Depends. If he was in the position in which he was found, yeah, it was odd. But there was no guarantee he had been in the culvert from the minute he was killed."

"And—d'you think that two weeks dead was correct?"

"Very hard to be sure. Once you go beyond the first few days it becomes rubbery. But in this case we knew the day when James McCormack left the house where he was staying. So we knew it could not be more than those two weeks in which he'd been missing."

"And now that we know that that identification is in doubt—would you still say two weeks?"

"With reservations. If the body had spent most of the time inside the culvert out of the sun it might be a little more."

But they didn't have a definitive last sighting for Donald Smith.

*

Justin Castley had been a little nervous about taking Harry Kuhl up on his invitation to 'come any time' but he had gradually realised that Harry was always happy to see him. And he was privately convinced that 'his' horse Kenny was happy to see him. He spent hours grooming him, rasping his feet, training his mane to fall neatly on the off-side, getting him used to his new bridle and the old stock saddle Harry had unearthed in one of his sheds.

He now had Kenny lunging nicely and he had begun tying a chaff bag stuffed with old rags on to the saddle to jounce around and get the horse used to carrying a weight without trying to buck it off. He wasn't sure whether he was optimistic in believing that the horse didn't mind the weight. But what should they do next?

Harry's pet fox had at first looked at him suspiciously but he had now accepted Justin as part of the menagerie and sometimes came up to his chair and waited hopefully for a titbit. "Poor old lad," Harry had said, "but I thought it best to get the op for him, didn't want him wandering, looking for a vixen, for sure some idiot would shoot him."

Justin agreed with this. Farmers didn't want foxes around. But now he only had to say "Benny" and the little fox would come running.

But this happy sense of being at home here didn't tell him what he should do about Kenny. Harry had a simple suggestion. "Either you get a top rider in to try him out or you jump up and hang on and I'll lead him round the yard."

It sounded simple but Justin though he still went and had an occasional riding lesson from Elise Walsh wondered if he was really capable of riding anything but a quiet children's pony. Yet all the time he had spent with his horse had lulled him into believing that whatever Kenny might do to someone else he wouldn't do to him. He would've wavered between doubt and confidence for months if Elise hadn't asked him if he was riding Kenny yet.

"No-o-o, not yet, I'm not sure … we're not sure if he still likes to buck."

"I could come and ride him for you, if you like. Or see what happens."

Justin thought Dennis Walsh might have something to say about this. Elise was a good rider but if his horse bucked her off he would feel mean that he hadn't been the one to take the risk. "No-o-o, I think it'll have to be me, he's my horse, and if I fall off … y'know, it'll be … "

"Okay, but we can all come and help if you like."

Did she mean just herself and Robbie or the whole family? And did he want to fall off with a whole audience to watch? And yet … there *was* something about Sergeant Walsh which might help. When he put it to Harry the old man said, "Oh, for sure. Animals always know who's boss when Dinny Walsh's around."

"D'you think—well, should I ask Ellie to ask him?"

"You can ask him yourself. See if he can come out next time you're coming."

"Justin tells me I'm an idiot trying to turn Kenny into a riding horse."

"Well, people told me I was mad trying to turn a fox into a pet. Depends what's important to you."

Justin supposed this was an answer but it didn't make it any easier to go into the station and see if Sergeant Walsh would like to come out to Harry's farm one day.

"This fierce horse of yours?" Dennis said with a slight grin. "Well, seeing I brought the horse in I s'pose I'd better see how he's going. But even if he goes like a lamb for you, you'll always have to take care seeing we don't know what they did to him to spark him off."

This was hardly the way to boost Justin's confidence but he could see there was truth in it. Had 'they' simply encouraged his natural buckjumping tendencies or had they found a way to set him off?

"Don't worry. As your riding gets better you'll manage better anyway." Just so long as the horse didn't make a habit of throwing himself over backwards.

Justin took this away as a crumb of comfort. And the whole Walsh family turned up on Sunday afternoon along with George Hickman and his grandson. Young Mike Hickman was a good rider and had offered to mount the horse if Justin would like him to try but Castley had said, though not very firmly, that he thought he should be the one to take the risks. George had brought along his camera in the hope of getting a 'happy ending' story for the *Buckton Bugle*.

Dennis hooked a lead on to the noseband and said to Justin, "Right, up you go."

Justin gave his horse a nervous pat then struggled into the saddle. For a moment the horse seemed surprised, then accepting, then he gave a little jiggle as though wondering what to do next. Justin clumsily gathered up the reins. Dennis said calmly, "Walk on, lad," and began leading the animal quietly round the yard. After four circuits, he said to Justin, "Just touch him with your heels and we'll see whether he'll trot or buck."

Justin said 'trot' nervously and was surprised and pleased when the horse did as he was asked. After two rounds, Dennis said, "Okay, round you go by yourself, then turn and go the other way."

By the time Justin dismounted half an hour later and gave his horse a slice of apple everyone had begun to breathe more easily. There might still be rocky roads ahead but the horse seemed to have accepted Justin.

"Don't get cocky yet," Dennis said as Justin unsaddled. "Stay in the yard for the next couple of weeks."

Justin wasn't in the habit of getting cocky but he had begun to feel the first stirrings of confidence in his ability to manage. The secret impulse to say something to his boss came and went. Stirling had done nothing but tell him he was mad to try and do anything with that 'useless horse'. But then he accepted that what Justin thought no longer mattered. Leila Burkett would be back next week and Stirling would be gone from Buckton.

*

Both Donald Smith's dentist and Dr Coswell had agreed that Smith's dental records and the morgue's x-rays tallied very nicely. Coswell said with unexpected sympathy, "So we're looking at Donald Smith as the man in the culvert—not James McCormack?"

Dowdall agreed gloomily. "So we're back to Square One and we have no idea what happened to McCormack. Now we don't even know if he's dead or not."

"I think you can assume he is. The man was not in good health when I saw him all those years ago, quite apart from his skin cancers. And I think you can assume he was murdered rather than just chose to disappear. He gave every sign of caring about his wife and daughter. He said they were planning to go to London for a visit as soon as he was well enough."

"Well, thanks for that. But if only we hadn't made that mistake all those years ago … we wouldn't be scrambling now."

"So why were you so sure it was James McCormack? Apart from the fact he seemed to have gone missing?"

"It was George Seaman who was in charge then. He was very confident about the identification."

"George Seaman, eh?" Coswell sounded thoughtful. "I've seen him playing golf sometimes, with not a care in the world I would've thought." He gave Dowdall a considering look. "Not my business, I suppose, but when an ordinary copper suddenly moves into a mansion I find it a bit … surprising."

"He says he's made a lot of money on the Stock Exchange."

"Possible. But not a good idea to flaunt it if you don't want the ATO asking questions. Still he might've had a rich relative or something."

After Coswell had gone Dowdall and Griffin looked at each other and Griffin said, "Was he giving us a hint?"

"Don't know. But I assume they're checking in Brisbane. And seeing that George doesn't seem to want to come to us I think we'd better go to him. Take those pictures and give him a fright." Though they both knew it would take more than some pictures to puncture Seaman's sangfroid.

"And there's Madden. When do we put him on the mat?" Dowdall had put off tackling Madden, not least because he wasn't sure how, but he knew it had to be done.

"I'd like to know more about The Black Rock first."

George Seaman and his wife were having lunch by the pool when Dowdall and Griffin walked in. "The big guns," Seaman said cheerfully as he waved them to chairs. Mrs Seaman got up and brought two glasses and poured them what seemed to be a tropical punch.

"So what brings you round?" Seaman pushed away his plate and leant back.

"We asked you to come by. Seems you were too busy." Griffin looked over at Dowdall; he rarely spoke with that kind of determined grimness.

"Couldn't see the urgency, to tell the truth."

"I'm glad you're interested in telling the truth." Dowdall handed over two pictures. "This one is the body in the morgue. This one is Donald Smith's dental records. Two experts have told us they are of the same person."

"I didn't know the morgue had x-rays." Seaman sounded conversational.

"You told them the man had been hit by a vehicle. Of course they were looking for trauma. You also told them the body had been identified as James McCormack. We need to know why you told them it was McCormack."

"Did I? I would very much doubt that. I may have said it *could* be James McCormack as he had been reported missing. But that's a different matter." Mrs Seaman nodded.

"They didn't take samples for testing because you told them you knew it was McCormack. No ifs or buts." Dowdall showed no let up in his grim expression.

"Then they misunderstood me. And the inquest said it was James McCormack so it was more than the possibility I had suggested."

"You provided the information the Coroner used. There is no hint in the material provided to them that there was any doubt over the identification."

"And you are saying this Donald Smith was listed as missing? I don't remember ever having anyone list him as missing."

Both visitors could see that they would now be taken off into vague speculation about Smith. "You must have had more reason to say it was McCormack than that he was missing."

"Yes, I seem to remember his aunt gave us a detailed description—"

"Man with grey hair, wearing jeans and a blue shirt? It would've needed more than that."

"I don't remember what she told us but it was more detailed than that."

"Yes, he was wearing large dressings on his back and legs but there were no dressings on the body found in the culvert. Didn't that raise doubts?"

"It's a long time ago, mate, but it'll all be there in the file."

"We need you to come in and tell us where you put this file you say has this information."

"I can't help it if you've lost things."

"No. Mr Seaman, we haven't lost things. We are starting to wonder why you did. We are even starting to wonder if you were paid to lose things. It's the way the Plowman family work."

"I don't like your tone, mate, and you are speaking complete rubbish, so I think it's time you bods left. You are way out of line. I do not expect to be accused in my own home and in front of my wife."

"I'm sure your wife knows just when and how you suddenly became wealthy."

Dowdall and Griffin stood up. For a moment Seaman's genial expression had slipped but now it was back in place. He said, "You can see yourselves out and I think you had better go away and really do your homework."

When Dowdall and Griffin were back in the car Dowdall said, "The slimy bastard!"

"Maybe we need more before we tackle him again?"

"No. I am going round to see his stockbroker. We'll see if he really is this investment whiz."

Mr Ted Mullins listened then said he was sorry but he couldn't give out client information.

"Not even to prove your client isn't corrupt?" Dowdall sounded sarcastic. Griffin felt a faint tinge of concern. What had got into Dowdall, usually quiet and unimpressive, to create this sense of suppressed anger? He thought he understood. Dowdall was facing the possibility of having to carry a very public can …

"I beg your pardon." Mullins looked puzzled. "I don't think you should be making those sorts of allegations. George Seaman is a decent man who worked his guts out for the community."

"And suddenly became very rich. You might like to explain that."

"He didn't *suddenly* become rich. He worked at it over many years with our advice and gradually built up a very solid portfolio. So I think you should be very careful in what you say about him. We do have laws on slander and vilification here, you know."

For a moment doubts assailed Dowdall. Had he jumped to conclusions? Then he said coldly, "Brisbane is investigating Seaman's finances so I hope you've been as clever as you think you have."

"I don't like your insinuations, sergeant, so I think you'd best leave now unless you have something more than these wild allegations. Making statements without evidence is unprofessional." Mullins also spoke coldly.

As they went to the car Dowdall said, "I s'pose I've made things worse, making allegations … "

The thought had occurred to Griffin. The need for greater circumspection. But he said, "No, I think he knows … things. I saw the way he tightened up when you mentioned Brisbane. It was slight but it was there. I wouldn't mind to see his client list. He might also do business for some of the Plowmans."

"He might." Dowdall seemed to be sinking back into his habitual moroseness.

"We've got some insights. And if no one else has ever been able to dismantle the Plowman family why are we assuming we can do it overnight?"

"I had a chat with a cop on the Darling Downs. He said that was the way they caught a corrupt cop. He'd killed a woman and put her in a culvert and just pulled her out when he wanted her found."

Griffin gave him a long look before saying, "So there are patterns? Not just a general sense of chaos. The family uses plans that have worked in the past. That is probably the key to it all."

Dowdall didn't seem to share Griffin's sudden enthusiasm. "That cop said they change first names as well as surnames. How're we s'posed to know who is who?"

"I wonder … normally we look at the individual … but what if we treated the family in the way we would look at a rogue company or … say a bikie gang?"

"I don't see how that would work."

Griffin wasn't sure either but he said slowly, "If every family member knows that the family is being seen as a criminal entity … then maybe they will start to break ranks. After all, some of them have legitimate businesses or professional positions and they might like to keep them."

*

Dennis Walsh didn't want to get caught up in anything to do with the Plowmans again, no matter how vaguely or indirectly. He trusted Payne to get to the bottom of everything. He had the skills and the resources. But he couldn't help pondering on ways to go on to a property out West and have a look around.

Fiona had gone to George Winter's launch at the library of his new poetry book. Dennis hadn't done more than glance at the cover. It might contain some wonderful poetry but he doubted whether he would get much from it. He and the children had had dinner, he had taken an unexpected call from Townsville, and then he had sat down in the kitchen while Elise and Robert played Ludo in her room.

He knew no one in Longreach but finally a thought crystallised. What about the Stock Squad. Did they have anyone in the area? He finally put through a call to a friend who was now an inspector in Rockhampton. Did he know anyone in Longreach? Dennis explained what he was looking at and why. Russ Spicer said, "Interesting" and then "if they really are looking for uranium and dropping rubbish in the creek there—what about the environmental bods? I know someone who went to Brisbane to study environmental science, my nephew in fact, so I could run it past him."

"That could be a help. We really need to shine a spotlight on that place."

"So what exactly do you think is going on there?"

Dennis always found it hard to try and encapsulate a complicated problem in a few words. He sometimes felt the Plowmans needed a book rather than a five minute mention. Spicer listened and finally said, "If there's ever been any kind of complaint I can get on to Longreach to check."

"The Hoysteds who used to have a property up there say they put in a complaint about possible contamination of a creek. They said the samples showed cesium, or that's what they thought, and that stock preferred to drink from the creek rather than the bore drains—so there might be health issues."

"Good one. Do you know who sent the complaint—and who to?"

Dennis gave him Henley Hoysted's contact details. "He said they'd sent samples to Brisbane for testing. He must know where they sent them. And then two guys calling themselves Simon and Richard Ferguson were s'posed to be transporting some uranium samples to Brisbane for testing. I'd reckon they came from that property. So it would be interesting to see whether there's more than a few holes in the ground there."

Spicer said it all sounded intriguing but asked Dennis to fax him some more background information. When Walsh hung up he felt a sense of satisfaction. Russ Spicer would find a way to get that property investigated …

He got up and went down the hallway and said, "I think it's bedtime for you two."

"Just one more game, Dada. You can play too. That would make it harder for me to win all the time." Elise could be very hard to resist. He brought a chair in and they were on their fourth game, with Elise still winning each time, when Fiona came in from her book launch, expecting to find the children in bed and Dennis half-asleep in front of the television.

"Don't know how she does it," he said with a grin. "I think she must have her own secret dice. I haven't managed to throw a single six all evening."

*

Reid Strohling in the lab at Winville wasn't noted for his social skills or lively conversation. But he was a deeply knowledgeable and careful technician. When he offered

information it was trustworthy. With the torn and dirty backpack offered to him he and his assistant had unpicked the whole thing, laying the pieces bare, and collecting up the detritus for further investigation. Among the dust and cotton fibres and an unidentified powder he had found several hairs. And in there was a disintegrating piece of paper tucked under the bottom between the material and the stiffening.

"Don't know what it is." Reid had put it in acid-free tissue paper then a plastic bag to go to the lab in Brisbane.

It was DC Kelly who said immediately, "It's Cyrillic." He looked at Jenny Forman who nodded. He couldn't hide his sense of elation. "We can translate the letters for you."

"No." Reid didn't seem to share his excitement. "Brisbane will tell us what it says. But at a guess I'd say it was an address and a note."

It was nothing so obvious as a sigh of relief but the two young detectives felt certain this would be the final clincher to the case they had painstakingly and with little encouragement built up.

"You will need to let DI Stimson know," Reid said.

"Of course." But both Kelly and Forman felt like adding "when we get around to it."

Because they knew perfectly well that once it was out of their hands there was no guarantee that Stimson would keep them in the loop.

Nor did the Brisbane officer who had opened the e-mail from Dennis Walsh in Buckton about Reuben Godfrey see any need to keep Buckton in the loop. But unlike Kelly and Forman Dennis saw no need to fret over the lack of a response. Toowoomba had said no more about him encouraging Jackie Truscott to go out and commit a crime and he was too busy to give the matter any further thought. He had the suspicion that they thought Truscott was a nut case and completely unreliable in everything she said. But he assumed that if they had charged her she would come up in court at some stage.

So it came as a complete surprise to him when a news item weeks later said that 'a teacher based in Toowoomba' was being investigated over collecting and sharing child abuse images on-line. It was Rhonda Prendergast who came in to the station and said "How did you know?" It had named no names but Dennis immediately thought of Reuben Godfrey. Obviously Mrs Prendergast had jumped to the same conclusion. Or her daughter had passed something on.

Dennis said he hadn't known, just the feeling that something was a bit off, and then he had said dampeningly, "It's early days. He may have some excuse. It might not even be him. Not up to me."

She didn't really believe this. If it was on the news then she assumed they had some evidence. They hadn't named him but, after all, it was someone's reputation and livelihood on the line. 'Investigated' sounded very definite. She wasn't cynical enough to consider that the media could crucify someone and blithely move on.

She said to Walsh, "My daughter's name won't need to come up in conjunction with this, will it?"

"I wouldn't think so."

In a way he disliked those people who tried to hide behind a cloak of anonymity but in this case he could understand. A teacher linked, even indirectly, to child abuse images could suffer. Parents, understandably, wanted those who taught their children to be of the highest standard of integrity. It was different to the people who failed to come forward as witnesses to traffic accidents or muggings or burglaries … because they were 'too busy', 'hadn't really seen—', 'didn't think it was our business', 'his mates might come after me' and a dozen other excuses …

It was Constable Waters who felt the deepest secret elation. Other people, possibly even Jackie Truscott, might already have flagged Godfrey but he thought that things coming

from police, rather than the public, usually got more attention. Though it might be months before anything actually came to court, it even might be dropped or a deal done, though his name would probably not be mentuioned, it was a result. He might cloak it under normal police work but he also had the belief that those who said 'anything goes' and why was he such a wowser could no longer say that. He just hoped that Senior Sergeant Merrill had been listening to the news …

And when Dennis said "You and John did good work on this one," he felt that he need no longer agonise over whether he had made the right decision in joining the police.

*

Walsh had gone into the Coolibah mid-afternoon to wash down the dust after going out to a small problem on a farm and had taken a beer over to one of the booths by the front windows because several noisy men were perched on bar stools and he wanted a moment of peace. That farm which had been a thoroughbred stud and then a quarter horse stud was now apparently owned and run by a chaotic family called Hichens. They had already got into arguments with their neighbours on their east and north and had now had a fight with the Caltex driver and had accused the father of one of the children who went to Buckton High School with their kids of stealing a bicycle.

There was something ramshackle and shiftless about the family, though there must be money somewhere to be able to afford what had been a good farm, and both parents seemed to have hair-trigger tempers. Though each problem looked trivial they seemed to have the ability to turn it into something much bigger. This history depressed him and he thought it might be worth trying to find a bit more out about the family. If they had been a pain somewhere else had cops somewhere else found a way of dealing with them?

As he sat with his drink he heard female voices and he immediately recognised one of them as Lynnell Morton. She seemed to be with Mary Burchall. He had done nothing about Leon Gamble's grumble because telling Mrs Burchall to take a good long look at herself wasn't likely to be productive and he didn't think it was police business—unless she stepped over the line. She was a hard woman to like and yet he felt vaguely sorry for her. She would probably always be desperate to find someone who seemed to genuinely like her or at least be able to put up with her company.

The two women were out of his sight and he wasn't sure that he wanted to listen in to their conversation. It was all over town that Mrs Morton had a young relative living with her, a Shona Webb, who offered sexual services. He had said to several people like the Barnards at the service station that it was hard to believe any woman would want to pimp a young relative. Noel Barnard had said, "Are you sure pimp's the right word, Den?"

"Well, isn't it? Here's someone setting up some—" he had been going to say 'brainless bimbo' and changed it to "some kid that doesn't know how to stand up to Lynnell, and I'll bet Lynnell's not doing it because she feels sorry for turds like Craig Goodrick, I'll bet she's making money out of her."

"I guess she is." Noel found the whole situation pretty tacky but he supposed there was nothing to be done unless the girl herself made a complaint against Mrs Morton. But almost without thinking about it he passed it on to friends and customers and soon it was all around town that Lynnell Morton was a pimp. Several other people, like Noel, wondered if pimp was the right word. Weren't pimps always men? But Mrs Perriman told several friends that pimp was exactly the right word, no doubt about it, and she said almost word for word what Dennis had said about Lynnell being in it for the money. No one knew just when or how Mrs Morton heard what was being said about her. She certainly gave no sign of being bothered by it. But Dennis was mainly relieved that she had been keeping a relatively low profile since her return to Buckton.

He didn't particularly set out to listen to the two women. He didn't think their conversation would be gripping. But he made more effort when Lynnell said something about 'that bastard'. He couldn't hear everything they said but it became clear that Lynnell was referring to Leon Gamble and that she thought Mary should not supinely accept her brush-off. Mr Gamble was, in some way, to pay for dumping Mary. Dennis strained to hear what form this proposed payback might take. Lynnell dropped her voice as she apparently laid out various ideas. Mary Burchall several times said something about 'not knowing what was best to do' and he heard Lynnell ask Mary if Leon had dogs. Mary didn't sound decisive but didn't think Gamble currently had any.

Lynnell got up and went to the bar and came back with new drinks. Dennis looked at his watch. He could get up and go but he preferred not to let the women know he'd been sitting nearby. The women sat on another twenty minutes with Lynnell slagging off various Bucktonites including Fiona and Daphne Perriman but Mrs Burchall constantly brought the conversation back to her misery and anger over Leon Gamble's apparent coldness towards her. Dennis heard with relief their voices fade into the distance. He could understand that Lynnell Morton might have mixed feelings about her acolyte. Mary Burchall might be thankful to have Lynnell's company but it didn't make her an exhilarating companion. It didn't even make her friendship flattering or useful.

Dennis got back to the station and checked with Constable Waters if anything had happened. Ben Waters said only, "Glen told me the inspector is in Winville. D'you think he'll come here tomorrow?"

"Probably. Best do a tidy up. I've just been stuck in the pub listening to bloody Lynnell threatening to do something to Leon Gamble, don't know what, but maybe I'd best warn him to keep an eye out."

"What sort of thing?" Waters was slowly learning the names of people around Buckton, particularly the ones likely to give police any trouble.

"Don't know. But Lynnell can be vicious. So I wouldn't put it past her to set fire to a shed or destroy his front gate or something."

"But how would that make him take up with Mrs Burchall again?"

"Don't think Lynnell really cares about Mary's love life. She just likes getting back at people. I'll bet she's getting a real buzz out of thinking up nasty things to do to him."

"Why would she be like that, d'you think?"

"Well, first off, she's a Goodrick so she was brought up to believe that other people and their property don't matter. There must be more to it, I s'pose. She's Dan's half-sister and he pinches anything not being watched but he's not usually nasty, just greedy. Whereas Lynnell seems to get an added kick out of putting other people down."

He wasn't sure just what to tell Leon Gamble when he got on to him in the evening because he didn't know exactly what Lynnell was planning. And it was always possible she was just running ideas by Mary Burchall without necessarily planning to put them into action. But he asked Gamble if he had any dogs.

"No, not at the moment. Why?"

"Lynnell asked Mary if you had any. It might be a good idea to get one or two."

Gamble didn't sound convinced. Like many people he found it hard to believe that the grandmotherly-looking Mrs Morton was a real threat to him. But he didn't think Walsh would bother to ring unless there was likely to be something going on so he finally said, "Okay, thanks for letting me know."

And after he'd hung up he thought 'why not?'; he'd vaguely been thinking of getting another dog after his old cattle dog bitch died. A dog was always company. Even better company than someone like Mary Burchall, he thought wryly. And a visit to the Dogs' Home in Winville was interesting. He finally chose out a Border Collie-kelpie cross and an old dog

with some Labrador in him. He didn't mind them being well past their youth. With luck they would be happy to stay around the house and sheds and piggery. He wished he had a better idea of what to keep an eye out for. But with luck the dogs would alert him to anyone coming on to the farm.

And three days later both dogs broke into a fusillade of barks around midnight, waking him up. He went out, carrying his old rifle with him. He couldn't see anyone but the dogs kept barking as they stared towards the track up to the gate. He wasn't sure but he thought there was a figure in the lane. And a couple of minutes later he thought he heard a car start up. The night was dark and overcast and he wasn't certain he had really seen or heard anyone. He turned to the dogs and said 'Good boys' and went back inside.

As he closed the back door he thought he had been wise to follow Walsh's advice … but very unwise to visit that house in town with its young woman offering … he hadn't seen Mrs Morton around when he called by … but now he wondered if she kept records, took photos, told people who came by to cavort with young Shona … well, he certainly wouldn't be going again …

Lynnell had a quite different problem. She tore strips off Mary for not warning her about the dogs and Mary's miserable response that he must've just gone out and got a dog wasn't enough to appease Lynnell. It was Sister O'Brien who found Mary Burchall sitting miserably in the little park with its war memorial and said kindly, "What is the matter, my dear?"

She sat down beside Mrs Burchall and proffered a tissue. Mary hesitated then it all came pouring out; Leon's perfidy, Lynnell's criticisms, how no one liked her, how her kids never took any notice of her, how her dad never gave her any help …

Kath O'Brien was good at sympathising with people but intuition, if not Dennis Walsh's words, suggested to her that sympathy would only make Mary more convinced that she was always the victim of other people. At last she said, "I can't do anything about your kids but I don't think Lynnell is a very good friend to have and I know Leon said he didn't want to take you out any more because he got so sick of you whingeing and whining. I don't know the details but, you know, people do get tired of feeling sorry for someone. I don't know if it would help but have you ever thought of seeing some kind of counselor?"

Mary Burchall stared at her, then she grew red and angry. "How can you lie to me like that! It's you who should go to a counselor, not me! It's not my fault if everything has gone wrong in my life—"

"Maybe not. But what d'you expect other people to do—if you won't do anything to help yourself?" She half-expected Mary Burchall to jump up and march off but Mary began to sniffle again. "It's not my fault that Leon went and got some dogs, I didn't know he was going to, and Lynnell says I should of told her—"

"What have dogs got to do with it? Why shouldn't Leon get dogs if he wants them?"

"They barked at Lynnell and gave her a big fright and Leon came out to see what was going on."

For a moment Kath was non-plussed then she said with uncharacteristic coolness, "So Lynnell went there to make mischief, did she? And how is that going to make Leon change his mind about you?"

"I don't know. But she was going to teach him a lesson."

"Oh, for goodness sake, Mary, how on earth did you get involved in her plans to make trouble? It's no wonder no man wants anything to do with her. They'd rather go out with a redback spider than Lynnell."

Mary, anger and despair warring in her face, turned to Kath then away again. She hesitated then got up and walked away. Kath watched her go and wondered if she would be next on the list to suffer one of Lynnell's spiteful 'paybacks'. And would Mary do any

serious thinking about herself, about what she wanted from life, about the way she related to people? Kath doubted it.

*

Justin Castley was a bit nervous about having Leila Burkett back as his boss. Stirling might've told him he was an idiot to want that 'useless horse' but he had been easygoing in other ways. Whereas Leila expected …

But she seemed relaxed as he and Justin walked round with her going over all the patients and their current treatment. He wasn't sure if he wanted to tell Mrs Burkett about the horse but the matter was taken out of his hands by Stirling telling her and saying Sergeant Walsh should've warned them when he brought the horse in. Leila, far from being annoyed by Walsh's actions, just smiled and said, "Well, jumping on an unknown horse is always a risk but I assume you thought it through carefully before you mounted him?"

Justin, confident in his own abilities, had not done any preparation but he said "Of course, but that was one mad horse."

"So where is the horse now?"

"He's out at Harry Kuhl's place," Castley put in. "I go out there to ride him."

Mrs Burkett was surprised. When she left Buckton Justin had never been on a horse; now he was suggesting he went out to ride an old buckjumper. But she just went on with her tour of the yards and cages.

Justin later said to Harry Kuhl, "I think she was a bit surprised when I said I was riding him."

Harry found that quite amusing. And the 'riding' was ultra-cautious.

But he had a different thought in his mind. "What about going next door to see if that Darcy bloke is needing any help? He's on his own and he's got the racehorses as well as cattle. He might like to offer you a bit of work for when you've got time away from the vet's."

Justin wasn't sure about this. But he didn't mind to try to make a bit extra if there was any casual work going. He wanted to trade his old ute in on something newer, not to impress anyone but just because he was always afraid of his old bomb breaking down at a awkward time. "I thought you said he was a bit of an odd bod?"

"Oh, he is, definitely, but doesn't mean his money isn't as good as anyone else's. Worth a try anyway."

It might be. But Justin was in the throes of nerves and shyness as he drove up Darcy's lane. Harry had told him the story of Darcy being bashed then saying he hadn't, even though someone had knocked him out. It might mean that dangerous people came round to visit Peter Darcy.

But the man seemed perfectly normal as he came over to the front gate to see who had driven in. Justin got out and said a nervous "hullo". Darcy said, "What's going on?"

"It was your neighbour told me that maybe, well, that you might sometimes need some extra help on, well, doing things here."

"I might." Darcy first looked surprised then considering. "Can you plough?"

"For sure. I did quite a lot of ploughing before I went to work for the vet."

"Okay." Darcy beckoned and Justin followed him around to the sheds. "All that back slope, I'm thinking of turning it into cultivation. Might be able to make a bit from putting in a crop." The land to the east of the house and sheds was a long slight slope with the occasional tree and a waving sea of dry grass.

"You want it all ploughed?"

"Most of it. Leave say two hundred metres between it and the sheds. Don't know but I s'pose we'd best take those trees out. Can you do that?"

"I guess so. Do you want firewood?" They could be burnt in place or cut down, then the stumps snigged out.

"Nah. Doesn't seem worth bothering."

Justin, brought up to be careful and not waste things, wondered why someone wouldn't bother. But he just went over to look at Darcy's John Deere in the shed and an assortment of old ploughs, half hidden in the long grass.

"See what you want?" All the equipment looked old and rusty but to Justin's experienced eyes, still workable.

"When d'you want me to start?"

"Right now, if you want."

It might've been nerve-wracking to be thrown in the deep end like that but Justin intuited that Darcy knew nothing about ploughing and planting. So if he could do a good job in creating cultivation and advising Darcy what best to plant … well, it might lead on to more work. By the time he left to go back to the vet's to do the evening feeds he was feeling unexpectedly confident.

Harry Kuhl had watched the events unfolding next door through his binoculars and was pleased that something had come from his suggestion and he didn't think he needed to tell Justin that alongside helping him make a bit of extra income he'd had an ulterior motive in making the suggestion.

Case No. 5: The Past is Another Country?

Dennis Walsh had two small cases due in court on Monday morning. But as he drove his mind drifted back to wondering about that property out West. He had told Fiona that Russ Spicer was going to look into it and she had accepted that, or so he thought, but then she had said, "That won't stop you though, will it? You'll spend hours wondering how you can get to see what's going on there."

He admitted that he'd been giving it quite a lot of thought. "I guess there's two separate issues. Are they using the house or sheds to store stuff that I'd like to see—that Carl Payne would like to see—and what's going on with them mining there."

"Someone could fly over it. After all, if those were yellowcake samples then there must be more to see than them just dropping some earth into bags."

"That's a thought. Did Willy Jackson not only fly over their makeshift mine—but maybe film something?"

"What happened to all Willy's business papers?"

"I assume Jill took them." It seemed obvious to him but then he seemed to change track. "That story that Jill was being paid to keep her mouth shut—did she find something and go to see someone—don't know who." And her lawyer had apparently been Gavin Whittaker who to Dennis's mind had been a crook; he wasn't sure if this was relevant.

"Are you sure she was?"

"Payne seemed to think so. And where did she get the money to go into that offshore account?"

She was interested but she could also see the dangers in encouraging Dennis to go back over things which remained unresolved but which she would prefer he left to other people to look into.

Now as he drove he speculated on ways to visit a remote property. But although he could visit, he couldn't take it further. Russ Spicer or someone in the Stock Squad could visit if there was a possibility of contaminated water going downstream. It might even be possible to persuade someone that the place needed to be searched but none of his ideas really gripped

him. No doubt the manager would want to know why police were interested. So unless they could go in hard things would undoubtedly disappear. And how could they go in hard without real evidence. It wasn't like going round town kicking in doors because a potential drug-dealer was behind those same doors.

When he came over to the station from court he found Jake Moss wanting to have a few minutes with him. Moss began by saying Toowoomba seemed to have let the Jackie Truscott case lapse but he might be asked, at some stage, why he thought Reuben Godfrey could be interested in porn. Dennis shrugged. "Just a hint really. Nothing obvious. But he reminded me a bit of Derek Coleman when he was at the High School in Buckton."

Jake nodded. Sometimes it was as vague as that but worth following up. Trouble was—such hints usually got lost in the more obvious things going down.

"And there's another thing." Jake began fiddling with a biro. "Troy Dann. He's been reinstated, sent to Gympie. Seems they thought you'd been too hard on him, just the sort of carelessness any young fella might be guilty of. And don't tell me it was more than carelessness—"

"So why didn't they talk to me about it?"

"Don't know, Dennis. I put in a report. They rang me and I said we didn't want him back here. That was it, end of conversation."

Dennis didn't look happy about it but it wasn't worth worrying about. "So they took the same line—that years of persecution don't matter?"

"I'd say so. Anonymous letters are a fact of life. You don't give them the time of day. Maybe he's learnt his lesson. Maybe he'll be dishonest with some other evidence some day. But they said something about taking it easy with a young man from a migrant background."

"Bollocks! He had a grandfather born in Sicily. Since when does that count as a migrant background? And even if it did—"

"I know. But seems they're always trying to make it look like all sorts join the police, not just some ordinary white boys."

"And then when they get a genuine migrant like Sam Hassan they give him a hard time."

"Dennis, I know all that, so don't get hot under the collar."

"Okay, so here's a different problem." And he sketched in the possibility that Willy Jackson had been visiting a Plowman property north-east of Longreach. Jake listened and finally said, "So you're suggesting Willy might've been killed because of something he saw there?"

"It's possible. I thought it might've been to avoid paying him. And maybe that comes into it. But the whole thing seems more complex in its planning so I wondered if there was more to it."

"So you're saying Willy went to their station, picked up a box of samples, picked up the two men, and maybe saw something he shouldn't while he was there?"

"We need to know if there's a runway on their land for starters. But if he did go there then what happened at that end could be as important as what happened at the Prickly Creek end."

Jake considered this and finally agreed. "So where does Wayne Booth come into everything? If he was on the plane and Willy stopped over to drop him off—then what was he doing when the Plowmans killed Willy, put him in the crate and got Doug and Sam out to fly the plane?"

"That's the odd thing. What was Wayne doing? And what about Eddie Morton and Jill Jackson? They were there that day."

"Don't know if I want to even think about the Eddie Morton case. It's been left to get very cold. After the mess with Billy the Lad."

Dennis agreed. “And I’ve wondered if the thing which brought Jill Jackson and Wayne Booth into some sort of partnership was what they knew about Willy’s death, not sure just how, but I think they had to know more than they ever let on.”

“Well, coming back to practical questions—everywhere Willy landed and refueled except when it was a private runway must have records. So those could be checked. Longreach. Charters Towers. Maybe even Townsville or Mareeba.”

For a moment Dennis stared at Jake then he said “Bingo!” As soon as Jake said it Dennis wondered why they had never—he had never—thought of tracking the plane. Maybe it had never touched down on a commercial aerodrome but then there was the question of refueling. “I wonder what sort of range that Cessna had?”

“I’ll see if I can get Petra to have a look.” But when he went into the CIB room later and found Petra Moore there on her own he immediately said, “Petra, you look terrible.” She was sitting there, almost grey in the face, with a sheen of sweat on her forehead, and a great sense of weariness in her. “Sorry, that sounds awful but d’you want to take time off? Go and see a doctor.”

“Don’t fuss, Jake. I’m busy.” She might also have said that she never went to doctors except in an emergency. Jake could guess this. He wasn’t so different, though unlike Petra he didn’t feel he needed to prove how tough he was. And he lived with a trained nurse/administrator. That probably made a difference.

“No, look, take time out and I’ll run you round to the doctor.”

“I haven’t got a doctor.”

That didn’t really surprise him. “I went to Dr Pemberton when I broke my finger. He was very good. I’ll give him a ring and see if he can fit you in today.”

Petra opened her mouth to say ‘don’t bother’ and then she seemed to respond to his obvious concern, saying non-committally, “Okay. It’s probably just some bug.” But the thought came to her that it might be a relief to talk with someone who would listen. The sense of grey gloom which seemed to come and sit on her shoulders the minute she woke showed no sign of lifting and there were times when she felt her thinking was no longer clear and precise. Maybe there was a simple answer …

Jake was as good as his word and immediately got through to Pemberton to say he’d like to get DS Moore an appointment. And five minutes later he came back and said, “He can see you now so come on and I’ll drop you round.”

It left him with the job of asking one of her juniors to do some research for him but he didn’t doubt they would do a good job. He watched Petra walk slowly into the surgery and drove back to the station. Stephanie at the front desk said, “What’s wrong with Petra?”

“Don’t know. But she wasn’t looking well. I was surprised she agreed to take time off—”

“She hasn’t looked well for quite a while but I’m surprised she would admit to anything.” She was tempted to go on and say ‘she’s determined to be tougher than any bloke’ but it seemed disloyal; not that she and Petra were close but she was aware that women still got put down by some men in the force and felt they had to prove things. Jake nodded and went on into the CIB room to talk with Brent Kelly.

Dr Pemberton was as good as Jake had hoped, going carefully over Petra’s vague symptoms, asking careful questions. At the end he said, “How long has it been since you started feeling a bit down?”

“It must be nearly two years. But I usually blamed the job. There are days when you feel you’ve failed or just not done your best or you just get fed up with people always doing the wrong thing.”

He could see that. “But I think we need to first make sure there’s no physical reason for your severe depression. I’d like to do a blood test and a scan.”

Petra said, “I did wonder if I should start taking Prozac or something, some kind of imbalance … ”

“Well, let’s start with the basics.”

By the time Petra went back to the station she was feeling a little more cheerful. In a way the idea of definable physical symptoms and reasons was better than the sense of indefinable mood swings and a sense of grey gloom pressing down on her all the time. She told Jake Dr Pemberton wanted to get some tests done. He nodded. He had considerable faith that Dr Pemberton would be careful and thorough. And as he thought that his mind went back to Susan’s complaints about Dr Davis. He immediately banished her worries. Dr Davis wasn’t his business, not unless someone came with a specific complaint, and he sometimes had the feeling that people at the hospital would rather mutter and grumble rather than putting together a specific charge of incompetence or wrongdoing.

Several weeks later Petra told the station she had been diagnosed with a brain tumour and would need to take time off.

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DC Kelly could see the value in trying to find which airports Willy Jackson might have visited on his forays north-west of Prickly Creek. If records had been kept from that far back. Undoubtedly he would have had a log book in the cabin but there was no guarantee the log book was still there when Rupert Sale took the plane over at the Meandara property and flew south-west. Kelly could see that there might also be value in trying to work out where Sale had been heading but he assumed NSW police had been looking into it. This wasn’t guaranteed but he kept his focus on Queensland.

He rang Rushton’s to get the details of Willy’s plane and they faxed him a picture of it, along with the details. He got one recorded visit to Longreach and noted the date. And one to Charters Towers. But he didn’t manage to turn up any recorded visits for Townsville or Mareeba. While he was pondering on whether he should try anywhere else, such as smaller towns like Aramac and Muttaburra, Jenny Forman said “What about Mt Isa? Do you think he ever went there?”

Brent said “Who knows?” and put Mt Isa on his list to check. A day later he said to her, “You were right. He did visit. And the interesting thing is that it seems to be just after that payroll robbery. So maybe he spirited the men and the money away? And did they already have that place near Longreach? And how did they know him or that he did charter work?”

“Maybe he advertised? So was this why they killed him? That he had put two and two together? Or asked a question? And is that why they killed Ruby? Because they thought she must know something?”

“But then—why not Jill?”

“Because they couldn’t make it look like she had gone off to Brisbane too? Maybe.”

“So Doug Towner was in Mt Isa when the money was stolen and in Winville when Willy was killed? That has to be significant, surely.”

“It must be. And did they bribe Jill—or threaten her?”

“Maybe it was both?”

“So what do we do with this information?”

“Send it to Carl Payne. Can we do it or does it need to be Petra?”

“We don’t know when she’ll be back and they haven’t said anything about a replacement. So let’s run it past Dennis.”

*

Dowdall knew he would need to go and talk with Garth Madden. He was certain Madden was the key to several things. But he kept putting it off because he couldn’t think how best to tackle a sharp lawyer like Madden. “Okay,” he finally said to Pasquale, “let’s be

clear on what we need to check. First off, why was he listed as the licensee of The Black Rock and what happened to Donald Smith. So we put together the business of that fake death notice, and the fact that we now have Donald Smith ID'd as the body in the culvert." Pasquale nodded. "Then it gets more tricky when we get into the dealings of Nebo and Northern Agricultural Supplies. But we've got the list of their properties and the list of their directors. So we want current addresses for them all."

"So if Northern only has two directors listed … does this mean that all of Nebo's directors have … well, disappeared?"

Dowdall said gloomily, "I'd bet my life on it. But by law Madden should have all their addresses, otherwise he is guilty of listing a company with phantom directors."

DC Pasquale looked more cheerful but said, "Maybe they all lived at The Black Rock?"

"Maybe they did. Maybe the place was stuffed full of phantom directors. Maybe that Richard Ferguson was all of them?"

Madden's secretary told them he was a very busy man. "Of course," Dowdall said non-committally, "so we'll just sit down and wait."

They didn't think she was best pleased but she just said mildly, "I'll see if he can squeeze you in. He's flying to Brisbane later today."

"Business meeting, is it?"

She didn't answer but turned and picked up her phone and made a call and said, "I have two police here wanting to see you. Is there any chance you can squeeze them in?"

And a moment later she turned back to Dowdall and said, "He'll be here in half-an-hour."

Dowdall nodded and opened his briefcase and began to talk in muted tones about all the people they needed to ask about; the names of people rolling off his tongue as though he knew them all well. Briefly, Enrico Pasquale wondered what was going on then he realised Dowdall almost certainly believed that the secretary, an efficient-looking middleaged woman, would pass things on. Pasquale hoped he wouldn't spoil this sense of talking about long time acquaintances. "But was it Simon or Richard Ferguson who died on the Darling Downs that you mentioned?"

"It was very odd that he would be calling himself Frederick Smith when he ran into that bridge and was burnt to death, poor sod, but I s'pose every family has a Smith in it. He'd had a go at farming, you know, cattle, it's mostly cattle country around there but he was coming and going a lot, I don't think he was ever a real farmer at heart, but his daughter moved to Winville and started a little giftware shop, Giftwares Galore, I think she called it. But then there was some trouble with a guy called Eddie Morton, he was stealing stuff from Richard and Simon—"

"What sort of stuff?" Pasquale hadn't read through all the material Jay Barron had given them but it was becoming obvious that Dowdall had.

"It was money actually. They'd buried it there, seems it was a bit hot, came from a job someone had done in Mt Isa, so it needed to be kept out of circulation for a while, and this Eddie Morton bloke got antsy, all that lovely money sitting around, he thought it should go back into circulation but no one knows just how much he had pinched because they couldn't come out and tell the police that their stolen money had been stolen."

"So what did they do?"

"Well, what would you do in that situation?"

"Get rid of the guy, I guess."

"The trouble is—if you keep doing that sooner or later someone gets suspicious. So Richard decided it'd be best to move on. He'd done it before, he'd been here at The Black Rock Hotel, and then he decided, it was before your time, but his long time barman got

knocked on the head and dumped in a culvert, no one linked it to him but there were rumours going round so he thought it might be time to move on, so they knocked down the hotel and put up some flats, and off he went and ended up on the Darling Downs."

They were both sure that the secretary was pretending to work while she strained to listen.

"But George Seaman would have known all this, he used to go and drink at The Black Rock in those days, didn't he?"

"Yeah, he even took me when I was just starting out here, that's a while ago now, and George is living in luxury and I'm still plodding along, but there you have it, and it seems like poor old Richard didn't live to enjoy his retirement, nasty way to go being burnt to death. But I s'pose it was fairly quick, well, not quick enough, but they weren't too sure if they had the right identity so they took DNA and blood and fingerprints and said, yeah, they reckoned it was the same bloke that had been out at that farm because the fingerprints matched, don't know all the details. But that's all water under the bridge and nothing much to do with us."

The phone rang. The secretary looked up and said, "Mr Madden will see you now but he can only give you ten minutes, I'm afraid. Come through."

She ushered them into a big roomy office with seascapes on the white walls and a big desk piled with papers. Garth Madden stood up and waved them to chairs. "Now, how can I help you gentlemen?"

"Two things, Mr Madden. You were licensee of The Black Rock Hotel when Richard Ferguson ran it and Donald Smith was the long time barman there."

"I had nothing to do with the day-to-day running—"

"You were listed as the licensee so you did have responsibilities. So how did you come to meet Richard Ferguson?"

"I really don't remember. It is a long time ago."

"You must have known him well enough to trust that he wouldn't do anything which would get you into trouble with the Licensing Board?"

"Probably."

"And Mr Smith, how well did you know him?"

"I'd met him now and then."

"So you would recognise him if you saw him?"

"Now? No, I wouldn't think so."

"You terminated his employment and told him to give up his room at the hotel. How did you do that?"

"The usual way. A letter of termination. A bonus, I would think."

"You didn't think of doing something more personal, given that you were taking away both his home and his job?"

"If I did I don't remember."

"Now you got Mr Smith to sign some documents on behalf of the Nebo Agricultural Company. Why did you do that?"

"I'm sure I didn't."

"Mr Smith and an Alan Dawkins, both giving their address as The Black Rock Hotel, bought a large tobacco farm up at Mareeba. Now, Donald Smith just got by, he didn't have that kind of money and he was about to lose his job. So clearly there was something dodgy going on. You were his employer so you must have known that he was signing up for a half million dollar debt."

"No, why should I?"

"He clearly couldn't repay that kind of debt so someone must have stood guarantor if he was going to try and borrow it."

"Sorry, you've lost me. How would Donald Smith's debts concern me?"

"You employed him."

"That doesn't follow."

"Now, Donald Smith was only somebody's patsy. Once he'd signed the papers to buy the property on behalf of Nebo he was expendable and he ended up dead in a culvert west of here."

"I never heard that."

"No. Because George Seaman was paid to say the body was that of James McCormack. We're still looking at that money trail. But you might be able to help us along the way."

"I don't think you should be making insinuations, Mr Dowdall."

Dowdall ignored this and went on calmly, "Now, you did all the legal work for Nebo so we need to have a list of the directors and their addresses. We have the list of names but all ten of them are given hotels, including The Black Rock, as their addresses. Clearly they didn't stay on at the hotel as it was being demolished. So we need to know where they went. I've brought the list. So you might like to crosscheck with your records."

"There is no problem with someone giving a hotel as an address. Some people live in hotels."

"They don't live in hotels that are being demolished. So we would like that list. We have been told by a Mr Massey that all ten directors are actually the same person using different names—which would not comply with the Companies Act. So the sooner you can resolve the question of where we can find these directors and question them the better."

"I'm afraid I find your questioning offensive, Mr Dowdall, I have always done my legal work with the utmost care and integrity."

Dowdall sat back and put his fingertips together. DC Pasquale had always, privately, thought Dowdall was a bit of a gloomy old plodder. But now he found himself re-thinking that. He felt that there was a core of steel hidden there, that no matter what came out of this meeting Dowdall would not give up. "I wonder if those Legal Practioners Board members would agree. But we do need those addresses."

There was a moment of silence then Madden smiled. "I'm afraid I have another appointment. Next time ring my secretary and make an appointment."

He stood up. Dowdall flipped his notebook and said, "How did a little two-bit operation like Northern Agricultural Supplies buy Nebo? Or was it time for Nebo to disappear. It was becoming an embarrassment, wasn't it, with its farms being used to bury bodies."

Madden shrugged, "You can speculate all you like. Now, if you will excuse me." He walked to the door. Dowdall stood up and said to Pasquale, "The slimy little bastard." Madden was not particularly little but Pasquale felt that in a strange way it was true. As Madden had equivocated he had somehow seemed to grow smaller while Dowdall seemed to grow in stature. Strange.

"I think we need to put it down in writing then ask him to come to the station for a formal interview." He considered his statement then went on, "And I think we need some more background like finding out who got that death notice in the paper in Mareeba. I would bet it was Madden doing some clearing up for them. See what you can find."

But the answer when they got on to the *Express's* staff to do some digging was an odd one. The notice had been sent in by Marilyn Seaman. In her covering letter she said that although Donald Smith had died 'near Townsville' she knew he had relatives living round Mareeba and they would like to know what had happened. Dowdall sat back after reading the faxed copy of Mrs Seaman's letter. "I think Mrs Seaman is a very loyal wife … but is she loyal enough?" Newspapers didn't necessarily keep every letter sent to them but they did tend

to keep births, deaths and marriages in their morgue. Sending that notice might prove to have been a mistake.

Pasquale gave that a big grin. “Maybe this is the smoking gun?”

*

Winville had an unexpected visitor one quiet afternoon in late autumn. Eric Rushton. He asked to see Inspector Moss and said, “There seem to be rumours going round town about Willy Jackson and his plane so I thought it best to come in and see what’s going on.”

Jake Moss certainly hadn’t been spreading stories around Winville but he could well believe that stories had begun circulating hard on the heels of the inquests on Willy and Ruby Jackson. He said “Come through.” With luck, Eric could provide some insights into Willy seeing that he was nearly seventy and had been in Winville all his life.

“Can you tell me just where things are at?”

Jake thought it was probably too complex to fully cover in a couple of minutes but he didn’t mind to tell him what they had just learnt about Willy’s travels. “So what happened when Willy’s plane disappeared?”

“It wasn’t actually Willy’s plane. He bought a share in our company. I think his parents helped him, his wife, and he got a bank loan. But we were very happy with him. He really hustled business, crop-dusting, charters, cargo, flying lessons, he was always fully booked.”

“So would your office have done all the bookings for him?”

“No. Willy said he was happy to do that. He did use our office and we took messages, but he did the bulk of his paperwork himself, or maybe his wife helped him.”

“So would you have anything at all about the work he was doing in your office?”

“Oh, for sure, there’d be odds and ends. But we don’t know just where he’d been before he landed on the farm at Prickly Creek because I know we had a look to see. But he would’ve had his log book with him. I don’t know what happened to it.”

“Mmmm, so when Willy disappeared what happened? As a missing person surely his accounts and everything would have been frozen?”

“No. I think his wife went to court to have him declared dead. I have an idea she used Gavin Whittaker but I don’t know what information they brought forward.”

Jake made a mental note.

“So we agreed to buy back Willy’s share in our company but with the plane missing of course his share was worth much less. It took us years to get our insurer to pay out on the missing plane and we certainly lost on the whole thing.”

“Doug Towner arranged for a man named Rupert Sale to fly Willy’s plane to New South Wales—”

“I knew Sale,” Rushton sounded unexpectedly grim, “and I wouldn’t put him in any plane I owned—except as supercargo. So it all comes back to Doug Towner? Did no one ever get suspicious?”

It was a question Jake would prefer not to be asked. But there was no point in getting defensive. “Doug Towner was a very slick operator. No one saw any reason to get suspicious of a senior detective. Until Dennis Walsh was put into Buckton to replace Joe Bosch.”

“So what made Walsh suspicious when you lot seemed to think Towner was a great bloke?”

“You can ask him yourself.” He wasn’t sure what the clincher had been. “He didn’t have any time for Towner right from when they first met.”

“So can we sue Towner for putting Rupert Sale into one of our planes?”

“I would think that both you and your insurer would have a civil case. Towner isn’t exactly poor though he may have had to spend quite a lot on lawyers.” He was tempted to add ‘not that it did him any good, thank God’. “But did Sale still have a pilot’s licence?”

"No. We put in a complaint about him but nothing happened. We took him on briefly a year before Willy disappeared to fill in for someone and he turned up drunk. So we sacked him on the spot. But he got some work with someone in Dalby and then they put in another complaint. And he finally got stripped. He should never have been allowed near a plane after that."

"Could Doug claim that he didn't know that?"

"He could try. I'd like to see him weasel his way out of that one. First he stole the plane … well, you know all that."

"Police over the border, when all the bits of the plane were collected, told us they believed there had been an explosion on board but they couldn't say whether it was intended or accidental. I doubt if Doug would have wanted to risk Sale talking."

"Yet it seems like a lot of effort … there must've been something big to make all his shenanigans worth while." It was both a question and a statement.

"The two men Willy had on board the day he was killed were … we've heard them called hitmen though that might not be correct, but involved in a death in north Queensland. And we now know they were related to Doug Towner. I think Doug had several good reasons for wanting the plane and Willy to disappear. I'm sorry you suffered because of all this but, yep, go ahead and sue the socks off Towner." He didn't feel he needed to say that Doug had brought them all in to disrepute.

*

DS Griffin took Enrico Pasquale with him when he went round to see Marilyn Seaman. "Do we want to see them together or make a point of talking with her alone?"

"It probably doesn't matter." Dowdall had considered asking her to come in to the station but he still thought she might've been used by her husband to do his dirty work. It depended on how much she knew about his working life—and possibly the closeness of their marriage.

Griffin and Pasquale were secretly pleased to find her home alone. She said immediately, "I'm sorry, George won't be back till this evening—"

"Don't worry, Mrs Seaman, it's you we would like to have a quick word with." She didn't look pleased but invited them to take chairs by the pool. She was wearing a pink caftan with dangling ear rings with pink glass in them. Griffin privately wondered if they were pink diamonds but decided they were too big …

"It's about this letter you sent to the *Express* to ask them to put in a Death Notice for Donald Smith." He wasn't sure if it was his imagination but he thought she paled slightly behind her deep tan. "Could you talk us through it."

She took the faxed copy and read it slowly before saying, "No, I have no memory of sending it."

"How did you come to know Donald Smith?"

"I don't remember."

"You say in your letter that your husband DI Seaman was still checking to make sure there were no suspicious circumstances but that you knew Donald Smith had relatives round Mareeba and you wouldn't want to risk them hearing of his death perhaps on the radio. So you obviously knew quite a lot about Mr Smith. So you must remember something about him."

"No, I honestly don't remember anything about him."

"So your husband asked you to write this letter?"

"I don't remember."

"He told you what to write?"

"As I said, I don't remember anything about it."

"You will need to do some thinking, Mrs Seaman, because Donald Smith was the man who was found murdered and put in that culvert."

"No, that can't be right." If she was shocked or upset the only clue was a slight tightening of her hand on the chair arm.

"We know your husband said the body was James McCormack but dental records show conclusively that it was Donald Smith. So when your husband told you to write that letter and send that Death Notice to the paper he was asking you to connive at covering up a murder."

"No, no, you've got that all wrong. Truly." She gave Griffin and Pasquale what she obviously thought was an appealing look. "My husband is an absolutely honest man. He genuinely believed it was James McCormack who had been found."

"So he asked you to send a Death Notice for Donald Smith. Why?"

"You will have to ask him."

"No. I am asking you. You signed the letter. There is absolutely no record of a Donald Smith dying in that time-frame. So how did he know Donald Smith was dead and why did you agree to send a letter you must have known was designed to muddy the waters?"

"But you are saying that Donald Smith *was* dead. So how can that letter be wrong?"

"Yes, Donald Smith had been murdered. He had been whacked on the head. But your husband had identified his body as James McCormack. So you connived at a cover-up, Mrs Seaman. That is a very serious state of affairs. So we will have to ask you to come to the station for a formal interview. You are welcome to bring your lawyer. I assume you and your husband use Garth Madden."

For a moment she looked completely bewildered. Then she seemed to grow angry. Perhaps it had something to do with the grin Pasquale had not quite suppressed at the idea of Madden being called to the station. "That is complete nonsense and you will have George to deal with if you keep on hounding me!"

"By all means bring your husband too. After all, he will also need to be questioned formally."

"You can't do this to us! We've never done anything to hurt you and George gave his *life* to the police! You know that! Everyone knows that!" She was growing shriller by the minute.

Pasquale, used to people venting their emotions, didn't look fazed. But Paul Griffin had the horrible feeling that she would probably now claim to have been threatened and victimised, a lone woman, two police, all of that.

"Would you like us to ring Mr Madden for you, tell him we are taking you in for an interview?"

"No, I would not. And you can't make me!"

Griffin suddenly saw horrible headlines 'DI's Wife Manhandled' and all the rest of it. Seaman undoubtedly had friends in the media. He took a moment to calm himself and think how best to go forward. Then he took out his phone and rang Madden's office. He said briskly that Mrs Seaman had been asked to come into the station and could Madden meet them there. Madden's secretary immediately said she was afraid he wasn't available. "When will he be available?"

"Not till tomorrow."

"Okay. Ask him to be at the station at 10 am."

She said reluctantly that she would.

"Mrs Seaman, you will need to be at the station by 10 am, with or without your husband. Mr Madden will be there."

"But—you can't do this to me! I will make sure the media is there to see me being pushed around like some deadbeat druggie—"

"By all means invite the media around. We might let them know what is going on ourselves."

"But—you can't." She half-stood then slumped back into her chair. "I never thought I would see such brutality—and you all owe George for your—for your records—for everything he did for you—"

"We do our jobs, Mrs Seaman. That's all. And you and your husband will now have to tell us why you tried to cover up the murder of Donald Smith." He stood up. Pasquale followed suit.

"But—you can't—" She seemed to shrivel back into her chair and close her eyes.

"Ten o'clock tomorrow."

He might've felt sorry for a woman being used as a patsy by her husband, men could threaten and bully women into doing wrong things for them, except that Marilyn Seaman had enjoyed the good life apparently without a qualm …

*

Leila Burkett ran into Dennis Walsh outside the shops in Buckton. He had come to look at an attempted break-in at the video shop. She had come to get things at the chemist and go to the bank. She said without preamble, "What have you been doing to Justin?"

Dennis was slightly taken aback. "Justin? Don't think I've been doing anything to him. Why?"

"He's like a different person."

"In what way?"

"More confident. More relaxed. More willing to talk. Interested in learning new things. Something must have happened while I was away."

"Well, he got a horse—"

"He told me he's learning to ride."

Dennis thought it was more than that. "Yeah, he's got the buckjumper that put Stirling in hospital. And he's doing some ploughing for Peter Darcy who doesn't know the first thing about it. So that probably makes Justin feel he knows something."

"Well, whatever the reasons—thanks for helping him. I always felt like I was a monster to be pushing him to do things."

Dennis gave that a bit of a grin. He understood the feeling. "Yeah, but keep pushing him. It'll do him good."

And while they were discussing Justin Castley the Seamans and Garth Madden were entering the station and George Seaman was saying loudly, "I will not have my wife persecuted like this."

John Dowdall was tempted to say 'no one is persecuting' but it didn't seem the moment to argue. He ushered them into an interview room and checked the equipment. Then he sat down with DS Griffin and did the preliminaries. Then he passed three copies of the fax of Mrs Seaman's letter across and said calmly, "We can find no record of a death of a Donald Smith in that timeframe so why did you write and send that letter, Mrs Seaman?"

Madden turned to her and said quietly, "You don't have to answer."

It didn't surprise Dowdall or Griffin that every question was stymied by Madden.

After twenty minutes of this, Dowdall said to the room, "Why would you sell your soul to the Plowman family? Was the money they paid really enough to become a party to all their evil?"

"I don't know who you're talking about," Mrs Seaman didn't look at the men beside her. "I've never heard of any Plowmans."

Dowdall hesitated then said calmly, "When the Nebo Company bought James McCormack's farm they used the names of Donald Smith and Alan Dawkins. They then ran such a campaign of harassment against Mrs McCormack that she got so frightened she sold

up and left Mareeba, never asking for the half-a-million dollars she was still owed on the farm. She had been told her husband had been murdered and stuffed in a culvert. The farm was then sold on with the Plowman family making a six hundred thousand dollar profit. Your husband said the body in the culvert was James McCormack but we have now found the body was Donald Smith. Although there was no record of his death anywhere you wrote and told the *Express* he was dead. So clearly your husband knew he was dead. Mr Smith had no relatives except a nephew in Warwick and a sister in the US so maybe he didn't matter. But James McCormack also disappeared. His body has never been found but we assume the Plowman family buried it somewhere. You may not care that Mrs McCormack was cheated, lied to, threatened and effectively chased out of Mareeba by a campaign of harassment. But we do care so we are going to have to charge you with—"

"But Donald Smith *was* dead! How can that be called a lie?" Madden put a hand on Mrs Seaman's arm and said quietly, "Don't say anything."

She looked at him and then back to Dowdall. "Why shouldn't I? George told me he was dead and asked me to send that letter, so what's wrong with that? He was dead so I didn't tell anyone a lie."

Seaman had sat there with his usual genial expression but now it tightened. The Seamans might be a happy couple but this outburst was guaranteed to undermine their 'togetherness'.

"George told you he was dead." Dowdall said this slowly and grimly. "And who told George he was dead?"

"I don't know. How would I know what goes on here? But I think it was that Mr Ferguson who came round to see us and said there were just a few loose ends to be tidied up. I didn't ask what he was talking about."

"He mentioned Donald Smith?"

"I'm sure he said something about a 'Mr Smith'."

The look George Seaman gave his wife was definitely unloving.

"And how much did Mr Ferguson pay your husband for tidying up those loose ends?"

She looked at her husband who scowled at her. Garth Madden said "You don't have to answer that. They're just fishing."

She looked at Madden, hesitated, then said with the air of someone getting something off their chest: "I don't know. George bought a new car about a week after. I was a bit worried but he just said it was time we got something decent. I was brought up never to be in debt and he said he hadn't gone into debt. But I couldn't see how he could pay cash for it."

"We can tell the media you've just been helping with enquiries and you can tell us everything—and I mean everything—and then go into a Protected Witness program—or we can go out there and tell the media that George Seaman with the help of his wife and his lawyer made a gigantic cock-up. It will make us all look bad but at the end of the day we want a very strong spotlight shone on the Plowman family. And we want to find James McCormack's body so his widow can finally lay him to rest."

Madden gave that a tight smile. "You can fish all you like. My clients have done nothing wrong. If an honest mistake was made that is not evidence of any wrongdoing."

Dowdall suppressed the wish to sneer 'honest mistake?' and said calmly: "Very well. We'll leave it there. And we will now go public with the story of the wrong body in that culvert and ask the public for help. They will probably be camped on your doorstep tomorrow morning."

For the first time in months John Dowdall felt energised. After the three had gone out, Madden still talking of putting in a complaint about harassment, he said, "I'd best bring Barron up to speed and you might like to have a chat with Alan Dudley." It wouldn't make

the next few days any easier but he felt he had climbed a personal mountain and that the view beyond was not as terrible as he had pictured.

And Jay Barron when contacted said, “That’s great news. Keep us posted and we’ve just got the date when Willy Jackson picked up a cargo in Charters Towers. It just might’ve been James McCormack well wrapped up.”

*

Book Seventy-One

Case No. 1: When the Wind Blows

Nothing about the small Darling Downs town of Buckton seemed to improve with the arrival of winter. Several people opined that the winters seemed to be getting milder; “not as many frosts” George Hickman said in the Post Office. “But I’m not sure if that’s a good thing or not. Frosts kill the bugs.”

“I wish we could get fewer winds,” Mrs Applegarth said gloomily. “And they always bring the dust. I spend my whole time dusting and vacuuming.”

Her daughter Jenny had taken over as postmistress and she seemed to pop into the Post Office every second day, perhaps as relief from dusting and vacuuming. Several people thought that Jenny might prefer not to have her mother round so often. Bronwen Applegarth had strong opinions on most things including the best way to set out items for sale and how to deal with Lynnell Morton when she came in to badmouth people.

And Mrs Applegarth wasn’t backward in telling other people that she thought the ‘new man’ at the hospital was a ‘pain’. She and Charmian Crabbe ran the Hospital Auxiliary and had already had problems with him. “Mark my words,” she said to several customers in the Post Office, “that man sneaks and snoops and puts people down. I’ve never yet heard him have a good word for anyone, it’s all just pick pick pick all the time, you’d think it was the worst run place in Queensland.”

Other people agreed. Quentin Mayne had taken over from Susan Denby when she moved to Winville and most of Buckton believed he was here to close down their hospital; small country hospitals being seen as fair game by Brisbane bureaucrats.

He had already accused both the kitchen and the office at the hospital of unnecessary waste. Mrs Hall had run the office for years and had never been heard to complain about the small cramped space she inhabited with nothing but a small fan to keep her cool through summer and a little two-bar heater to see her through winter. She wasn’t in the habit of arguing with people, being a mild rather self-effacing soul, but she said firmly, “Mr Mayne, did you have air-conditioning in Brisbane?”

“No, of course not.”

“Are you quite sure about that? We can check, you know.”

"Don't you talk to me like that, Mrs Hall. I want to see this whole place tidy and old records sent to Archives."

"We do send old records when we know people have died or moved—but not before."

"Then you are going to have to cull more rigorously."

"I will consult you next time someone dies."

And Mrs Pitka in the kitchen was also taken to task and told to buy margarine not butter. She said firmly, "The Butter Factory delivers. Margarine comes from Brisbane via the supermarket so it is *not* cheaper."

He had demanded to see the figures and then had insisted she buy in bulk from Toowoomba. "I don't think you quite understand the situation, Mr Mayne. We get milk, cream, fruit, veg, eggs and meat from local businesses. They are fresh and vouched for."

"We are not here to keep local businesses solvent, Mrs Pitka."

"Some of our items are donated by kind local people. It keeps costs down."

"What? Day-old bread? And how do your patients like getting second-best? All our bread should be today's."

"We use the day-old for the morning toast. I make breadcrumbs and bread-and-butter pudding. I haven't noticed you complaining about your meals."

It set Quentin Mayne apart from the town. Unsurprisingly he told his friends back in Brisbane that Buckton was the unfriendliest country town he had ever been in. He said that to Sergeant Walsh when Walsh was around at the hospital to interview old Mr Symons who had been in a slight traffic accident. Dennis had said to Mayne "any other problems?"

"Well, they hated me when I came because the previous sergeant had let them get away with everything, bad driving, fights in the pub, pinching things. But that's not your problem, is it? People know you've come here to find an excuse to close down their hospital so of course they're not happy."

"That's rubbish!" Mayne sounded defensive.

"Is it?"

"Country hospitals do get slack. Waste, carelessness, things not done by the book, repairs not done."

"Bit hard to do repairs when you've got next to nothing in the budget to do them with. There's a limit to how much goodwill you can expect from local tradesmen."

"I'm just trying to get the place up to scratch."

"So what exactly is your problem with the place?"

"I don't think that's police business, Sergeant."

"Then don't complain about unfriendly people. They're not looking forward to having to go to Winville or Oakey when they're bleeding to death."

"That's just being silly."

This was not the best way to get Dennis Walsh on side but he couldn't see any point in arguing. He told Sister Martin that a talk with their local MP might be worthwhile. "And maybe he's just trying to make himself look good. He's maybe here because he's too incompetent to handle a bigger hospital." Jeannie Martin didn't find this very comforting.

*

Dorita who lived next door to the Walsh family was going out to Dalby for a week as her daughter was having a baby and her husband said to Dennis he didn't know how he was going to manage to look after their toddler for a week. Dennis believed that Maurie always believed he couldn't cope and then was surprised to find that he sometimes could.

"You'll be okay."

"Ellie offered to help." Elise Walsh had given little Michael two Golden Pekin bantams and the little boy loved them, feeding them, making them boxes to climb on. "She'll probably want to put Little Mick on a pony. I don't reckon he's big enough."

"Don't think you need to start worrying yet."

"D'you think Fiona could tell me what to do?"

"Maurie, you've been looking after that kid since Day One. Stop fussing, you'll be fine." It got tiring telling other people they could cope. It would be nice to talk with someone who had a head full of confidence. And Walsh's friend Russ Spicer was cheerful when he rang Dennis one night. Russ was good at what he did and didn't need to be told so. "Your place out West, mate. I've got a bit from Andy. He talked with Henley Hoysted and found where that water sample went. But you didn't have it quite right. Or Henley didn't. They had obviously been mining pollucite which you can refine down to cesium, depending on the percentage. Cesium reacts explosively with both air and water so you'd need to be careful. So what they found was specks of unrefined pollucite and that the creek water had reacted to cesium and there were also traces of the oil you would store the cesium in to stop it reacting."

"Pollucite, eh? Never heard of it. Is it dangerous?"

"No. Not in its original form. Some New Age folk use it in jewellery, say it has healing properties. It looks like lumps of quartz. Quite pretty. But you can refine cesium from it and then you can get radioactive isotopes for medical use by refining the cesium further. That is dangerous. But the very small quantities in the water would not be dangerous to stock unless you got a drought and the stock were all going to the same small waterholes."

"Makes sense. So where are things at?"

"He talked with his tutor and then he took a week and went out to Longreach and talked with a guy there about testing the water all down that creek and they went out to those three stations. The guy on the Nebo property told them they couldn't come on to the land without permission. He was told that they didn't need his permission to check that creek for pollution. So they took samples all up and down the creek. It's mostly dry at the moment so they took soil samples all along the creek bed. It turned into quite a big operation. Andy is really chuffed. He's going to do a full-scale article on it. He's been looking into all the properties right down to where that creek runs into Cornish Creek then into the Thomson River. Local people weren't happy when they heard about the testing because any pollution can't get flushed out to sea. It'll all end up in Lake Eyre. But it'll be so diluted it shouldn't be a problem, I don't reckon."

"So have they tracked down the source?"

"They're looking. Nothing visible from the air. The company has been served notice so they're now working back up from where it seems to have entered the creek. If it's a natural outcrop which seems likely they might already have removed drills and crushing equipment and so on but there'll still be signs—"

"I'd say they've covered over their whole operation."

"Even so. It'll still be findable."

"So I wonder what was in that original box of samples that was on Willy Jackson's plane. Would they cart cesium in plastic bags in a box on a plane?"

"No, I'd say you were looking at their pollucite samples. They'd want them assayed for the cesium content."

"So is that cesium stuff valuable?"

"Oh, definitely. But it would depend on the percentage to make it worthwhile mining out there, then you'd have your cartage."

"So is this pollucite stuff found with uranium?"

"I'm not the expert, Den, but Andy didn't mention uranium."

"I wonder where that original box I found hidden in that disused meatworks ended up. They made a big song-and-dance about it being all hush-hush." And there was certainly evidence that the Plowman family had some knowledge and interest in finding uranium. He thought he needed to do something about his own ignorance …

"Well, I wouldn't want your Plowmans going round with samples of cesium. You could still do some very nasty things with it."

"And would you find it with a Geiger counter?"

"Not sure, Den, I think you'd best run it past a geologist."

"Uh huh, well, tell Andy thanks from me—but tell him to be a bit careful. The Plowmans are going to be buzzing like a wasps' nest … and I wonder if James McCormack *is* somewhere there." But he said this almost as an afterthought. McCormack wasn't his business. And Russ was not up in the McCormack case. But after Dennis had hung up he thought 'is McCormack what got Willy Jackson killed?' And then he sat down and sent an e-mail to Carlton Payne to say 'looks like your uranium samples that were on Willy's plane were pollucite. Longreach is investigating that Nebo property for the source of the pollution found in the creek. You might be able to get Longreach police out there to look for bodies at the same time.'

Payne thought it wiser not to respond immediately but he said to his wife, "So, it looks like that old devil has got us the entré we needed on to that property."

"What old devil?"

"Dennis Bloody Walsh. And maybe it isn't what happened when Willy Jackson landed. It's what happened when he took off?"

*

Walsh, next time he was in Winville, said to his boss Inspector Jake Moss, "Maybe we were all looking at Willy Jackson and Wayne Booth round the wrong way."

"Not my business, Dennis, but in what way?"

"All that business about them being lovers. I think Willy was playing around much closer to home."

"Is this something Brent and Jenny need to know?"

Jake got up and went through to the CIB room. DS Petra Moore had been in hospital having a tumour removed from her brain and was now in a convalescent home. They had a relief DS, Joel Brosnan from Toowoomba. "Dennis has some more speculation for you," Jake said drily. They all looked up.

"About what?" Brent Kelly after feeling rather fed up with some of their more trivial cases had got re-energised by their success with the Bulgarian problem. If the Von Scheisser patriarch was never brought to book it wouldn't be Winville's fault.

"Think Willy Jackson was having an affair with David Ranke." Dennis lent on a desk.

"Why?" Jake sat down and prepared to listen.

"Well, the puzzle in all this is why didn't Wayne Booth, Jill Jackson and Eddie Morton who were all at the farm that day ever do or say anything about the death of Willy. I always thought it might have something to do with them being paid off. But would you really take money and keep your mouth shut if your best mate'd just been killed? I thought maybe they were scared and I think Jill was but if Wayne or Eddie were scared of anyone they hid it pretty well. David Ranke was Eddie's half-brother. Eddie had sticky fingers but I'd reckon he was pretty strait-laced in his private life. He certainly didn't approve of Bryce Hoysted. And I think Jill maybe fancied David herself. And I think she was scared stories might leak out about her husband carrying on with Ranke, that wouldn't go down well out there and this is all those years ago. Some of her family hadn't wanted her to marry Willy in the first place. Wayne's harder to pin down. Maybe something happened. Maybe Willy said he would tell the women that Wayne was chatting up that he already had a wife. Maybe Wayne didn't want Willy to get involved with the Plowmans. Who knows? Maybe Willy was becoming an embarrassment. Maybe it had something to do with money."

Everyone digested this in silence. Then Brent said, "So where does this leave the investigation?"

"Well, Ben's done some calculations about fuel usage on that plane. So it might be possible to find out where it refueled that day. And it looks like those were pollucite samples on that plane. Not uranium. Not scheelite. But you can do your own investigation." Dennis straightened up and he and Jake went out again.

Jenny and Brent looked at each other. Brosnan said, "What was all that about?"

"The deaths of Willy Jackson and Ruby Jackson on a farm at Prickly Creek. But it's too complicated to go into just now. The thing is—Eddie Morton is still an open case too. Can we use any of this to … are there any clues in all that?"

Jenny Forman gave it some thought then said, "The gun … and the ute … maybe they're there, alongside that saddle and the fancy vest those people saw at that service station? Out on that property, I mean."

For a moment Brent looked blank then he said "Bingo! You might throw a shirt away but would you throw away a good saddle?"

"The trouble is—one Western saddle probably looks pretty much like another Western saddle."

"Only up to a point. And if they don't use horses to muster then a saddle would be out of place there. And those people at the garage got part of the number plate. I'll pull that file and check. You never know—we might be able to put some egg on those Cold Case guys." The two Brisbane detectives who had tried to pin Eddie Morton's death on to a neighbour Billy the Lad had never been forgiven by anyone in Winville CIB.

Brosnan still looked lost but said he didn't mind to have a look at the file too. All he'd worked on here so far were two burglaries. Brent and Jenny looked pleased. A new set of eyes just might pick up on something they had missed because of familiarity with the case.

*

In Townsville Paul Griffin said cheerfully, "Good news. That station out West is getting investigated."

"Who by?" several people said in unison.

"Longreach." No one was looking at John Dowdall as Griffin spoke but his sense of relief was almost palpable. "I think I need a good map and then I'm going to try and get Alan Dudley on side." Journalist Alan Dudley might pride himself on his impartial criticisms but however he wrote the story it might be a nail in a Plowman family coffin. Even just linking them to a crime …

They had already gone public with the news that the Body in the Culvert was Donald Smith not James McCormack and asking for help from the public for last sightings of Donald Smith. So far the only person to contact them had been Nancy Crawford. They all felt a little guilty about not warning her. Leaving her to hear such momentous news through the media seemed unkind. And more so now that they couldn't give her any real indication of where her nephew had ended up. And Mrs McCormack who had carried an urn around with her for so many years would now have to relinquish it to a man in Warwick who might or might not treasure it.

Alan Dudley said rather cynically when Paul Griffin rang him: "So you've got another cock-up for me to publicise for you? Whose body this time?"

Griffin told him about Willy Jackson picking up a crate in Charters Towers three days after James McCormack's disappearance and about the property being investigated. "It is leased, it seems, by Northern Agricultural Supplies here so it might be interesting to know how they're handling the search of their property."

"You'd like me to do your dirty work for you, would you?"

"I'm just suggesting there might be a good story in it."

"So kind. At the moment I am more interested in looking into George Seaman. Looking at corrupt cops might be more rewarding than looking for your Plowman family."

"And safer. True."

Griffin didn't see any point in trying to convince anyone, and certainly not Dudley, that George Seaman was merely incompetent or mistake-prone. He didn't know that he had pressed a useful button. Dudley had never admitted to concern about any story he had covered. But then some of Townsville's criminal element had responded with a dreary lack of imagination, shit in the mailbox, a fire in his shed, his car backed into; it might have upset his wife but he knew it wasn't the same as pointing a finger straight at a Plowman. They could cut loose the Bells on Cradock Downs (rather than the manager Todd Vercelli) who had been charged with receiving stolen goods but had turned into oysters when it came to telling anyone how they had come by a number of gold bars. Mrs Bell had said her father always put his savings into gold and why not but unfortunately some of the bars still had their original stamping. That was a carelessness the Plowmans would not easily forgive, Dudley thought, but then he was unaware that Todd Vercelli might also link to the Plowman family.

Alan Dudley rang an old friend on the Longreach *Leader* to ask if he knew what had been found on that property. Isaac Schmid said they had found some mining equipment but nothing that couldn't be justified. "It seems a little tinpot company called Brecon Hill Mining had a lease over the area and had taken a few samples but had decided the ore body wasn't rich enough to proceed with. They were using a little drilling company from Townsville to sink the bores."

"Now that is interesting. It was Brecon Hill Mining which had a lease over Cradock Downs—where they found those gold bars. They were obviously planning to reduce them all to gold dust then gradually sell it on the open market. I think Brecon Hill might pay some more digging."

"It's not listed. I checked. Seems it's gone belly-up. But the lease is still in their name. I'm not sure what the situation is when that happens. Whether the lease still has to run its course or can be re-assigned."

"Interesting."

"And the fact the company is no longer listed is not quite the same as saying it has been dissolved or merged or become a non-listed subsidiary."

Though neither of them knew it this was also a question which DSS Jay Barron was looking into. Dudley agreed with Isaac on this, it might be helpful to know when and why the Stock Exchange removed the company or was it simply not trading at the moment, for whatever reason, and said, "Anything else found on that property?"

"I haven't heard of anything. Why? What were you hoping to find?"

"Cops here think it might be where James McCormack was buried."

"Who's James McCormack?"

"His body was s'posed to have been found in a culvert here, some fifteen years ago. Now they've found that body was really a Donald Smith. So the hunt is on for James McCormack."

"That sounds like a major cock-up. Didn't they check?"

"It's beginning to look like the lead detective on the case, one George Seaman, took a bribe to identify the body as McCormack."

Schmid was tempted to query this. Where were all the rest of the team? How could one investigator manage that kind of sleight of hand? But he left it for the moment and put through a call to see if police in Longreach might have a story for him. He only got a non-committal, "Not so far".

And Alan Dudley thought later 'a little drilling company from Townsville'? Was that something worth following up? Would they tell him what they had been drilling for?

*

Fiona Greehan was in the Post Office with several other women when Lynnell Morton came in. Mrs Morton as soon as she saw Fiona put a theatrical hand up to pinch her nose and say, "Uh oh, there's a very nasty smell in here. I'll come back later," and turned to go out.

Jenny Applegarth started to say, "I haven't noticed—" but Mrs Dalby said firmly to Lynnell's retreating back, "Thou shalt not bear false witness". Fiona watched Mrs Morton leave and said calmly, "The poor foolish woman."

Both Mrs West and Robina Curtis were also there and Mrs West said in surprise, "Why would you feel sorry for her?"

"Well, think about it. She is reduced to pimping a young relative to make a living. Her daughter is in prison. Her other two daughters want nothing to do with her. Even Mary Burchall now avoids her."

The other women could see the truth in this but it didn't make Lynnell nicer and Mrs West who found Lynnell very hard to deal with, even alarming, said, "You may be right but I would still rather not have my morning spoiled by Lynnell."

"I know," Mrs Curtis was friendly with Pauline Scully who was Lynnell's niece and could have added that Pauline now had nothing but criticism for her aunt, "but why do you think she always has it in for you? Did Dennis … well, of course, that's a silly question. He was the one to charge Cherry, wasn't he?"

Fiona had sometimes wondered why Lynnell seemed to take pleasure in singling her out. Of course Dennis *had* charged both Lynnell and her daughter over the years but she thought it was more personal than that. "Someone once said to me that Lynnell resents women who have men in their lives. I don't know if that's true."

Jenny Applegarth didn't have a current boyfriend but the other three women had all been married for many years. Robina privately resented a husband who used the excuse of a bad back to do nothing and leave her to go out to work but she could see that Lynnell had been alone for many years. Mrs West said what they were all thinking. "It would take a brave man to take Lynnell on."

"It's a sort of chicken-and-egg situation," Fiona said thoughtfully. "She probably resents the fact that she never gets invited out but she does nothing to make herself—"

"But she *is* getting visitors," Mrs Curtis said suddenly. "I've seen them. You know those people who've moved on to the place that was a horse stud and they've got all those grown-up kids and I've seen two of the girls coming round to Lynnell's in the mornings about ten and they keep the blinds down till nearly lunchtime."

Mrs West stared at her. "You don't mean they go round to," she dropped her voice, "you know … "

"There is a lot of adultery in this town," Mrs Dalby said briskly. "But not usually in the morning."

Fiona looked at Jenny and was tempted to burst out laughing. But she didn't think Mrs Dalby would see the humour in her statement. Mrs Dalby was a strict Christian and was in the habit of quoting the *Bible* regularly. She was not known for treating anything with light-hearted merriment.

"So why do they go there?" Mrs West was still searching for a reason.

"Coming up with some kind of mischief probably. Lynnell enjoys thinking up things … you know she does." Mrs Curtis looked at the Post Office clock and thought it was time she was on her way.

Fiona too went out but she took the thought away with her. Was Lynnell using two young women to help her cook up some kind of trouble for someone? No ideas came to her although there was the faint possibility that Lynnell kept tabs on young Shona's customers and might like to use that information in some way. So could these other young women be

some kind of ‘decoy’, some sort of ‘honey trap’? She wasn’t sure what she meant and there were no obviously wealthy men around Buckton who might be worth targeting.

As she came round the corner she came upon George and May Hickman walking their little dog and carrying several shopping bags. She stopped to say hullo, hoping they would take her mind off Lynnell Morton. George asked her if she had met the new Anglican minister.

“Yes. Why?” Winville had provided services every fortnight after the Chandlers left but now Buckton had its own minister again. The Reverend Drew Hamilton had moved in and at the end of the school term his wife had arrived with their four children. She proved to be a young Thai woman, Meetak, and several local women had gone round to offer help (and possibly satisfy their curiosity) and it had soon become obvious that the new minister’s wife saw her role as wife and mother as a full time job. She had said no to becoming involved in any of the church activities. Or she had said nervously ‘I don’t think I could’. Vera Hopgood had said, “I know I can’t talk as I don’t have four children but I don’t really think she’s looking after them very well.” As Vera was a kind woman this was seen as a very mild criticism. Other people were less forbearing calling the Hamilton children ‘little horrors’ and the house a ‘terrible mess’. Fiona was sympathetic. It must be hard for a woman from a Thai village to meet the expectations of pattern housekeepers like Bronwen Applegarth and Gwen Alford and hard for a young woman who had not been brought up in an Anglican tradition to follow someone like Ivy Chandler who had run the Sunday School, the Guild, organised the annual fête, drawn up flower and cleaning rosters, done the garden round the church, helped at the op-shop, visited hospital patients; in other words done as much as her husband did. Suddenly the church was scratching around for people to take on all the duties she had done apparently without effort.

“I don’t suppose you’ve heard anything but there’s a story going round town that Dennis told him not to have any more children and to look after the ones he already has. Don’t know where that one got started.”

“I’m sure Dennis hasn’t even met him. He doesn’t go to church and so far as I know they haven’t come in with a police problem. I can ask him but I can’t see him telling a minister how to run his life.”

May smiled at that. Dennis didn’t mind to hand his opinion out now and then. But this sounded unlikely. “Have any of the children come to his attention?”

“Not that I’ve ever heard. And they’re quite young, aren’t they?”

“There’s two at the primary school but I think they’re only about Grade Two or Three. And the others are only little.”

“So why have they got a bad reputation already?”

“I think it’s only mischief and a lack of supervision. One of them was throwing things at a neighbour’s puppy and Karen said they took a toy from the shop. But their mum never seems to know where they are or what they’re doing. I think she is feeling rather lost.”

*

It was well into the evening before Fiona sat down with Dennis. He had been late home from the station and the question she really needed to put to him was about his holidays. Had he decided what he’d like to do and where he’d like to go.

“Never met the bloke,” he said in answer to Fiona’s question about the minister. “But you know what this bloody place’s like. They’re not happy unless they’re coming up with some weird story.”

“Mmmm. But what we really need to think about is your break. Have you set a date? And can Ben manage?”

“He’s a clever kid. Or clever with numbers. Not so good with people. I’ve asked Jake when can he spare someone to help him.” He had been impressed by all the calculations Ben

had done with working out fuel usage in that Cessna and putting in variables like speed and altitude. He had sent the results to Carlton Payne in Brisbane along with a note to say 'Ben's the sort of lad you could use'. "But he's still happy to be here. Apparently bloody Merrill told him he was an atheist and Ben's spent all this time trying to think how best to respond to that to get Merrill to change his mind."

"It *is* hard to change someone's mind—unless they're open to change."

"Don't know if Merrill really believes that. I think he's just a lazy sod and this way he doesn't need to feel guilty if he never does anything to help anyone."

"Because—if you don't think your behaviour matters to God because there isn't a God?"

"Uh huh. So long's as you're keeping your job and staying within the law—that's all you need to worry about."

"I suppose it's true. I mean that most of the people who go out of their way to help others have religion somewhere in their background—even if they say they don't personally believe—their parents or grandparents, a teacher, a friend, a neighbour."

"But Ben is still convinced that he can't be true to his beliefs unless he can also convince the doubters and non-believers. I told him to stop fussing about Merrill." He had actually told Ben that Merrill was someone to feel sorry for because he had next to nothing in his life: "At the end of the day he can't look back on anything and say 'I did a good job there' and his stubby isn't going to jump up and say 'Yep, you really did'." Ben hadn't been convinced but he hadn't mentioned Merrill since then which Dennis saw as a plus.

"I see. So on a different subject—if we take a long weekend somewhere then you can go off and have a few quiet weeks doing whatever you'd like to do."

"So is there somewhere you'd like to go? Some place you haven't been?"

"There's lots of places I haven't been. What about a day round Esk and Somerset Dam. And then I think you should go and have a couple of weeks to yourself up north."

She knew Dennis's mother had not been well and although he would not necessarily be a soothing presence for a frail old lady she thought he should go. "We'll drop you at the airport and go and visit my mum." But when Elise, busy with her plans to ride at the Buckton Show, heard what was in the wind she said immediately she would rather go and spend the weekend with Lyn Harding.

Although Fiona could understand this she didn't feel she knew (or liked) Lyn Harding well enough to foist Elise on to her. She could see the attraction. Lyn always had dozens of horses there. But Fiona felt a secret regret that Elise had chosen to go in this direction. She was still an avid reader. She still went to see Anya Mackie now and then to talk Russian with her. But most of her time she was content to be in old slacks smelling of horse and busy with grooming or riding or planning. Fiona knew there was no point in regretting that Elise had dropped dancing and music and most of her languages. It was Dennis who had told Elise she needed to keep her other languages 'just ticking over' and Elise had seen the sense in that. But any image of Elise as someone dainty, graceful, very feminine, had had to be relinquished. Telling herself it was enough that Rob shared her interest in ballet and music didn't quite remove that secret sense of something lost.

"I'm sure she would be glad to have me to help out," Elise said as though to clinch the plan. "She's expecting a baby. So I can do things for her."

A baby! Fiona found the idea of Lyn Harding with a baby quite hard to get used to. "Well, I will discuss it with your dad but I hope the baby's father is being useful."

"He's still got his job but he comes a lot."

Fiona assumed Elise was referring to Brent Kelly but she couldn't bring herself to ask. Perhaps she was being unfair but she didn't really want Elise drawn further and further into Lyn Harding's world. She felt that Dennis agreed with her, that what Lyn Harding did in

her private life was her own business, but she wasn't the ideal person for Elise to perhaps look to as a role model. Her philosophy of life, according to Dennis, was 'grab what you want and worry about other people later'.

"It's not Lyn herself, I don't think," he said thoughtfully, "it's the horses. I can't really see her taking on Lyn's ideas about people and money and whatever."

"I hope you're right." Elise had always been the dominant one in her friendships with other girls. But it was different when it came to her looking up to an older woman. "I'm sure Lyn has some good qualities but I'm afraid I see her as a tough cookie who's all about getting what she wants and it doesn't matter about anyone else."

Perhaps it wouldn't matter for a long weekend. It might even be good for Elise to see how much hard work was involved in running a place like Lyn's rather than just playing at horses. And Fiona was wise enough to see that this wasn't just about Lyn; that it was her cherished idea of Elise going to her old school which would never come to fruition. To take Elise away from somewhere where she was happy and fulfilled to send her away to boarding school in Brisbane, no matter how much better the education, would be an unkind thing to do.

"And what if she loses interest in horses in a few years—will she regret that she didn't do other things?"

"No. She will have had these years. And you never stop being interested in horses, even if you stop riding them." She accepted his view; he knew much more about children who loved horses. "I know. But it never stops me being nervous, thinking of all the things that could happen."

Unexpectedly, Dennis said, "Then that makes two of us."

*

Robina Curtis was not a particularly nosy woman. But after telling the other women in the Post Office about Mrs Morton's unexpected guests she found herself watching the house much more closely. And it was true that when those couple of strange girls came no one else did. So they were obviously visiting Lynnell and Shona for some other reason but was it because they just liked each other. There was something about the brisk way those girls entered carrying a couple of big bags which somehow suggested it wasn't just a social visit. Were they practicing their technique for going out selling something? Were they trying to sell Lynnell something? They still looked brisk when they left. And it wasn't the sort of departure where Lynnell stood in the doorway and said 'see you soon'. So they were doing some kind of business … but what? She shared it with her husband Peter who said "Who cares what Lynny does?"

"Well, don't you think it's all a bit odd?"

"So who are these girls you're talking about?"

"You know those people that bought that horse stud? They've got lots of big kids living there, you know, grown-up kids."

"Must be a bit boring for them."

"They always bring big bags with them when they come around." She couldn't decide what they would most likely be carrying. Clothes? Make-up? Kitchen things?

"What sort of bags?"

"They look quite heavy."

"Probably making a girly movie—you know, to put up on that internet thing the kids are always talking about."

Robina digested the idea in silence. She knew nothing about what he called a 'girly movie' or how they might be made. But wouldn't they need some men … she retreated in embarrassment from the thought. Surely Lynnell wouldn't be into something like that anyway. "I wouldn't think Lynnell would know anything about making movies—"

"She doesn't need to. You ask the boys, they'll know all about it. You just point the camera then somehow you put it out there in that cyberspace stuff they talk about."

"Why would you do that?" Robina felt her own ignorance of this new world children seemed to enter so glibly.

"So someone'll think this is a real person and then you get them to pay, don't ask me how, but the boys'll know."

"What sort of someone … and why would they pay?"

"There's lots of desperate guys out there … you make them think this's a real chick wanting them … don't ask me how but Lynney must know all about it seeing Cherry and now this other girl … and she's cleverer than you'd think."

"Nastier too," Robina said almost to herself. Then more briskly, "But is it legal?"

"Dunno. S'pose so. But Lynney wouldn't worry about that."

"Should we tell Sergeant Walsh?"

"You don't know that anything is really going on, it's just your stickybeaking, and anyway he doesn't know much about cyberspace, I don't reckon."

She could see that all this was true. "But that young fella does I'm sure. Pauly said he's some sort of brain in that way." He agreed that young Constable Waters probably did know more about such things than his boss.

*

Dr Leslie Davis at Winville District Hospital hid his surprise pretty well when he heard that Susan Denby was to be their new Assistant Director. He had later said to a couple of junior nurses, "Pity. She made a mess of Buckton, so let's hope she doesn't repeat her incompetence here". When asked how he knew that he said wth an air of assurance "They're having to send someone from Brisbane to sort the place out and get it back on track."

From the way he said this it sounded as though he really did know. The young women would have been surprised to know that it was all pure speculation and spite on his part. And when, after Quentin Mayne's arrival, stories reached Winville about his criticisms it really looked as though Dr Davis had been right. Susan Denby *had* left a mess behind her. Several nurses wondered how she'd got the Winville position and could only conjecture that there hadn't been any better applicants. But for those not in Leslie Davis's orbit it was soon obvious that Susan Denby was both pleasant and professional. Even those who had believed Davis were conflicted by the stories they'd heard and their own personal dealings with Ms Denby. Several people noticed that Dr Davis seemed to avoid Ms Denby. He had often stayed to have a cup of tea and a chat with her predecessor but showed no sign of wanting to socialise with her. For some this seemed to back his assessment of her. For others it suggested she knew more than he wanted about him.

Susan had been quite open with her senior staff and her boss, Mrs Gorman, that she'd had a brief fling with Dr Davis when she'd first arrived in Buckton. "But I soon realised I'd made a mistake and I didn't want to be a party to him cheating on his wife. So I ended it and later I apologised to his wife. He had told me they were planning to divorce."

"But they *did* divorce," someone said.

"She later divorced him. But I didn't want to be a part of his life and I soon realised he was not a good doctor. He diagnosed a woman with pneumonia when she had hepatitis. I urged him to do tests because the symptoms were different and he told me I didn't know what I was talking about. We got a visit from the Health Department because we had not notified them about the case. I am just thankful it hadn't spread."

"But surely … well, didn't they ask him for his notes and everything?"

"You know our Dr Davis." She was about to go on when she saw the others nodding. They *did* know that Leslie Davis was adept at sliding his mistakes on to other people, at talking his way out of trouble.

It was Sr Uniacke who said suddenly, “Then why do we only *talk* about his mistakes?”

“What do you suggest we do?” Susan Denby said quietly. She felt that as ‘the new kid on the block’ she shouldn’t be the one to look like she was out to ‘get’ their doctor.

“First, we document his orders, his treatments, his diagnoses, which we believe to be incorrect. We’ve all had a grumble now and then. Let’s start putting everything down. Dates, times, details. But it needs to be a collective effort, not just one or two people.” She didn’t need to spell it out. One person could be undermined. The whole staff, or most of them, was too much for one doctor to try to get sacked.

Dr Watling did not immediately hear what was going on. His relations with the staff were correct and professional and usually pleasant but he didn’t count any of them as personal friends. It was only after people heard he’d gone to the UK with the vet from Buckton that there was talk of him having a ‘friend’.

It was a potentially awkward situation when everyone who’d had a grumble put down their complaints. What to actually *do* with the report. Susan Denby knew staff were looking to her for guidance and she was reluctant to say do this or do that. But she could see that no one had put down anything about Maryann Dillon and her original claim to want to sue Dr Sorenson, apparently at Dr Davis’s suggestion. ‘I think, next time I’m in Buckton, I should go and talk with Maryann.’

But Maryann, when Susan Denby called in after a visit with Kath O’Brien and Jeannie Martin, at first said she wasn’t going to talk about it. Susan hesitated, then said quietly, “I think you were entitled to ask for compensation. Dr Sorenson had been negligent, and I do not think it would have affected your Centrelink payments—or only in a very minor way. I wondered if someone had given you some wrong advice about your Centrelink obligations.”

“You mean—I shoulda got money, after all?”

“Well, I think so. I haven’t been into your case, of course, but someone would’ve been willing to go with you to discuss it with Centrelink. You needed that extra bit of help to get back on your feet.”

“He told me, the bastard, Centrelink would take it all so it wouldn’t be worth asking.”

“When you say he?”

“That bloody doctor, that Davis, first he tells me to ask for twenty thousand and we’ll go halves, then he changes his tune. He comes round all smarmy and says he didn’t realise I lived on a disability pension. Hah! Course he knew. They all knew. He told me he was sure I could get money out of that Sorenson, and he says he’s a poof and won’t want any bad publicity, and then he tells me I can get more outa Buckton Council ’cause they sprayed me weeds.”

“So you would get twenty thousand and he would get twenty thousand?”

“Yep, reckon so. That’s if they paid up. An’ he reckoned it was a sure thing.”

“There was nothing wrong with him making the suggestion or helping you write the letters but he stepped over the line when he wanted to take some of your money, and he didn’t report it.”

“Why should he report it? Just him an’ me he reckoned. Like it was a private thing.”

“He is employed by the hospital so he cannot carry on private business in the hospital.”

“You mean—he can come round here and do business—but not while I was in the hospital?”

“If you were a private patient of his it might be different but he can’t be making money out of the hospital’s patients.” She thought she, if not the hospital, probably needed some legal guidance on this. And what exactly did his terms of employment spell out? It was

a grey area when the hospital took both private and public patients. Leslie Davis could have his own private patients admitted. But Maryann Dillon was very definitely not his private patient. In fact she was not his public patient either as it had been Dr Watling who had operated and who had determined her post-operative care.

"So whatta you going to do with him?"

"Would you be willing to come and see the lawyer here and do a signed and witnessed statement?"

"And what's in it for me?"

"What would be most useful to you?"

Susan Denby, like most people in Buckton, was reluctant to put money in Maryann's pocket as it would only be spent at the pub, something which was hardly going to help her health.

Maryann sat considering this for a while. At last she said, "Would someone cut me grass?"

"Yes, I'm sure I can arrange that. Martin is a very kind man. I'm sure he wouldn't mind coming round every so often." Martin Hobbes was the groundsman at the hospital.

"Then that'll do. But you'll have to tell me what to say."

Ms Denby thought it might be better coming from Sonia Lockwood that the statement had to be in Maryann's own words.

When she received a copy of Maryann's affidavit from Sonia Lockwood with a note affixed to ask what she wanted done with it, whether she wanted copies sent to anyone else, she added it to the pile of statements other people had prepared. But should copies go to the people Maryann had originally asked for money? Dr Sorenson? The Buckton Shire Council? Should she send it on to Dr Davis rather than waiting for everyone to present whatever they wanted to the collection Sr Uniacke was putting into chronological order? In the end she thought she should wait and discuss it with some of her senior staff.

Case No. 2: Connections

Alan Dudley knew perfectly well that the police would be happy for him to do some private digging. He suspected they would even be happy if he criticised George Seaman so long as he dug up other useful things. Seaman, for so long seen as 'the Grand Old Man' was now definitely less popular. He began by going back over the Cradock Downs case. Mr and Mrs Bell were both in their seventies. This might have made the court go easy on them. Mrs Bell said it was her father who had believed in putting money into gold 'for a rainy day'. Her father was dead so she didn't know where he had bought that gold. As no one had linked the Bells to a sunken ship off the Queensland coast carrying gold bars from Hong Kong there was a gap which no one seemed to be able to bridge. Where, when, and how had her father acquired the gold? The Bells had been charged with receiving stolen goods but had eventually been given a suspended sentence. A big story for a small sentence. Dudley as he looked over his notes again found himself thinking: 'Did their manager know more than he ever let on?' The manager, Todd Vercelli, had been questioned about that old fossicker, Ted Braine, who had been killed on the road, and had said he had had next to nothing to do with him as the old man always camped well away from the homestead.

He wrote 'Todd Vercelli' and underlined the name. There had been an accountant called Vercelli… Vercelli and Harmer … and he now knew that a director of Northern Agricultural Supplies was a Vercelli. Were they all related? He checked the phone book. There was an R. Vercelli listed. He was also listed on the current electoral roll as Richard Vercelli. But where had Todd gone? Cradock Downs had been sold. 'I need to find him.'

He spent several days trying to track down a Todd Vercelli and finally accepted that it would need more time and resources than he could muster. But Richard surely deserved a visit. He found a woman and some young children there. But they said they didn't know who he was talking about and shut the door in his face. He tried Northern Agricultural Supplies but was told Mr Vercelli was more in the nature of a sleeping partner and rarely there.

"Do you have a contact number for him?"

"Sorry, can't give it out without his permission."

"So how does he do business?"

"Through the company."

"And would you know a Todd Vercelli?"

"No. Sorry. Can't help you there."

Frank Stewart said to his wife that night: "Can't think why people keep coming round wanting to ask me stuff."

"It is a bit odd," she agreed. "But then why set up a company if you're never going to have anything to do with it. Maybe it's all above board … "

Frank Stewart knew a lot about fertilizers and pesticides but he wasn't particularly perceptive where people were concerned. He was even secretly glad that he had two bosses who largely left him to run things his own way. He didn't know anything about their other interests and privately thought he didn't want to.

"What are you suggesting?"

"Well, I don't know that I am suggesting anything. But you've almost never even set eyes on those Italians that run it? Don't you think that's a bit funny?"

"Just the way they do things, I guess. Bloke asked me if I knew a Todd Vercelli. Said I didn't."

"But why would a reporter want to ask you? You don't think there's something crooked going on?"

She sounded a little apprehensive.

"Wouldn't think so, love."

"It couldn't connect to that strange story in the paper, could it? How the police got the wrong man."

"I don't see how." But then he made the connection between the Paul Griffin who had come to the warehouse and the Paul Griffin who had been on TV asking people to come forward if they remembered seeing a Donald Smith. But although he puzzled over it vaguely all evening he couldn't come up with anything. He had never heard of Donald Smith till now and couldn't see how he could have anything to do with the company. He didn't even think the company had been around when Smith died.

But the thought worried him vaguely. Next morning he rang Vercelli to tell him what had happened and did he want anybody told anything. "And he asked me about a Todd Vercelli? Is he someone I need to know about?"

"Of course not. Don't worry about it. Pity the police made such a giant cock-up but it's nothing to do with us." And Vercelli went on to talk about the business, sounding knowledgeable and interested. But something, something almost too vague to be pinned down, had changed for Frank Stewart.

*

Alan Dudley went round to the suburban bungalow which was now home to the Bells. There was a For Sale board by the front gate. He wasn't really surprised that the Bells might be thinking of moving. Too many people in Townsville knew about the court case. Mrs Bell came to the front door and said immediately, when he introduced himself, that she had nothing to say to him. She went to close the door but he could see in her a dilemma. She

wanted to sell the house so being rude to him, even if he wasn't there as a potential buyer, might not be a good idea.

"Mrs Bell, I'm looking for the Todd Vercelli who worked for you," he said quickly. "I can't seem to find him anywhere. I wondered if you knew where he went when you sold out."

"No. I don't know anything about his whereabouts."

She looked old and tired and, he thought, a little apprehensive. It seemed to be the moment to show some sympathy. "I know what the court said but I've always been a bit dubious. You didn't strike me as the sort of person who would be involved in any wrongdoing."

She hesitated then said he could come in. It might just be that she didn't feel comfortable standing in the doorway with a well-known journalist. She waved him to a chair in the pleasant room. "Why do you say that?"

"I have found two other Vercellis. One was an accountant. Richard. I haven't tracked him down. Another Richard, or maybe it's the same one, is a director of a small company called Northern Agricultural Supplies. I don't yet know for sure but I don't think the company is squeaky clean. It merged with a company called Nebo which has been cited in the case of that body they found dead in a culvert. It doesn't mean that Todd Vercelli is related to anyone here but it isn't a common name."

Miriam Bell sat quietly, apparently digesting all this and trying to decide how to respond. Finally she said, "I don't think Todd Vercelli was his real name."

"Why did you think that?" He hoped his sudden curiosity didn't show.

"Our children are long gone so we said he could have the wing of the house to himself. He always said he could do everything, he didn't need me to vacuum or change sheets or anything. I didn't mind. But one time when he was out with my husband I thought I would go in and just make sure he really was keeping his rooms fairly clean. You know that young men don't always bother much."

"How old d'you think he was?"

"Oh, late thirties."

"Mmmm."

"His wallet was sitting with his things on the dressing table. I know it sounds awful to go poking round but I was curious about him, whether he had family, a girlfriend, maybe kids somewhere. So I had a look. There were two driving licences in his wallet. One was Todd Vercelli. The other was in the name of Jefferson Harris. But the strange thing was that they both seemed to use the same photo. I didn't really know what to think. Maybe he had a relative just like him. Maybe he had changed his name. I couldn't ask him because he would know I had been snooping." She looked a little embarrassed to admit this. "I told my husband and he got annoyed with me and told me not to snoop any more and keep my mouth shut. I said something like 'don't you think it's all a bit odd' and he said no, it wasn't, and he couldn't afford to lose a good man. I don't really know but I felt he was annoyed with me. I thought it was just because he thought I had done an underhand thing. I don't know. But things never seemed the same afterwards."

"Did you ever say any of this to a lawyer?"

"No. My husband told me to tell them about my dad giving us the gold bars but I really don't know where they came from. Gary said we would get off, or the lawyer said we would, and we did. I mean, we didn't go to prison or have to pay a fine. So maybe it was good advice. I don't know. I don't know who tipped the police off."

"Have you ever met people called Plowman?"

"No-o-o, I don't think so. But my husband said he'd done business with them, that their company had approached them about buying the property."

"So who did buy it?"

"Our lawyer arranged a private sale, a young couple. He did all the arrangements."

"And your lawyer is? It wouldn't be Garth Madden, would it?"

"Yes. Yes, it was. Well, him and his partner."

"I know it isn't my business but did he arrange for them to pay you off over time, rather than just getting, say, a bank loan?"

She looked surprised but agreed that that was how it had been arranged. "Something about paying less tax, I believe, so we just got this small place until it's all paid. But things have gone wrong here. It's horrible having people send us stuff to say that we are crooks and must have paid off the judge and we didn't deserve to get off, things like that." She looked at him closely and went on, "I don't mind if you put *that* in the paper, how horrible people have been to us here."

"Was it ever more than anonymous notes?"

"Oh, lots of little things, you know the sort of petty vandalism? Things broken, scribbles on the fence, we found a dead rat in the mailbox one time. Someone put a cricket ball through a window. The front tap was turned on and flooded the garage. Just little things, but horrible."

"Did you go to the police?"

"No. Gary said it goes on all the time here, gangs, you know, kids out running wild, and there's not a lot the police can do. I still thought we should say something but he said they wouldn't be likely to listen to us."

As she spoke a memory of things DS Griffin had shared surfaced. Was there a pattern or was it just random bad luck? Dudley had written about teenagers out of control himself but this seemed targeted, not general bad behaviour.

"Would you mind me asking how much you are still owed from the sale of your property?"

"I couldn't tell you the exact amount offhand but at least two hundred thousand, probably more. Why?"

"And do you know the name of the buyers?"

"Jake and Diane Smith. Why?"

"Did they say why they wanted your place?"

"They made some joke about hoping there might still be some gold floating around but I think they said they had a cousin in Charters, we didn't ask for any details, and the lawyers did most of the work. We just met them the once, I think."

"Did they say anything about wanting Todd Vercelli to stay on as manager?"

"Not to me. I don't remember Gary saying anything. But why are you interested?"

"I'm not sure. But I think there is a pattern. When the McCormacks sold their property the disappearance of Mr McCormack and the campaign of vandalism against Mrs McCormack meant that the Nebo company got out of paying them half a million they were still owed. I wondered if something similar might be going on here too."

"You mean—you think we might be in danger?" She looked faintly disbelieving.

"I really have no idea and I don't want to worry you. But it just might be worth having another lawyer look at your agreement, just as a precaution, a second opinion."

"I'm not sure my husband would agree to that. He regards Garth Madden as a friend."

"Fair enough. But I am always in favour of people getting second opinions … about everything." He could tell her that Garth Madden was the Seamans' lawyer and the Seamans were now being investigated but he strongly suspected that whoever else went down it would not be Garth Madden.

*

Robina Curtis had never thought of herself as a stickybeak but now she found herself watching out for the times when a car drew up next door and those unknown girls got out

with their bags and went inside and shut the door firmly. She was discreet about her watching. Lynnell Morton wasn't a neighbour to get on the wrong side of.

There might be some perfectly ordinary explanation but she had known Lynnell for long enough to be suspicious. Lynnell rarely did things just to be nice and kind to people. But once they were inside with the blinds down there was nothing she could do but speculate. Nevertheless she started taking note of when they came and when they left on the mornings she was at home to watch.

"You're just being silly," her husband said several times. "And if Lynney catches you—there'll be hell to pay."

"But—don't *you* think it's odd? I mean … they're not coming there for … what that Shona does … and I can't imagine them just wanting to sit around and listen to her slag off about half the people in Buckton … so what do they do all the time there?"

"Play cards? Heck, I don't know—and what's more I don't care. So don't you go snooping round their house."

She took very little notice of this. Peter might be content to do nothing, think about nothing, just occasionally go to the pub or have some mates around to play poker or yarn. But she felt she would not be able to stop wondering until she had some answers. She shared her thoughts with Pauline next time she saw her. Pauline no longer got along with her aunt, not since she and her husband had persuaded old Dan Goodrick to do a swop of houses. Lynnell claimed to have wanted Dan's place and she had had some very public set-to's with Pauline. But Pauline rarely took any notice of Lynnell's vituperation. She was happy to have Dan's place, happy for Chad to have a place where he could make a little money and just go along at his own pace. It gave her the backbone to stand up to Lynnell. But she was as puzzled as Robina was about the visits of those young women.

"They're a bit strange, that family, I've heard their kids at the high school don't behave very well. And why do the grown-up kids hang around when they could go out and look for work."

"There must be something for Lynnell in it, you'd think—"

"But you wouldn't always know with Lynney. Sometimes it's making money and sometimes it's just to get back at someone."

"Well, the people she seems to hate most are Dennis and Fiona … but I don't see how those girls … whatever they're all doing … could … well, I wish I knew …Peter says they're doing something in cyberspace but he doesn't know any more than I do about computers … "

"That's an idea. I don't understand it myself but Cherry did teach Lynney … and she did say something about putting films on the internet or something as a way to make money … but don't ask me how."

And as Cherry Morton was doing time she couldn't be teaching Lynnell how to do anything. But what if these girls were savvy with all of that? "Do you think that's what they're doing?" Mrs Curtis still couldn't really picture how this might work. "That they're making *films*?"

"Films about girls?" Pauline Scully found this idea puzzling. Who would be interested in seeing girls on the internet. "I really have no idea but maybe it's like Blind Date … you remember, you meet a stranger … except this is meeting people in cyberspace … except I don't know how that would work."

Both women had lived relatively quiet and restricted lives. They couldn't take their vague ideas to any sort of fruition but they both shared their speculation around in case someone else would know more and they both knew Lynnell Morton and felt sure that regardless of what she was doing or planning to do, there must be something in it for her.

*

Quentin Mayne did not take seriously Dennis Walsh's claims about being unpopular. Of course police could expect to be unpopular. But he mentioned it to Noel Barnard when he was getting petrol at the garage. Noel hadn't heard the stories about Mayne constantly criticising everything about the hospital. And if he had he might have thought it was just a few grumblers. He was usually cheerful and friendly and he said in response to Mayne's statement about Walsh, "Yeah, that was a business and a half. They even tried to get up a petition to get rid of him. Fortunately it didn't go anywhere. Den's tough but he's fair and people gradually came round to see that it was a help to have a station with someone who would come when you had a problem."

Mayne agreed. He didn't think Noel was implying that it would be good to keep a hospital where people could be treated when they had a problem. There was nothing devious about Noel.

Afterwards Noel wondered aloud to his wife why Walsh might have said that to Mayne and why Mayne had passed it on. Mavis said, "Haven't you heard? Everyone is worrying that he wants to close the hospital down. He thinks we're all unfriendly. Maybe Den was saying it isn't just Mayne that can get the cold shoulder here."

"Maybe."

And Mayne put Noel's friendliness to one side. It was an aberration and not to be included in his view of the community. They *were* all unfriendly. And after he'd spent the rest of the day going over details in the Annexe and accusing Mrs Bateman of waste and telling Sister O'Brien that the place should be making a 'decent' profit rather than the 'miniscule' one it currently made he didn't mind that he had left behind several upset people.

In his rooms he turned to his internet browsing to watch what his ex-girlfriend was up to. She had walked out on him and although it was expensive to have her watched and filmed he felt it was all worth it. The images were not remarkably clear but good enough to monitor the man he called 'the bastard'. But he felt he would like to do more than watch. He would like to find a way to break them up. And the more publicly and embarrassingly the better. He enjoyed running all sorts of ideas through his mind. But nothing quite grabbed him or seemed quite workable.

He was having breakfast next morning and there were two young nurses talking at the next table in the big cafeteria-style space. He didn't usually bother to listen to twenty-year-olds but in this case they were saying something about 'Lynnell' making films to put on the internet. He wondered who 'Lynnell' was and what sort of films. "They get you in," one nurse was saying, "and people start believing they're real people and they think that person is in love with them."

The other girl wondered how this would work. Neither of them seemed to know how it might be set up to draw people in but they were sure it could be done. They went on to talk of other people saying they were 'quite cute' but as he had no idea who 'they' might be he eventually tuned their conversation out. But it had left him with an idea. Could he get this 'Lynnell' to make a film with a woman who would entice 'the bastard' away and leave his ex-girlfriend Juliet high and dry? And then 'the bastard' could be dropped by his internet lover … All day he mused on how this might work and thought he just needed to insert a couple of casual questions so no one would take much notice. That the girls were merely speculating on gossip they'd heard didn't occur to him. They had sounded very certain about what they were saying.

*

Carlton Payne rang Dennis Walsh on a Tuesday night. The house was quiet as Fiona had taken Rob to ballet and Elise had chosen to go with them. Elise was still hankering to go to Lyn Harding's after the Show on Saturday and he had reluctantly spoken to Harding who had said she would be more than happy to have Elise for Sunday and Monday.

Payne said briskly, “I just thought you might like to know what’s happened out on that place near Longreach.” Dennis had been glad that he needn’t worry about it any more but he was slightly curious. “They found a sort of cellar underneath the back of the house, not much in it, but they’re going through everything and they’ve found a few fake documents.”

“What sort of fakes?”

“Not forgeries but they think they’re people who have died and their things have been, shall we say, liberated. I don’t have the details yet. Also a bit of money.”

“A bit?”

“Around forty thousand, I think. It may be perfectly above-board. They may not trust banks but there’s a chance it’s from a robbery somewhere.”

“Mt Isa?”

“Nothing proven yet. And I don’t think that’s the only robbery they’ve got away with.”

“No sign of McCormack?”

“Not so far. They’re hoping to bring in a cadaver dog to sniff around the house and sheds.”

“Mmmm.” It obviously wouldn’t be realistic to go everywhere on forty thousand hectares or whatever size the place might be. “Tell them to look around where they’ve been mining.”

“Nothing happening there. Nottidge said they’d sent two boxes of samples to a shop in Charters Towers to see if it might be useful. There’s not much there, a few holes where they’ve dug into an outcrop, some drums and boxes, a crusher, a few holes around. They got in a small drilling company from Townsville apparently, thing called Tryon Drilling but they’re not there now.”

They had also found a well-looked-after runway but that wasn’t unusual out there. Most big properties would call in the Flying Doctor Service if they had a medical emergency. And being a private runway it was not required to keep records of all arrivals and departures.

“Well, that’s suss for starters. Weren’t they the lot that had a connection to Milward Dutton?”

“Could be.” Payne realised he hadn’t taken enough notice of the company. “Just a small rig on the back of a truck, seems like. So you think they might’ve done an extra test bore and dropped McCormack down it?”

“Well, they wouldn’t want him too close to the house, I don’t reckon. Nottidge isn’t family, is he, so he mightn’t be as well-drilled as Alvin Massey. He just might go poking about.”

“Well, I’ll pass your ideas on, Dennis.”

But after he’d hung up, Dennis closed his eyes briefly as he sat on in the hall by the phone table, and felt the silence of the house surround him. He didn’t know what sparked it off, this strange disembodied feeling, his words or Carl’s, and he couldn’t do more than hazard a guess. But he suddenly found himself feeling deeply melancholy as he seemed to move north-west of an imagined mining operation and looking down at what seemed to be a big rock. The image was very clear and vivid for a moment then gradually faded again. He sat on for several minutes. His surroundings seemed to grow back again, clear and normal, and he wasn’t sure what to think. Was it worth telling Payne where to look on the basis of this brief image which might only be sparked by regrets coming together with talk of drilling? He didn’t want to waste their time and resources.

At last he got up and went away to make a coffee, then he said ‘what the heck’ and sat down again to send a terse e-mail telling them to go north-west about two hundred metres and look for a large rock with a sort of dimple in it where water might’ve collected in the past and dig a metre or two beyond there.

Payne considered this. Of course that was how they, Dennis and Grant, had found Ruby Jackson. An oddly-placed rock. Did Dennis believe it made a pattern? He might be right. No matter how careful people thought they were in avoiding routines they still tended to fall back on ideas that had worked somewhere else. He saw no reason not to pass on the suggestion. He wanted James McCormack found if humanly possible.

Dennis was already on his way to Townsville after the show, after dropping Elise off, after spending two days with Rob and Fiona wandering round past Ravensbourne and Esk and being dropped at Eagle Farm for his flight, when he received a call from Payne to say, "Good guess. They've found a skeleton. They haven't got an identity yet. But I just thought you'd like to know."

"Yep. Thanks. I'll be in Townsville for the next two weeks." He wasn't sure if he'd be with his mother and father all the time or whether he might try for a lightning trip up to see Terry and Geraldine and his nephews. Elise had asked him to get a photo of the monument to the large crocodile in Normanton and he had told her to download something from the internet. He didn't feel like sharing the thought that Normanton reminded him painfully of his failure to keep his young wife safe all those years ago … and Elise only wanted it for a project she was doing on 'Australian animals'. He had queried whether a crocodile was an animal and she had said, 'Of course it's an animal … except it could not have been in the ark because Noah didn't know Australia existed … ' and that had led on to an interesting diversion on how Noah had rounded up his animals. Did he use horses to chase the giraffes and things? There were times when Dennis wondered how May Hickman coped with Elise's queries in Sunday School—or indeed her teachers in school.

"Then go in and see John Dowdall and Paul Griffin while you're there. You might know something else they can use."

Walsh didn't think this was very likely. He had told them what he could about the Plowmans and nothing else came to mind. Beyond that they would have to do their own hard yards. He wasn't even sure he would recognise a Plowman if he came face to face with one. But he said he would.

Payne after he'd shared his news thought suddenly 'How did he know to go north-west? Was that also something to do with Ruby Jackson being hidden in some way?' Although he pondered on it in odd moments he didn't think they had ever mentioned directions.

"Maybe the old devil is psychic," he said to his wife.

"Is that possible?"

"If you believe—then I guess anything is possible."

"But hard-nosed accountants don't believe?" She said this with a smile.

"Not really, but then Dennis Walsh isn't me. He may be a hard-nosed copper but it isn't quite the same … " He didn't know how much Celtic blood Walsh might lay claim to but obviously some. And then he shrugged. "Ignore me. The main thing is that they've found a skeleton in a bore hole. And this time it places it squarely on a property originally leased by two Plowmans and now what is probably a Plowman company and probably using a Plowman-owned drilling company."

*

Chris Weaver covered a variety of sports for *The Chronicle* but he had a long time interest in anything to do with horses. When he'd started covering racing on the Downs Jim Atkins had been regarded as Toowoomba's best trainer. These days he thought Barry Woodbridge had taken on that mantle. And yet there was something curiously elusive about Woodbridge. He was a big bluff in-your-face sort of person. And yet he gave away surprisingly little information about his horses. And he wasn't known for getting enthusiastic about any particular horse.

Weaver had looked at all the records of the horses currently in his care. He had eight 'outside' owners and a further seven horses which he had apparently bought for himself. Two of these were now in the ownership of a Tom Lewis. But it looked as though Woodbridge had bred all seven through a small company called Bridge Transport. This apparently small company did some transporting of horses and owned a farm at Norwilla and had as directors Barry Woodbridge and Tom Lewis.

There was nothing wrong with trainers breeding some of their own horses or transporting other people's animals. It often made sense. The only possible thing about it was that all seven horses were virtually identical. Bays with hardly a speck of white on them. So did he just like that look of horse? Was it a bloodline he had found successful in the past? And as he had bred all the horses himself they all carried his own brand. Presumably he had sold several on to Lewis or it might be some other arrangement.

Weaver found the idea intriguing but Woodbridge had never been linked to any wrongdoing. He made himself a note 'do stewards check his horses closely?' Then there was the story of his putative daughter. According to gossip from some of the older men around the track, Woodbridge had said his wife had been having an affair and therefore her daughter was not his daughter. But no one among those who remembered Serena Woodbridge could link her to anyone. Woodbridge had divorced her nearly twenty-five years ago but it wasn't like the old days where a co-respondent got cited so there was no clear reason given for the divorce. Serena Woodbridge had died more than twenty years ago so there was no help there and he was reluctant to go delving into the past. But next time he saw the woman someone pointed out as Kari Woodbridge at Clifford Park he managed to make it look like a casual meeting when he found himself beside her and said, "Having any luck today?"

She offered him a smile and a rueful shrug. "I don't usually back Barry's horses but I occasionally take the risk."

"Because you think you're on to a good thing?"

"Not really. But if I see Tom Lewis here I know there's a good chance they expect to win."

"I don't think I know a Tom Lewis."

She obligingly pointed him out. "He doesn't always come when he's got a runner. So if I see him here it's a good sign."

"So he's a good judge of when a horse he owns is likely to win?"

"I guess you could put it like that."

Weaver wondered if there was a message in this rather odd way of saying 'yes' but he couldn't decide how best to proceed. "Well, Barry has a good reputation as a trainer so I s'pose you know you're always going to get a good run for your money."

She gave him a look which he couldn't interpret. "But there are lots of things which can go wrong in a horse race, you know."

"True. But he does seem to use the same jockey most of the time. Experience helps."

"Well, he uses Roley Marsh on his own horses but he uses a couple of others on his other owners' horses."

He was tempted to say "Interesting" but he hadn't looked to see if there was any pattern in riders. He just nodded. "Anyway, I hope you get a winner."

She gave him the thumbs up and moved away. He wondered if she really was suggesting anything or just expressing … it wasn't as specific as sour grapes … but she certainly didn't sound like someone with time for Barry Woodbridge. But he thought he needed to do some more homework. Which jockey rode what, certainly, but also a more careful look at the histories of those seven horses. Had they ever won—or lost—unexpectedly? It wasn't failsafe. Any horse could have a bad day. But alongside his research

he thought he would say to steward Brett Rowlings ‘can you always tell Barry Woodbridge’s plain bays apart?’

And when he had finished writing up his day he thought Kari Woodbridge was rather attractive. He might be wrong but he wondered if her very obvious clothes and style were put on so that her putative father could not miss seeing her. His own marriage had slowly disintegrated, not least because the interest his wife had feigned in sport when they first met and were attracted had gradually disappeared. But they had stayed together until their children were in their late teens. Now the thought came unexpectedly: would Kari agree to a date, would she speak about her life and suspicions, did she really know things which he would also like to know …

*

Dennis Walsh had no objection to dropping in on police elsewhere but when it came to the Plowmans he thought he was just about wrung dry. He couldn’t think of anything he hadn’t passed on. It wasn’t completely relaxing in his mother’s little bungalow; his parents had spent so much of their married life apart that there were some unspoken tensions now that they were sharing a small suburban house. And Dennis wasn’t necessarily the ideal person to inject a sense of studied calm. But both his parents were pleased to have him there and were only sorry he hadn’t brought Fiona and the children.

It was Jay Barron in Brisbane who passed on to Dowdall and Griffin that Dennis Walsh would be in Townsville if they thought it could help to get in touch. DSS Dowdall might have been motivated more by curiosity than hope but he gave Walsh a ring and asked if he would like to meet up one evening. Dennis said that would be fine. He might as well have an evening out. John Dowdall came by around six to pick him up and said his wife was out so he’d ordered in a pizza if that was okay.

Dennis found the Dowdall home pleasant and comfortable but it seemed curiously devoid of personality. It wasn’t something he had ever thought deeply about. But no one could doubt that a Scotswoman lived in his mother’s house and he felt that Fiona had impressed something of herself on their home, the thought struck him unexpectedly, but it was almost as though she wanted anyone who came into the house to be happy. Whereas the Dowdalls didn’t seem to have impressed anything in particular on to their home.

After a scratch meal Dennis asked for a big map and they spent an hour going over the places where things had happened. Dowdall didn’t find Dennis Walsh an easy person to chat with but with a map in front of them it seemed simple enough to share some of his doubts and problems. And it also started to fit together in a more coherent way.

But when he said something of this to Dennis, including his belief when they began re-looking at the body in the culvert that they would never get anywhere, Dennis said, “Yeah, the Plowmans never seem to make any sense. We didn’t know, at the beginning, that there were so many of them all swopping names. I couldn’t work out how they seemed to disappear so easily … and they’re still an absolute pain. We don’t know which of them shot Eddie Morton and we don’t know which of them is dead and whether someone else is using his name. They’re just a gigantic bloody pain.”

“And we didn’t know that we had corruption at the heart of the investigation.” Dowdall couldn’t help sounded gloomy. “That’s been pretty hard to deal with.”

“But you’ve done good work in tackling it. Winville had Doug Towner wrecking cases and it’s been a long hard road trying to sort things out.”

“Has it affected the way ordinary people there see you all?”

“There’s still people think Doug Towner was a good guy and we’re a lot of sour old wankers—because he was so good at promoting himself and putting everyone else down. There’s people still believe we were just out to get him. It’s a strange thing—even with him

in jail there's still people who believe he didn't do anything, that it's just us being a lot of bastards."

Dowdall could see the parallels. "Yeah, I can understand that. People here refuse to believe George Seaman could have done anything wrong. And if they never manage to prove that he did take bribes we'll all end up looking like we were jealous and went gunning for him and his reputation."

Dennis said he had a lot of faith in Carlton Payne and Jay Barron when it came to following money trails. "Doug said he was a whiz on the stock exchange and people still believe that. He was running a phantom 'partnership' and they still haven't been able to get that money back."

"Uh huh." Maybe George Seaman also had money squirreled away but he didn't think it was up to him to go looking. "So how did you deal with the fall-out when it came to Doug Towner and the Plowmans?"

Dennis didn't have a simple answer to this because he didn't start out as seeing Doug Towner as corrupt, only incompetent, but he ended up by saying, "You have to keep going on the Plowmans even if there's some bad publicity along the way—for the sake of the younger generations who just want to live normal lives, not being jerked round by their oldies and told to do things they don't want to do. And in the end they're the ones who will break everything wide open."

Dowdall agreed but privately hoped this would come well before he retired. "So have you got any ideas we might run with?"

"Can't say I know all the ins and outs of how they found Milward Dutton had taken bribes but it had something to do with a small drilling company called Tryon Drilling, that he was getting mail through them in another name, I think, so you never know, they might be some sort of clearing house, that they're the ones who pay out to corrupt cops. I might be wrong but I think it was a bloke there called Richard Massey who could be any one of the family. So if he runs the business he has to have some documents, you'd think. Don't know if you could get a search warrant."

"With the connection to that property out West," Dowdall suddenly had the awful thought that they had probably missed that boat, "it's a chance." He didn't sound hopeful. Dennis, not the most optimistic of people either, understood. "And there was a little snippet in the paper today, don't know if you saw it." Dennis hadn't read the paper and Dowdall picked it up from a side table and handed it over.

It didn't have a by-line and no one was quoted but it said the paper had received a tip-off that the manager on Cradock Downs, Todd Vercelli, had also used the name Jefferson Harris. "So d'you know who Jeff Harris might be?"

Dennis knew he'd heard the name somewhere and tried to throw his mind back. "There are supposedly three Harris kids, Jonathon who runs a shop in Charters Towers, James works for a travel agent in Brisbane and Tanya escaped the family by going down south. Their mum lives in Rockhampton. Ainslie Harris. But Alvin Massey," he tapped the approximate spot where Massey had run the property north of Meandara, "he says it was a Jeff Harris who came out to see him so it could be worth getting on to him, don't know where he went after the inquest in Brisbane, probably somewhere far away where the family can't find him because he said the Nebo company was a party to the death and disposal of Willy Jackson's body." As he said that he realised that was probably why Nebo as a distinct entity had to disappear. Now it probably could never be sued if anyone in the Jackson family decided to try for some money. "But Carl Payne'll know."

"We tried to get Nebo's lawyer to tell us how to find all the company directors but they all seemed to disappear into the sand, none of the addresses checked out."

"Well, Alvin Massey told the inquest all the directors were probably the same person. The judge looked pretty gob-smacked."

"That's the way I feel some days, that nothing makes sense."

Dennis agreed. He had his own days. "But it's a funny thing. When cracks start to appear in what seemed like a tough wall, sometimes people realise they aren't up against the all-powerful and decide to come forward. There must be a heck of a lot of people who know something and just haven't risked coming forward … and maybe it's just as well they didn't come forward when Seaman was in charge."

Dowdall hadn't thought of it like that and now he wondered if anyone ever had contacted Seaman and tried to give some information. It left him with a queasy feeling in his stomach. "I really hope you're right."

When Dennis stood up to go back to his parents' house, Dowdall's teenage son wandered out to see about some food. His father introduced him and Dennis shook hands and said, "You're planning to follow your dad?"

"Heck no, last thing I'd want to do."

"You could do worse. The force needs young 'uns with brains and energy and … honesty."

"I'd rather work in IT."

Dennis didn't see his role as trying to persuade anyone else's kids into anything; after all, he hadn't been fussed on letting his daughter stay a weekend with Lyn Harding, but maybe it was better to let them follow their inclinations and end up doing exactly what they wanted. The trouble with this was that his intuition told him John Dowdall's son wasn't fussed on doing anything much.

"Well, good luck with it."

When his father got back from dropping Dennis Walsh off his son said, "Where did you find him? More like The Hulk than someone with brains."

"Then you'd be wrong. He's a guy I wouldn't want to get on the wrong side of—if I was a crook."

"Why? Because he'd bash you up?"

"That's just being silly. He's done more to put together information on a crime family and its connections than anyone else in Queensland."

"What crime family? There aren't any crime families here. Just gangs."

"The Plowmans—"

"That doesn't sound like the Mafia."

"In the old days when there were a lot of Italian cane-cutters a thing called the Black Hand stood over them. The police got tired of the killings and extortions and finally managed to chase most of the ringleaders out of the state. The Plowmans aren't like that though some of them married Italian women." For the first time in ages he realised his son was actually interested in what he had to say. "They work in the shadows, using fake names, but just ordinary names, nothing you'd take much notice of, and they swop names and identities all the time, they look ordinary, they sound ordinary, but they've got away with murder, theft, bribery, arson, you name it. And if you want to say Richard Ferguson was here doing something it turns out he was really a thousand miles away and seen by dozens of people and we didn't realise for a long time what was going on." He felt like adding 'we still don't know—most of the time'.

"But what about fingerprints—and DNA?"

"The trouble is you can't just go round fingerprinting people. You have to charge them with something and if they're found innocent you're not s'posed to keep their prints on file." In theory.

"But there's ways round that, aren't there?"

"I think, now that we've got a better line on their aliases and the ways they swop and the … patterns … in the way they work, it'll gradually become easier to pin them down."

He sounded more confident than he felt. And as he thought back over it later he thought Dennis Walsh's visit had been helpful and perhaps in ways he would never know about.

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Fiona had asked Elise if she had enjoyed being out at Lyn Harding's over the long weekend and Elise had just said a non-committal, "I learnt quite a lot of new things." For someone who usually had lots to say for herself this was surprising but Fiona didn't push for more.

And Elise herself would have found it hard to define exactly why she had felt uncomfortable in her stayover at the riding school. It didn't occur to her that she might be picking up on Brent Kelly's vague and unspoken sense of failure and dissatisfaction. Brent had come out on the Sunday afternoon and she had been delighted to see him. She also thought he was delighted to see her.

It did not occur to her that Brent might be feeling trapped, that he didn't want a long-term relationship with Lyn Harding but that he felt profoundly grateful to her for all her help with his horses, riding skills, and general horse knowledge. He didn't really want to have children. Or at least not with Lyn. Yet he had understood that Lyn felt her time to have a child was running out and she wanted a child, not least to share everything she had worked so hard to create.

He couldn't say anything to anyone, he even had difficulty in facing it himself, but he still missed Naomi Burkett and hated himself for his stupidity in destroying the lovely relationship they had had. He still didn't know how he had allowed Cindy Bethune to move in on him and next thing Naomi wanted nothing more to do with him. He understood why she had turned away and he blamed himself bitterly. And hating himself meant that there were days when he believed he had no right to happiness in his private life. Having Elise there with her uncomplicated liking helped him to put his problems briefly aside.

But he couldn't say anything of this to Elise. In fact, there was no one he could share his private feelings of failure and discontent with. He sometimes felt that his times at work and his times over at his horse paddock with Sir Ned and Lady Luck were the only times when he felt at peace with himself.

That Elise with her affection for him had picked up on these feelings without understanding the turmoil in his thoughts would have surprised him. He certainly would not want to put any of his problems and doubts on to her.

Elise sitting on the sofa with her mother's arm around her finally shared a bit about Lyn's horses and then said suddenly, "She wants me to buy Migloo and I don't want to buy him. She suggested it at least three times and I said I liked him but I would have to ask Dad. She kept saying how well he would suit me but I don't really like him all that much. I would much rather choose my own horse but I didn't really know if I could say that."

"Well, when your Dad comes home we can have a look in the paper—or maybe Mr Hickman might have heard of someone with a horse for sale, he knows a lot of people."

Elise liked the idea and was all for talking with him immediately but Fiona suggested it might be better if she made a discreet enquiry. She didn't want Lyn Harding to hear things and feel that Elise had been ungrateful. "You didn't see another horse there you liked better?"

"Not really. It was interesting but Lyn is only interested in horses. She couldn't understand why anyone might read Shakespeare or the Bible or poetry or want to learn another language."

Fiona gave that a slight smile. “Yes, but I suppose she feels that if you want to be very good at what you do you have to give it your whole attention. It doesn’t necessarily leave a lot of time for other things.”

Elise agreed with that. “But maybe you get very boring—except to the people who share your one passion. I think I would rather be a Renaissance Woman—interested in lots of things.”

“A Renaissance Woman?”

“They talk about a Renaissance Man so why shouldn’t there be a Renaissance Woman? Except they didn’t give women lots of chances to study and do things or go to university, only have lots of children.” Fiona found Elise’s idea comforting as well as interesting. It had worried her that Elise had been dropping her other interests in favour of a wholehearted passion for horses. Now she felt she could put that worry aside. Lyn was right to think that if you wanted to get to the top you had to be single-minded but she didn’t want Elise to become single-minded just yet.

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Quentin Mayne had included the hospital handyman and groundsman, Martin Hobbes, in his close surveillance. Martin was an even-tempered man and had taken Mayne’s poking around in his shed and through the equipment there with equanimity. But when Mayne said something about ‘waste’ Hobbes had looked at him in surprise.

“Waste? Here? In what way?”

“There’s a lot of maintenance not getting done and I see equipment in here not being used—”

“You’ll need to be more specific, mate.”

“And all that junk under the buildings. You should have got in there and pulled it all out and sold anything worth selling and binned the rest of it.”

This wasn’t an answer to his question but Martin treated it seriously. “We got most of the stuff out when there was that trouble with that man hiding under there so there’s nothing but some rolls of wire that I haven’t got room for here and a bit of timber. It’s probably worth keeping in case we need to replace a step or a railing.”

“I don’t think that’s good enough. Do a stocktake of it. And all the time you’re out gardening, that’s a waste of time and money.”

“You’d rather we didn’t grow some of our own fruit and veg?”

“I was hunting for you yesterday and I couldn’t find you. I suppose you were out here drooling over your vegetable patch.”

Hobbes looked at him in surprise. “What did you want me for? And you could have got Mrs Hall to page me if it was urgent.”

“You’re spending the hospital budget on all this and it just doesn’t stack up.”

“No, I’ve mostly spent my own money or brought seedlings from home and Tony Thomas donated a couple of the fruit trees. That doesn’t sound like waste to me. So what did you want me for? I was over at the office later but I didn’t see or hear from you.”

“I got someone else to do it. So it doesn’t matter now.”

“Well, I can check it over for you, if you like.”

“I said it doesn’t matter now.”

Mayne took another look around the small crowded space then went to the door. “Anyway, get all that stuff out from under and I’ll see what’s there.”

“Can do.” But after Mayne had walked away Martin stood looking after him with a frown. There was something disjointed about it all. The man had failed to answer any direct question. So what were the problems and where was the waste? He shared it with Dennis Walsh over the fence as Dennis, back from Townsville, went over to shut up his chookhouse.

“Is that fella for real?” Martin said after sharing Mayne’s request and apparent reluctance to spell anything out.

“Don’t know but everyone seems to be wondering if he’s come to close the hospital down. Guess he’s looking for some ammunition to go in a report. That’s if—he really is doing a report.”

“It’s a bit weird though. I don’t mind someone telling me something needs to be done. You can miss things when you’re busy. But he wouldn’t give me a straight answer to anything.”

“So what d’you think of him, as a bloke I mean? Maybe they’ve palmed some odd bod off on to us because they didn’t know where to send him. Maybe he’s got friends in high places.”

Martin hadn’t really thought about Mayne as a person. He just seemed to be like a bureaucrat sneaking round trying to find things to grizzle about. “Yeah, when you come to think of it, he is a bit strange, sort of sneaky, like he never just looks at you straight and gives you a straight answer to a straight question. Maybe he had a breakdown or maybe they didn’t want him in a bigger hospital because he couldn’t hack it. But it’s hard to know how to deal with him. Anyhow, I pulled all the stuff out from under the buildings and made piles and we’ll see what he wants done with it all tomorrow.”

“So what was still there?”

“Some timber, some rolls of wire, a few packing cases, a box of old kitchen stuff, a case of old medicine bottles. I don’t mind to send it all to the tip but I’m always looking out for ways to re-use stuff.” Dennis nodded. He rarely dumped anything unless he’d first considered a possible re-use.

“Timber and wire always comes in handy. Wash out the bottles and recycle them. Don’t know who wants old kitchen stuff unless it’s kids with a cubby.”

Mayne didn’t have any useful suggestions after he’d looked it all over just saying several times, “Get rid of it all.”

But as Martin stood there watching him he wondered if his speculation might be right. Certainly Mayne might have been charged with doing a report which might lead to the hospital being closed (although he thought they would have a fight on their hands) but there was something a bit strange in the way Mayne related to people … or perhaps didn’t relate to them.

“I’ll re-use that wire along the side fence. Dogs and stray animals occasionally get in. And a bit of timber is good to have on hand but I’ll put the rest of the stuff out for the Council.”

“No. Get rid of the lot. Look, you can even see redbacks in there!”

“Well, that’s not unusual,” Martin said mildly. “You must have some redbacks in Brisbane.” He casually reached out and squashed a redback with one calloused thumb. Mayne looked away.

“Just do as you’re told or I’ll have to go looking for someone else who does what he’s told.”

Martin shrugged. It possibly wasn’t worth arguing over but he said calmly, “You say you’re concerned about waste. Well, so am I and I see no good reason to send good wire and good timber to the tip for someone else to re-use.”

Mayne grew red. “Look, just do as you’re told!”

“Or?”

“Or—you’re out!”

“Then go for it.” Martin picked up the box of old bottles and walked away with it. It was a good job and he liked it. But he understood now why the other staff said Mayne was spoiling the whole atmosphere of the place. The trouble with this was—he had possibly

played into Mayne's hands. He would get his marching orders and Mayne would find someone who would toady to him. But then he cheered up a little. It would be hard to find a replacement round Buckton and if he had to bring in someone …

It was only when he was home and telling his wife about it that the awkward question came to him: was this what Mayne wanted? A hospital lacking staff might be seen as unviable and therefore better closed? Maybe he *had* played into Mayne's hands?

*

Dennis, when Fiona had picked him up in Toowoomba for the last leg of his journey and driven in their gate at home, had found himself looking at their home in two ways. For himself he was just happy to be back in the place where he lived with the three people he loved best in the world but he could also see it through Fiona's eyes; and although it was a pleasant old house he could also see that it lacked the style and modest luxury of the house she had grown up in. The lawn was parched. The shrubs and roses looked a bit dusty. The house though cared for looked its age. The little side street was unexciting. The town around them was unexciting. And yet, yes, it had personality …

As they pulled in and went to get out he said, "How d'you feel when you come home? D'you wish you were somewhere else?"

She looked at him in a little surprise. "Are you missing Townsville?"

"Heck, no. But I thought you might be missing Brisbane." He could also say that he had missed her and the family but didn't. And yet, seeing Fiona again, made his day. He never stopped thinking how lucky he was to have her in his life and putting up with him.

For a moment she was tempted to just slide the question away but then she thought it deserved a careful answer. "Yes and no. We did some fun things in our day there and I think Rob enjoyed the beach … but in a way the longer we stay away the less like home it seems … and it is nice to come back to somewhere where you know everyone around you. There are days when that doesn't seem enough. But then we got out and I could see how happy Rob was to be home and he couldn't wait to go and find Butty and go out to his little farm. And there was a willie wagtail on the fence and I thought that in all the time I'd lived in Brisbane I'd never seen one. Maybe they were there and I'd just never noticed … I don't know."

And then the moment had closed over them with Rob and Ellie running down the ramp to welcome him home with a hug and a rush of news to be shared. And later Fiona told him about all Buckton, or much of it, talking about Lynnell Morton making a film. He wasn't sure that he really believed it. What did Mrs Morton know about making films?

But even Constable Waters in the station said he thought it might be a little film to go on the internet. "You know, you just point the camera, say something, then you post it on the internet."

"And that's easy, is it?"

"Well, pretty much. We could easily make a little video about road safety or dobbing in a vandal."

Dennis wasn't sure it was all that easy but he said, "So what would we need?"

"We could do it on a good phone but it would be better quality done with a camera, I think, then we need a site to upload it to." Waters sounded more confident than he really felt. He had never done anything like that himself but he knew other people were posting videos of themselves on-line all the time so it surely couldn't be all that difficult.

"Okay, then we'll try something with a phone, doesn't matter if it isn't good quality, it's just to see what's involved."

"Is this because … because of Mrs Morton?" Ben Waters wondered if this was a realistic response to what was only a rumour.

"Lynnell Morton doesn't do things just for fun. If she really is making films I'd bet she's wanting to find a way to get back at someone."

"But—wouldn't it be up to—well, the person targeted—to come to us?"

"I'm not the expert," Dennis said with considerable understatement, "but I've heard that defamatory things can be posted on-line and the person targeted doesn't even know why people are avoiding him."

Ben agreed with that. "So she might be targeting someone who might not even be on-line?"

Dennis considered Leon Gamble as a victim and dismissed him. "Could be. It might be spite, it might be she's wanting to get money out of someone, and if these girls that go around there know things—" He wasn't sure what he had in mind.

"You mean—like what spies do, a sort of honey trap, using pretty girls to suck someone in or get money or information out of them?"

"Hard to believe it might happen in Buckton but I s'pose it could be done anywhere."

Ben too thought Buckton wasn't the obvious home for such an exercise but he understood that the internet made geography unimportant. And trying to make a little film would be more interesting than telling people they were parked on yellow lines.

"Okay, I think I can set something up."

Just as Dennis was turning away to get on with other work he remembered his daughter as little more than a toddler making a film. It was hardly a sophisticated program, he didn't think he would want to put it out on the internet, but it was certainly watchable and fun. "George Hickman has a couple of movie cameras. He might lend you one."

Case No. 3: Hollywood Comes To—

A new kind of energy seemed to suffuse Winville District Hospital with the decision to chronicle Dr Davis's known mistakes instead of merely grumbling about him behind his back. Susan Denby added in the material she had got from Maryann Dillon and the mistake he had made while in Buckton. Sister Uniacke, slightly reluctant to take on the job of co-ordinator, had listed the problems with the death of a man in Norwilla and Davis's pat decision to say he had died from a heart attack. A lot of the other problems seemed small but put together they showed a pattern of carelessness, glib assumptions, and a refusal to listen to any other opinion.

Dr Davis knew something was going on although it would not occur to him that anyone would try to show him up as a rogue doctor. He believed Susan Denby was spreading false rumours and he made a point of telling anyone who would listen, including several of his patients, that she was a troublemaker and the hospital would rue the day it had employed her. He considered discussing her with her superior but his relations with Mrs Gorman had gradually cooled, he wasn't sure why, but he put it down to women 'sticking together' rather than maintaining good relations with him. No one, understandably, asked him what he meant by 'sticking togther'.

Sister Uniacke said to Susan Denby one late afternoon, "It certainly looks bad when it's all put together but what do we do with it?"

"It should go to the Board but the thing is—do we do it behind his back or do we tell him what we are doing?"

Uniacke had not thought of this but finally said slowly, "I guess we have to tell him. One copy to him, one to the Board. And I think we have the right to make our own recommendation."

"Which would be?"

"I don't think we can ask for him to be sacked because we aren't his employers but I think we can ask that his work be peer-reviewed."

"Which would mean—Mason Watling? Or we bring in an outside person to have a look?"

"I think someone from the Department of Health would take it out of any claim that local people are 'ganging up' or there is local bias. They might say that because he has had affairs with several local women that some sort of revenge is playing out."

Denby nodded. She didn't think she was motivated by revenge but it might look like that to an outsider. "There is another thing. The police were involved in several of his cock-ups. Do we, or should we, share a copy with them?"

Sister Uniacke felt a fleeting sense of dismay. She had wanted this to be a discreet in-house kind of survey but it seemed to be determined to bulge out in to the public domain. She pictured headlines in the *Winville Courier* when someone leaked something. She thought that John Daly and Leslie Davis were friendly; how friendly she couldn't say. She knew any final decisions were not up to her but she had been at the hospital for twenty years and she felt strongly about its safety, its good-running, its reputation.

At last, she said, "Yes. The Board, the Department, both Davis and Watling, and I think we could discreetly share it with Jake." She knew Susan and Jake Moss were close, how close she had never enquired, but she thought he would be discreet. "But I do not think Leslie will take it lying down."

"No. I know that it is the safety of all our patients which is paramount, but it will descend into the personal … and that won't be pleasant. But I suppose I should be the one to distribute the copies."

Sister Uniacke felt a fleeting moment of relief then a sense of responsibility kicked in. "No. If you would pass a copy to Jake then I will distribute the others. It would be easy for him to paint you merely as some sort of bitch with a down on him. He's gone round saying you are incompetent and unprofessional. We want everyone to take our material seriously."

Ms Denby had found Sr Uniacke pleasant but reserved. She wasn't sure whether the sister had wanted someone else to get the job or whether it was just her natural personality. Now she appreciated Mary Uniacke's offer. It would be hard for anyone to say that the two of them were 'ganging up' on Dr Davis because there was no obvious close friendship between them. "Thank you." After Sr Uniacke had gone out she wondered if they should give a copy to Dennis Walsh in Buckton. After all, he had been the first one to raise the question of Davis's competence as a doctor. And she wondered about challenging Leslie Davis to say his criticisms to her face rather than behind her back. Would that make things worse or remind him that she did get to hear all the things he was doing and saying?

So she wasn't there to see any of the responses as people were handed copies of the report, only Jake Moss's, and he said only, "Do you want us to to do anything about him?"

"No. I think it has to be treated as a matter of his fitness to provide health care."

Dr Watling had heard rumours about the nursing staff collecting information on his colleague but he didn't find it appropriate to become a party to their actions. "I will read it," he said to Sister Uniacke, "nothing more. It is a matter for the Board."

And after she had gone he wondered if he should even go as far as reading it. He wanted Davis gone but he didn't want it to descend into what might look like a witchhunt. Then curiosity got the better of him and he gave it a quick read. And there was the information the Board should have collected when he had raised questions about Maryann Dillon's relationship with Dr Davis. He sat for several minutes in silence, coming to terms with a feeling of understandable irritation, then put the report in his drawer. It was still there, untouched, when Leslie Davis burst into his office a couple of days later to say, "Do you know what those bitches have gone and done?"

"No. What bitches?"

"That Denby bitch and the others!"

"Calm down and explain yourself. And I don't expect to hear any staff member referred to in those terms."

This criticism seemed to slide off Dr Davis. "They're trying to get me sacked by spreading a whole pack of lies about me—"

"Are you sure they're lies?"

For a moment Davis merely stared at him then he said angrily, "Of course they're lies!"

Mason Watling simply wanted Davis to go away and do some hard and introspective thinking. But he finally said, "Maryann Dillon was *my* patient. And yet *you* tried to make money out of a woman who had just undergone major surgery."

"Well, you weren't going to raise a finger to help her get a pay-out so don't get all sanctimonious with me."

Watling wondered if there was the slightest use in debating anything. "I am not your employer so there is absolutely no point in coming and grumbling to me—"

"But you can tell those bitches where to get off! They listen to you—"

"If you call any woman a bitch one more time I will personally put in a complaint about you. Now this conversation is at an end so please leave my office."

Davis seemed to consider an angry come-back then change his mind, turn, and march out. It left Dr Watling feeling drained. Working with Davis, always problematic, would now be just about impossible and he still had young Dr Murphy who had hoped to leave at the beginning of the year but so far had not found a position he regarded as a better one. He might improve but he had not so far impressed Mason Watling. For a fleeting moment he almost wished everyone had simply left things. A hospital now full of anger and tension was hardly a healing environment. And then he thought of the long list of problems the women had collected and he accepted that however unpleasant the near future was likely to be things had to be resolved in some way.

While he sat there, willing himself to calm down, Dr Pemberton came by on his way to see one of his own patients and stopped in to say hello. After he'd gone again Watling thought 'If only I could swop Davis for Pemberton how much more pleasant and professional … ' and then he accepted there was no point in wishing and pulled some paperwork towards him to begin filling in forms.

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Quentin Mayne by discreet questions slipped into other conversations had discovered that 'Lynnell' was Lynnell Morton and that she lived with a young relative, Shona Webb, who offered sexual services. This raised the awkward question: when to drop by? If he went in daylight probably people would notice. He wasn't blind to the nosiness of Buckton's people. But if he went after dark any one noticing him would probably assume he was going round to cavort with young Shona and he found the whole idea tacky. He, at least, was not one of the losers who had to pay for sex.

He finally decided to go mid-morning.

Robina Curtis saw the car draw up but didn't recognise it.

He knocked and waited and when Mrs Morton came to the door he introduced himself and said he just might have a proposition for her. Lynnell raised her eyebrows but said only, "Well, come in," and steered him into a small sitting room after firmly shutting a door to a back room. She waved him to an armchair and he sat down and looked around. The room though quite comfortable gave no suggestion that any kind of business was carried on here.

"I know a lot of gossip goes round Buckton and some of it probably isn't correct but I heard people saying that you make films to go on the internet and I wondered if that was correct."

Lynnell gave a cautious nod. "Sometimes. Why would you be interested?"

He explained that his girlfriend had been bullied into leaving him for another man and now was too frightened to try and get away. “I had the idea that if we could divert this guy with another woman, a face on the internet, he might lose interest in Juliet and she could get away from him. I’m not sure just how we could work this or what you charge but he does have an interactive Facebook page so there might be possibilities there.”

She sat back and looked at him thoughtfully. She didn’t for one minute believe his altruistic story of wanting to save his girlfriend. Undoubtedly she had left him for someone else and he was miffed. But it didn’t bother her that the girl might prefer someone else. It might even be rather fun to see what Kyrelle and Serisa could come up with.

“Okay, well, give me all the details you have and I will give it some thought on how we might proceed. We usually charge a hundred dollars upfront for equipment and forty dollars an hour.”

It struck him as expensive for what would undoubtedly be an amateurish response to his problem. “Okay, I’ll pay you for a couple of hours and I’d be really interested in how you go about it.”

“The girls are getting pretty good so I am sure they won’t have any problem getting on to his account. Do you check it yourself?”

“Sometimes.”

“Okay, well, drop down tomorrow and we’ll tell you where we’re at. You’re the new manager at the hospital, aren’t you?”

He agreed he was.

“And is it true what everyone’s saying, that the hospital is going to close soon?”

“Not as far as I know.”

She got businesslike, writing an invoice though not specifiying the ‘film services’ which would be rendered, and doing him a receipt. It struck him that it wasn’t just the money she had just made but a kind of pleasure in the job she had agreed to undertake. He thought this was all to the good. He had half-expected her to say it was too difficult or that she was busy with other things. He went back to the hospital feeling cheered. He was sorry he hadn’t queried her ‘we’ but he probably wouldn’t have been much the wiser. Was ‘we’ the young woman who was said to live there or the young women who were said to visit?

Several people round the hospital noticed Mayne looking pleased with himself and wondered who else he had put on notice.

*

Chris Weaver liked the idea of inviting Kari Woodbridge out but there was one problem. He didn’t have an address for her. He could wait till he saw her at the races sometime or … He rang Dennis Walsh in Buckton to see if he could help. Walsh said her aunt was called Estelle Crosbie, “they both gave me Barry Woodbridge’s address but I see Ms Crosbie is in the phone book. So have you got any … don’t know … ideas on whether anything’s going on?”

“Barry Woodbridge owns seven bays which are virtually identical, two of them in partnership with Tom Lewis and he and Lewis own a business called Bridge Transport which is the company which owns Woodbridge’s brood mares. He uses the same jockey all the time on his own horses but uses several others on the horses he trains for other people. I don’t know if it adds up to anything but it seems worth doing a bit more digging.”

“I’d say so. And I think in some way they use Peter Darcy but Darcy is tighter than an oyster when it comes to telling anyone anything. I just wondered why they would spell horses with him rather than with Tom Lewis.” Of course those horses might have outside owners …

“I’m hoping Kari really does know something. She told me she only bets on their jointly-owned horses when she sees Tom Lewis at the races.”

Dennis asked to be kept in the loop but he wondered if because Woodbridge and Lewis kept such a low profile, no big betting plunges, that they had got away—and would continue to get away—with substitutions. Then he pulled himself up. Barry Woodbridge might have something to answer for when it came to his daughter but it didn't automatically mean that Woodbridge and Lewis were swopping their horses around.

Kari accepted Weaver's invitation to dinner with apparent alacrity and they had a pleasant meal out and she told him she was a dental nurse. He talked about his work but he was unsure how, or even if, to raise his questions about Barry Woodbridge. Kari finally seemed to accept it was up to her, that this wasn't just a social occasion. "You've got your suspicions about my dad, haven't you? That's why you invited me out."

"Partly. But I have rarely enjoyed an evening more. And don't tell me anything if you would rather not. I will just go on quietly looking at things."

"Who put you on to it?"

"It was a small time trainer I know, occasionally brings a couple of horses to town."

"Well, I can't tell you exactly what's going on, but I know he swops horses. I take photos of them, just quietly so he doesn't notice. So I know he swops horses. Here, let me show you." She took out a packet of photos and handed them over. They were all carefully dated with the horse, the race, the jockey, the place. He went through the pack several times and at last he sat back with the horses grouped.

"Nite Lite Dancer. You've got three pictures of him and they all look very similar but I think they are three different horses. Their tails are slightly different. This one seems to have a longer forelock. I'm not sure but I think this one is slightly smaller. The differences are very small but I think a good horseman would pick up on them."

"I've sometimes wondered if I was imagining things. I know quite a lot about horses but I am certainly not an expert. And I don't see how anyone could prove anything. For instance, in those three races he had a third and a fourth then won. But the horse which won looks to me like Bird Song," she put those two photos together. "And the one who ran fourth then came out and ran second but when he was favourite in his next race he only ran fifth and I noticed Barry had backed Tic Tac Man which won, not his own horse. I think he knew his horse was an also ran. But how the hell can anyone prove this? Maybe I can sneak a few hairs from them all and get them tested for DNA?"

"Mmmm. Stewards get antsy when there's a plunge but I've never heard of Barry plunging. So … would you mind if I showed these to a steward I know? It mightn't prove anything but just getting them to have a closer look, maybe take their own photos, maybe ask around and see if anyone else ever had any suspicions … maybe go and talk with Tom Lewis and Peter Darcy, they mightn't be as good at dealing with tough questions. Do you know them?"

"I chatted Tom up. That was hard going but I guess it was worth the effort. But I'd be glad never to see him again."

He wasn't sure just what 'chatting' Tom Lewis up had involved but clearly she was dedicated to finding things out. "Is it just that you don't like your father or is it something else which drives you?"

"According to my aunt he told everyone my mum was having an affair—which she wasn't—and it seems she had queried something about his horses, my aunt reckons she knew way back then that he was a crook." He didn't know how old Kari was but this would take it back probably thirty years.

"You mean—all that way back he was setting things up so he could swop his horses to and fro?" He supposed he sounded slightly disbelieving.

"That's what my aunt thinks. She thinks my mother was going to say something to someone and so that's why Barry started accusing her of carrying on with someone. If she did

say anything then maybe they thought it was just some tit-for-tat going on between the two of them. I don't know."

When he got home and let himself in he still felt slightly bemused. Could something really have been going on under everyone's noses for thirty years? He was tempted to dismiss the whole thing. Then his own curiosity kicked in. He wouldn't be able to dismiss anything until he had done his best to check everything. He would take those photos to Brett Rowlings and see if he had ever had doubts, no matter how small.

*

Quentin Mayne was not there to hear Lynnell Morton call him names or hear the two young women laugh. "The big doozy's obviously got it in for his girlfriend for dropping him for this other guy and I don't blame her one bit, he really is a dork. But so long as he pays up I think we can give him something which will satisfy him. He's obviously got tickets on himself."

The two young women had been looking at the Facebook pages for Quentin and his ex-girlfriend and her new man, Alister Peacock. They seemed to find it all very funny. It was one thing to try and create a page which would pull at the heart strings of some lonely man who could then be persuaded to send off some money. It was another to see real people in front of them, all available for some kind of plucking.

It didn't make Buckton any less boring but while they were here they were more than willing to find some fun and get good at creating mysterious and fictitious personas. "The first thing," Kyrelle said thoughtfully, "is to create the sort of chick this Alister guy might go for and then get him to start interacting with her on his site. So she probably needs to look a bit like this Juliet but we need to make her sound a bit more exotic and mysterious. So she needs to be filmed against the sort of background which gives nothing away."

Mrs Morton was content to sit and listen. They knew a great deal more than she did about young men. She saw and listed the men who came round for a half hour or hour with Shona but they were mostly dreary old sods who didn't even know what a Facebook page was. But Kyrelle and Serisa were sharp cookies and they were always bursting with ideas. She had at first wondered why they would want to stay on in Buckton but they had given her some rigmarole about needing to live in the country until their old shark of a grandfather agreed to pay up. What that was all about she neither knew nor cared.

She sat and watched the girls experimenting with different clothes and hairstyles and backgrounds until they came up with something they decided was suitably mysterious, then took a couple of stills with one camera.

"What about getting one of your brothers to try and appeal to this Juliet?" Lynnell suggested.

"Not interested. Anyway, isn't she s'posed to come back to him?"

"I wonder why she left him in the first place? He sounds a sneaky sort of sod."

"Then, what say we try to get on to her site as friends and share the troubles we've been having with a boyfriend who was sort of sneaky and a bit of a bastard?"

Of course they would expect most of the money from Quentin Mayne but she would have the entertainment of watching it all take shape. That some of the things they were doing involved getting money via false pretences didn't worry her. But there was an added buzz in knowing that this business with Mayne and his 'troubles' was all legal. After all, people put rubbish up on web-sites day and night.

And an added buzz when Mr Peacock responded in a friendly way to the mysterious Magella who had just appeared on his site. But while the girls saw it largely as work which assuaged their boredom Lynnell thought there might be other possibilities lurking. She wasn't deaf to the stories which had gone round town about Quentin Mayne and she thought it might be rather fun to find a way to also make a fool of him. The biter bit. Something like that.

But of course it didn't need to use anything as sophisticated as the internet. She was perfectly aware that Mrs Curtis next door was curious about why the girls came and went. She had seen her kitchen curtains move a little. It might just be that Robina had a very boring life. But it also meant that Robina was ripe for the hearing and passing on of some gossip.

She spent her own moments on thinking how best to get the ball rolling. Just a gentle mention of 'the new hospital manager being desperate enough to come round' or should she make it more vague or should she suggest that he was hoping for a threesome, even a foursome … No, better not make it too complicated. Robina had spent all her life with boring Peter, she probably wouldn't know what a threesome was.

She enjoyed going to bed and mulling over all the possibilities. And there was someone else she needed to get back at. Leon Gamble. How dare he set his dogs on her! But she only needed to see him downtown to yell out something about when would he next be round to have some fun with Shona. He wanted to be seen as a pillar of the local community so it was time to let people know …

*

DS Brosnan was quiet and conscientious. No one looked at him and said 'promotion material' but both Jenny and Brent in Winville found him good to work with. It might be that he deferred to their greater local knowledge but Brent who had spent time under Sergeant Walsh thought he had that quality which Dennis would approve of: he was prepared to go the extra mile. He had read carefully through all their files that covered the deaths of Willy Jackson, Ruby Jackson, Wayne Booth, Jill Jackson, David Ranke and Eddie Morton. He had made copious notes and done himself graphs and used hi-lighters. In the end he said to Brent, "D'you want my ideas?"

"Of course. We both do."

"Okay, when's a good time to go over things?"

They all sat down in the late afternoon and Jenny and Brent listened with interest.

"Right. So the only one of those deaths that I think can be accepted as natural is Wayne Booth's. He was autopsied and they said it was heart. Maybe something led up to it, a fright or something, but they said heart. But all the others could have been staged. Jill Jackson could've been run off the road or there was something put down on the road to make her swerve. David Ranke could have been killed and it set up to look like an accident. But I can't see any way to prove anything for either of those. Both Willy and Ruby Jackson have been passed to Brisbane so I think we can leave them unless we come up with some new evidence. But the thing with Eddie Morton was that there was a witness to the killing but there was no attempt to find either the ute or the man in the lairy shirt. And the other thing is the man who broke in and was going to take Eddie's documents. You don't take documents unless you're going to use them in some way … or … you want to destroy them. No one then can pin things down. And the thing about all Eddie's documents is that they seem totally unimportant except to a farmer."

Jenny and Brent knew he had gone through everything carefully and had been on to Mt Isa with the list of every serial number of the money found buried on Eddie Morton's farm.

"And except to the Ferguson brothers because they show a relationship which stretched over several years?" Jenny said.

"Exactly. So if Eddie was to be seen as simply having a fight with Billy the Lad then they had to make sure that there was nothing on that farm which linked Eddie to the Fergusons and that farm at Prickly Creek. Police should have removed all his documents and gone through everything. But that didn't happen."

"I know." Brent sounded almost apologetic. "We had Eric De Jong and Aidan Hassell in charge. Right from the word Go they went after Billy."

"Okay. So we know they were suss. But who told Ben Withers to go out and get them? Wouldn't it have been easier for, say, Hassell to go in and collect everything, just as part of the ordinary investigation?"

"But if Hassell brought them back here, Greg would expect to be given them and he would find the connection to the Fergusons. And he knew more about them than Hassell did. Hassell said he didn't even believe there were any Fergusons. And also Hassell didn't know anything about farming. He wouldn't have known what was legitimately part of Eddie's estate and that his daughter would need to look after and maybe sell the place."

"Okay. So someone had to go in and collect everything. Do you think he would've removed the dangerous ones then taken the other stuff back?"

"Possible."

"So how did Ben Withers know to look in the loft? How many farmers keep their documents in the loft?"

Both Jenny and Brent looked at each other. "And did Edwina know there was anything in the loft?" Brent said. "We could ask her, I guess."

"Sam Hoysted stored the money Doug Towner gave him in his loft. A lot of people round town must've heard that story."

"No. I think it would have been more specific. Can we get Ben Withers', or the shops' phone records for back then and see who rang him or his wife?"

"We should be able to. It's not that long ago. They maybe had a mobile we don't know about. But they had a landline in both the shop and their living quarters out the back."

"Right, well, let's give that a try."

"There was the suggestion that someone was tapping Eddie's phone, just to make sure he was staying quietly at home maybe or to know when Billy the Lad might come around."

"So how often would Billy have gone around?"

"Eddie was in his sixties. I guess whenever he had a job where some younger muscles might come in handy. Every few months maybe." This was a guess but Billy had admitted to going round there 'sometimes' to help out.

"So this guy who had a business that didn't do much business in Winville, this Leo Ford, maybe he was the one sent to monitor everything. In which case he might've simply dropped in to see Ben Withers."

"He might've." Brent couldn't remember how soon after Eddie Morton had died that Leo Ford had packed up and left. "But let's hope … and we could get the records from that business too. They might be instructive."

"Now, there's another thing. You've got Tanya Harris who became Mrs Withers saying that man who died was her father. And you've got Alvin Massey saying he was *his* father."

"Greg thought grandfather might be more like but we don't know how old that Frederick Smith was. They only made a guesstimate."

"Well, let's take it as the simplest. That he was father to both of them. If he was one of the seven Plowman kids he'd be at least in his sixties, maybe seventy. So what's to stop him marrying first as Richard Massey and having kids and then marrying as Simon Gaunson Harris and having more kids."

They both nodded. "We know Tanya married Ben Withers. James got struck off for passing on Ruby Jackson's estate to a Paul Dawkins. And Jonathon is s'posed to have a gift shop in Charters Towers. Are we sure that's all the kids?"

"The mother is s'posed to live in Rockhampton—" Brent began.

"Then she needs to be interviewed in depth. She surely must know who she married. He would need to show documents surely? It mightn't stop him committing bigamy. Maybe she even connived at something. Maybe she was crazy about him. Who knows? But we need

to know exactly who she is, where she met him, where they got married, where the kids were born."

Brent and Jenny agreed. Mrs Harris had never come within their jurisdiction as far as they knew. So the only thing they knew was that she had been Ainslie Bartell.

"And the men who supposedly bought or leased that place at Longreach were called Richard and Simon Bartell. Does that mean that some Bartell documents got … re-used … or was her family in league with the Plowmans?"

"Joel, these are all good questions," Jenny Forman said briskly. "But let's keep it simple. Background on Mrs Harris and phone records for that business. Brent, you looked through all their papers after they buzzed off. Were there phone records there?"

"I'll get the list. Everything was logged in." But when he brought up the list on his computer it had no phone records listed. "That's odd. Nobody destroys all their phone accounts the minute they've paid them."

"Did you do a paper copy?" Jenny had come over to the computer to check.

"No. We were waiting to be told what to do with the stuff. But don't worry, it's all backed up on disk and USB." And five minutes later he was able to say, "Uh huh. There were phone records in with the other stuff, according to the original records, but I'll have to check the folders in the store room to see if the records themselves are still there."

"So who would have messed round with things?" Joel had come into a Winville which ran fairly smoothly. He knew only by occasional things said that this hadn't always been the case.

"It was either Eric De Jong or Aidan Hassell." Brent sounded resigned. It was hard to see the point when they could apply to the provider for records. But then that was time-consuming. Had someone simply wanted to make things more difficult or had they wanted the records for reasons of their own?

"I wonder," Jenny said slowly, "whether Tanya and Ben were seen as unreliable even well before they scarpered? That they'd been given jobs to do for the family and either hadn't done them or hadn't done them properly?"

*

The Winville District Hospital had a Board which had always been fairly friendly towards Dr Leslie Davis. They had chosen to employ him and were possibly reluctant to now say he wasn't suitable. Sister Uniacke had agreed to do the job of passing on the report the nurses had prepared. She felt as though this was a Judas thing to do and yet she also knew it had to be done. After everything had been put together she had decided to take one very private step of her own.

She had always respected Dr Thompson who was now retired and he had married Leslie Davis' ex-wife. She knew them both and thought she would like to talk things over very quietly and privately. Even if they didn't like or didn't agree with what she was doing she knew she would have to go ahead with it. But it would be good to talk with people who were not infected with the bad feeling that now seemed to be part of the hospital.

Alister, when she rang to see if they would be free through the week, immediately said she should come to dinner. She didn't know how much he still heard of hospital gossip. His wife had the occasional patient admitted. But she too had relatively little to do with hospital 'politics'.

When they sat back with coffee after dinner she pitched in to tell them that the staff had collected up Dr Davis's known mistakes and were doing a report for the Board. "I feel it has to be done although I don't feel terribly comfortable putting the screws on a doctor like this."

"Why not?" Alister Thompson said briskly. "We're as fallible as anyone else. And our mistakes are sometimes deadlier."

"Oh I know. We do owe the best care possible and he is very slapdash. It's more the feeling that we have gone behind his back."

"But you could hardly ask him to document his own mistakes," Kamala Thompson said with a slight smile. "Leslie doesn't believe he makes mistakes."

"That is part of the trouble. Things are always someone else's fault. But it doesn't quite remove this sense of sneakiness."

"But he has always been like that," Kamala said seriously. "Even at uni. If Leslie failed something it was always the lecturer's fault or the examiner, that they had been 'got at' or something. It was never that he hadn't bothered to work at things. He failed pathology twice, it was only because his father was a doctor and intervened that they let him sit it again. His father told them that Leslie had been having trouble with his eyes and that was why he hadn't done better and they believed him."

"But he did finally get through pathology," Sr Uniacke said carefully.

"Just. He said it didn't really matter, that you send things to the labs these days and they do the work for you."

"Wait a moment." Alister was obviously following a slightly different track. "I have heard Mason Watling not wanting Dr Davis to assist at the occasional post mortem there. I wonder if he thinks … well, that Leslie *doesn't* know what he's doing?"

"Dr Watling has no time for him but I don't know if it's for one specific thing. Dr Watling doesn't confide in me."

"No. But Mason Watling has qualifications coming out his ears. He probably expects his fellow medicos to be equally willing to continue to improve and gain new qualifications. I don't think Mason accepts fools gladly. I know it is easy to end up as a GP in a country town and get complacent with the round of small infections and the occasional broken bone. But that's not Mason Watling. Do you think he expects too much from other people?"

"Perhaps." Mary Uniacke had never thought of it in quite these terms. "But that doesn't excuse Leslie's carelessness."

"And it isn't what Mason thinks anyway, though I know he would like to have colleagues he can trust to do a good job. It's about the Board and if they didn't check Leslie properly before taking him on—well, they may be unwilling to admit to careless oversight." Alister Thompson rather admired Mason Watling. Most men with his qualifications would be making a lot more money in a city, not being apparently content with a place like Winville.

"But—surely—even if they have been careless—they won't be able to ignore this material?" Sister Uniacke had been over and over the report to make sure everything was documented, not reliant on hearsay or anyone's personal complaints. This kind of need to have everything carefully documented didn't always make her popular with some of the staff who liked to think their word was good enough.

"It may not make for sweetness and light," Alister Thompson said thoughtfully, "but if they genuinely have the best interests of the hospital at heart they will take it seriously and act on it. He may be able to worm his way out of a couple of these problems but I can't really see them giving him the benefit of the doubt on everything. But you have placed them in an awkward position. So far as I know they have never had to query the competence of any of their resident doctors. I might be wrong but I can't think of a similar case. I think they suggested to Dr Wittenbach that he might like to retire and that he told them he would be happy to retire when they'd found a good replacement. But that's not the same."

As the nursing sister drove away again she felt that they were on her side but she would still be the one who had 'sneaked' in Dr Davis's estimation and she wondered if he would try and retaliate in some way.

*

Sergeant Walsh was only vaguely curious about where the Hichens family had been before moving to Buckton. Had they created problems for police elsewhere or had they just decided to be a nuisance in Buckton? When he found himself in the pub on a quiet afternoon he asked the long-time barman George Johnson if he knew anything about the Hichens, parents and kids.

"Giving you trouble, Dennis?" Johnson said with a slight grin.

"Minor."

"Well, they're city folk, don't know anything about farming. But I heard his granddad had made a lot of money farming, don't know what sort of farming, and reckoned that his family were a lazy lot of so-and-so's and he was only going to leave them his dough if they could show him not only that they could make a go of a farm but that all the kids would pitch in and work hard on that same farm. Don't know if that's all on the up-and-up but that's the story. The kids don't want to be there but they all like the idea of lots of money coming their way. And the granddad's s'posed to be in his eighties so they hope he won't last much longer. They've just got to stick it out another coupla years probably."

Dennis nodded. "Might explain why they all like being a nuisance."

"You're thinking about those girls Lynnell has sucked in to making films?"

Dennis hadn't been. "Thought that was just gossip going round."

"No, seems it's for real. Had Lynney in here one afternoon saying if you can't get people in real life you can get 'em in cyberspace, something like that."

"You think they really are making films to—*get* people?"

"Why not? Sounds the sort o' thing she'd go for."

"And—d'you know who she's got in her sights?"

"This is only an idea but I think they're doing something with that new guy at the hospital, that Mayne, he goes round but what he does there—don't ask me, but I'd say he mightn't mind to get back at people. You heard he had a run-in with Martin and tried to get him sacked?"

"Didn't hear the details." Martin had told him, over the back fence, something about Mayne telling him he wasn't irreplaceable.

"Made a bit of a stir. Apparently a delegation of staff went to see Mayne to tell him Martin was the best groundsman they'd ever had and if he didn't back off they'd put in a formal complaint. He said 'go for it' but he's left Martin alone since then, it seems like, but I wouldn't mind to see Mayne move on myself."

Dennis nodded. There was a different story going the rounds, that Mayne went down to Lynnell's to cavort with young Shona, but Dennis was inclined to think that making a film to get back at someone was more Mayne's style.

In the late evening he passed George's thoughts on to Fiona who said she had heard Lynnell and the girls were making a film for Mayne but no one had any idea what it might be about. The only thing people were agreed on was that it wouldn't be about providing better health care. "He probably has his own blog or site. Do you want to have a look?"

And it was true that they could bring up a site which extolled Mayne as a 'health provider'. According to his site his brilliant qualifications had seen him called in several times to resolve problems that certain unnamed hospitals were having.

"A sort of troubleshooter," Dennis said thoughtfully. "I wonder what these brilliant qualifications are?"

"I'm sure we can find out. He must've gone to university somewhere."

It wasn't really a problem for Karen and Ruth who shared her little financial services business, although they all wanted to have the best local hospital possible, but they were both interested and said it shouldn't be hard to find out. And a week later Karen said rather dubiously, "Well, he has a Diploma in Hospital Administration. I'm not sure if that would

qualify as a brilliant qualification. We haven't found anything else, and certainly no nursing qualifications which I thought would be required. After all Susan Denby and Matron Heidenreich or whatever her name was were both fully qualified sisters as well as having experience in administration."

"Maybe that's the problem. He has some sort of inferiority complex because he knows he isn't as qualified."

All three women considered this. "I wonder if they couldn't find anyone better?" Karen Dalton said slowly. "Not everyone wants to come to a small country hospital."

*

DS Joel Brosnan had found himself in de facto control of the CIB section in Winville when Petra Moore went to hospital. Things had been fairly quiet so he hadn't requested extra help until Greg Sullivan came back from Long Service Leave and Petra Moore came back from convalescing. He had used most of his spare time in looking at the Eddie Morton case in the hope that he could succeed where other people failed. And his suggestions had been enthusiastically accepted by DC Kelly and DC Forman, both of whom would like to see Winville succeed with the Eddie Morton case.

He had had no involvement in the case of the mysterious Bulgarians found dead outside Winville but had looked at those files too. DI Stimson had told Winville he had now passed the question of the disappearance of Damien Bankes on to both Foreign Affairs and the AFP. He seemed to think they should congratulate him for being proactive. But Brosnan found himself in the unfortunate position, now that Petra was away, of dealing with Elaine Bankes' two sisters and their determined campaign to get control of the Bankes' property.

When he tried to tell them it wasn't really CIB's business, the status of that farm, they both glared at him. "The case has gone to Brisbane," he said by way of explanation. "I can give you DI Stimson's contact details."

"That's not good enough, young man," Mrs Redpath said grimly. "All the time we do nothing that farm is going to pot."

Jenny Forman came to his rescue by coming over and saying, "DS Moore suggested you apply to the court to get an interim order until Damien Bankes can either be found or declared dead. I thought you would already have done that."

"They are sitting on it," Marcia Redpath said crossly, "They may still be sitting on it when we go to our graves." The way she said it implied something very large and heavy sitting on something small and breakable.

"And all the time," her sister chimed in, "the farm gets more and more decrepit."

Jenny Forman thought, like DS Moore, that the farm would be better lived on, even if it couldn't be sold, and agreed with their concern. This seemed to mollify them slightly. "So where is Detective Moore," Mrs Redpath said.

"In hospital, I'm afraid. Look, if you wouldn't mind waiting, we'll ring DI Stimson and see if he can tell you anything." She had the secret hope that this might encourage Stimson to stop sitting on his hands but when she rang and explained the situation to him he said simply, "Not my business. That's up to their lawyer."

"I will put them on, sir, because you need to explain to them just where the case is at, seeing that they are next-of-kin."

She handed the phone over, saying simply, "DI Stimson."

If Stimson had thought it would be simple to fob off an elderly aunt he hadn't bargained on Mrs Redpath who said briskly, "I don't think the police have tried very hard to find our nephew—and all the time you lot fiddle-faddle around that farm is going to rack and ruin. So if you will guarantee, in writing, that police *cannot* find him then we want that farm passed to us so we can look after it."

Stimson immediately said that the search was ongoing but was cut off by Damien's aunt. "Don't give me that nonsense, young man, you have had months to find him and I doubt if you have lifted a finger. So we want that guarantee quick smart or we will go to the press."

Jenny Forman was inclined to think this was a hollow threat but she hoped Stimson would take it seriously. Instead Stimson obviously hung up on them because Mrs Redpath turned to Joel and Jenny and said, "Well! Of all the rude men!"

It was not a situation Brosnan had ever come across before and he said cautiously, "Have you had good legal advice?"

"We paid through the nose—so it'd want to be good. But that's not to say it was. Why?"

Joel had been hurriedly testing possibilities in his mind. He gave Jenny Forman a slightly dying-duck look. He was supposed to be in charge but he felt himself out of his depth. But to admit that would see him go down not only in these women's estimation but also possibly in DC Forman's estimation. At last he said, "First off, it might be worth getting a second legal opinion. Then it would be worth talking with your local Member and it might also be worth contacting the Ombudsman's office. I'm sure short term arrangements could be made for the care of that farm and I can't see that anyone could actually stop you from staying on the farm whenever you wanted. It's not being treated as a crime scene now."

This all sounded sensible but Jenny Forman wasn't surprised when Mrs Redpath said grimly, "We don't want to farm, we want to sell, and all the time you lot mess about the value of the farm goes down."

"I'm sorry," Forman said briskly while her senior agonised over a possible response, "but Damien Bankes is the heir, regardless of what state the farm is in, and all efforts have to be made first to find him. We know he went to Bulgaria to meet with a man called Kurt Von Scheisser so we are still trying to find what happened next—"

"Well, if you're trying—you need to try a lot harder. But we will get a second opinion." She turned and marched out. Her sister followed.

Joel looked at Jenny who raised both hands, palms upwards, and said, "I still haven't given up hope that Damien might still be alive but I honestly don't know what else we can do."

"Stimson says it's gone to the AFP but can we go round them and ask Interpol directly?"

She wasn't sure if this would make Stimson cranky or whether he wouldn't care less. At last she said, "I think we can ask Deeping in the UK to list it. After all Damien was traveling from the UK and Interpol is based in France. It would be much easier for them to work from there. They must have some idea if Bulgaria is being used to traffic … I don't know … people, drugs … "

DI Deeping might have hoped that his connection to the case was finished but they got a thoughtful reply a couple of days later to say 'Yes, Interpol is the obvious next step. I will contact our embassy there to see if they can help as I don't think Aust has an embassy in Sofia. He just might have sought help.'

Forman couldn't help a grin and the unworthy thought that she would like DI Stimson shown up for his gung ho attitude to the whole sorry business. He might be a DI but she and Brent, lowly DCs, had achieved far more.

*

Chris Weaver privately admitted that Brett Rowlings had been rather sceptical at first. He had said, "Barry? Heck no. Barry's never been in trouble."

"Then you might like to look at these photos and see what you think."

He wasn't sure that he had convinced Rowlings but the steward did go over the photos very carefully. "I'm not absolutely convinced but they are interesting. What d'you want me to do?"

"Look very closely at the bays Woodbridge owns. Those are the ones he and possibly Tom Lewis are swopping around because they are virtually identical."

"You mean—those are the ones you say they are swopping around."

"Brett, there's nothing in it for me. I rarely bet. I don't own any horses. But I want racing to be clean. I'm sure you do too."

"Well, okay, I'll keep an eye out."

It wasn't the ringing endorsement Weaver had hoped for. But he thought better than to push it. Instead he pondered on finding another way forward. That Sergeant Walsh had mentioned Peter Darcy and he wondered if he would be willing to talk about Barry Woodbridge. And should he go as a reporter or should he pretend he was looking for somewhere to spell a horse?

As he drove north-west he ran both possibilities through his mind and decided to play it by ear. The main thing was to come over as sympathetic and not at all pushy. And if Darcy refused to speak with him at least he could get an idea of how Darcy was living and what horses he had.

When he drove into Darcy's farm and parked on Sunday afternoon he could see an old ute parked at the front gate. If Darcy had a visitor would he want to talk? But it might be his own vehicle. He went to the front door and knocked and waited. He had dug up a photo of Darcy at Clifford Park with several other people, owners apparently of one of the horses spelled at his farm when he lived just outside of Toowoomba.

The man who came to the door was older and looked slightly unkempt as though he didn't really care how he appeared to anyone. Weaver introduced himself and asked if he could show Darcy some photos. Darcy seemed rather taken aback and said cautiously "What kind of photos?"

"Horse photos. I just thought you might be able to help me identify them."

This seemed to intrigue Darcy sufficiently for him to say, "Okay, come in, we're just finishing lunch. Want a cuppa?"

Weaver followed him in and was surprised that the rather spartan house was clean and tidy. Darcy waved him to a chair in the kitchen and said, "This is Justin, he helps me with some ploughing and things."

Weaver extended a hand to the young man sitting at the table. He wasn't sure whether the young man's presence might make things more relaxed or would put the kybosh on everything. But he had come all this way so there was nothing to do but hope he could get something from the visit.

He sat down and accepted the mug that Darcy poured. "I don't know if you can help me but I am investigating Barry Woodbridge and Tom Lewis because I believe they swop their horses around and have been doing so for many years."

"Investigating? How?" Darcy seemed to be wanting time to take it all in.

Weaver laid out the photos he'd got from Kari and said, "See what you think before I say anything."

Both Darcy and Justin looked carefully at the groups of pictures. Justin wasn't sure if they wanted his opinion so he merely sat there waiting. But after a long silence Peter Darcy said, "I used to spell horses just outside of Toowoomba and Barry sent me horses regularly."

Weaver nodded.

"I had a day job so I would feed up and check them night and morning but I could see that Barry was changing his horses around without telling me."

"How did you know?"

"Each horse smells like a horse but each horse smells different. And there's dozens of small things. The way they hold their heads, their tails, little whorls in their hair, the way they respond when you touch them, some horses give a little shiver, some are good at lifting their feet, some have a higher neigh than others, some'll give you a little nudge, they all have their little habits, how would you not know?"

Weaver had only looked at obvious things but he could see that someone who lived much closer to the animals would pick up on things though he was slightly dubious about the idea of each horse smelling differently. Did Darcy have a particularly sensitive nose?

"Did you say anything?"

"Yep. Worse thing I ever did. Barry told me I didn't know what I was talking about, he knew his horses inside out. Then some young hood in a balaclava came round and bashed me up, don't ask me who, but I wondered, not Barry, but I wondered about one of his lot there, but I can't prove anything."

"What did the police say?"

"Didn't go to the police."

Darcy had tensed up as he spoke. Justin didn't pick up on a lot of nuances but he wondered now if this might explain why Peter always seemed on edge. He had assumed that was just the way he was.

After a pause Darcy said, "I decided to sell up and move. If I asked Barry to move his horses without a good reason … I'd saved enough and so I sold my place and thought if I bought far enough out Barry couldn't be dropping by but when I came here and set it up he immediately said he'd send me some horses because Tom didn't have much room. So he keeps sending me horses. I don't want 'em but I'd soon be outa business if it got around that I wouldn't take his horses. So don't go saying anything."

Chris Weaver wasn't sure what he could say anyway, and certainly not without hard evidence. He said cautiously, "Do you ever take pictures of the horses he sends you?"

"No. What'd be the point?"

"I s'pose we could get DNA tests done on all his horses … "

"They're all closely related. What'd that tell you?" Weaver hadn't considered this aspect but he still thought it might be worthwhile to have them all on record even though it would get expensive. "No," Darcy went on. "Look at their teeth. I'd say he sometimes puts a three-year-old in a two-year-old race, or puts in a four-year-old to run in place of a three-year-old and who's to check?"

"I'll see if I can follow that up."

"Keep my name out of it. I don't want another whack on the skull."

"If we can get Barry—and maybe Tom Lewis—on fraud charges—would you be willing to say anything?"

Justin could see that this really put Darcy on the spot. His whole body seemed to grow rigid and his knuckles tightened. "No. It's those lazy stewards not doing their job, just waving Barry through, giving him the big 'hi!' likes he's their favourite pal, they're the ones you should talk to."

Weaver could see the truth in this, Barry was so well-known around the circuit and so apparently 'clean' that he was on first name terms with all the officials. And they wouldn't take kindly to any suggestion that they had turned a blind eye to fraud all these years.

"I wonder if any of the bookies ever got suspicious," Weaver said suddenly. "They're the ones that lose out, them and the punters."

"Not when Barry gets an outsider up."

But Weaver thought that wasn't the way Woodbridge worked. He was never linked to any big upset. His horses went up a few places or down a few places but it was never obvious enough to raise questions. It was just that Barry undoubtedly did very nicely when his horse

beat the others when the bookies had only had the horse as a place chance. There was a low-key sense of discretion about it all. Barry must've done very well over the years but he didn't live in an obviously ostentatious way.

"I wonder what his bank accounts look like."

"He had a horse years ago that he called Offshore."

"Did he now? But we aren't going to get at his accounts, not without bringing in the police, and I'm not sure how we can do that without the evidence to charge him with anything."

Justin had been trying to follow the conversation. He didn't know Barry Woodbridge and he didn't know much about racing but he did know … "What about talking to Dennis Walsh?" he put in diffidently.

Chris Weaver and Peter Darcy looked at each other. Then Weaver said slowly, "It may come to that but let me put it to … people I know first." As well as Brett Rowlings he thought he needed to talk with several racecourse vets. Horses might get swabbed but he couldn't remember hearing that a vet had checked a horse's teeth. It just might spark off some unease in the Woodbridge stable if Darcy was right in thinking that older horses were being substituted.

Case No. 4: Threads

George Hickman, when asked if he knew of anyone with a pony or perhaps a galloway for sale, had said to Fiona that he thought the Gandy boy was wanting a good home for his horse as he was growing tall "and I have an idea he's going to boarding school in Toowoomba next year. I think he might suit Ellie."

So Fiona with Mr Hickman, Elise and Rob, had come out to Dinawadding to meet the Gandy family and have a look at the pony. Mr and Mrs Gandy took them out the back of their house where they could see several small paddocks, one set up with homemade jumps, and a pony of not quite 14 hands, a dark grey with a whitish mane and tail. Elise and young Blair Gandy walked over to where the pony, already saddled, was tied by the gate.

"What do you call him?" Elise said as she ran what she hoped was an experienced eye over the animal.

"Hoyle."

"You mean—like in Fred Hoyle?"

Blair looked at her in surprise and said, "You've heard of him?"

"I don't know a lot but I've got a video about the planets and I've read up a bit."

From being unenthusiastic about meeting a young girl, Blair seemed to have hurriedly rethought his ideas about girls. "I'm planning to become an astrophysicist so I need to get a good education. I didn't think Buckton would be good enough. They've put me down for Concordia next year so I hope its science program is good enough to get me through to uni."

Elise knew nothing about the Lutheran College in Toowoomba but she suddenly thought that maybe it would be fun to go to a college in Toowoomba rather than Buckton High. Blair watched while Elise gave the pony a pat then mounted and rode off round the paddock. He watched with a critical eye as she walked and trotted and cantered. Then he came over and said, "Do you want to try him over a jump?" and opened the gate into the next paddock.

Elise was finding the pony very comfortable and biddable. But she vaguely intuited that he would not provide her with a challenge. That he was probably as good as he was ever going to get. Whereas when her father had got Freddie for her he had been ridden by a boy whose only idea about horses was to go at full gallop all the time. Freddie had been a learning

experience for her and she thought that Freddie had gone on improving after she began working with him. Naomi Burkett had ridden him for a little while but Elise could see that Freddie had continued to develop since then. Hoyle would probably always be a pleasure to ride but she would never have any great feeling of achievement.

He obediently whisked over several small jumps then she rode back and did several figure-of-eights and tried stopping and starting him several times. Then she rode back to the people who had come out to watch and were now standing by the back gate. "Yes, he's very nice to ride."

"And you ride him very well," Jim Gandy said sincerely. "But if you'd like time to think about it … Blair's entered for two more shows this season and then the pony'll be free to come to you."

Elise looked round the circle of expectant faces then said, "I think he'll suit me very well." Fiona turned to the Gandys to talk about price and how to get him to Buckton eventually but she had the odd feeling that Elise though she sounded very enthusiastic wasn't so enthusiastic inside. She wondered if she was correct in thinking that. Of course people said 'never sound enthusiastic, it'll only push the price up' but she didn't think Elise would be thinking in that way.

It was only when they were home again that she ventured to say, "He looks a nice pony and well-looked-after so was he nice to ride?"

Elise said he was and then she said unexpectedly, "I think I will need to do a science degree."

"A science degree?"

"Well, not just yet, mumsie, but physics, chemistry, probably geology, certainly astronomy."

"So as to be a better rider?" Fiona said in puzzlement.

"No," Elise started to giggle, "so as to be an astrophysicist."

When Fiona came later to tell Dennis about the visit to the Gandys she was able to explain that it was young Blair Gandy's dream and he had somehow in that short time managed to inspire and intrigue Elise. Then she said thoughtfully, "I don't suppose Buckton High is planning on offering astronomy."

"Doesn't seem very likely but for sure you can do a course on the internet these days." He thought but didn't say that he hoped it didn't signal the end of his daughter's passion for horses. Instead he began talking about them needing to find another small paddock to buy.

*

DS Brosnan in his quiet way had gone looking for anything he could find out about the Bartell and Harris families and he looked pleased with himself when he could say to the room, "I think the Plowmans might've wanted Ainslie in the family for a quite different reason. Two of her brothers are Simon and Richard Bartell. Now we need to find where they're living or whether they're dead and their names re-used."

DC Forman said, "Bingo! It's a pattern, isn't it?"

"Maybe that's why she divorced him," Brent put in. "She found out she'd been used."

"Possibly. But the files say that she moved *back* to Rockhampton and seemed to have a relationship with people called both Fletcher and Fulcher, not sure if I really understood all that," Joel said from his notes. "So someone in Rocky must know the family if that's where she grew up."

"And nobody knows just how Fulchers and Fletchers and all the rest link up," Jenny said more soberly. "If you can sort that out, DI Payne—and probably Dennis Walsh—will give you a medal."

"Well, I've got some leave coming up so maybe I can spend a week in Rocky." Joel didn't want a medal but he wouldn't object to someone as senior as Payne telling him he'd done a good job.

"There's worse places to spend a week," Jenny said. "Ross and Terry Fulcher have a butcher's shop so you can drop by every day and get your sausages. But do you think you should actually approach Mrs Harris and ask some questions?"

"I'd like to—but maybe I should run that past someone."

"Greg'll be back in a month but you could run it past Dennis. I think he knows some people in Rocky. And he's been trying to sort the Plowmans out longer than anyone else." It didn't occur to Forman that Dennis now felt the Plowmans were other people's problem and he didn't want them back in his life.

*

Russell Bolger on the Board of Winville District Hospital also felt that he didn't want anything to do with Dr Leslie Davis back in his life. He believed that Davis was an inadequate doctor but he didn't like the feeling that he seemed to be the only person on the Board who thought like that. And there was that other thing: if he pushed for Davis to be sacked it could easily involve the hospital in a long-running unfair dismissal case which wouldn't do the hospital's reputation any good and which would cost time and money.

But the arrival of the report which the nursing staff had put together couldn't be ignored. He read it carefully and wondered if he should've been more proactive when the question of Dr Davis trying to influence and possibly make money out of Maryann Dillon had come up. The chairman of the Board, Sam Kirkland, said rather sourly that they would need to call a special meeting to discuss the report when everyone had had time to read it.

But Kirkland had only suggested a date and time when Leslie Davis rang him to say he hoped the Board wasn't going to give any credence to the 'pack of lies some of those bitches are peddling'. If there had only been one or two complaints Kirkland might have agreed with him that it was merely sour grapes on someone's part, not to be dismissed out of hand but equally not something deserving a special meeting.

He said apologetically, "I'm afraid we do need to discuss it, Les, but we will certainly give you the chance to come and discuss, or refute it."

"That's not good enough, Sam. Once you give them and their lies some oxygen we'll never hear the end of it."

"I'm afraid it's too serious to just shelve it. I assume you've read it and will be able to speak to all the allegations."

"I wouldn't give it the time o' day."

"Well, I think you should. You can't give us carefully considered responses if you haven't read it." It was Russell Bolger who had said that about 'carefully considered responses' and Kirkland thought it sounded rather well. But it was immediately obvious that Leslie Davis didn't agree.

"You don't seem to realise just how busy I am, Sam. I've got both public and private patients and they all take time."

"I know. But if you could spare an hour on Tuesday night."

"If there's no emergency."

"Understood."

*

Quentin Mayne had not grown any more popular around the hospital after backing off from his threat to sack Martin Hobbes. The staff were courteous but didn't try to infuse any of their interactions with genuine warmth. Yet they were all curious about why Mayne was now going round to see Lynnell Morton on a regular basis. The idea that he went to see Shona Webb had done the rounds but none of the hospital staff actually believed it. Their

own summing up of Mayne was that he had tickets on himself and certainly wouldn't go and cavort with a girl like Shona. And anyway that story had now been superceded by the one in which he was making a film using the Hichens girls. Why he would want to make a film had sparked various ideas—from a narcissistic impulse on his part to a desire to do down Buckton Hospital to get back at the person who had sent him to Buckton.

One young nurse, more openly curious than her colleagues, had dared ask him if he was making a film and he had responded with a sharp, "That question is completely inappropriate, Nurse Brumby. I do not ask questions about your private life so I would thank you to respect mine."

"I only asked," she said without being noticeably squelched.

"Well, don't, if you want to keep your job."

"I didn't think people could be sacked for asking questions."

"No, but they can be sacked for insolence."

It seemed to be a standoff but certainly didn't do anything to enhance his reputation in Buckton. After all, Gemma Brumby was related to quite a few people around Buckton. And what was wrong with asking questions?

Young Ben Waters had taken no particular interest in young nurses although Dennis had said he thought he needed a social life of some kind and had suggested he try the local churches. Ben had agreed, though perhaps without conviction, but had not so far done anything about it. He did go into the pub when there was a problem and sometimes dropped in to talk with George Johnson of a quiet afternoon as George was always a mine of information about Buckton's residents.

He went in one weekday afternoon and saw a half-dozen men scattered round and sitting alone was the young woman he knew was Shona Webb although he had never spoken to her. She had her head down on her arms and he wondered if she was unwell. He asked George if he knew what was going on.

"Several of those guys bought her drinks and then she started to cry and so they backed off. I asked her what was the matter but she just put her head down and wouldn't tell me anything. She might tell you what's the matter. I don't like to send her home in that state and she's not being any trouble."

Constable Waters wasn't the obvious person to deal with upset young women but he went over dutifully and said with obvious diffidence, "Is there anything wrong, Ms Webb? Can I help?"

At first he thought she hadn't heard or wasn't going to respond. Then she slowly lifted her head and showed him a face with smudged mascara and finally said, "I wish I was dead."

He was a little taken aback and wondered how to respond.

"That sounds pretty awful but maybe tomorrow will be a better day."

"No. It won't. It'll be more horrible stuff."

He felt rather exposed with both pub patrons and George Johnson watching him. "Would you like to go somewhere else to tell me what the problem is?"

"Doesn't matter but I s'pose I can."

Ben hurriedly drank his bitter lemon and said, "Okay. We can just drive down to the … the picnic grounds." It was a chilly day but he couldn't immediately think where else to take her. If they went to the café they would probably have the people there staring at them. She stood up without argument and came out with him and they drove down to the picnic table by the creek, behind the Butter Factory. But he didn't get out straight away, just saying, "I know it's not a police problem, not unless you are being coerced into doing things you don't want to do—but is there anyone else you would feel comfortable talking with?"

She took out a tissue and wiped her eyes though it didn't improve them much. He thought she would be quite pretty without makeup and with a different hairstyle. It might be

her own choice or someone else had told her ‘to look sexy’ and it just came out looking cheap. But he didn’t think he could say something so personal. And his ideas about how he wanted young women to look weren’t necessarily shared by many young women.

“How would you feel if you had to live with Lynney and put up with all those horrible old men? Some of them even keep pigs.”

“Well, I would hate it. But is there any way you can leave?”

He had no idea what sort of agreement, if any, might be in place.

“She never pays me. Only enough for a couple of drinks a week. And I can’t go home. Both my fuckin’ parents drink like fish. And my dad’s as bad as some o’ those guys.”

And to Ben’s embarrassment she started to cry again.

“You mean your dad—interferes with you?”

“All the time, the old bastard.”

“Do you want him charged?”

“He would only call me a liar, same as Lynney’s always callin’ me a liar. Every time I ask for my money she says I didn’t earn any, only what I owe her and when I say I did she calls me a liar.”

He didn’t fancy tackling Mrs Morton to demand that she pay Shona whatever she might be owed. “What would you like to do—if you went away, I mean?”

She thought about the unexpected question then said, “I’d go to Toowoomba and get a job as a waitress, I reckon.”

Ben nodded. “Or you could go to TAFE and get a qualification.” He had no idea whether she had finished high school in Winville.

She dismissed that by saying she had no brains. He said he was sure she did. But none of that solved the problem of what to do now. At last he said, “Do you go for regular check-ups with the doctor?”

“Course not. You think Lynney wants me talkin’ to anyone about … things?”

“I don’t know but I think it would be a good idea.” He wondered if Mrs Morton had some hold over this young woman or had just bolstered her belief that she was too dumb to do anything else with her life. “I could take you there now.” This would have the added benefit that Dr Long might be better at talking with young women and would probably have some good advice. “But there is one thing we have all been wondering about. Quentin Mayne from the hospital comes to your house and we’ve all heard that he is making a film. I wonder if that’s right?”

She nodded. “Yeah, he’s a bit creepy, the way he looks at you, but he wants to pay back his girlfriend for leaving him for some other guy. So they’ve got this other guy believing they’re these hot chicks that really fancy him, like he might end up dumping the girlfriend and that’ll pay her back, something like that. They don’t tell me everything they’re doing but I hear things.”

“Do you think they ever try and get money out of anyone?”

She seemed to believe this still referred to Quentin Mayne because she said, “He paid Lynney for them to make the film, like a fake film I guess, is that what you mean?”

“Partly. But do you think they pretend to be girls that need money so other men will pay them?” It was a fraught area because so many people who went on-line didn’t see a need to be scrupulously honest about who they were and what they did.

“Oh, for sure, but it’s no good asking me about all they do.”

“Pretending to be someone else as a way to get money is illegal—”

Internet crime didn’t impinge on their daily work in Buckton so he wasn’t particularly well-versed in the details of what was legal and what not.

"Yeah, that'd be right. They're always laughin' about what they get people to do but it's no good asking me. I'm too dumb to know what goes on. But those bitches are pretty cluey."

"Why do you call them bitches?" Maybe she called all other young women bitches. He didn't think she had been brought up with words like 'respect' and 'dignity'.

"'Cause they are, treat me like I'm just some stupid slag—and they make sure Lynney pays them their share, that's for sure. She just thinks it's all a big laugh."

At least she had stopped crying and become quite animated. He didn't know what they should be doing about Mrs Morton but he said he'd better be getting back to the station. "So I'll just drop you round to see Dr Long. She's very nice so tell her all you want to about how Mrs Morton treats you. And are any of the men ever violent towards you?"

It struck him as bizarre that most men would not dream of hitting a waitress but seemed to think it was quite okay to knock a prostitute about.

"What d'you care about what happens to me. Men are all the same."

"Well, I don't think they are. But tell Dr Long about abuse—and about your dad. She will know what to do for you." He hoped his confidence in Gillian Long was not misplaced.

Joanne McNally at the doctor's surgery said if Shona didn't mind waiting she was sure Dr Long could fit her in. Ben said for Shona to come into the station if she'd like more help then thankfully got himself out and back to the station.

Dennis listened carefully to his recital and agreed that he would like to know just what the arrangements were with Lynnell Morton. "But the harder question—can we get a warrant and go in?"

"Would we know what we were looking for?"

"With Shona—for sure. I'll guarantee that Mrs Morton keeps a ledger with all the customers and what they pay and probably some personal details. We could ask the Fair Work bods to check it out. But we'd need an expert to have a look at their computers. Not much good us messing around. But keep the lid on it for the moment. We don't want them removing stuff if they think we're sniffing around."

Constable Waters agreed with this. He knew more than Dennis but not enough to really hunt down scams. "Could we get a search warrant, do you think?"

"Let me run it past Jake. They must've dealt with more of this on-line stuff. And the other thing is this Shona's dad. If he's been messing with her then I want to see him in court."

"What if he just says she's a liar?"

"Most abusers say that. But there's ways around it. And I wonder if Lynnell knew what was going on? Maybe the girl thought she was being offered an escape—and then found it wasn't. Mrs Morton likes to know people's dirty little secrets. It's part of the reason people are reluctant to tackle her. I'll guarantee she knows things about Shona's customers that they would rather she didn't know."

"How would she find out?"

"It's not a very big house." Dennis thought of Don Whelan's old cottage and wondered if it was why Mrs Morton had wanted Dan Goodrick's place. It was well away from other houses. "She's the sort that always looks for the worst in people and anything she finds she twists around to make it seem even worse."

There were people round Buckton who found the non-drinking non-smoking non-swearing Constable Waters 'a bit of a wowser' but Dennis privately thought he was the ideal person to help deal with this situation. Not by any stretch of the imagination could he be seen as part of the problem.

"And there's the other thing," Dennis added after a few moments thought on how they should respond. "Is Quentin Mayne doing something illegal or conniving at someone else doing something illegal?"

Waters admitted that he didn't know. "Should we ask him … anything?"

"Not yet."

Neither of them knew that Gillian Long had taken Shona Webb round to the local hospital, saying she needed a bed for the night. Then she had met with Sr Martin and Sr Hitchener to discuss her worries.

*

It was nearly 9 pm when Lynnell Morton went round to the police station and banged loudly on the door. Constable Waters had been watching a film and got up reluctantly to go to the door. He had hardly got it open when Mrs Morton pushed her way in and said, "Right you sleazebag! Where're you hiding her?"

"Hiding who?"

"Don't come the dumb act with me! Shona of course. They said you went off with her so where is she?"

"She wasn't well. I stayed with her until she said she was feeling okay again." He wasn't sure that he wanted to dob the doctor in. She might be able to deal with a furious Mrs Morton but she might not. He desperately wished that Dennis was here to tell him what to do.

"Not well? Don't be stupid! Of course she's okay! Why wouldn't she be? So where is she?"

"I'm sure she'll come home." He could understand that Shona might well not want to go 'home' but he didn't think she could still be at the doctor's surgery. "But I don't honestly know where she is." He also felt constrained by his boss telling him to keep the lid on everything. He wasn't sure if Dennis had already taken any steps to contact anyone. He thought that people like Workplace Standards probably should look to see if it was safe for anyone to work in that cottage. And if it was true that Shona wasn't being paid then that too needed to be sorted out.

"You're sure she'll come home," Lynnell said in a mincing little voice. "Don't give me that bullshit!" Ben Waters in the times he had seen Lynnell Morton downtown hadn't really taken on board the stories which went round about her. She looked like anyone's pleasant granny. But this screaming harpy wasn't a gran he would wish on any child.

"Mrs Morton, I cannot help you. I don't know where she is. If she's still missing in the morning then come back and we can list her as missing." It probably wouldn't be long enough but he just wanted the woman gone.

"She's not bloody *missing*, you've got her somewhere, you useless little git!"

"Mrs Morton, I can assure you I don't know where your friend is."

"Don't give me that! And she's not my friend!"

"Then what is she?"

"Don't come with this bullshit! You've got her in there with you, I'll bet. You fancy her, don't you, you little creep, and you don't want to pay. I know your sort." She sort of leered at him then barged over to his door to look inside his small flat. Any last vestige of belief in her as your average granny flickered and died. At that moment he found her the most repulsive woman he'd ever met.

She turned back to him. "Okay, I'm waiting! Where is she?"

"I do not know where she is, Mrs Morton, so will you please leave. If she has not returned by tomorrow you can list her as missing—" He wasn't sure if she really could. Shona was an adult (at least he assumed she was) and there was no suggestion that she might have met with foul play.

"And when I find the little slut she won't know what's hit her," Mrs Morton said grimly as she went to the station door. Ben Waters looked after her rather helplessly. He could only hope that Mrs Morton would not be the one to find the young woman. He could ring Dennis but finally decided against it. Because it wasn't as though they would now go out

and scour the district for young Shona. As he went behind the counter to note down the visit it occurred to him that if Shona was related to Mrs Morton then she was also related to various other people round the district. Would she have tried to find refuge with John Goodrick or even old Dan Goodrick?

He went back to his flat but found he could no longer concentrate on his movie.

*

Robina Curtis had kept a record of when the Hichens girls had come round to Mrs Morton's house. She wasn't sure what she was trying to achieve but she had a vague idea that it might be useful if the girls really were coming to help Lynnell in something that was illegal. They couldn't later pretend that they didn't come or didn't know what Lynnell was up to. She still had no idea what they were exactly 'up to' but she had known Lynnell all her life and knew she was no respecter of the norms of decent behaviour.

She had seen Lynnell go out late, she had seen a man come and knock and go away again, she had seen Lynnell come home and slam the door. She had seen the man come back and knock again and seen Lynnell say something and then he had gone away again. She recognised the man as George Plimsoll from over Norwilla way. It wasn't anything to do with the Hichens girls but she made a note of his coming and going. It all suggested that something had happened to Shona but she couldn't guess what. Maybe the young woman had just had enough and had finally walked out?

And next morning Lynnell went out early and came back in a bad temper just as Mrs Curtis made a point of getting ready to go out. She hesitated then called out to Lynnell, "Hi Lynney! Is anything wrong? You look upset."

"I'll say I'm upset! The little bitch's buzzed off without telling me. And those fucking useless cops won't look for her. But I'll find her and she won't know what's hit her."

Mrs Curtis didn't like her neighbour but this level of viciousness was unusual even for Mrs Morton. She looked rather taken aback but she said in what she hoped was a soothing manner, "Oh, I'm sure she'll come home. Pretty young girl, she's probably met some nice young fella as a nice change from old sods like George Plimsoll." Mrs Curtis wasn't particularly religious or judgmental but she did find it tacky to say the least that a young girl should have to put up with tedious old goats like George Plimsoll. And as a private person herself she also thought that other people's, other *women's*, bodies should be kept private.

"Well, I must be off to work," Mrs Curtis waved a hand vaguely and went out to her car. But she had only turned on the ignition when she wondered if she should warn anyone about Lynnell's threats. They might only be hot air and annoyance but she didn't trust her neighbour not to get physical. It felt a bit sneaky but she finally resolved that she should say something before she went to the supermarket.

Dennis Walsh listened and nodded and said, "Well, don't go worrying about young Shona. We've asked the Workplace Standards bods to check the place out." He didn't see any need to tell Mrs Curtis that the hospital here had sent Shona to Winville because of severe pelvic inflammation.

She didn't understand just what they would come in to look at but she thought it could only be a good thing. She said, "Oh good, I've been worrying. And those girls that come regularly to make films … " Then she wasn't sure what more to say about them. "Well, I … I've been recording the times they come and go most days, sometimes I'm not at home and Pete says not to bother because Lynney'll find out I've been stickybeaking."

Dennis wasn't sure whether this information would be useful or not. But he said, "Good oh, and have you noticed Quentin Mayne from the hospital visiting?"

"Yeah, I've seen him come and go. He always looks a bit sort of … sneaky … like he doesn't want anyone to notice him going in." When she'd first seen him come she hadn't recognised him and had had to ask some discreet questions.

"Morning or evening?" There had been talk of the man visiting Shona but Dennis doubted that.

"Oh, always morning."

"Well, thanks for that, Mrs Curtis. And don't worry about Ms Webb. Someone is looking after her."

She felt a whole lot better as she went out again. What 'looking after' meant she couldn't guess but the very fact that Sergeant Walsh knew seemed to be a comfort in itself. She knew some of her young relatives, or her husband's young relatives, gave him a hard time. But this awkward fact didn't alter the feeling that she was glad he was in charge in Buckton.

*

When the Hospital Board asked Dr Watling to sit in on their 'discussion' about the staff report on Dr Davis he had refused unequivocally, saying he was not Dr Davis's employer and that he thought they would be far better to ask someone from the Department of Health to be there as a neutral observer.

As he later shared over a dinner with Leila Burkett he had got a second-hand version from Russell Bolger (though he only called him 'a sympathetic Board member'). According to Bolger Davis had refused to answer any specific question saying to every allegation that it was all lies and he didn't believe any reputable Board should be a party to this witch hunt. Bolger said they had tried to work through each allegation, beginning with the well-documented case of him being censured for writing a death certificate for a man from Norwilla. "Are you suggesting that the *court* was involved in a witch hunt against you?" Bolger had asked.

"I did my very best for that man. If he chose to be irresponsible that wasn't my business."

Russell Bolger had never thought of himself as a tough questioner but he had finally felt he had had enough of Dr Davis. "I'd had him up to here," was how he later expressed it to Mason Watling. "That isn't what you were asked, Dr Davis. You wrote a death certificate saying a man you barely knew had died from a heart attack with complications when he was brought into the hospital suffering from severe vomiting. He could have been suffering from any number of things, including poisoning. But you simply plucked heart attack out of thin air and put it on his death certificate."

"Don't be silly. The man gave every appearance of dying from a heart attack and he had complained to me about his heart."

"If you had asked for an autopsy you would have saved the courts time and money. Now we also have the signed affidavit here from Maryann Dillon and copies of the letters you dictated for her. Yet at no time did you inform the hospital that you had agreed to split any monies received with her. That is a breach of protocol."

Mason had listened to Bolger's long recital and had thought the most impressive thing in it had been Bolger's refusal, unlike several Board members, to cut Davis any slack. Leslie Davis could not dimiss court transcripts as lies but according to him everything else was a lot of hysterical women trying to do him down.

Mrs Burkett had agreed that Dr Davis had never given any sign of respecting women. "Did they think of asking his wife, his ex-wife, about his physical abuse, I wonder?"

Watling looked at her in surprise. "I know he regularly undermines and puts women down but I hadn't heard of him getting physical."

"You can ask Dennis Walsh or you can ask Kamala herself. But I think it probably had something to do with them being married. Since then he only seems to have wanted brief flings. Some men cannot cope with the kind of forced intimacy that marriage brings. Not that that should ever be an excuse."

Mason gave that a rather wry agreement. “And were charges ever brought?”

“I don’t think so. I don’t think Kamala had the … well, the strength to go through with it. It might’ve been different if she’d had friends or family here.”

And from what he knew of Kamala Thompson she wasn’t a tough-minded woman. She had probably been brought up to believe that women were subservient to men and her meekness might well have encouraged her husband in his bullying. He probably felt confident that she would never share what went on inside their home with anyone outside it.

“Mmmm. Well, then, it’s just as well he has been content with brief flings. And the fact that he’s never had any apparent difficulty in finding women for his flings probably boosts his little ego.”

“The Casanova type?” she said with a smile. “So what ended up happening? Was he put on notice?”

“No. He resigned.” The laconic way he said it almost removed its significance.

“But—isn’t that what you always wanted? To see the back of him?”

“No. I wanted him sacked. Even if they refuse to give him any sort of reference or recommendation the very fact that he’s worked there for six years will make it easy for him to get work in another desperate country town.”

“Ye-es, yes, I can see that. So can the Board do or say anything to make it clear that he resigned while being investigated?”

“I think they could but whether they will … I’m not sure. And they’re not pleased that they now have to go looking for a replacement doctor and they don’t grow on bushes.”

“No. And you’re still not very happy with Dr Murphy, are you?”

“I’m not. And the other thing is that Dr Davis has private patients. He could stay with his private practice in Winville and try to convince people that he is the martyr and the hospital staff the inquisition.”

“Yes, I hadn’t thought of that.” Yet she was thankful that at least he would not have to see Dr Davis on a regular basis. She had seen him constantly worrying over the possibility that Leslie Davis would make a really serious mistake and he would be helpless to prevent it.

She didn’t mind to share it with anyone she was speaking with over the next few days and very soon it was all around Buckton. People had begun to forget Leslie Davis and a couple of people had to ask who he was but everyone at the hospital felt a sense of relief. And Dennis Walsh just said, “Good, one less donkey around,” when he heard. Then he thought that was being unfair to donkeys.

*

Inspector Jake Moss had no problem with someone from Workplace Standards being called in to check over the working conditions for young Shona Webb but he had much greater difficulty in deciding what if anything could be done about the possibility that Mrs Morton and two young women were making films with the intention of defrauding members of the public.

“Have you got any evidence, Dennis?”

“Not really. You could go round to Winville Hospital and interview Shona Webb but just how much she knew about their targets I don’t know. I can go and talk with Quentin Mayne about what he asked them to do. It may not be illegal. That’s where I’d like some guidance.”

Moss felt like saying “So would I” but he accepted that wouldn’t help. “And no one has come to you with a complaint?”

“No. Not so far. But then would they know to come to us? They might not even know where the material is originating from. I’m sure those girls are not saying ‘Hi, we’re in Buckton’ or anything to identify themselves.”

"No, I don't s'pose they are." And he wasn't sure that he wanted Dennis Walsh in the mix. He might be the ideal person to break up an affray in the pub but he didn't have the knowledge or the finesse to deal with possible cyber crime. "Well, leave it with me."

Walsh was more than happy to leave it with Moss but when he later told Fiona about it she said, "Well, I wasn't going to mention it unless Ruth got anywhere with it."

"Ruth?"

"Ruth found Quentin's ex-girlfriend's Facebook page and has got on to it as a 'friend' and they have been having long chats about men … or some men … and Juliet has told her some things about Quentin and she's also shared something about how a mysterious woman has got in contact with her new man and seems to be trying to seduce him. I'm not sure that he would want to put in an official complaint, after all, it doesn't seem to be against the law unless they ask for money. But if he really knew what was going on and that it was Mayne that was paying for it, well, at least they could perhaps disengage themselves before it spoils their relationship."

"So should I get on to this man and tell him he is being conned?"

Like Jake Moss she didn't think Dennis was the ideal person to get involved but on the other hand Moss might take weeks, even months, to decide whether it warranted police intervention. And in the meantime … perhaps Dennis just telling the man what was going on would be sufficient.

Finally she said, "Yes, I think you could just tell him that Mayne is paying someone to pose as an interested woman. If he wants to go on with the cyber-relationship then that is up to him."

"Okay. So now I need a name and contact number."

"Well, let's see what we can find." And Fiona in just a few minutes turned up Alister Peacock's page. She made a mental note to thank Ruth for her help in gently inserting herself into Juliet's life and sharing and collecting information.

With Fiona's help he nutted out a message from Buckton Police to warn Peacock that two young women, paid by Quentin Mayne, had gained access to his Facebook page. "Their names are Kyrelle and Serisa Hichens and they live in Buckton on the Darling Downs. Whether you want to continue any 'friendship' you have with them is up to you. But there is a strong possibility that they are posing as 'friends' solely in the hope of breaking up your relationship with Quentin Mayne's ex-girlfriend" and he signed it Senior Sergeant Dennis Walsh and gave his phone number.

Fiona finally sat back and said, "I think we've done our part. But are you going to say anything to Mayne?"

"He is part of a possible false pretences case but I think it is up to this Peacock character. For all we know he was getting tired of Juliet and is delighted to have a reason to break it off."

"There is that. But you could perhaps warn him? He may not realise that Mrs Morton isn't the ideal person to deal with."

"I've heard that someone will come and check the house on Monday. It's quite legal for Shona to offer sex from home but it is still a workplace so there are requirements and I would doubt whether they are meeting them. And I doubt whether old sods like George Plimsoll would care anyway." As Fiona couldn't remember ever meeting Plimsoll she left it at that. Then she had another thought. "Do you think she was actually getting paid?"

"Board and lodging? Who knows?"

A few days later Dennis said to Constable Waters, "Looks like we nipped something in the bud. This Peacock bloke says he's going to come to Buckton to have it out with Mayne. Not sure that's a good idea but at least he says he's banned that woman from his page so that's something."

Constable Waters too was a little nervous about the idea of a punch-up at Buckton Hospital but 'have it out' might only mean a bit of yelling and he thought the hospital could probably cope.

Ruth Drexler when Fiona brought her up to date on what had been happening said she was enjoying her contacts with Juliet and was happy to continue on as a friend and support.

*

What the man from Workplace Standards said to Mrs Morton was a mystery but he dropped by the station and said he'd found no problems. "Everything clean, adequate towels, a good bed, a clean bathroom."

"Did you check Mrs Morton's record-keeping?"

"No. She said the girl kept her own records and she didn't know where she had put them."

"Well, that's a lie for starters. I think you'd better interview the girl and I'd say it would help if you went to a couple of her customers. As soon as the girl went missing I'd say Mrs Morton got the wind up that we might want to go in and look around so I'd say she's been busy. The other thing is that the girl told my constable she wasn't being paid."

"Well, I'll talk to the girl," Jonah Teller said without enthusiasm. "But I've given the premises a clean bill of health."

"Did you see film equipment there?"

"No. Not that I looked in all the cupboards. You're not suggesting clients are being filmed without their permission, are you?"

"No, I think they're setting up some kind of internet scam. There's two girls who come there regularly."

"To offer sex? I only saw one bedroom for clients."

"No. To make films with the idea of putting out fake women on the internet."

"Mmm, it can happen. Sex workers can make a little extra by posing. It's not automatically illegal. The internet is stuffed with porn but this would surely be very low-key amateur stuff?"

"Think it's more to do with finding ways to get money out of lonely old goats."

"A romance scam? Yes, they seem to be on the rise."

Dennis privately thought it had nothing to do with romance. Next time he saw Jake Moss he said he thought they all needed to know more about cyber crime, "Maybe we won't have to worry about it any more but it'd be good to have a bit more insight into what some sods are up to."

The same thought had occurred to Moss and he said, "I'm planning a training session. So you can send young Waters along."

"Yeah, you don't want some old coot like me asking stupid questions."

"No, Dennis, I don't," Jake said drily.

*

DS Joel Brosnan had spent a lot of his spare time going over and over the Morton case and the related possibility of Ainslie Harris knowing things he thought they should know. He had gone out to Garramindi to talk with John Applegarth, he'd been out to the Morton farm, he had talked with Billy the Lad and with Edwin Morton's daughter. He could see that Aidan Hassell's insistence that they look for sightings of Billy's truck on the road had diverted attention.

He said to Applegarth, "Did you ever try to get any sightings of a dark green ute on the roads?"

Sergeant Applegarth told him about Brent Kelly's meeting with people who had seen a ute but he immediately said, "No, I mean back this way, between Garra and the farm or between Garra and Winville. Did anyone round Garra have a ute that might fit?"

As soon as he asked John Applegarth could see the importance of the question. That ute might never have been anywhere near Garra but it was a question he should've asked. He had never even asked Billy the Lad which way the ute had been coming from when it turned in Eddie Morton's gate.

"Joel, you're a genius! And I wonder if Billy might have things still tucked away in his mind that we might be able to find through hypnosis or even just a sympathetic questioner. And there's another thing. The people who took Ruby Jackson's house were connected. They did have a white sedan but I wonder if the next door neighbour ever saw a dark green ute there?"

And John then said, "Let's go round and see what Mrs Watkins saw in the way of cars." Joel was all for action too but he was a bit less hopeful that the old lady might remember back that far and might be good on cars.

Mrs Watkins had never ceased to wonder and worry about what might have happened to her neighbour and, in a way, it had been a relief when they had found Ruby's bones on the farm the other side of Prickly Creek. It brought to an end the endless uncertainty. She was pleased to see the two men and invited them in for tea and a fresh damper.

"Cars?" She sat there thinking back. "People did come and go. I understood he was some kind of traveling rep and she was … well, she was an unsociable old so-and-so, a real old grump. But cars … "

They sat and waited. At last she said, "It was mostly a white sedan but other cars were occasionally parked in the driveway. A ute, dark green or dark blue, and a grey car, don't know what brand and a small truck one time. I think you should talk with the Legges along here, the boys always seem to be changing cars so they would know more than me."

And young Curtis Legge immediately said, "Yeah, I remember them but they were hardly ever there."

"And did you ever notice what cars were there?"

"Yeah, for sure, there was a white Commodore, and a dark green Ford ute, a little HiLux, a grey Peugeot sedan, a black Ford ute, a blue Camry. But it was usually the Commodore."

"And—were you around here when Eddie Morton got shot?"

"I didn't shoot him." The young man suddenly looked alarmed.

"Of course not. But we wondered if you noticed what cars were around that day."

"No-o-o," the young man shook his head slowly. "Don't think there was anyone around then. They were often gone for weeks, even months. Don't know where they went. And that dame that was there, she was really weird. She had this really deep voice and we reckoned she wasn't a real woman."

Applegarth grinned at that. "You're probably right. She called herself Fifi. But we think they might've been brothers."

He could see he had grabbed the young man's interest. Curtis nodded and said, "Yeah, yeah, they were about the same size. So … d'you want me to ask around?"

"Sure. It was a dark green ute that drove into Eddie Morton's farm, a man in a lairy shirt got out with a rifle, shot Eddie and drove out again. We think he then went round to Billy the Lad's house and put the rifle there to frame Billy and drove away towards the coast."

Curtis Legge's eyes shone with excitement. "Fingerprints? He must've left prints on the rifle."

"He cleaned it."

"No one cleans it that good."

"And the shirt was black and red."

"So maybe he bought it here?"

"Yes, or in Winville. You didn't happen to ever notice any number plates?"

Curtis considered this and finally admitted that he hadn't. Then he brightened. "My mum'd know."

"Your mum?" Brosnan said in surprise.

"Yeah, when we'd be going somewhere and we'd get bored, she'd say look at the letters and see if you can turn them into a word. Y'know, say it was RDE we could turn it into RUDE or RIDE or RODE, things like that."

"Great." John knew Nadine Legge slightly but he hadn't known of this interest. He wondered if her children ended up as good spellers. "Is she at home?"

And Mrs Legge said cheerfully that she had tried that with the kids when they got bored and restless or had lost interest in playing 'I Spy'. "So the cars along the street, yeah, I s'pose I did." She seemed to throw her mind back. John ran through the cars that her son had mentioned.

"Yeah, I remember them coming and going but they'd never give anyone the time of day. The white car was RUL and the dark green ute was PTE and the little truck … not sure … maybe SLE … I don't think I ever saw a grey one there … "

"But that is all very helpful, Mrs Legge. Did you happen to notice anything around the time that Eddie Morton was shot?"

"I'm sure they weren't there. Everyone was talking because it was Edwina's dad and everyone knows her—even though we didn't really know Eddie. And we knew it couldn't have been Billy the Lad's rifle because he was scared of guns. I went to school here with Billy and he was away for ages after Donny Logan shot him. And you could see how Billy was never the same afterwards."

"Thank you, Mrs Legge. And would you be willing to do a statement about those number plates if we need any back-up evidence?"

"Well, I don't guarantee my memory, Mr Applegarth, but I'll do my best. D'you think the same person who shot Eddie is the one who killed poor Ruby?"

"Maybe not the same person but the same family. That's why it's so hard to pin them down. They seem to swop names and identities."

"Do you remember the one called Fifi?" Brosnan put in.

Mrs Legge laughed. "Fifi! Is that what he called himself?"

"Himself?"

"Well, he had an Adam's apple … and he had a nick out of one ear … and I'm sure it was a blonde wig … pretty weird, wouldn't you say."

"Very." Both John and Joel nodded. But John wondered if they had used the fiction of Fifi because two men living together in a small country town might arouse more interest unless they presented themselves as brothers. And possibly the Plowman family preferred people not to think in terms of brothers.

As Joel drove back to Winville he thought a thorough forensic re-examine of that rifle should be their first priority. And had it actually been checked against the bullet taken from Eddie Morton? With no suspect other than Billy the Lad … and with the rifle found there on his cleaned-off cupboard top it had looked like a foregone conclusion. He went to the evidence room and took down the rifle in its plastic bag and label and said, "This needs to be thoroughly re-examined and cross-checked with the bullet."

Jenny and Brent were immediately supportive. "Can do," Jenny said immediately. "And I'm not sure the bullet *was* ever crosschecked. Is that in the file?"

"There's a note to say the gun confiscated was the gun used but there is no actual forensics report from the ballistics lab."

"So we don't know if this is an examination or a re-examination but I don't suppose it matters." Jenny began to tap out the paperwork to go with the items.

But the reports when they came back threw everything into turmoil. The rifle they had sent didn't match the bullet. Though the rifle had been cleaned they had lifted two prints from the bolt. Neither matched the prints taken from Billy the Lad.

"So whose are they?"

"They didn't get a match."

There was a silence then Brent Kelly said soberly, "I think someone swopped rifles. Do you remember old Gus Ranke coming and saying he wanted his son's rifle returned to him and we couldn't find it? I think this might be that rifle and someone's got rid of the rifle which shot Eddie Morton."

Jenny Forman gave a mock hit to her forehead. "And I was hoping we finally had a … a clean team."

"Well, let's get on to Gus Ranke," Brosnan said practically, "and see if it really is his. That'll get one problem out of the way. And it sounds better saying it was merely mislabeled rather than pinched."

"And see if he has anything which belonged to his son that might have his prints on it."

Gus Ranke when they contacted him came into the station beaming. It wasn't that he planned to do anything with the rifle but the worm of suspicion had eaten deep into him. If they could steal Dave's rifle what else had they compromised.

He had also brought a box of things which had belonged to his son. By the end of the day the lab in Winville had linked one print to old Gus and the other to his son. And Gus had gone away cheerfully. He still didn't believe his son had shot himself but he accepted that there was no obvious way to prove that. "My son didn't have an enemy in the world," he had said several times. In every day terms this was probably true. Everyone said Dave Ranke was a nice quiet young man. And it seemed too difficult to try to explain to the old man that anyone who had even indirect contact with the Plowman family could be deemed at risk.

"There is another thing," Joel Brosnan said after the old man had gone out. "I got Reid to fingerprint the plastic bag and label. The prints on it belong to Aidan Hassell. Why would he have been the one to label and store it?"

"He swopped the rifles," Brent hated saying it to Brosnan; they had presented themselves as a clean team and had hoped they would never need to revisit the corrupt past, "and removed the one used to shoot Eddie Morton."

"Then your Mr Hassell has some tough questions to answer. Where is he now?"

"Gympie." Both Brent and Jenny wondered if they should wait till Greg came back in two week's time. Hassell was very touchy about his seniority. The chance of him agreeing to talk with people junior to him was very small. Not unless he was given no choice. But saying this to Brosnan when he had worked to get this far might sound like prevarication.

Case No. 5: A Make-Believe World

Buckton Police had given the sisters at Buckton Hospital a discreet warning that someone called Alister Peacock might come to see, possibly to confront, Quentin Mayne. Sister O'Brien had immediately asked who Alister Peacock might be. "Someone involved in his private life, no love lost between them, so I hope they will behave themselves." Kath O'Brien didn't think to ask then how Dennis knew the man was coming.

And Dennis half-expected that the man, when he thought about coming from Brisbane to Buckton, might have second thoughts. But Peacock didn't mind to take the long drive in the hope of getting Quentin Mayne out of his life, once and for all. He drew into the front car

park at the hospital about 4 pm and went up the ramp and into a door marked ‘office’. Mrs Hall said she would page Mr Mayne for him and suggested he take a chair in her little room.

Peacock was in the same area as both Quentin and Quentin’s ex-girlfriend Juliet, Hospital Administration, and he looked round the small space with interest.

“What is it like working here?” he said to Mrs Hall.

“I’ve always loved it.” She thought that had been honest up until the arrival of Quentin Mayne. She wasn’t sure what this man might want with Mayne or whether he would pass anything on if she said something critical.

“Quentin Mayne hasn’t been criticising you?” Peacock said curiously.

“Oh, he criticises everything and everyone. He must’ve been at a very superior hospital before he came here.”

“He was. But he certainly wasn’t in charge.” Peacock had a disarming smile. “This is his first time in charge anywhere. Probably the power has gone to his head.”

Mrs Hall looked at him in curiosity. She had re-thought her first idea that he might be a friend dropped in to visit. But if not a friend what was he? She didn’t think he could be an inspector, not in a t-shirt and jeans, but nothing else came to her. “So where are you visiting from?” she asked rather diffidently.

“Brisbane.”

“Oh! That’s a long way to come. Oh, this must be Mr Mayne now!”

Mayne stepped in the door, saw Peacock and said sourly, “What’re you doing here?”

“I’ve come to see you. You paid a woman called Lynnell Morton to make a film with two women called Kyrelle and Serisa Hichens with the hope of breaking up Juliet and me. You probably think that all is fair in love and war but people here might not see it like that.”

Quentin Mayne, suddenly aware of Mrs Hall’s interested gaze, stepped back outside. Peacock gave Mrs Hall a bit of a grin and followed him out. Mrs Hall wasn’t sure whether she should do anything or simply leave them to ‘discuss’ whatever they wanted to discuss. It seemed a long way to come to argue over a girlfriend. She got up and came to the door. They were simply standing on the verandah facing each other. She didn’t want them arguing where patients and public could hear them. She went back inside and paged Sister Martin. She thought she might be over-reacting but she always felt uncomfortable in Mr Mayne’s presence and thought she would like someone else here as a witness if Mayne was going to have a big argument outside her office.

When Jeannie Martin came along the verandah she could see the two men arguing loudly but she had no idea what it was about. She was a quiet reserved person but she felt strongly about keeping the hospital running smoothly. She reached them and said, “What seems to be the problem, gentlemen?”

“I came to see this scumbag,” Peacock began but Mayne butted in, “I want this man off the premises immediately!”

“What has he done?” She didn’t recognise the man who was standing there watching with a rather cynical smile.

“None of your business, Sister,” Mayne said brusquely.

“Then would you both move away from here and do your arguing somewhere else.”

She might speak calmly and quietly but there was no missing a hint of steel behind it.

Quentin Mayne said, “I have nothing to say to this loser,” and he turned abruptly and went along to the small office he shared with visiting doctors and slammed the door.

“What on earth is going on?” Sr Martin turned to the stranger who introduced himself with a charming smile. Then he repeated what he had told Mrs Hall.

“Mrs Morton?” she said in puzzlement. “What has she got to do with you and your girlfriend?”

"He was paying her to produce a film to try and break up my relationship with his ex-girlfriend. I got a message from a Sergeant Walsh."

"Sergeant Walsh?" she said in surprise. "Well, he must've seen it as serious." She considered her statement. Then she went on more carefully, "He has no time for Mrs Morton but he must know something we don't know."

"I know nothing about Mrs Morton. I was just so angry that Quentin would go to such sneaky lengths to try and end my relationship."

"I think it is more serious than that. We would not interfere in any staff member's private life but he is in a very responsible position here so we don't want any sort of scandal." She thought back to all their ponderings on whether he was here to recommend the closure of the hospital. If he brought the hospital into disrepute would that encourage anyone in Brisbane to wonder what was going on here?

Alister Peacock did not think that running a small country hospital could be all that responsible but neither would he want to be sick in any hospital run by Quentin Mayne.

"Well, I don't want to be a nuisance so I think I should go and try to catch up with that copper."

She didn't try to detain him even though she was left with the uneasy feeling that they would still have Quentin Mayne in charge but an extremely uncomfortable relationship between him and everyone who would now know the lengths he was prepared to go to get his girlfriend back. She wondered if there was more to it than the story Peacock had shared. And what could Dennis do to help get rid of Mayne? Unless there was a crime to be tackled … but if Lynnell had got someone to pretend to be someone else … was that a crime …

Dennis Walsh was out when Peacock came by and Constable Waters said, "Can I help you?"

"I'm the guy your Sergeant Walsh told about a scam run by someone called Lynnell Morton."

Waters nodded. "So you're Alister Peacock? But what did you want us to do about it?"

"Well, nothing really. But thanks for letting me know what was going on. I went to see Mayne but I didn't think I could start a big argument at the hospital."

"Do you think he has done something similar before now?"

"Have you got half-an-hour to spare?"

Ben Waters gave that a slight smile. "I don't mean just arguments and—things like that. I mean anything criminal."

"I'm not sure. When do dirty tricks become crimes?"

"You would need to be more specific."

"Well, I won't go into it just now. And how do I find this Mrs Morton?"

Constable Waters had a moment of doubt. Should he give out her address? But then she had been quite happy to take Mayne's money to try and interfere in this man's life.

"What are you going to do if I give it to you?"

"Are you always so pedantic? I just want to know what she's got to say for herself."

Waters told him how to find Lynnell Morton but added that he thought Peacock should come back later to talk with Sergeant Walsh. He wasn't quite sure why he felt uneasy with his visitor. Something a bit slick perhaps. He couldn't decide. And when Dennis came back ten minutes later he was still agonising over the best way to describe the man.

"Well, unless he comes to blows with anyone it doesn't seem to be our business," Dennis said briskly. "And Mrs Morton has never seemed to have any difficulty in standing up for herself. I very much doubt whether he'll get an apology out of her. But if it discourages her and those girls from messing round on the internet maybe something useful'll come out of it."

*

Mr Peacock, knocking on the door of the small weatherboard cottage, didn't think it looked like a base for cybercrime. Lynnell Morton had done a bit of painting and put in a neat garden path and some geraniums. But the house still looked its age.

He hadn't developed any picture of the woman who had been in cahoots with Mayne but the pleasant grandmotherly woman who opened the door set him back a little. She looked more like someone who would get out her knitting rather than know the first thing about setting up a sophisticated scam.

"I'm sorry but Shona isn't here at the moment. I'm not sure when she'll be back."

"Shona?" He was sure he'd been given two different names. "No, it was actually you I wanted to see—if you are Mrs Morton."

"What about?"

"I'm Alister Peacock. Quentin Mayne says he has been paying you to try and break up my relationship with his ex-girlfriend. He is quite welcome to have her back—although I doubt if she'd want a bar of him, the sneaky little sod."

Mrs Morton's first thought was that this man was certainly better-looking than Mayne. Her second thought was that he had tickets on himself. Then she thought of Mayne and his lying explanation and then she wondered if this man knew anything specific about the money which had changed hands.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Mr Peacock. Ms Webb, Shona, provides sexual services to approved clients. That is the only money which changes hands in this house. So I think you should be very careful about passing on any nonsense that Mr Mayne has told you."

"Are you saying—well, that Quentin comes here—for sex—with this Shona?"

"I am not saying anything, Mr Peacock, just warning you to be careful in what you say."

"The police seem to believe you have been involved in a scam—"

"The police! You poor booby! And you believed that useless Walsh. Lordy! You are a simple one. That oaf keeps his brains in his dick. You don't want to listen to anything he says."

Alister Peacock was accustomed to seeing himself as an intelligent professional with the ability to sum people and situations up quickly. It was part of the reason his career had outpaced that of Quentin Mayne. But now he wasn't sure what to say or do. Equally he didn't want to go on standing on her doorstep and she obviously wasn't going to invite him in.

Was it possible the police had got the wrong end of the stick?

If there was bad blood between the police and this Mrs Morton … He was no longer sure whether to try and prolong this conversation. "Mrs Morton, if Quentin has been paying you to take part in fraud then I think you are the one who needs to be careful."

She gave that a smile which didn't strike him as the sort of smile his own grandmother would share with him. She shook her head slowly and said again, "You poor booby." Then she went back inside and closed the door. He hoped that nobody had noticed as he walked back to his car. Robina Curtis had heard the raised voices but none of the words and she said to husband, "I wonder what all that was about?"

Peacock had managed to work up considerable anger by the time he parked outside the police station again and went in. Without any lead-in he said crossly, "Why did you send me down there. She says someone called Shona offers sex, nothing about cybercrime—and she said you don't know what you're talking about. I'm beginning to wonder too."

Dennis Walsh contemplated their angry visitor for a long moment before saying, "So Mrs Morton snowed you, did she?" He didn't sound very interested. "Well, it's up to you. She pays two women called Kyrelle and Serisa Hichens to pose and get men interested. Very

tacky and underhand in my book but not necessarily criminal unless you come to us with a specific complaint. Have you paid any money to the woman pretending to be a friend on your Facebook page?"

"No."

"Okay. Don't. And just ban her from your site."

"And that's all?" He sounded disbelieving. "You don't mind that Quentin is paying someone to make trouble for me? That's not good enough."

"Unpleasant. But not criminal." Dennis again had the feeling that he needed to know more about cybercrime. "You can ask Quentin Mayne to cease and desist. Or you can get a lawyer to do it for you. But at the moment it isn't police business."

"And you don't mind that that Mrs Morton is a party to all this deceit and carry-on?"

Dennis Walsh gave that the slightest of grins. "Her second name should be Sneak. But we can only tackle her when she steps over the line. And even then the magistrates usually only put her on a Good Behaviour bond."

"So you're not going to do anything?"

"No."

Peacock looked at the granite figure of Dennis Walsh, hesitated, then turned and flounced out of the station.

After he'd gone, and neither Dennis nor Ben had been impressed by him, Dennis said, "Pity. It would've been nice to have something which would encourage Mayne to up stakes."

And when he shared this later with Fiona she said, "So Juliet has gone from one not-very-nice man to another?"

"Looks like it. Maybe third time lucky."

*

DS Brosnan had the feeling of champing at the bit. He wanted to tackle Aidan Hassell but Jenny and Brent had spoken with Jake Moss on the grounds that he was the one who had taken over from Hassell—and also perhaps understanding better than Brosnan that Hassell would be a little more willing to talk with Moss. There was no love lost between the two men but Jake was an inspector not a DC.

Jake immediately said, "I thought the case was with the Cold Case guys."

"In theory," Brent remembered back to the cock-up made by Jennings and Murray when they came to Winville. "But I'll bet they've never even looked at it since Jennings went home."

"Still, you need to check with them."

Brosnan agreed but without looking convinced and he said after Brent had tried to find someone in Brisbane who actually knew about the Morton homicide, "I could go by Gympie as well as Rocky if necessary."

Privately Brent and Jenny thought it would be more productive to have Joel confront both Hassell and Ainslie Harris. But they accepted that they needed to see if the Cold Case team was actually doing anything.

"And there is another thing." Brent had been going over Joel's notes on his talk with Applegarth. "That business about Fifi having a nick in his ear. People said Richard Ferguson had a nick and the man who was at that pub in Townsville. I don't think most people saw Fifi's ears because of the wig so he must've pushed it back a bit one time."

"And the man who died at Ryan's Bridge, didn't he have a nick?" It began to seem like too many men with nicks and Jenny said, "Maybe several had a nick, maybe that was the way they recognised each other, different nicks." Brent gave that a grin.

Joel had listened to this. "Okay, I accept all that. But I still think we can do a bit here. Those number plates. Whether any shop here was selling those shirts. And putting together all those people who are s'posed to have had a nick in their ears. Maybe that was why they

went for a wig. To hide that nick. But there's no guarantee it was always the same one posing as Fifi."

"Okay. So now we know the ute was a Ford. I think I would trust Curtis Legge on that. So we want an owner."

"We've already got an owner for that ute. Richard Ferguson, but he gave a non-existent address in Kilcoy. So I need to see if we can find if it got registered under another address later on or if it disappeared." And none of them believed that the Cold Case people would object to them following this lead. And the history of that dark green ute they had christened Pete had had an interesting career. It had had, apparently, four owners in its career. Alvin Massey. Richard Ferguson. Terry Fulcher. Todd Vercelli. Then it had apparently gone to a wreckers in Townsville.

"But I wouldn't guarantee it was always the same ute," Brent said drily. "They probably swopped plates around the same way they swopped identities."

The others agreed. "But I wonder if there's anything left. They might not have wiped it over before they sold it on."

"We can let Townsville know."

"There is something interesting about those addresses. Alvin Massey was at that property near Meandara. Kilcoy was a wrong number. But Terry Fulcher doesn't live at that address, Ainslie Harris does."

Both Joel and Jenny stared at Brent then Jenny said, "Bingo! So she *is* still involved with the Plowman family." There might be other explanations but they all seemed more far-fetched. "And I think that Townsville is more likely to follow up. They may not care about Eddie Morton but they seem to be on to the Plowmans."

Winville put together an e-mail for the Townsville team with what they had and the possibility that the wreckers just might still have something and they got back an e-mail next day to thank them and the information that Josh Nottidge had been arrested for the death and burial of James McCormack.

"Josh Nottidge?" Brent said in surprise. "But I thought he was only the manager?"

"He is. So either they think he does some of the dirty work for the Plowmans—or he's their patsy … or … " Jenny Forman tried to think this through, "they will do a deal with him. When he's told them all he knows they'll give him a new identity."

*

Greg Sullivan took a while when he was back at work to bring himself up-to-date with everything. He was secretly pleased that his team had taken the Morton case and run with it, even if DI Scott Osborne of the Cold Case team said they were still 'busy' with it, because it had always bothered him that once Billy the Lad was finally dismissed from all consideration nobody else had ever been fingered. He felt it as his own private failure.

After he had got on top of their local cases he went back to the Morton case and said, "I think you should also let Carlton Payne know. He's always looked at the money side of the Plowmans. And he knows where Alvin Massey is … or I assume he does."

"And Aidan Hassell—we want to question him. How do we do that?" Brosnan liked Greg and thought he wouldn't mind working here permanently if Petra Moore wasn't coming back after extended sick leave. But he could also see that lightning-fast decision-making was not Sullivan's forte.

"If Aidan is in charge in Gympie we ask him some questions. If he isn't we'll need to go through his boss."

Jenny Forman said, "We can soon check." And it was interesting that Hassell, so full of his own importance here, was only listed as an inspector there.

"Okay. First, I need a detailed report on the rifle and get Reid's material on all the tests that were run, along with the lab in Brisbane, and background on how that rifle was

brought in as evidence and the chain of evidence for the bullet they got from Eddie Morton. We don't want to leave any wriggle room for Aidan to say we don't know what we're talking about."

It all looked clear and professional when put together. "And exactly what questions do we want answers to?" Greg had read through everything and thought that his juniors were better at just about everything than him. He even thought that it would be nice to be junior to a boss of intelligence and integrity. And then he thought back to Dennis encouraging him to go for the position and some of the difficult cases they had brought to fruition.

The other three had nutted out a number of questions. DSS Sullivan read down the list and vaguely wished he could come at things with that kind of clarity. But when he got on to Aidan Hassell to put those clear questions it was to face the fact that Aidan Hassell was an old hand at fudging things. And Aidan was not above pulling rank. After saying various things including that he couldn't remember anything about the Eddie Morton case he reminded Greg that he was an Inspector. "If you think it's appropriate for a sergeant to be trying to put me on the spot, Greg, you're way out of line."

"It's very simple, Aidan," Greg was beginning to lose patience, "the gun belonging to David Ranke was put in a bag and you labeled it as the gun that killed Eddie Morton. Why did you do that?"

"That's nonsense! I had nothing to do with the Eddie Morton case—"

"Aidan, don't tell porkies! You were the one who went into Billy Smith's house and claimed to find the gun. We know Billy had nothing to do with the gun being put there. So you might like to tell us who told you to go there and where to look."

"Nothing to do with me. I think it was Liam who found it."

"We'll check. But that isn't what you told Frank Jennings. And why did you label the wrong rifle? And what did you or Eric De Jong do with the rifle you brought back from Billy Smith's."

"We brought back a rifle, I seem to remember, and I handed it to Eric."

"Why Eric? He wasn't CIB."

"He was interested in the case."

"That isn't good enough. What else did you give him?"

"Heck, give me a break, Greg, I don't remember what he wanted to know."

"Well, the Eddie Morton case has finally gained some traction so we will probably have to subpoena you at some stage. So try to remember why you labeled David Ranke's rifle as being the murder weapon in Morton's case."

"I don't like your tone, Greg, so don't you go telling me what to do."

"See it as a friendly warning then."

*

Dennis Walsh hadn't heard anything about Petra Moore's plans to return to work and hadn't asked after her. He simply assumed that at some stage she would be back and Brosnan would return to Toowoomba.

But he saw Petra come into the station when he was in Winville a couple of weeks later to do a stint and said, "So you're back on deck."

"No. I've resigned. I just dropped in to pick up a couple of magazines I left in a drawer here."

Dennis didn't have more than a working relationship with Moore and he said, "I see. So what made you give up the work? Your health?"

Petra Moore hesitated then waved him into a small interview room and sat down. "I'm not in brilliant health." Dennis nodded. He had some sympathy. He had been through something a little similar. "But it wasn't that. It was the business with Diane Maxwell. I completely misread her and because of that she thought I was encouraging her to grab

Pickering's farm—so I feel responsible for her killing that old man. It's preyed on my mind ever since. I'd rather not be the one to make another mistake like that."

Dennis listened to this candid explanation and nodded slowly. "Y'know, I had some sympathy for Diane Maxwell in the beginning but not for long. She was nasty to her mother-in-law and her kids, she was a thief and a liar, and she never lifted a finger to stop her kids from torturing their pets. But what went on in her mind—God only knows. So don't blame yourself."

"But I can't hide from the fact that I genuinely thought she had some sort of relationship with Pickering and she read that as encouragement to claim his farm. I can't get away from my misreading of the whole situation."

"You know I was responsible for a teenager dying while he was in my custody? I put him in the cell to cool off. He had a cream bun in a brown paper bag. I let him take it in with him. I didn't know a hornet had also crawled into the bag. It got out and stung him and he died from shock within a couple of minutes. Maybe it could have happened in his car or in his room at home. Maybe the hornet might just have flown away. But I've never stopped feeling responsible. If I'd taken the bun out and stuck it on a plate he'd probably still be alive." If it had been a plastic bag he might've removed it, plastic bags having been used in suicides, but a paper bag didn't seem potentially dangerous.

He thought that Pauline and Chad Scully had long since come to terms with their son's death and he hadn't tried to get them a good deal on that little farm out of any feeling of guilt but rather that he thought Dan Goodrick would have fewer opportunities for petty pilfering if he lived in town with neighbours around him and a small back yard. But as he thought back over it the old feeling of regret came back in full force.

"I see. Well, thanks for sharing that. But, you know, Dennis, I blamed everything on what was going on in my head when they found out, but it wasn't just that. The job had sort of gone stale on me well before that. I was getting careless and not really giving it my full attention before then. I think it was those years of struggling to prove I was the best so as to show up some of the men who put women in the force down—and then when I didn't really need to fight for anything any longer … I don't know, but somehow I just couldn't seem to care enough about the job any more to do my best work."

"Uh huh, yep, I think I can understand that. So what would you like to do instead?"

"I've got a cousin who's an auctioneer in Brisbane. He's offered me a job. I think, when I feel up to speed again, I'll take it."

He had noticed that her speech still seemed a little slower than normal but he assumed she didn't mean she would take over the gavel. "Office work?"

"Partly. Checking and appraising items. Going out to properties to catalogue everything. I think it could be quite interesting."

He agreed with her, it was work he might also have enjoyed if life hadn't taken him in a different direction, and wished her well. For the first time since coming back to collect items from the station she felt good about the future. She was certain that Greg had not wanted her back, that he much preferred working with DS Brosnan, but didn't like to say so upfront. With Dennis she felt he genuinely thought she would enjoy her new career and find it worthwhile. She stood up again. "Thanks, Dennis." And unexpectedly she leaned over and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "And good luck with Plowmans and Hoysteds and all the other useless sods."

*

"Listen to this, Dada, it's the parody I'm going to recite at school—so long as I don't start laughing in the middle of it. I'm going to do a presentation on parodies so I need to present a couple—

I sprang to the rollocks and Jorrocks and me,

And I galloped, you galloped, he galloped, we galloped all three …
Not a word to each other; we kept changing place,
Neck to neck, back to front, ear to ear, face to face;
And we yelled once or twice, when we heard a clock chime,
'Would you kindly oblige us, *Is that the right time?*'
As I galloped, you galloped, he galloped, we galloped, ye galloped,
They two shall have galloped; *let us trot*."

As Elise Walsh continued to recite the poem with verve and appropriate gestures it occurred to her father that he didn't know precisely what a parody was and he couldn't picture any teachers from his school years asking a pupil to do a presentation on parody. And then it came to him that it was very hard to think of Elise as a child. She was tall, confident, poised, full of vitality and enthusiasm. He had to keep reminding himself that she was still a child with a child's needs and a child's vulnerability.

He was still thinking on this after she'd gone to bed and he was starting to think about turning in himself.

The phone rang and Constable Waters said he'd received a report of a vehicle on fire over near the Six Mile Creek bridge. A Henry Tomlinson had rung in.

"Right, we'd best check it out. Get the camera. I'll be there in a minute." It might be a stolen vehicle being torched.

It was more like five minutes by the time Dennis got to the station and into the car with Constable Waters. Ben had put in their fire extinguisher though it was unlikely they could put the fire out with it unless the report was exaggerated. And it was unlikely there was water in the creek. Or not more than the occasional pool.

By the time they got there a small knot of locals had collected at some distance from the burning campervan. Mr Tomlinson came over as they got out and said, "Went up like a bomb. We heard a big bang and almost like a fireball so I thought I'd best come down in case it got away." He waved a gnarled hand at the short grass and dust around the vehicle now covered with nameless debris, some of it still smoking. "Doesn't seem to be a problem."

"And no sign of anyone round the vehicle?"

He said no and the other people standing round agreed. Whoever had set the fire if it hadn't been something left burning when it was dumped must have nicked off. The fire which had been burning furiously for nearly half an hour was gradually winding down. The air was filled with smoke and the foul smell of burning plastics and rubber. But any danger the fire might have posed was declining.

"Should we stay until it's right out," Constable Waters said.

"Another twenty minutes then walk round with the extinguisher and give it a good spray on the side near the paddocks." As the fire slowly died the dark night with light cloud covering moon and stars closed around them.

"Doesn't half stink," someone said behind them.

But the excitement was over and people started to drift away. As he walked to and fro spraying the passenger side of the vehicle with retardant Waters could see that the tyres and even some of the metal had melted in the heat. He wondered if there had still been gas bottles to explode as well as the petrol tank.

"Right," Dennis finally said. "We'll come back first thing in the morning and see if we can identify the vehicle. Check to see if anyone local has reported a campervan stolen."

It was nearly midnight when they got to bed.

*

A light mist still hung round the creek bank when they pulled in early next morning. It didn't do much to hide the grim sight of the burnt van. But as Dennis and Ben looked first to

see if there was a number plate then walked to the front of the vehicle they realised it would not be plain sailing after all.

"I think there's a body under there," Ben Waters pointed. "I'm sure I can see a skull."

"Strewth." Walsh let out a heavy sigh. "We'll need the big guns. Call Winville and tell them it's a badly-burnt body. We'll probably need some heavy lifting equipment before we can get it out."

Tyres, even metal had burnt, and part of the vehicle's body seemed to have collapsed on to the body. It was hard to tell but it suggested someone had got down under the chassis to check something or pull something out. "Left the stove burning maybe or there was a gas leak. Don't know." Dennis walked slowly round the travesty of a vehicle while his constable called Winville. Was an exploding gas bottle sufficient to explain the wrecked van or was it the petrol tank which had blown up? Or both? Had someone used an accelerant?

He couldn't get more than a bit of semi-melted metal which might be a number plate. And the body with bone showing through the charred flesh might not yield an obvious identification. He called over to Constable Waters, "Tell them we need the arson bods. It's possible someone was using this way to get rid of a body." It would not have been a sure way even with the force of the explosion but some yob might not have thought it through carefully.

Then he turned and walked away towards the gully. If someone else had been here then they would have headed for the creek, either in the hope of finding enough water to try and put a fire out or to keep themselves safe from the fireball as the van went up. He wasn't certain that the faint marks going through the fringing trees and down the bank to a small turbid pool in the bed of the creek were footprints but a little way along he found what might be the mark of someone putting a bag down. If he was right in thinking this it suggested something planned, or planned to some degree. But as there'd been no rain in weeks he couldn't be sure when the marks had been made.

Had someone panicked when the person under the van died suddenly? Had there been a fight? He spent twenty minutes walking along the creek bed and thought, but couldn't be sure, that someone had walked along the gully towards the bridge. As he climbed the bank to the road a car stopped and a man got out and came over. The driver introduced himself as Jim Hinkley and said he'd noticed the van there yesterday. "Didn't see anyone so I wondered if someone had dumped it. But maybe they were just inside having a kip. The van looked pretty crappy but I didn't go over and check."

"We've found a body under it. So if you think or hear anything let us know."

It was an hour before several cars drew in and various people got out, including Dr Watling. He came over and got down to try and see how badly burnt the body was. At last he said, "We should be able to get DNA and maybe a few scraps of clothing, a few hairs if we're lucky. But whether we can get any sort of dental profile—his face is partly smashed in, so let's hope you get some sightings of the van and its passenger or passengers."

*

Winville immediately put out requests for information and apart from several local people sighting the parked van as they came through this way they eventually got three reports from service stations which, if they were of the same van, added a little to the picture. One woman said a young man had come in to get bread and milk and coffee and chips and Coke and she saw a grey van parked outside. She described him as solid, not very tall, with dark straight hair a little on the long side. She also said he seemed a bit slow when it came to sorting out the money to pay but might only have been tired from driving. A second report of a grey van filliing up at a self-serve had a similar report on the young man and the added memory that the van probably had New South Wales number plates. A third report from a man who had looked over at the van while it was parked to the side of the bowsers at another

service station said he thought there was a woman in the passenger seat. When asked if it could have been a man with long hair said he supposed it could. “Fair hair, looked a bit curly, but I didn’t take all that much notice really.”

“Well, that’s something,” Greg Sullivan said without noticeable enthusiasm. “And if they’re all of the same van then it looks like it was heading north-west. I wonder where it was heading.”

“I think we need to get on to cops down south,” Brent Kelly said.

“Trouble is,” Greg wasn’t being deliberately obstructive, “grey van, one or two passengers, it isn’t a lot to go on. So let’s hope DNA will give us more.”

And the DNA profile said the body was male, probably between twenty-five and thirty-five, Caucasian. And to this Mason Watling could add ‘moderate height, say 5 feet 7 inches, slim build, fair hair, possibly but not certainly wearing blue jeans’. “Well, that’s something,” Sullivan said gloomily. “So let’s see if we can get a fair-haired young man listed as missing.”

Kelly and Forman exchanged wry looks. Of course there were young men missing. Some fair, some dark. But the skeleton with its grim remnants of flesh didn’t quite fit any of the details concerned families or friends had recorded for those missing men. “Well, we keep looking,” Sullivan said, “and if there was someone with him—let’s hope he says or does something to give the game away. And if we get nowhere, the case goes to Brisbane. They’ve got the resources.” None of his team seemed to find this very comforting. Brent later said to Jenny, “Stimson, Osborne, Jennings, Murray—why don’t I feel hopeful?”

“I know. We’d do better to give it to Dennis.”

And the initial hope that other people would come forward with information, of things seen and heard, gradually faded. Winville paid for the remnants of the van to be carted, along with collected up bits of the debris which had covered the surrounding area, and the Council in Buckton came and gave the area the All Clear in case anyone wanted to pull in there and park by the creek for lunch or to walk down in the hope of finding a thunderstorm had filled the pools in the gully.

*

Kieran Dobbs rang Fiona Freehan one afternoon and asked if it would be okay for him to come round one evening because he had a couple of things to discuss with them. Fiona had already heard that the DPI office in Buckton was to be closed so she assumed Kieran would be moving to Winville to work out of their office.

He came round just as they were finishing dinner and Fiona got him a cup of coffee and sat down again. He said almost immediately, “I guess you know what’s going on so I’ve got two things to put to you both. Would you like to buy back my share of the house? I could do with a bit extra because I’ve decided to resign rather than re-locate. I’m hoping I can do some freelance work as a consultant. And I wondered if you’d like to rent Wally Barron’s place to me. With a bit of consultant work and running some cattle I should be able to get by. I wouldn’t need the house so you could still rent it out separately.”

As well as Wally Barron’s old house Dennis already had two houses in Dinawadding. He was renting one to the new junior schoolteacher there but the other one had stood empty since Luke O’Neill had decided to go back to Melbourne, taking Nicky Wilcox with him.

“Anyway, think it over and let me know.”

“So you didn’t want to move to Winville?” Dennis said.

“The girls are a lot more relaxed and confident but we didn’t feel they were ready yet for a big move and a change of schools. Maybe someday.”

“So you and Jess are serious,” Fiona said with a smile.

“We are. We’ll maybe get married next year.”

"Well, there's no problem about the house," she said, "I'm happy to buy out your share but I'll leave Dennis to decide about the farm."

"Thanks. And I heard that the Council knocked back Japana's idea of building a dam on Six Mile Creek."

Six Mile Creek ran down the eastern side of the shire, past the bridge where the van had burnt, past various farms, then past the eastern side of the big feed lots at Japana then past the small hamlet of Dinawadding.

"We did. It would be good to have a small weir at Dinna as a back up water supply but Japana wanted to carve the dam out from the farms on the other side of the creek, not from their own land. So we knocked them back. They can come back with a new proposal if they're prepared to lose some land to it."

"They've got a new manager," Dennis put in. "Marcus Green. Not the sort of bloke who believes in compromise, I don't reckon." He hadn't been impressed with the surly nature of Green in the couple of times he had dealt with him.

"There is a rumour though," Kieran said thoughtfully, "only a rumour, mind you, that the Hoysteds would like to sell out. I think those kids might be telling their granddad in South Africa that the water supply problems there are only going to grow more acute with time. And a dam is only as good as the rain to fill it."

"Then let's hope." Dennis seemed to cheer up. "No one could be worse than that lot."

"And I wonder if the stream of crooks they could tuck away there—well, maybe that's drying up, all that money men were prepared to pay the old man for a safe haven in Australia." Fiona had not been following things closely in South Africa but she thought that the men who had wanted to avoid ever being charged with human rights abuses must surely be drying up, either charged or gone. Or perhaps forgiven under the Truth and Reconciliation provisions.

"So would the Council give the go-ahead for a small weir in Dinna just above or below the bridge?"

"Probably. But we would want to see just where it would impact."

"Mmmm," Kieran could see the value for the small township. "And anything new on the case of that burnt body by the bridge? There were pleas for help in the paper and over the radio but it seems to have all gone quiet."

"They got a couple of sightings and they think the van was up from New South Wales but I haven't heard anything new in a while."

"Several people said it was a crappy old van and probably full of rust so maybe they were some sort of itinerant workers, no fixed address, cash in hand, no one worrying where they'd got to?"

"Could be." It always worried Dennis when an investigation seemed to stall. It was often hard to get it up and going again. People's memories faded. Things got muddled. And if the van had held two young men on the road it might be months before someone in their families started to worry about not hearing anything.

"Well, don't let it spoil your Christmas," Kieran said more cheerfully. "Is Ben a cricket fan like Grant and wanting time off?"

"No. That kid sits around doing the sort of maths puzzles that Einstein probably fancied. I've told him he needs a social life."

Kieran gave that a grin. Dennis and 'social life' were not exactly close companions. But he could see that young Waters needed to get out and meet girls and play sport. "Well, we can invite him round for a meal if you think he'd come."

"Worth a try. And I'll give some thought to what that farm is worth. But seeing I was handed it on a plate I don't think I should charge much per week."

"But—don't forget, Dennis, you put your life on the line to save Wally from that fierce panther." Kieran had heard various versions of that old story.

"Don't think that panther would of fancied a tough old morsel like Wally but I didn't want it rampaging round the country killing stock."

Kieran gave that a grin. "That's not what Wally said."

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Book Seventy-Two
Case No. 1: A Mystery Man?

Christmas in the small Darling Downs town of Buckton passed quietly. Young Constable Waters went home to his family for a couple of days. He didn't say anything to his rigid-minded father about his boss suggesting he try out the churches in Buckton. He knew his father would probably call them wishy-washy or weak on sinners or something similar. But he had gone to carols at the Uniting Church and he had gone one Sunday to the Church of Christ, ostensibly, or so most of the congregation believed, to make sure that Artie Kees was behaving himself there. And he planned to go on Sundays in the new year to the other two churches. It wasn't that he wanted to hide things from his father but more that there seemed no reason to upset him. His father believed that if he couldn't get to his own church his Sundays should be spent in Bible reading and prayer.

He didn't like to say that he had quite enjoyed going around, not least because he knew people there so it wasn't like going among strangers. And on the first Sunday after Christmas he walked along to the Anglican church. He knew people around Buckton were not very happy with the minister, the Reverend Drew Hamilton, not because they had problems with his preaching or his doctrine, but because he seemed to let his children run wild. He now had five young children and the older ones were often out alone by the creek or down the streets to the shops or over in the memorial park after school. Police had received a number of complaints about the children stealing small items. No one had insisted they be charged on account of their young ages but it had created some bad feeling. Bad feeling their parents seemed oblivious to.

Ben went in and sat down and a minute later Jenny Applegarth came in with her parents and sat down in front of him after giving him a smile and a soft "Hi Ben". As he looked around he could see that he knew most of the people here, at least by sight. This might make it a more friendly place but he wasn't impressed by Hamilton's sermon. None of his children were in church so Ben assumed they went to Sunday School but whether that explained the vaguely preoccupied air with which the minister took the service Ben wasn't sure. Possibly he did worry about his children but just didn't know how best to bring them up properly?

As he joined the congregation for a cup of tea afterwards he wondered if Dennis had Kmade the suggestion about social life as meaning something more than just attending a service. He had no idea whether Jenny Applegarth had anyone in her life. She probably did. But he thought he should gird up his courage and just ask her if she'd like to go for a coffee one day. He felt embarrassed that it came out sounding a bit take-it-or-leave-it rather than as something sincerely meant. But she gave him a nice smile and said, "Why not? When would suit you?"

He knew she was Sergeant Applegarth's sister and he liked John so he thought it was quite likely he would like her too if he got better acquainted. He suggested the café after work one day "unless you'd like somewhere a bit quieter."

"No. The café's fine."

And having got over that hurdle Ben relaxed and found that they had lots to talk about and one meeting for coffee turned into two meetings then three. Then Jenny suggested he come round for dinner with her family. She put it as being that he might like a rest from cooking for himself. He was a bit nervous about accepting but it was true that he mainly lived on takeaways or the few simple things he knew how to cook. A nice home-cooked meal would be a treat.

"It is very kind of you—if your parents wouldn't mind."

It was true that Jenny's mother put on an excellent meal but he had the secret fear that she also expected him to turn up to church every Sunday and he was less sure about that. He said rather diffidently that police had had some complaints about the Hamilton children making nuisances of themselves. "I'm sure he is a good minister though I'm not the one to say. But there is some disquiet … "

"I'm not surprised," Bronwen Applegarth said briskly. "I can't think why they've had all those children when they never seem to know where they are or what they're up to. It is only mischief but it doesn't reflect well on the church."

He was reluctant to disagree with his hostess but he said, still diffidently, "I think it is a bit more serious than that. With no discipline they may be getting into real trouble by the time they're twelve. They seem to think they can help themselves to anything they fancy. And if they get away with that when they're six or seven it will soon become a habit."

Far from disagreeing with this Mrs Applegarth said, "In that case, we need to get serious about making sure those children are never out on their own."

"There is also the question of their safety. I know Buckton is pretty safe. But children can be abducted from anywhere. And we don't necessarily know everyone who stays at the caravan park or stops in for petrol."

"Then what should we be doing about it?"

Martin Applegarth had sat at the head of the table, not contributing but a quiet pleasant presence. Now he said, "If we don't want it to turn into a police problem then the church must deal with it. I don't like to criticise a minister but I think it is up to me, well, not just me, but if I were to ask Tony Thomas and perhaps the Greenaways to come with me to just have a chat. We could possibly arrange for the younger children to spend some time at the childcare centre to give their mother time to spend on the other children. Or some after school activities."

"And you do need to make it clear that if the children aren't getting any pocketmoney then they cannot just help themselves to anything they fancy." Mrs Applegarth had heard some of the stories going around though no one had complained directly to her about 'those little horrors' and she hadn't witnesses anything herself. Even people like Vera Hopgood seemed to have heard stories.

Mr Applegarth agreed with this though without enthusiasm. Ben felt he understood. He didn't think he would like to have to tackle a minister himself. Respect for his pastor

father had been drummed into him right from his earliest childhood. Common sense might tell him that pastors and other clergy were as fallible as anyone else but he could still understand that he would hate to be the one to tackle their misdemeanours and worse. That it would seem like a form of disrespect.

Despite his thankfulness that the problem could be tackled and maybe solved in this quiet way, he wasn't sorry when the conversation moved on to less contentious topics. And although he found Mrs Applegarth a little daunting he thought Jenny and her father were very nice people. It didn't tell him whether he wanted to get more serious about her but he thought that Dennis would see her as 'a social life' and say no more about getting out. He knew he should also offer to do things with the Community Youth Club but he didn't think he was the right person to be out chucking a ball with the kids who came or telling them how to go at the punching bag or putting on a tennis afternoon. It was one thing to keep fit and another to like games. He would far rather sit down with Elise Walsh and do complex puzzles. And, to his secret relief, he thought his boss understood that and didn't hold his lack of sporting prowess against him.

*

Brent Kelly didn't mind to call into the station in Buckton when he went out to visit Lyn Harding and his baby daughter. Lyn had suggested he pick a 'nice Irish name' but he had said no, that the baby would spend much more time with Lyn and would have Lyn's surname so it must be her choice. But she had continued to insist and he had finally said he rather liked Sasha even though it wasn't Irish. After a lot of private tossing of names round and discarding them Lyn had finally settled on Anna Sasha. Brent said he was happy with that.

But he accepted that he had only been a means to an end. He'd brought Dennis up to speed with what little they had on the body under the campervan and what Joel Brosnan had passed on about his visit to Rockhampton and his meeting with Terry Fulcher. Ainslie Harris had never been home when he'd called by. He hadn't known whether that was deliberate or she simply went away every so often.

Joel had certainly managed to get Terry Fulcher wrong-footed when he'd asked why he had used Ainslie Harris's address when he'd registered a dark-green Ford ute. Fulcher had simply stared at him then said, "No, that can't be right. I don't know any Ainslie Harris."

"Then how did you register your vehicle?"

"People know me. If they got a wrong letter in their mailbox they might drop it by, me or my brother. Don't remember."

"It's funny how that ute got around. So tell me how you came to buy it from a Richard Ferguson."

"Don't remember. Guy wants to sell a vehicle. Guess I'd just look it over, take it for a drive, look at mileage, general condition, dunno, just the usual."

"Did you know Richard Ferguson before you bought it?"

"Don't think so, not unless he'd come in the shop some time."

"So why did you sell it to Todd Vercelli?"

"Todd Vercelli?" Fulcher put on a blank look. "Don't think I know him. Any idea what he looked like?"

"He also used the name Jefferson Harris."

"Nope. Still doesn't ring a bell."

"Townsville CIB has found the ute at the wreckers and is giving it the third degree."

He was certain he had rattled Fulcher but he continued to play dumb.

Brosnan like other police was a little dubious about mentioning the Plowmans, not least because he didn't want someone (and he couldn't define someone) to be tipped off. But he had finally said, "Mr Fulcher, the Plowmans are under investigation so you might like to

do what some of the others have done. Tell us all you know and then start a new life with a new identity."

"I always knew they got some idiots in the police but you take the cake, mate. So how about going away and bothering someone else."

Dennis found DC Kelly's description of Brosnan's visit interesting. But he didn't feel called on to do more than agree that Ainslie Harris might be the weak link. "And what about life as a new dad?" It had never occurred to Brent to envy Dennis his family; perhaps not least because he knew Dennis had lost his first wife and child. But now he felt he would give anything to have the sort of relationship Dennis had with Elise and Rob. He had believed in the beginning that Dennis didn't appreciate Fiona but he had gradually come to see that behind Dennis's laconic way of relating to Fiona in public was genuine care for her.

"Lyn's hired a girl called Maree. She helps around the place and looks after the baby. Lyn has made it clear that she doesn't need me to do anything for the baby. I guess she always wanted to have the baby to herself."

He wasn't aware that this was said with a faint degree of bitterness. He didn't love Lyn. He wasn't even sure he liked her very much. But he had felt that he wanted to do the right thing by his child and be a good father to it. So that to feel himself unwanted and superfluous to the whole arrangement was deeply disappointing. Dennis hadn't given any of it much thought though he knew Fiona believed Lyn wanted to have a child so as to have someone to inherit what she was trying to build up.

"I'm sorry." He genuinely was sorry. "D'you want to fight for more access to your child?" He had long since seen that Brent allowed himself to be carried into situations and then found that they were not necessarily the situations he wanted to be in. He suspected Brent's relationship with Lyn was one of these; though probably gratitude towards Lyn for her help with his horses came into it too.

"I thought about it." Brent felt himself becoming emotional. "But maybe it wouldn't be a good thing for a baby. Maybe I should just accept it and hope that as she grows … that they'll share more with me."

"And this Maree—is she the sort of woman you'd want looking after your baby?"

"She—she seems nice. Lyn bosses her around but she seems to be okay with leaving Maree with the baby most of the time."

Dennis nodded. He maybe should keep an ear out to make sure that this Maree was being treated properly and not used as a cheap child minder. "Well, if you want any advice," Brent nodded slightly, "I'd say go on with your riding. Book yourself in for an intensive riding weekend or something. Push on with it. You've come a long way and you'll get to the top if you keep at it."

It wasn't the advice he'd been expecting but it seemed to cheer Brent a little. "I've started doing a bit of dressage. Aileen's been giving me some ideas. I thought I didn't want to jump Lady Luck on iron-hard ground, so dressage is our new challenge. It seems amazing, doesn't it, me doing dressage. I didn't even know what it was a few years ago."

"But that's the thing. You thrive on challenges. So go and get some first class teaching."

As Brent drove home he thought over that throw-away line 'You thrive on challenges' and wondered if it was true. But then learning to ride had been a challenge … and this was an extension of that challenge. At home he looked to see if he could find any riding workshops or weekends or dressage tuition on offer.

*

Elise Walsh had looked forward to leaving Mr Ellis behind and having a new teacher in the new school year. Ellis, in her private view, was a useless teacher and an unlikeable man into the bargain. Michele Preston would have to be better. Rob Walsh going into Mrs

McLaren's class hadn't made any comments. Elise had flourished under Julie McLaren's brisk stimulating tutelage. But Rob was a very different personality.

With Mr Sansom's help he had made a CD of songs to give to the family for Christmas. Although it didn't reach the highest standards of professional recording it was very well done and Mr Sansom had wisely kept to a very simple piano accompaniment and put in several duets with Rob and his mother. Most of the songs were nursery rhymes but Sansom had also set several animal poems to music. The CD had gone to both his grandmothers and his uncle's family and he had agreed that several people he liked such as Leila Burkett and the Hickman family could have copies.

It worried his mother that he had never made any friends at school, seeming to prefer the company of his animals. And when several of the older boys had called him a sissy for liking to sing nursery rhymes he had simply retreated into his own private little world. Fiona often thought he seemed happiest in his daydreams or doing practical things for his pets. But he needed to learn, she felt, how to socialise with other children. Julie McLaren had witnessed some of the teasing and had seen Elise come to her brother's rescue with some firm well-chosen words. There was no sign that Rob was hurt or upset with what the other boys had been saying, seeming to just retreat into his own thoughts, but she felt he needed to learn how to fight his own battles rather than simply retreat into his own private little space. Just how, she was less certain. He was growing tall but was not very robust. Perhaps in time he would become the sort of boy who didn't suggest any sort of pushover.

The decision to have a picture of himself on the cover with his pony Benbow and his cat had seen Fiona taking a dozen pictures before choosing. Rob himself had said he didn't need to be in the picture but Fiona had said, "People might think the CD is all about a singing horse" which he had found very funny. Elise had said he should put Freddie in the picture now that Rob had begun riding him but he had insisted that it be Benbow "because he's my friend".

At times both Dennis and Fiona pondered on this preference for animal friends. In itself Rob's empathy with the creatures around him was a nice thing but they both worried that he might feel the lack of human friends some day.

Their secret fears that Rob might find Mrs McLaren's no-nonsense style a bit daunting and retreat further into his shell seemed to be groundless. She had had time to learn that Rob was no second Elise. And she understood that he didn't want to be asked to sing in class so she had only encouraged him to give brief talks about the things which interested him in the times of class-sharing. She could see he was a very bright boy, not with the extroverted collecting of knowledge of his sister, but in a quiet thoughtful way. Getting him to pay more attention rather than sit looking out the window or drawing little animals all over his exercise books was more difficult. But he gave every appearance of being on top of his work and comfortable with her so she felt there was no need to worry particularly about him. Though when she mentioned him at home one day that "he seems more comfortable around adults than other children, I wonder why that is" her husband Andrew said thoughtfully from his knowledge of the boy "I think it's because he's always been surrounded by adults".

"But Elise isn't an adult."

"To him, she probably seems adult—"

"Ye-es, he probably would have been a different child with an annoying little sister wanting to mess around with his toys."

*

It was Andrew McLaren who came into the police station one quiet March morning with a very different young man. He had been employing the young man on the farm at the request of a friend of his: "I've run out of work for him for a couple of weeks, can you use him, best worker you'll ever get, and then you can send him back."

Andrew McLaren mainly grew pumpkins and melons, with a few other niche vegetables and he had agreed to take the lad. His friend John Kowalski had a couple of cabins on his big vegetable farm for his itinerant workers but Andrew had taken the young man into his house to live with himself and Julie when she was home as he only employed casuals from Buckton. And it hadn't taken him long to see that the young man had some worry that constantly gnawed away at him. His frenetic working habits might be a determination to prove himself useful but equally might be an attempt to escape the thoughts that troubled him. The young man was obviously no brain but he was an excellent steady worker and Andrew had got quite fond of him in the times they spent of an evening watching TV or having a lunchtime sandwich.

He wasn't sure whether the young man would be willing to unburden himself to a semi-stranger but he finally said, "Dave, I can see something's bothering you so if you'd like to share it with me, or is it something you'd like to share with police or a doctor?"

"Don't trust police, they sorta get you, make you suffer."

"Sergeant Walsh is a good man. I'm sure he'd try to help you."

The young man seemed to take a while to mull this over before muttering "Okay, if you say he's like sorta okay."

McLaren could not begin to guess how serious the young man's worries might be but he was glad they had got this far. And he had a lot of confidence in Dennis Walsh's ability to sort out problems. Walsh might never have got very far in his attempts to get Andrew's curmudgeonly old father to fix his fences but he had had more success than anyone else.

He found both Walsh and Waters in the station and said, "Hi, Dennis, this is David Burns—Sergeant Walsh," he turned to the young man, "and he'd like to talk with you."

"Okay, come through." Dennis saw a not very prepossessing young man, solidly built, with straight dark hair and worried dark eyes. Why McLaren had brought him in was a puzzle but presumably the young man had seen something, maybe even done something which needed to involve police. He didn't think Andrew McLaren would casually waste police time.

He waved the young man to a seat in the interview room. "Like a cup of tea?"

The young man shook his head but said, "Can he stay?" indicating McLaren.

Dennis raised an eyebrow but brought in another chair. Presumably there was nothing secret about the young man's troubles.

"Okay, what's your problem?"

Burns looked at McLaren then back at Walsh and over to Waters who was hovering in the background. "Y'know that campervan? By the bridge. I sorta burnt it, like I wanted it gone. Last year."

"Okay, so you were going where?"

Dennis snapped on the tape recorder. After his moment of surprise he knew Winville would want anything they could get about the burnt campervan and its body.

"We … like she said we should sorta go to Roma, don't know where it is but like starting a new life, like no one knew, like we'd be sorta strangers."

"Uh huh, you say she but the body we found was male."

"Like we done time in Long Bay," Dennis nodded; that would fit with the possible NSW number plate, "an' Robin, that was him, said he was a woman an' he went to hospital sorta like changing over, y'know, like woman's stuff. An' then she says she fancies me an' we should go north, sorta like get away from everything."

"So who was he to start with?"

"Yeah, Robin, Robin Patmore an' he says now he's Madison Brown, like y'know, Maddy, an' I got out an' bought that old van like I sorta didn't have much so it wasn't too hot, like I didn't want the cops looking, sorta keep to back roads, y'know, but it was registered okay, Maddy says we don't want no trouble."

"So what was he in Long Bay for?"

"He killed a kid, says he was Lamb, y'know sorta like sheep, him an' another guy Ross, yeah, he's still there, never talks to nobody, like just sits, dunno why."

"Ross who?"

"Gorringe, dunno how you spell that."

"And what were you in for?"

"They said I tapped an old geezer, didn't, but I was sorta glad to go inside, get away from my fucking dad, that bashed me every week, like he left me alone once I was inside, sorta like he was happy for someone else to bash me up."

"You said you didn't do anything. So who did?"

Dave Burns shot a hunted look towards Andrew McLaren then gave them two names.

"And the old geezer—he survived?"

"Yeah, yeah, think so."

Dennis made a note. "Okay, so how long was Patmore in for?"

"Dunno. Maybe twenty. He got out in ten sorta because he said he was a woman, like it's too much trouble to have him there, sorta saying it all the time."

"Okay, so the two of you took off in that old rust bucket and came to Queensland. And you were living like a couple, boy and girl?" Dennis wasn't sure if this was a key question.

"Didn't like sex with him, he sorta says I got to, an' I says okay, but it sorta didn't feel good, dunno, but I did it sometimes, an' he starts telling me about other kids they done, them two, round the country, an' I says like I didn't believe, not him, an' he always laughs, like I'm stupid, maybe I am stupid, dad always told I'm the biggest nong he ever met, but he keeps telling me about these kids, an' sorta laughin' like it's some big joke an' I said, that can't be right, how come no one sorta noticed they was missing, an' he says because they hid 'em good, him an' Ross, an' he gives me names, like to prove something, like then I'll believe him."

"D'you remember those names?"

"Yeah, sure, I can remember stuff, like sorta that's the only part o' me that's good, but I don't let on, like I'm useta being called stupid, sorta like teachers an' everyone, but I don't forget names much."

And he obediently reeled off a string of names and places. Dennis made a note. "This Billy, d'you know who he was?"

"He only said Billy, maybe the kid didn't say more, like it was sorta near Forbes, yeah, I reckon Billy was some kid he found playing in a sorta creek there. An' he give me all about Sammy Klein, even tells me Klein is sorta like small in English, he was more clever than me, but it didn't do him no good, an' him an' Ross done Lamb, yeah, sure it was lamb because they'd joke, like Robin an' some other guy, not Ross, Ross never talks with no one, like he's sorta dumb, just sits all day."

"So they traveled all over the place, round the country?"

"Yeah, yeah, they got around, had a van, sorta like Ross did some building an' fruit, yeah, think they picked fruit, sorta like when they needed money, yeah, don't know those places, y'know like Parkes, but I know Bathurst because y'know, like the cars. Yeah, he said they had a great time, looking out for kids, y'know, sorta like kids on their own, yeah, he reckons there's kids in parks, y'know, or walking home, he says he can sniff 'em out, dunno how, but he sorta looked cute, y'know like the kids don't need to get scared, like they'd be scared o' Ross but not of Maddy, like he's, she's sorta cute, y'know."

"I see. So you were both driving to Roma."

"Yeah, dunno the way but he has a map, an' I says I'm tired, let's take a day to rest up, like driving with him gets me, like sorta you can't think, him talking an' laughing an' he

starts saying we should grab another kid before we get to Roma, like somewhere here out in the country, no one sorta knows us, like we'd never be stopped, like him as a dame, like he tricked all them guys that run the prison, like they all thought he was okay, just got stuck with Ross an' they like to say what a bastard Ross is, but it's the other way I sorta reckon, like Ross is as dumb as me, y'know, an' he goes on an' on about us looking out for another kid, y'know, little boy out somewhere, maybe we can grab him, like it'll be fun, like I'll drive while he plays with the kid in the back, that's what he done before, like Ross sorta drives an' Maddy plays around, an' when the kid's dead, yeah," Burns was getting more and more emotional in his long splurge of words, and beginning to hyper-ventilate, "then they hide him, I guess."

"Okay, so he liked the idea of abducting another boy. So what did you do?"

"So I killed him." Burns was looking down at the table as he made the blunt statement. Then he put his head down on his arms and started to cry.

Andrew McLaren, thrust unsuspectingly into this scenario (he had vaguely wondered if Burns had broken up with a girlfriend, maybe got a girl pregnant, maybe pinched some money or even a vehicle at some stage), sat there looking rather gob-smacked.

Dennis sat in silence for several minutes. "Okay, son," he finally said, "you're in big big trouble. I am charging you with the murder of Robin Patmore alias Madison Brown and the illegal disposal of a body." He cautioned him then said quietly, "You'll have to go to the Watch House in Winville and come up before the magistrate there. I'll get the team there to check out the information you've given us."

Burns raised a tear-streaked face and mumbled something about it all being true.

"You mean," Dennis said less sympathetically, "you know what he told you but you don't know if he was telling you the truth."

Both Waters and McLaren could see that Patmore might've taken this gullible young man for a ride, telling him wild stories to wile away the long drive. But if he had killed one young boy then it wasn't beyond the bounds of possibility that there were more victims.

"I'm going to put you in the cell to calm down while we run off another tape to save you repeating your story. Ben, you can do the charge sheet. I can get Winville to come and pick him up unless you're okay with taking him."

Constable Waters hesitated then said, "I'll take him." Burns might say more while sitting in the car with him rather than in the back of the paddy wagon.

Burns got up meekly and followed Waters out and pulled a few small items out of his pocket to be bagged up. Dennis turned to McLaren and said, "Thanks for bringing him in."

Andrew McLaren said quietly, "He's got no one. Is it all right if I visit him in the watch house? And he's got a bag with a few things at our house."

"Sure." Dennis too had the feeling that Burns was someone lost and forlorn, someone who had got into a situation he had no idea how to handle. "Pity he didn't come to us before he did anything. Even with mitigating circumstances, if his story's true, he'll still do twenty years."

"He told me he didn't trust cops. I said you were a good man. But I wondered if there was more to his story about wanting to go to jail to get away from his dad. That seems pretty drastic."

"Maybe his dad's a cop? Anyway, we'll see if anything comes of his information. If it helps to find some other missing kids—might help him when he comes up in court."

"I know. It's a shocking thing, killing someone, yet I couldn't help feeling a bit sorry for him."

"Yeah, poor sod. But let's find out what's true and what maybe isn't, first off."

After McLaren had gone out, still looking faintly shell-shocked, and after saying to Dennis that if Burns got bail he'd be happy to have him back on the farm, Dennis wrote up

the key points of the interview for Greg Sullivan and the team. Then he wrote a note for Joe Landy at the Watch House and sealed it up.

*

After Dennis had sent Ben Walters to Winville with Dave Burns, the tape of the interview, and Buckton's requests to check out the names Burns had offered, Dennis thought he'd better tackle Long Bay and make sure both Patmore and Burns genuinely had been there. Burns hadn't struck him as a bright specimen but he was inclined to believe him. So before he endorsed anything shared he wanted to be sure Burns was who he said he was.

He had never had any reason to ring the prison, he wasn't even sure exactly where it was, and now he hunted round for contact details. He probably should run it past his boss but he only wanted confirmation or otherwise. He finally got on to a Stewart Hyndes who said, "Why are you looking for Patmore?"

"A man we've been told was Robin Patmore was killed here late last year. His DNA said he was male so we wasted a lot of time looking for his identity, not knowing he was living as a woman—"

"So how d'you know it was Patmore?"

"Bloke called Dave Burns finally came forward and confessed to killing him. He said they were both in Long Bay."

Hyndes seemed to reluctantly accept that Dennis Walsh was for real and said he would check dates for both men. He came back in a couple of minutes to say, "Yep, Robin Charles Patmore, but I have an idea he changed his name when he left here. There was a big campaign to get him out so he walked four years before he was due for parole."

"How come? How could a campaign get a murderer out four years early?"

"We had trouble before him, guy claiming to be a woman, they sent him to the women's prison at Silverwater and he raped a woman, brought him back here, he sued the department for not being allowed to live as a woman. I don't know the ins and outs of it but guys claiming to be transgender and demanding the right to a sex change operation are nothing but trouble. Maybe this guy was seen as likely to be trouble too. I wasn't a party to the decision. And there was some doubt about his guilt, I believe, that he was bullied into doing things by his partner, guy called Ross Gorringe."

"So Gorringe is still there?"

"Yep. But just sits all day staring at the wall, never speaks to anyone."

"So there was a new appeal and Patmore won it?"

"Don't think so. He was let out to have a sex change operation and they didn't want him back."

"And Burns. What was he in for?"

"Mmmm, David Robert Burns, in for an assault on an old man, behaved well, out in three years." He gave Dennis dates for both men before saying, "So why did Burns kill Patmore, can't remember what name he changed it to, some girl's name, they were s'posed to be friends."

"Burns says Patmore told him, boasted about killing three other young boys and wanted Burns to help him find another one, Burns jacked up and whacked him."

"I don't think that can be right. Patmore would've been too young—"

"Sixteen, seventeen, anyway Winville CIB is checking out the details he passed on." He thought, well, I hope they've got straight on to it. And after he'd hung up he wondered about the dynamics of the relationship between Gorringe and Patmore. Had Gorringe retreated from everything because of guilt? Remorse? He wondered if Gorringe was like Burns, none too bright and possibly even someone easy to manipulate by a sharper intelligence. Or was Patmore the victim in all this?

And he thought he needed some knowledgeable guidance on the differences between sex change and transgender and what might be involved. Or were they interchangeable … and how had Patmore managed to convince the prison authorities that he really was a woman … or was something else at work … someone influential … were Patmore's parents important in some way. He put his thoughts aside for the moment to write up the case.

*

Ben Waters wasn't a cheerful chatty young man who could start a conversation with anyone but he did get Burns to tell him a little more about the van and how he'd burnt it and where he'd gone afterwards. He was tempted to say, "You gave police a lot of trouble and wasted a lot of time", but he didn't think that would keep Burns talking.

He drove into the bay beside the Watch House and said, "If you think of anything more tell Mr Sullivan." He handed Burns over to Joe Landy and gave Landy Dennis's letter. Then he went over to give the paperwork to Greg Sullivan. They all expressed surprise and then a degree of thankfulness that they could now get a result on a case which had been sitting in limbo for several months.

"These are the kids that Patmore claimed he and Gorringe killed and buried, besides Lamb who died in or near Bathurst. You'll have to ask for the paperwork on that case. But no one seems to know about these other cases." No one couldn't be right; not if the boys had concerned parents, but he didn't know whether to believe Burns or not.

Brent Kelly came over and took the list from Waters and skimmed it.

Jonnie Shaw. Near Cowra.

'Billy' near Forbes had been fishing for yabbies.

Sammy Reuben Klein near or in Parkes. He had apparently been by himself in a park there.

"So we need to check with these three places to see if these kids really are missing?"

Greg after checking the charge sheet said, "If they've been missing more than ten years they might've given up looking but there must be something on record. Anyway, I'll leave that with you, Brent. Jenny get on to the court to see when they can slot him in. I'd best go over and have a chat with Burns after I've listened to the tape. Ben, you can tell your boss we'll be in touch."

As Waters got back in the car for the long drive home he felt they had achieved something. Those claims about other kids might be pie in the sky but he felt sure Burns had killed Patmore and Buckton would be seen as the one to clear up the case. Then he went back to pondering on the personality of Dave Burns. It was disconcerting that Burns was younger than him and had already done a stretch in a notorious prison and was now looking at decades in Wacol. He didn't feel sorry for him. There were always choices. But he tried to imagine the sort of family Burns had come from. He had obviously been frightened of his father. But was that because his father was violent, a bully, a criminal himself, very strict, in some public position where he was ashamed of his son? And should he check out those names Burns had given him to see if they had got themselves into trouble. If they had bashed one old man and got away with it, Burns taking the rap, then had they gone on to other crimes?

And while Ben pondered, DC Kelly was trying to track down possible missing children. He had half expected to be told there were no children of those names missing. But by the time he packed up in the evening he had been on to three country police forces and had three names of definitely missing boys. Jonathon Morton Shaw. Samuel Reuben Klein. William Harris Woodburn. He had shared the possibility that they were also victims of Ross Gorringe and Robin Patmore who had been jailed for the abduction and killing of a boy near Bathurst. Sergeant Gotz in Parkes had said, "Yep, I remember. Craig Allan Lamb. Little boy of seven. And you think they might've been on a killing spree round country New South Wales?"

"It's possible. But if those cases were looked at in isolation … the other thing we got from Burns was that they were traveling round in a van, Gorringe doing occasional building work, the two of them doing some fruit-picking. So it might be possible to link Gorringe to a vehicle or an employer."

Gotz was tempted to say he didn't need to be taught his job but then the knowledge that they had got nowhere on the case of that missing child made him clamp down on any retort he might make. If Queensland and this young Irish DC could help them solve a very sad and very cold case then any ideas might well be welcome.

"Thanks, mate. We'll be in touch if we can link Patmore and Gorringe to anything. But are you sure your info is reliable?"

"No. It came from the young guy who killed Patmore. He says he killed Patmore to stop him grabbing any more kids."

"Didn't know Patmore was out? Thought he got eighteen or twenty years, not sure. The other bloke got more."

"We've been told Patmore got out early because he claimed to be a woman. So he changed his name and headed north."

Gotz gave that a groan. "So he got out because of that. Let's hope they don't all start claiming they're something else."

Kelly hadn't considered this aspect of it all but said, "Good luck with searching. And Gorringe must know where the body is."

"Yeah, but he's probably conveniently forgotten. It's more than ten years ago."

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DC Kelly pondered over whether there was anyone in Sydney they might contact. Winville had listened to Buckton's tape and done their own in-depth interview with Burns, put Burns on the court list pending further investigation, and done their best, via calls to NSW forces, to determine if boys of those names were genuinely missing. He remembered back to his brief conversation with freelance journalist Cameron De Witt. It had not been a very productive contact but he had the hunch that De Witt might be hungry for another story seeing he had missed out on a scoop about Graeme Albini when he was found to be in possession of significant amounts of heroin. He hadn't run it past Sullivan, not least because De Witt could have retired, moved, changed work, but 'Nothing ventured …' he thought and De Witt could only say he knew nothing and wasn't interested. He rang, got De Witt, introduced himself and mentioned the Albini case.

De Witt said rather sourly, "So? He never ratted on Halpert so the case was only half a case. You want me to go after Halpert, is that it?" Albini was back in prison for a long stretch.

"No. It's a quite different case." Brent sketched in the release of Madison Brown and asked if De Witt had ever heard anything about the campaign to get him out of jail. De Witt obviously struggling to call something to mind said, "Why is that your case?"

Kelly explained that Madison Brown had been murdered and they were trying to build a profile for him. "Murdered? What—by some hick who hates trans—"

"No. His companion has confessed. But we wondered how this Madison Brown managed to convince everyone he was the innocent bunny in a shocking murder."

"Oh, there was a big campaign. Yep. I remember hearing about it now. In fact there is even going to be a book about it, a Cristina Bow who does true crime books, I think I heard the book is due out soon, you might like to talk to her, I assume she's done her research on your bod."

"Have you got a contact for her?"

"Might have. But why did someone murder him?"

"It's still under investigation. But it looks like he was involved in several other cases of missing children."

"That's for real, is it?"

"His possible involvement is under investigation. We're currently liaising on three cases of missing children in New South Wales."

"Can you give me some names?"

Brent gave him the names Burns had given him, and which had checked out as still being listed as missing, and the possibility that Patmore and Gorringe had been in the area in a white Holden panel van at the time of each disappearance. De Witt said "I'd want more than a sighting of a panel van."

"We have got more but it all has to be checked out."

"So you'd like me to do your work for you?"

"No. It's up to you, if you're interested."

Brent Kelly wasn't sanguine that he'd managed to interest De Witt but he thought a call to Cristina Bow might be worthwhile if she had thoroughly investigated the background to Patmore and Gorringe. And when he caught up with her he found her book was at the publisher and that she had ended it at the point where Madison Brown said she was going to Queensland to start a new life.

Brent said soberly that Brown had been murdered late last year.

"Murdered! Holy hell! But why was there nothing in the news?"

"Because the body was badly burnt and DNA said we were looking at a dead male. We spent a lot of time trying to track down a missing male. A young man finally came forward and confessed. Otherwise the body might have remained unidentified."

Bow considered this then asked where the murder had taken place. Brent told her where Buckton and Winville were and said, "We have tentatively linked Madison Brown to three other disappearances of children. Were you involved in the campaign to get him out of jail early?"

"I talked with the organisers."

"And d'you think they thought he was innocent or was it because he said he was really a woman—or some other reason?"

"If you'd met Ross Gorringe you would feel sorry for anyone who got caught up in his orbit too. He is a monster."

"You've interviewed him?"

"I tried to. He never talks to anyone. I talked with some of the inmates and staff who knew him."

"They said he was a monster?"

"They said he is a really scary bloke."

"And what did they say about Madison Brown?"

"Cute kid. They weren't surprised when she identified as a trans woman. Nothing of the tough guy about her."

"Did you find her manipulative?" Brent had accepted some of David Burns' … perhaps 'insights' was too strong a word, Burns had not impressed them with his razor-sharp intelligence … but sheer strength wasn't the key aspect to abducting children.

"No-o-o, just rather pathetic, someone who got drawn into something she couldn't handle."

"Did you find her intelligent?"

"Yes, quite thoughtful about everything."

"And Gorringe? Do people see him as intelligent?"

"No, not really. One of the staff described him as a moron. So are you suggesting that he was the one being manipulated by a more intelligent person?"

"It has been known. But I wondered if you would be willing to share the material you have dug up on his background, both backgrounds?"

"If you're prepared to give me access to your material on her murder. And when you say—three other abductions—do you have any proof?"

"We are liaising with police in mid-western New South Wales on those three cases. It certainly looks like there could be connections but it's early days. The young man who confessed will come up in court in a fortnight."

"Then I'd better go and pack. Will you let me have access to your suspect?"

"He's only on remand but if he wants to see you I guess it can be arranged." Brent thought he'd better run this conversation past Greg Sullivan before he went any further. And he would have been even more sure he needed to involve Greg if he could have seen the way he had energised both Cameron De Witt and Cristina Bow.

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Sergeant Walsh contacted Dr Watling to see if he could make sense of what they seemed to be looking at, next time he was due to do a stint in Winville. The case was now Winville's 'baby' but he thought it could be useful to be better informed. Watling offered him a time he expected to be free and took him into his office on the ground floor of the hospital and said, "So what did you want advice on?"

"It's the bloke we found burnt in—or under that van, late last year," Watling nodded; it had not been easy or pleasant to bag up the badly charred body, "and I rang the prison and they said he was a transgender woman and then they said he'd had a sex change operation and changed his name, and I said I didn't think you could do that in Long Bay but apparently you can. So is he a man who looks like a woman, clothes and whatever, or is it more than that?"

"I'd want to see his medical records," Dennis agreed though he couldn't guess where Patmore might've gone for treatment, "but it sounds like you're looking at a guy who's done more than put on makeup and a woman's dress. If he was taking sex hormones, which would probably mean oestrogen and possibly progesterone, then he would start to grow breasts. It doesn't necessarily change your voice, he might still have sounded like a man, and it doesn't necessarily remove facial hair. If he had gone further and had his penis and testicles removed then he might've been content to stop there but he might've gone on and had an artificial vagina created." Dennis nodded slowly; presumably if Burns had been having sex he meant this kind of sex, although it made him think of the gear used to get sperm from a bull for use in AI. "This has created problems," Watling went on. "At first they were using skin removed when they removed the testicles but this was outside skin, a vagina is warm and damp, so you sometimes found that skin rotting. So now they usually remove strips of skin from inside the rectum. This can also create problems, your bowels lose some elasticity."

"Uh huh." It conjured up something which didn't appeal but presumably these people were desperate enough to try anything even if it brought long term health issues with it.

"They usually do not remove the prostate gland and this can cause problems if it develops cancer and the person is presenting as a woman. It may not get diagnosed. I heard of a case while I was traveling, a man presenting as a woman, all his documents saying he was a woman, using a woman's name, and he took an overdose. The family threatened to sue the doctor because he hadn't diagnosed advanced prostate cancer. The doctor said, go for it, and I will tell the world how dangerous it is when people lie to their doctor. The family immediately backed off. But we will probably see more such cases. And then there are huge problems when they diagnose children as being transgender, that they are in the wrong body."

"But how can anyone be in the wrong body? It's what you developed in—right from the word go—"

"When it came to babies with both lots of sex organs they used to go with the obvious but now they would do a DNA test. That sometimes happened if a parent's DNA got scrambled, possibly through exposure to radiation, I've seen a couple of cases in the children of servicemen, but that's quite different, that's a medical problem. Here we're talking about children coming to *believe* something. It may be through some form of childhood trauma, a child sexually abused can come to believe that if only they had been the opposite sex they would have been safe and it can grow from there. It may not necessarily be a huge thing. All those men who wanted boys, their daughters could try to be tomboyish, but it didn't necessarily answer. It can be a small thing. A girl getting breasts may get teased about it, she might have an awful accident with her first menstruation, boys in all-female households can sometimes be made to feel ashamed of having a penis. All sorts of things can play out. Autism has been linked sometimes to confusion. So irresponsible doctors put them on 'puberty blockers' which are gonadotrophins. They were occasionally used when a child was seriously ill because it was thought that puberty would be an added stress on the body but now they're being given to healthy children which I do not approve of. In effect they pause the body's growth, so the child stops developing physically and mentally for a space of time. We don't know what the long term effects will be but there is a small amount of literature on past use which suggests that brittle bones can be a consequence. But it seems we will have to wait and see. And apart from the risks involved in any surgery you have a body which now has to be fed with opposite-sex hormones for the rest of its life, and taking large doses of any hormone for sixty years is a risky business, because unless you keep the body flooded with these cross-sex hormones it will try to revert to its natural state. Women on the Pill are advised to have a break but you can't have a break from your hormone regimen if you are living as transgender. So we may well see an increased risk of cancer in such people."

Dennis had made several notes on things he might look up or ask Fiona to look up. "So the guy I talked with he was talking about this guy being transgender and then he was talking about sex change, wasn't sure if I understood all that. Then he said there'd been a public campaign to get him out of jail because he shouldn't be in a men's prison anyway and then he said this young guy had obviously been used and abused by an older man because he was a bit effeminate and had told everyone he was really a woman. I got the impression they just wanted to see the back of him so they let him out four years before he was due for parole. Don't think he ever showed any remorse. So what's the difference between changing your sex and changing your gender?"

"Well, that's where most of the confusion lies with people using the two things interchangeably when they're not. Put simply, you can't change your sex. You can only change the outward trappings. Every cell in your body has DNA which says you're male. There's nothing you can do about it. No operation, no hormones, will change that. So that's why the DNA from that burnt body came up male. But gender is what you come to believe about yourself. If your parents told you from the minute you were born that you were a turtle you might not understand what it means to live as a turtle but you would have no concept of being a boy. Children who have been neglected as babies as in some overseas orphanages lack a sense of being a boy or a girl which can lead to mental health issues. Sometimes parents are so determined not to stereotype their baby that they can fail to give the baby any sense of itself. Usually we just hear of mothers giving their sons dolls to play with or little girls being given tractors. That doesn't make much difference if kids are being treated to a range of toys. It's only when you get someone so determined to impose their own view that they can set up an inner confusion in their child. But in general parents are the best people to understand their own children so when you get any sort of lobby saying parents don't know what's good for their kids … "

"D'you have anything in particular in mind—as a lobby?"

"Most single mothers do their best to expose their sons to other males but you occasionally get one who is determined to keep any men out of her son's life. That doesn't strike me as healthy. But when it comes down to this … person … we've got in cold storage … you can see the conflict. Is he trying to change his sex and failing or trying to change his gender with the help of a lobby group and having some success? It can create an inner conflict—where young people believe that a sex-change operation will make them happy and when it doesn't, that they're still depressed—then you get people dealing with an impossible situation, trying to prove to the world they're happy because they, or the state, has spent thousands of dollars—and they still don't really cope—that's when you get suicides as a way of resolving what is a conflict at the heart of their sense of self. And once you've been through surgery there's no realistic way back. You're stuck in the artificial world you've created for yourself which is why such people immerse themselves in such groups, because it becomes the only way to feel good about yourself if you can believe you are a persecuted minority. It's the big bad world out there which has got it all wrong. Maybe your guy did after all commit suicide?"

"No. He was killed. We've got a confession. But what's the answer to that inner conflict?"

"Well, I would say good counseling to get at the root cause of the problem if possible. This man we've got in the morgue—you think he was being used in some way by some older man?"

Mason Watling had been brought up with an austere sense of service rather than the now widespread narcissistic focus on the self. He had been brought up to believe that there was no right to happiness but rather that hard work and putting the needs of others first provided a sense of satisfaction in life. He suspected Dennis Walsh had probably been brought up with similar beliefs.

"No. Well, not if we believe this bloke who's confessed to killing him." Dennis wasn't sure whether he should talk about the information, so far unchecked, that Greg Sullivan and his team had dug up. "He thinks it was the other way around, that the older bloke went along with this young one and that that murder of a kid wasn't their first murder."

"I see. Have you got a name for the body?"

"According to prison records and the bloke who confessed he went in as Robin Patmore and came out as Madison Brown. His partner who's still in there, and they reckon he sits all day just staring at the wall, is a Ross Gorringe. And the young bloke we've got banged up is a David Burns."

"Well, if they kept any bits of him when they operated we might be able to cross-check the DNA and make sure we've got a match. Let me know which hospital did the op."

Case No. 2: The Nick of Time

After an unexpected call from a DC Kelly in Queensland Cristina Bow immediately got on to her publisher to find out whether her book was already at the printer. To her relief her editor said no, not yet, why. "I've just heard that Madison Brown has been murdered in Queensland. I will need to add to the book."

"Murdered? When?"

"She was murdered late last year but because the body was burnt she has only just been identified."

"And you're sure about this?"

Bow said gloomily that she would need to check everything with police and try to interview the man who had confessed. "I guess I should head for Queensland soon as I can."

She had looked on the map for Winville and Buckton and silently groaned. To go would involve either a very long drive or a lot of messing round with planes and hire cars.

Her editor could see that it would make for an even more dramatic book and said so. "Do you have any idea why she was murdered?"

"I'm not yet sure but it seems to have been a partner."

"A guy?" Bow agreed. "So it might be yet another case of domestic violence? Do you know anything about him?"

"Not yet. But I'll try to get in to interview him."

As Bow began to organise herself to be away she was conscious of a strange sense of relief. What if she hadn't had a call from that copper? What if the book had come out with her final paragraph saying Madison Brown was heading to a new life in Queensland and that she had wished her well? The minute the book hit the shelves she very likely would have been inundated with readers saying 'but she has been murdered! What's going on?' Even worse—what if she had responded 'has she? I didn't know.' The book would have fallen flatter than a pancake and it would have sounded weak to say 'Madison told me she was going to leave her old life and everyone in it behind and start completely anew'. It might be the truth. But it would not have impressed anyone. And a faint and less comfortable voice said 'why didn't she tell you she had someone in her life? Did she not trust you—or was it a case of her being selective with the truth?'

She stayed overnight in Armidale and spent the evening going over her manuscript looking for hints that Madison might have been economical with the truth elsewhere. She had interviewed a number of other criminals over the years and thought she was quite good at sifting lies and fudging from honest responses. But Madison Brown with her long campaign to be accepted and treated as a woman had tugged at the heart strings with her elfin charm and sweet slightly otherworldy retreat from the brutal world where she had found herself incarcerated. Cristina had not led the campaign to get her out of jail but she had sympathised and she had had long conversations while Madison was in hospital undergoing vaginoplastic surgery. Madison had been fulsome in her thanks and had several times said she didn't think she could have survived much more of Long Bay.

When Bow suggested she should have been sent to the women's prison at Silverwater Madison had said wistfully, "I would have liked that, at least for a little while." But it hadn't happened and when Bow had questioned someone from the Department of Justice it was to be told that 'the last time they did that the bastard immediately raped a woman'. When she had queried this and heard the full story she had said decisively, "But I can't see Madison Brown raping anybody, she just isn't that kind of person" she had been told that to put an intact male into the closed world of a women's prison always ran risks. "It doesn't matter how a man presents to the world, he is still capable of sexually assaulting a woman". She didn't agree but she had not taken the time to look into that other case, partly because she was on a tight schedule and partly because it would take the focus away from Madison and put it on to a man who had been convicted of killing a young man and hiding the body. Readers might also draw comparisons between the crimes. But now she wondered if she had missed a story which might be topical and relevant as more people claimed to be transgender.

It was a relief to drive into Winville and look for the police station, not because Winville looked particularly inviting but because she hoped it would provide her with all the answers she was seeking. She felt tired and the place looked rather dusty and uninteresting.

It was not hard to find the police station just beyond the courts and council offices and town hall. She walked in, hoping she looked and sounded confident, and said to the woman at the front desk that she had been contacted by a Brent Kelly and she wondered if he was available.

Stephanie Pohl was good at summing people up and she could see that this woman was well out of her comfort zone. “Come in here, and take a seat, and I’ll call DC Kelly.”

Brent when he came in, full of curiosity but also hopeful she would have useful information to share, saw a woman in her forties who had tried to counteract her tired eyes and wan complexion with a bright-coloured lipstick. There was something about her square jaw which said she normally took no nonsense from anyone but he thought it showed a degree of dedication to drive all the way to Winville. He introduced himself and took her details before saying, “So you have researched the backgrounds of Robin Patmore and Ross Gorringe?”

“I prefer to call her Madison Brown. Yes. She told me she had an appalling childhood of abuse. Her father died and she had a stepfather.”

“Were you in contact with her mother and stepfather?”

“They wouldn’t talk to me, they said they wanted nothing to do with her, didn’t visit, didn’t care. I suspect they didn’t want to be put on notice.”

“Do you have an address for them?”

“They moved to Victoria, distancing themselves from Madison. She always said she didn’t care, that she never wanted to see them again.”

“Still, we do need to contact them to see what they want done with the body—or what’s left of it.”

She took out a notebook and wrote a name and number. “I’m sure they’ll say they don’t care. But they do have a legal responsibility, I assume.”

“No. Madison was an adult. But it is normal for police to contact the next-of-kin.”

She tore off the page and handed it over.

“And what about Gorringe?”

“No. He grew up in various institutions as a ward of the state. But he was a lot older, nearly forty to Madison’s seventeen. That is one of the other things which worked in her favour, being at the mercy of a much older man, people could see how damaging it could be. But the thing I am interested in—can I interview the man you’ve arrested?”

“He’s only on remand so it’s up to him if he wants to talk with you.”

“And—did he say why he killed Madison? Was it a lover’s tiff, something to do with their relationship?”

Brent hesitated. It would all come out in court probably but he hadn’t asked Greg how much they should give out at this stage of the investigation. Then he thought it might be worth sharing if this woman had information they could use. “He says Madison wanted them to snatch another kid and he got angry and punched him. He says Madison had already boasted of the three other abductions they had got away with. He’s no saint, obviously, but he couldn’t stick any more of it.”

“And Madison must’ve just been taking the mickey. She would have been too young to have been involved in other crimes.”

“Seventeen? It would depend. But we wondered if we could read your manuscript before you publish your book in case there’s anything in there which would help us. Do you mention David Burns?”

“No. Madison just said she was heading for Queensland as soon as she had healed from her surgery. She said she wanted to get right away from all the bad vibes of her old life.”

“And she didn’t want to risk anyone asking more questions?”

“She was very upbeat. But of course the decision to go with Burns might not have been made till the last minute.”

“They apparently knew each other inside Long Bay. Dave Burns thought she was ‘cute’ in the beginning and then it all soured and he ended up hating her. We told him he

should've cut loose or come to the police but he doesn't seem to have been too keen on talking to police."

"So how do you know what happened?"

"A man he was working for encouraged him to go in and talk with Sergeant Walsh in Buckton. But Burns says he's not sorry Madison is dead because he wanted to stop him killing any other kids."

She looked slightly disbelieving. "And you believed him?"

"Until everything is cross-checked with police in New South Wales I can't answer that question."

"Well, I'd like to meet him. I've talked with a lot of criminals over the years so I would like to think I am a reasonable judge."

Brent Kelly didn't claim to have 'talked with a lot of criminals' but he was tempted to say 'but not infallible?' Instead he said he would check with his boss and the Watch House. But when he got back to her twenty minutes later it was to say "Burns doesn't want to talk with you." Brent didn't feel able to tell Burns that talking with a writer would help him in any way and he was inclined to think her apparent partisanship for Madison Brown might make things worse. "It could be worth staying around a couple of days because he might change his mind when he's had time to think it through."

"Yes, and I'd like to see where it all happened." She took a pile of A4 pages in an accordion folder from her bag. "You can have it for a couple of days but it will need extensive re-writing now with this new information." She handed it over. "But one thing—are you absolutely sure the body you have is Madison Brown? This David Burns could have taken up with someone else along the way?"

"We are cross-checking with the hospital where Patmore had his surgery done. And with luck he has some male relatives who can be used to cross-check. We should hear back from the hospital any day."

After she had gone out, planning to stay here overnight then drive to Buckton and seek directions, Kelly took the manuscript back to the CIB room and said, "Who would like to help me plough through this?"

DSS Sullivan, never a keen reader, said he wondered if it was worth the effort. DC Forman said "Okay, you start and pass it on page by page."

"Hold on," Greg was unexpectedly sharp, "we've got our own work to do. You can start reading on your own time."

Kelly and Forman looked at each other. There was no guarantee there was anything which would be genuinely helpful in it but Brent had slowly come to the insight that seeing how Patmore had possibly manipulated a journalist might also give insights into how he had possibly manipulated several men into doing what he wanted. "Sure. But she gave me the mother's address so I guess I'd better see if she can come and tell us what the family wants done with the body."

Greg Sullivan okayed this before returning to his own work. And Brent eventually got a pleasant voice saying "Hullo, Brenda McNabb speaking."

Brent introduced himself and said he was ringing from Winville police in Queensland, "And are you the mother of the Robin Patmore who later called himself Madison Brown?"

"Yes, yes, I am. Why?"

"You knew he was in Long Bay jail for helping to kill a child?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so. We offered him any help he needed but he refused. He refused to see me when I tried to visit him. I think he wanted sympathy as someone abandoned by the world but I don't really know. But why are you ringing me?"

Brent explained the circumstances, offered his condolences, and asked her what she wanted done with the body when they had finished doing tests. "We can arrange to have the

body or what's left cremated and sent to you or you can come here and make your own arrangements."

She said she would talk to her husband about coming to Queensland and would be in touch.

"There is another thing," Brent was reluctant to run it by someone he didn't know and couldn't see, "but your son told a journalist he had an appalling childhood of abuse and that that is why he didn't want to see you."

"No, no, why would he say that?" She sounded shocked. "His father died when he was six and I suppose I was … that I spoiled him a bit … and I remarried when Robin was about ten, Daniel McNabb, but Daniel always tried hard to be a father to Robin. He certainly never abused him. It didn't really work because Robin seemed to resent him … I suppose it doesn't always work out but Daniel did try hard." Brent could see that Robin had possibly resented being displaced as Number One Man in his mother's world. But it might be more than that. "Daniel finally thought it might be better if he left and he went to Victoria. Robin didn't want to go on in high school, I was sad about that as he was a bright boy, but he said he wasn't interested and he met a man called … called … Ross, I think, and they went off fruit-picking … I was disappointed about that. But Robin wouldn't listen to anything I said. They came back a couple of times to stay overnight but then I didn't see them for about eight months, I forget just how long, and then I heard he had been arrested. It was so horrible. All the things in the media. I've never stopped asking myself where I went wrong but I honestly don't know."

"He says his stepfather abused him."

"No, no, that can't be right. Daniel tried very hard to be a second father to him."

"And he says, said, he was really a woman and had a sex-change operation."

"I-I saw something, a friend in Sydney sent something, but I don't know why, he was a happy little boy up until his dad died, then he became very close to me. But he never never said anything about wanting to be a girl. He used to say he hated girls. I think he got a bit bullied at school but I spoke to his teachers and they said they would keep an eye out."

"Did he have any close friends with other boys?"

"Not really. He used to go out with the twins next door occasionally. They all had bikes but the boys were a year older, I think, so I don't think … well, maybe they didn't want a smaller boy tagging along but they were always polite with him."

"So you have no idea why he would decide to become a woman?"

"I honestly don't. It seems just extraordinary but once he left home … I wish I could be more help but once he said he never wanted to see me again I didn't really know what to do. I used to write to him regularly but I never got a reply so, slowly, I wrote less and less and finally gave up after he'd been in Long Bay for about six years."

He told her where to come and gave her Greg's name in case she wanted to talk at any time with the head of the team. As he made notes from the conversation he wondered who was right. Had Robin Patmore suffered a childhood of abuse and the mother was never going to own up to it—or had it been a ploy to get sympathy and the fact that the mother had gone to Victoria and lost touch played into his claims of a terrible childhood?

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Ms Gow didn't enjoy her drive to Buckton. The countryside was brown except for patches of irrigated green. She felt she needed to see and photograph the place where Madison Brown had died. But her journey seemed to underscore a sense of failure. And if she couldn't talk with David Burns the alternative of staying in Winville to see him in court was not particularly appealing.

The woman at the front counter in the station in Winville had shown her on a map where to go to find the side road and the creek and she drove through Buckton and eventually

found the road through. Small fleecy clouds rode high in what seemed an abnormally wide sky. It was an oddly anonymous little spot, just a sprinkling of gums, an open patch of dry grass, and a couple of small muddy waterholes in the creek bed. She stood there for several minutes looking out over the gully to the paddocks beyond. A dragonfly skimmed the turbid water and a tiny wisp of bark drifted down when an unseen bird took off.

The only sign that something terrible had happened here was the still visible marks that sketched out a faint and uneven oblong where she assumed the campervan had burned. She walked round taking pictures in every direction and wondered who had been the first on the scene of the fire.

At last she walked back to her car and stood beside it for several more minutes. What had gone so terribly wrong here? Or had things gone wrong long before that van drew in and parked? Writing true crime books always threw up imponderables. It wasn't like writing fiction where the threads could be neatly joined and tied up. There were always real people doing or saying things that seemed to spoil any neat pattern. But this case added in the imponderable of her own ideas and assumptions and responses and she had the uneasy feeling that she had not come at the whole mess with an open mind. And yet …

It might be that her instincts *were* correct and that the police would find that the stories they had been told to suggest Madison Brown was a serial murderer were wrong.

As she stood there an old ute with something rattling in the back drew in beside the verge and a man in his sixties wearing a battered felt hat got out and said, "You okay, lady?"

"Oh yes, yes, thank you. I stopped to look at the place where that van burnt. Did you know about it?"

He took his hat off and scratched some grizzled curls. "You'd want to have a chat with old Henry over the hill." He waved vaguely. "He heard the explosion an' come down to see what was goin' on. I reckon he called the cops but it was a while before they got here an' there was no way to put the fire out. They thought it was just some yob burnin' an old banger—till they found a body. But I can't tell you more'n that. Why d'you want to know?"

"I write books about crimes—"

"Not a job for a lady, that, but I s'pose you know your own business." He sounded slightly critical.

She had no intention of arguing with him, just thanking him for his suggestions and getting back into her car. She drove back the way she'd come and turned into the first gate she came to, assuming it would lead her to 'old Henry'. The rutted lane brought her to a house tucked into the slight rise and looking westward. Except for the tops of the trees the creek was invisible from here. She thought if she had been building here she would've chosen the other side of the hill.

A fox terrier came out to the gate and barked at her. A screen door banged and a man stood at the top of the front steps. She unlatched the garden gate and came up to him, introducing herself and explaining why she had come. He, too, looked to be in his sixties but quite tanned and fit.

He didn't say anything about writing crime books being a man's job but he gave her several sideways glances as though he wasn't quite sure she was for real. Nevertheless he said briskly, "There isn't much to tell. Must've been about nine, a bit later, when I heard an almighty bang. My wife and I got up and went out. We thought there might've been a smash on the road but we could see the light in the sky from the flames. We didn't know what was burning but I'd seen an old van down by the creek the day before. I hadn't seen anyone around so I thought maybe it'd been dumped. I thought of ringing the fire brigade but no point if someone was getting rid of some old bomb. But I thought I should go down and check just in case the fire might get away into my bottom paddock. I went down and I could see it still burning but it was well away from my boundary fence so I came home. But I

thought I'd better ring the cops just in case, maybe the van was stolen or something. And that's about it. Next day Dinny Walsh came to see me and he said they'd found a body there. But I couldn't help him."

"So no one knew who the dead body was?"

"We heard it was a man but didn't hear any more, just last week something on the radio about them finding something out. We heard it was Andy McLaren who went to the cops but don't ask me just what's going on."

"So how would I find Mr McLaren?"

He told her but he continued to look slightly bemused as she thanked him and went back to her car. He too went back inside to where they had been finishing their lunch and sat down again, saying, "Some dame asking about that body in the van. S'pose there might be a book in it but don't know who'd read it."

Cristina Bow took a while to find the McLaren homestead and she wondered exactly where this Andy McLaren came into the business. She parked and got out. She could see a man over at the sheds and turned in that direction. Though dry the place looked well cared for. She wasn't sure what kind of farming was carried on here but he might be willing to give her some background.

He turned to meet her, just saying, "Afternoon."

She explained again why she was interested in the case and said, "I was told by a man called Henry that you came into things. I hope you can tell me a bit more."

"There isn't a lot to tell." He stood there looking out over the paddocks. "A mate of mine was employing a young man called Dave Burns. He ran out of work for him and asked me if I needed an extra hand. He said he was an excellent worker so I took him on to pick melons. He was right. Best worker I've ever had. But I could see he was troubled about something and I finally managed to persuade him to come and talk to Sergeant Walsh. That's when it all came out about him and that other young fella. I guess you could go and talk to Walsh. The young fella is in Winville so I guess he'll be convicted and go to prison. I said I'd be happy to have him back here to work if they had a day release scheme or something but they said 'nothing doing'."

"Would it bother you to have a convicted murderer working for you?" She wondered if that was putting it too bluntly.

"I sat there and listened to him tell Dennis what went on. It was like listening to a kid alone in the world and driven to doing a desperate thing. That doesn't make it right. But I could understand how it all happened."

"And—did you believe he was telling the truth?"

Andrew McLaren took his time over the question. At last he said, "I'm not a psychologist or anything, just an ordinary farmer, but yeah, I did. I heard they were going to arrange for him to have a hypnosis session. That's not something I've ever had anything to do with but I assume it would bring out things, you know, if he was completely off with the birds. But you'd have to ask the police about that."

"Have you seen him since he went to Winville?"

"Uh huh, I've been in a couple of times—"

"He refused to see me. I don't know why."

"Don't you? For him to tell his story to police was emotionally draining. Why would he want to do it again for someone who just wants to make money out of his experience?"

"I might be able to help him."

"The last thing he wants, I'd think, is publicity. But that's up to him."

"So what did you think of him? Personality wise, I mean."

"Not the sharpest knife in the drawer. I think he got himself into something he couldn't handle. But I assume they'll get him properly assessed before he goes to trial. Anyway, good luck with your book."

*

Having come this far, Ms Gow thought she might as well try to get something on record from the Sergeant Walsh who had been first responder to the fire. She went into a place calling itself Buckton Café and had a late lunch and asked the middle-aged woman serving her if she knew anything about the case of the burnt campervan. Jess Brumby raised an eyebrow but said politely, "Not really. He worked for the McLarens for a few weeks. I guess you could talk to Andrew or Julie. I don't know if the police are allowed to tell you things before a trial but you could ask."

"Where would I find Julie McLaren?"

"She teaches at the primary school."

Cristina thanked her. If the sergeant wouldn't tell her anything she thought another woman might be more chatty and insightful. She found two men in the police station. But whereas she had found McLaren a pleasant if mildly reserved man she found Sergeant Walsh slightly intimidating. She told herself firmly that that was a ridiculous thought; he was merely a sergeant in a small country station, been nowhere, going nowhere, so why should that be intimidating?

He ushered her into the small interview room. With the afternoon sun on it she found it hot and stuffy but she sat down and accepted the offer of a cup of tea. Both men then came in and sat down and Walsh said, "So you're the woman writing a book about that Robin Patmore?"

She thought of saying 'I prefer to call him by his own choice, Madison Brown' but it didn't seem worth it. "That's right. I interviewed Robin, Madison, a number of times while he was undergoing surgery. That's how I came to start writing the book."

"Winville says your book makes him out to be the victim in the death of Craig Allan Lamb." She was surprised that he should already have heard from his colleagues. Were they very fast readers or had they cherry-picked her manuscript? "Why did you come to that conclusion?"

She had intended interviewing him rather than being grilled but it was probably what the police wanted to know, if they were to also understand his killer.

"There were several things. The first thing was that he had had an appalling childhood of abuse and was effectively alone in the world."

"You've spoken to his school teachers, classmates, neighbours, his GP, maybe the local hospital?"

"I am still researching for the book."

"Go on."

"Then he was caught up in a damaging relationship with a much older and stronger man. He was only sixteen when he met Ross Gorringe."

Dennis nodded and made a note. "You've talked with Gorringe?"

"No. He refuses to talk to anyone. People call him a monster—"

"What d'you mean by people? Names."

"People are afraid of him—"

"He's banged up for another ten years, never talks, just sits there. Has he got dangerous family on the outside?"

"Not that I know of."

"Okay. So you can't say someone is a monster and leave it at that. What crimes against children had he committed before he met Patmore?"

"I haven't yet found anything, just a couple of traffic things."

"So a bloke gets to forty with a clean slate then meets a youngster and starts abducting kids. There must've been something beforehand even if it's just hanging round schoolyards, wouldn't you think?"

"As I say, I'm still researching." It came out sounding rather prissy which annoyed her. She had always prided herself on a tough take-no-prisoners attitude.

"Okay, so what else have you got?"

"Anyone could've heard about those other missing kids. It's not proof that Patmore had anything to do with them."

"True. But Burns was only a kid himself when they went missing. Twelve. Thirteen. Was he reading regional newspapers, d'you think?"

"Probably not." Dennis and Ben had both had the impression that Burns and reading were not close mates. "But there would've been talk inside the jail."

"Maybe when the kids first went missing, though they were well away from Sydney. But Burns didn't go in till Patmore'd been there about six years, maybe more. Would they still be talking?"

"It's possible. And it's possible Gorringe had told Burns he was responsible for other kids."

Dennis nodded. "So what was life like inside for Patmore? Child killers often get a hard time inside. Was he in a special isolation unit or something?" It always struck Dennis as the rankest hypocrisy that men in there for rape, domestic violence, bashing the elderly, stealing from pensioners, could turn around and sanctimoniously take their frustrations out on child abusers on the grounds that they were entitled to give them a hard time.

"No. He told me he sucked more cocks than he could count. I asked a couple of the men who'd come out round that time and they said he was the expert, that the men would be lining up. I asked Madison and she said it gave her power."

"What sort of power?"

"When you've seen just about every cock in the place you can start a discreet rumour or two."

Constable Waters looked puzzled and slightly embarrassed. "Telling the world, well, through innuendo, that some big tough guy has a two inch dick? That the sort o' thing you mean?" Dennis looked at her with raised eyebrows. He wasn't fussed on talking about such things with a woman but he assumed this woman took such conversations in her stride. Winville said she had already published three books about grisly murders in New South Wales.

"I guess it's like sex workers getting intimate details about their clients, some look for ways to use it."

"So you would say that Patmore was devious?"

"No. I think he was just looking for ways to survive in there."

"So when did he start claiming to be a woman?"

"Two or three years before he came out."

"Not before that?"

"Not unless he kept it to himself."

"So it got him out of jail, got him a new name, new documents and a lot of support from some lobby. What d'you reckon it cost the taxpayer?"

It wasn't a relevant question, she didn't think. The taxpayer paid out when people did all kinds of things and had all kinds of medical needs, some self-inflicted. On the other hand, Patmore out of jail was no longer costing the taxpayer for his incarceration.

"Well, say, a hundred thousand dollars to get him out of jail and free years before he was due out? That suggests a pretty clever young man." Dennis Walsh didn't mind to answer his own question even if he had no idea what a sex change operation might cost.

"Are you suggesting it was all a big con?" She sounded sharp.

"Never met the bloke. What did you think of him?"

She considered fudging this with more talk of more research needed but finally said, "I think he was an unfortunate kid who got himself into something he couldn't handle and he took a way out which coincided with his natural inclinations. I felt sorry for him but I still need to talk with more people to get a fuller picture."

"Did you talk to the parents of the little boy that was tortured and killed?"

"No. I got the trial transcript. But I didn't think they would want to know there were doubts about the guilt of one of the perpetrators."

"Which perp?"

Ben Waters thought Dennis's grim question had thrown Ms Gow. But then she wouldn't be the first person …

"Patmore, of course. If he was acting under duress from an older and more powerful man then it doesn't make him completely innocent but it would be strong mitigating evidence."

"He couldn't have walked away from an evil man?"

"Not if he valued his safety."

"So we come back to the question of whether Ross Gorringe had ever used violence or threats against anybody. That seems to be the key question if you want to see your young man as a victim."

She picked up her big bag and said neutrally, "What will happen to Dave Burns now?"

"Unless he changes his story he'll be convicted, sentenced, and go back to jail."

"Is it likely he'll change his story?"

"Not my call but I believe Legal Aid has suggested he consider pleading Not Guilty. Don't know if that's a possibility."

"But if he's already confessed … "

"They can say he didn't have legal advice, they can suggest provocation. Don't know. But there is also the chance that Burns was wrongly convicted for the assault he did time for. Don't know if there's any chance of that getting re-investigated. Anyway, lots for you to dig into." Dennis got up. Waters followed suit and took away her mug to wash it.

*

Dennis in the late evening shared something of his meeting with Ms Gow. "I'm still not convinced he was the innocent in all this but it's not up to me."

She thought it all through carefully and finally said, "Why do you think they chose little boys—or a little boy? Were they gay? Pedophiles usually go for the children that fit with their own inclinations."

"They didn't find any sign of sex. The other bodies haven't been found. Might just be that they got interrupted or something. Not sure. But I don't think they were pedophiles, not in the usual way. Someone said to me after Patmore had everything removed he wouldn't be seething with testosterone anyway so he wouldn't be interested in grabbing kids any more, not for sex anyway. But I wondered if it might be some kind of spite—some kind of revenge playing out."

"What did you have in mind?"

"Well, he was small. And his dad died when he was young. He was maybe a bit of a mummy's boy, maybe got teased or bullied, maybe some kid stole his favourite toy, maybe he didn't get invited to birthday parties, whatever. Don't know. But those big boys grew up and moved away and he couldn't get back at them, but now *he's* the big boy so he grabs little kids who can't fight back and enjoys this kind of substitute revenge."

Fiona considered this carefully. “So something might’ve happened that festered all through his growing-up and he finds a man who will help him get his revenge? It might be.”

“Don’t know if that dame is really prepared to look into his background in an unbiased way. You could see from a mile off that she was sorry for him and had swallowed all his stories because he was like some little lost waif. So what would you suggest we do?”

“Police, you mean? Or just you?”

“Winville.”

“Well, sometimes before a successful abduction there’s been a failed try. Did any children complain about strange men trying to entice them into a car or something? And the other thing is that—surely this other man must know exactly what they did? There must be some way to get him to talk? Maybe he won’t talk inside prison. Would he talk outside? Or would he talk with a complete outsider?”

“You’re right. Maybe he’s gone completely round the bend but there must be some way to get him to say something, even if it’s just nonsense. Maybe he would talk to you?”

“Thank you, sweetheart, I’ve always wanted to talk with a serious criminal. And maybe he would talk to you?”

“Doubt it. But I’ll put both things to them. There’s a chance no one’s told him that Patmore’s copped it or that Burns has named these other kids.”

To all this when Dennis next spoke with him DSS Sullivan said gloomily, “Funny how you always want us to do more work, Dennis.”

“No. Just get the cops down south to broaden their search and check whether Gorringe has ever been told Patmore’s dead. And that’s what juniors are for, mate, the donkey work.”

“So I’ll put you forward to visit Gorringe and give him the good news, will I?” Greg sounded slightly snide.

“Do what you like. We just want those kids found. That’s the bottom line.”

*

The session Winville had arranged with a hypnotherapist from Toowoomba had added several small points to their folder. Mrs Woodley had asked for petrol money and her normal fee and had said, rather tentatively, that most of her clients wanted to stop smoking, eating, or doing something obsessive like constant hand-washing; that she had never worked with someone involved in a crime. But she had found David Burns a good subject and he had seemed to respond positively to her pleasant motherly way. It was Dennis Walsh who had wanted Burns asked about the case which had seen him sent to Long Bay. Greg had been rather reluctant. He didn’t want the focus diffused. And Burns had had plenty of time to convince himself he hadn’t done anything to any old gentleman.

Winville got on to police in NSW with these extra snippets and passed on the possibility that Patmore and Gorringe had done one or more failed snatches. But Greg said to his team, “What do we do about this business with Burns, if he didn’t do that GBH, wanting them to relook at something done and dusted isn’t going to make anyone happy.”

Both Joel and Jenny looked at Brent who said slowly, “First, we tell Dennis, it was his doubt. And then we run off copies of the tape of the session and send a copy to the DPP in Sydney, see how he responds, and if he doesn’t want to know we consider spreading it more widely. But it’s the bits about that panel van which just might break those cases wide open.”

“Okay, you tell him.”

When he went into the station and found Ben Waters there, he said, “Hi, Ben, Dennis around?”

“He should be back soon. What’s happened?”

Brent explained about the hypnosis and said simply, “Looks like Dennis was right, that Burns probably didn’t do it.”

Ben nodded. He had wondered himself. “But why do you think he put his hand up?”

“Seems he wanted to get right away from home, from an abusive father.” He thought of adding ‘and I understand why he would do that’. “I know Long Bay is a desperate response, it would’ve been simpler to run away from home maybe, but he said his dad is a cop and would find him if he went. But once he was in Long Bay his dad washed his hands of him.”

“And—did he say who actually did it?”

“He did.” Brent grinned. “He gave us two names. I think he also knew he was safe here, don’t know about how much he knew what he was saying when he was in a trance but he said later when we ran those names past him again that they wouldn’t come all the way to Winville and try to get at him in the Watch House.”

“Except—they aren’t going to want to open the case again, are they?”

“They’ll have Dennis to deal with if they say no.” Both young men found that amusing. Dennis might be a nobody in a small country station but they both had a healthy respect for his ability to get far more important people to listen to him.

“I’ll tell him. And did you get anything else?”

“We did.” Brent felt good sharing the other things the session had thrown up.

*

Whether cops in the central west of New South Wales felt good wasn’t known to anyone in Queensland but perhaps some of the very positive help coming from their colleagues north of the border inspired them to an immediate follow up.

It was about a week later when Winville had a ring from a Sergeant Brock in Young who said they might be interested to know that when they had publicised the photos of Gorringe and Patmore a family had come forward with an interesting story.

They had bought their son a bicycle for his ninth birthday and after he’d ridden it round home for a week or two they had given him permission to go out on the road and ride about a k to his friend’s house. He had been approached near his gate by a young man who said they had seen a stray kitten on the road and were worried it might get squashed and would he like to come with them to pick it up and take it home with him. He had said no, that he was allergic to cats, and he had got on his bike and ridden off. He had immediately said ‘that’s him!’ when he’d seen the picture of Patmore on the TV. He also said Patmore had got out of a white panel van. He hadn’t seen the driver. But he said Patmore had blonde curls and was quite slightly built and spoke nicely and politely.

“So that might be the line he took with other kids?” Sullivan said thoughtfully. “And I reckon that kid should be very grateful he did have an allergy.”

And the white panel van brought Winville some more good news not long afterwards. A DC Mancini rang Winville and talked with Jenny Forman who told the rest of the team when they came back to the office: “Bingo. They’ve found the white panel van Gorringe sold. The guy who bought it for parts said the back had a bad smell. When he’d queried this a man he thinks was Gorringe said his little frig had broken down and the food in it had gone bad. He wasn’t totally convinced. But he took some parts and said the tyres were in reasonable nick but he dumped most of it. They’re going over it now and they’ve found what looks like blood stains and some hair and a couple of bits of what they think might’ve come from a pair of broken spectacles. Even if they can’t find the bodies they might get something to prove they were in that van.”

“So the kids might’ve been killed in the back of the van then dumped?”

“And any luck with whoever sold them the grey van they were using when they killed the Lamb boy?”

“We’ve got the date when they sold the white van so it would’ve been around then. The mechanic said Gorringe took a box of tools out of the back after he’d handed over the

keys, told him he was a carpenter, went round doing odd jobs for people in the country. The man said he seemed a bit of a dork, he wasn't sure that he would hire him unless he was desperate."

"Well, that might fit with what we've heard about Gorringe. So let's hope their Forensic people are first class."

"But there must be a way to get Gorringe to tell someone where they buried the bodies?"

"I said we should send Dennis down south to talk with him," Greg said drily.

The other three looked at him, wondering if this was serious or some sort of in-house joke. Then Jenny Forman said, "Why not? Dennis might be the sort of man he'd talk to—"

"Why Dennis?" Joel Brosnan said.

"Well, think about it. I'll bet they've sent psychiatrists and lawyers and bureaucrats but if Gorringe is a country bloke which it looks like, he was in an institution somewhere in the sticks, then Dennis might be the sort of guy he would talk to—if he's ever going to talk."

"And if he refuses to talk Dennis can get stuck into him," Greg said drily.

"I don't think they'd allow that," Brosnan said rather pedantically.

"I wasn't being serious," Greg said, "but I still think we should put the idea forward."

"Would Dennis want to go?" Forman thought Sydney would be the last place Dennis would want to visit. It still seemed strange to her that there were lots of country people who hated the very thought of visiting a city.

"He can do what he's told." Greg had had more than his share of times when he'd done what Dennis wanted. That he had sometimes ended up being very grateful … "Anyway, they may say no."

*

Magistrate Marian Vohland had refused bail to David Burns. Given that he'd come from NSW she understandably deemed him a flight risk. But she had laid down a whole list of requirements. A confession was not enough. She wanted an assessment of his physical and mental state. She wanted to know why he had no lawyer, not even Legal Aid, she wanted to know if there were any outstanding warrants either in Queensland or NSW. She asked what back-up proof they had from the history of the burnt vehicle, she wanted to know if he was still on parole and whether he'd ever had a parole officer.

Greg Sullivan had managed to convince her that they were doing their best to liaise with NSW but he was happy to arrange for an assessment of Burns' mental state. He pointed out that Legal Aid in Winville was currently minus a staff member and trying to cover their workload via one young lawyer and a secretary. The lack of available personnel wasn't something police could do anything about.

Mrs Vohland accepted all this and set a hearing date for a month's time. Her own impression of David Burns was that he had no objection to spending months if not years in the Watch House here. She wasn't sure whether he simply felt safer inside or it had something to do with his previous experience of jail time. After all, the Watch House in Winville under the benign care of Joe Landy could not be compared to the tough regime of the Long Bay Correctional Complex. She didn't know that Joe Landy, from the suggestion made to him by Dennis Walsh, had brought a kitten in and asked Burns to look after it for him.

Burns, rather than reading or watching TV, was content to sit for hours stroking the small grey animal. No one would ever call Dennis Walsh sentimental (and certainly not to his face) but he understood from seeing what a difference an animal to care for had made to Brent Kelly's life that Burns, whether or not he had been abused by his father, was alone in the world and needing something to care about. Burns didn't know whether he would some

day have to relinquish the kitten. He probably couldn't take it to Brisbane when they sent him. So he was making the most of his time with Sooty now.

Cristina Bow had seen Burns in court but her repeated requests to be allowed to talk with him had all been knocked back. Burns simply said he wasn't talking to any reporter. So if she couldn't interview him she wondered if she could interview his family. They must know something of his troubled history though whether they now knew he was up on a new charge in Queensland … and she could easily get more through a friend in Long Bay who could give her some home details and she thought she would try to interview the man he was said to have assaulted.

She didn't fancy the long drive home but there didn't seem to be any point in staying longer. But as she went out of court she thought she recognised a man sitting at the back of the small room. She was reasonably sure he was a Sydney journalist. So was he also thinking of writing a book? Because the case had now grown much more complex. She took the thought away with her. She could do a thorough re-write but at some level she refused to believe in this different Robin-cum-Madison. To believe that the times they had spent together in long and earnest conversations were all a sham made her doubt herself.

And nowhere in there was a hint that she was dealing with a killer.

She had interviewed tough guys over the last fifteen years. She was sure she understood what it took to kill and then stand back and laugh. She had genuinely liked Madison Brown. But an uncomfortable little voice now got in the way. Children could be taken by brute force, by deliberate lies, but they could also be taken by apparent sympathy cloaking guile. They could be cheated into believing someone was safe and had their best interests at heart. They wouldn't go with a Ross Gorringe from choice but, yes, she could see children going with a Robin Patmore without even considering Stranger Danger …

But when she tracked down Senior Sergeant Kyle Burns and said she would like to interview him about his son she was told that David 'was no son of mine' and that 'he had brought lasting shame on their family'. Then he had said that if she put a word about the family into her book he would take her to court and have the book pulped.

She was slightly taken aback by his vehemence. Of course families of both perpetrators and victims had some right to privacy but they didn't have the right to threaten a journalist going about her work of trying to dig out the truth. "His name will inevitably be in all the papers when the case comes up. There is nothing I can do to prevent other people from making the connection."

Burns had not responded to that statement simply telling her their conversation was at an end.

"Pulped," she said to her publisher and then more soberly, "I wonder what he's scared will come out?"

"Up to you to dig that out. But go carefully. NSW Police … well, you know they like to pretend they've cleaned up their act but we all know that's a furphy."

Corruption? But she thought that Kyle Burns's response could suggest something much more private. Had he known even before that old man was put in hospital that his son was out with a gang and running wild … and had done nothing …

*

Even if other people didn't necessarily take Sergeant Walsh's advice to heart Brent Kelly liked the idea of an intensive training weekend. Years ago he couldn't have told anyone anything about dressage but now he read and worked and planned with great enthusiasm. And both his horses responded to the training he did round at Aileen Dempster's little riding school. She admitted quite frankly that she didn't know a lot but she did her own search for a course that Brent could go to and came up with a Friday to Sunday workshop being held on a property near Toowoomba. He didn't have his own caravan but he did have a tent and the

people putting on the workshop, the Stadlers, were sympathetic and said he was welcome to use their facilities and use one of their yards for Lady Luck but he would need to bring fodder for her.

Brent, used to taking his horses round two-day shows, was well organised. And he found he recognised a couple of people from the show circuit. But as he did a simple test in the dressage arena on the first day with everyone else watching on and critiquing him with their notebooks and pencils one of the observers realised as he rode out that she knew him.

For a moment Naomi Burkett was tempted to pretend she had never met him before now. Then common sense and her innate kindness kicked in. As he rode over to the waiting group and the next person rode in he suddenly realised that the young woman on a chestnut mare was Naomi with Rilloby Fair. He found himself growing hot and red but there was nothing to be done but say, "Hi, Naomi, I didn't know you were coming."

She just smiled and turned back to do her own assessment of the next rider. It wasn't until everyone had been through and their expert had gone over each test in detail that Brent had the chance to walk over to the makeshift lunch canteen with her. He had no idea whether she knew about him and Lyn Harding and it wasn't a subject he wanted to raise.

"You did a very good test," Naomi said, making it sound professionally disinterested. But it was the truth. She was secretly impressed by the beautiful way Brent and his mare seemed to be in harmony.

"Where are you living now?"

"Toowoomba. I'm with the DPI working on publications. Where are you?"

"Still in Winville."

"Still in the CIB?"

"Aye, still with Greg and Jenny. Naomi, if there's a chance—would you like to go for a coffee somewhere." He wished he could make his voice sound perfectly normal instead of like a shy kid.

She considered this in silence then said, "Maybe. But the weekend is going to be pretty full on."

"I know. That's why I came. But I would really like to … to hear more about how things are going with you."

"We'll see." She felt she needed time to think this through. It might only be a coffee. But did she want even that with Brent? At last she went on, "Okay, tomorrow lunchtime I guess we can get away for a short while."

"That's great." He wanted to say more and then couldn't decide whether to say anything about looking forward to it. Naomi might just be saying that so as not to be seen entering into any sort of brush-off in such a public place.

And when they went out for a short drive to look for somewhere offering food nearby he found he still couldn't decide what to say to Naomi.

"You're riding really well," she said kindly.

"I really work at it. My horses are everything to me."

"So you've still got Sir Ned?"

They talked horses and work and then Naomi said, "I guess we'd better be getting back for the afternoon session."

"I know. But … could we meet up again sometime?"

Naomi had been deeply hurt when Brent had gone off so publicly with Cindy Bethune but she understood that someone like Brent was no match for someone like Cindy. But the much harder question which faced her now was whether she wanted to restart anything at all with Brent. It wasn't that they had been an item back then. It had just been a lovely relaxing stimulating friendship. She thought she would like something like that back in her life but she didn't know if it could really be resurrected.

He took away with him her lukewarm agreement that they might meet up sometime. Brent was grateful but when he set out on the long drive home to Winville the question which kept gnawing away at him was to do with Lyn Harding and the baby. Did Naomi already know and not care. Or did she not know and would be deeply suspicious of his motives when she found out. He had almost convinced himself that it would be best to do without any social life and just concentrate on his horses by the time he reached home and unloaded Lady Luck. After all, he had done a test when he arrived and another at the end to compare and he had the judge's report on both and at the end she had noted 'very promising horse and rider'; he could still bask in the moment of excitement that had given him. So maybe just going out for the occasional drink with Greg and the others was enough and it was pointless to hope for anything more. So although Naomi had given him her phone number he made no attempt to ring her.

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Case No. 3: Suffer the Little Children—

Cristina Bow, knocked back by David Burns' father, remembered Sergeant Walsh asking whether she had any supporting evidence for Patmore's claims of an abusive childhood. Of course no one outside necessarily knew what went on inside a family. But maybe it was time to look for some supporting evidence.

She looked through the lists of staff and students from the primary and high schools he had attended. If his parents had really thought he was a very bright boy she was faintly surprised they had been content with the local state schools rather than looking for a top notch private school. But then if Mrs Patmore had been left a widow she might not have been particularly flush with funds. Gow wondered what the first husband had done for a living.

She set up interviews with two teachers who had been there when Robin Patmore was a student and said simply she was writing a book about him. She hadn't seen anything in any of the NSW papers about possible other victims and wondered if the police were still sitting on those potential cases. Or had they begun to have doubts about linking them to Patmore and Gorringe? Or had they confined their requests or reports to small rural newspapers?

Mrs Edwards had taught Patmore in his last year of primary school. She said she found it hard to picture him as a killer—or indeed as a murder victim. Gow saw this as supporting her own views but she said cautiously, "So you liked him as a young boy?"

"No, I'm afraid I didn't. He was spoiled rotten from what I can remember. I do understand his mother treating him as her little ewe lamb but it hadn't been good for him being that little king of the castle. I knew his mother a bit and I couldn't bring myself to tell her not to let him get away with his nasty sneaky little habits. That he really needed some firm discipline. But then she remarried and his little nose was put right out of joint. He used his intelligence not to excel in school but to think up ways to make life difficult for his new stepfather. I know it can be hard for children in that situation. But it was hard on Brenda too. She loved them both but she told me a couple of years later that Daniel had decided to leave, that he felt he was making things worse for her. I wasn't happy about that. It was giving power to a child to decide whether his mother was allowed to have her own life. I didn't know Daniel McNabb well but he always seemed a kind and thoughtful man. Maybe it would have been better if he was the sort of tough guy who took no nonsense from a stepson."

"So do you have any idea why Robin would have taken up with a gorilla like Ross Gorringe—or later claimed to be a woman?" The conversation made her uneasy. But she wasn't sure that teachers were always the best judges of children's personalities. In her own

experience teachers tended to concentrate on either very bright or very disruptive students and leave the rest largely alone.

"I saw him occasionally after he went to High School but I can't honestly say why he did so poorly or didn't want to go on with his education. A natural laziness maybe. Things had come easily to him at the beginning. But you have to work at things as they get harder. I don't know. Maybe he was looking for someone who didn't take any nonsense from him. But as I don't know anything about the other man, I would only be guessing. I suppose you could say he was a little on the effeminate side, those lovely blonde curls when he was young, but he was quite a good athlete and played a bit of cricket."

"He told me he was physically abused by his stepfather. Do you know who was their family doctor?"

"Probably Dr Petrov. He's still in practice. I certainly never saw any sign of anything but I suppose you can never say categorically what goes on inside families, just that I would think it was very unlikely. Are you sure he wasn't just trying to get some sympathy?"

The other teacher had taught Robin maths in High School and seemed to have difficulty in throwing his mind back. "Patmore? Lazy little sod." John Pinker was dubious about having any insights to offer. "But I was astonished when I heard about his arrest. He was a sneaky sort of kid but I didn't think of him as ever using violence."

"Do you think he went along with an older and stronger man?"

"When I saw that mug shot of Gorringe in the paper I couldn't imagine any little kid wanting to get into a vehicle with him. So it must've been Robin who spoke with the kids and persuaded them to go somewhere with him. What happened after that—well, I only know what was in the media and I don't know if that was accurate."

"He said he had been badly abused as a child."

"Did he? I never saw any sign of anything. Daniel McNabb was a decent man. I got to know him through Rotary. Dads, stepdads, might give a kid a smack, but I can't even picture him doing that. He would be more likely to explain in his earnest sort of way why something wasn't acceptable."

Dr Petrov said he couldn't give out any patient details but thawed a little upon hearing that Robin Patmore had been killed and police in Queensland had a man in custody. "You want to know if I ever saw any sign of abuse, is that it? Well, the answer is no. A grazed knee. A bit of bronchitis. He was always a bit chesty. A cough that hung on. There's nothing else here. He was a bit on the small side for his age but his dad, if I remember rightly, was quite short."

"So you knew his father?"

"I treated him initially when he got liver cancer. I think they both spoiled the boy a bit. They'd hoped for a family for quite a while before Robin came along and they seemed to see him as this little angel that was finally sent to them. I've occasionally seen parents in that situation throw common sense out the window. Their little darling can do no wrong. But he was well fed and well looked after so I hoped they'd get more sensible about him once he started school. But then his dad got sick. So then he only had one parent to spoil him. His mum had to get part time work and then she remarried. I suppose all that put his nose out of joint. But I think I only saw him once when he got to his teens. He got hit by a cricket ball and had a nasty bruise on his arm. So he gave up cricket."

When Cristina Gow put everything together back in Sydney she felt she could only say that 'Madison told me she had an appalling childhood of abuse. But from the various people I spoke with who knew her as a child that doesn't seem to be the case. It is a truism that no outsider knows what goes on inside a family as any Child Protection officer will confirm but there are usually telltale signs.' She hoped she could get something more definite before the extended publication date came closer. It was true that she had mainly spoken with

Madison in hospital which wasn't the same as seeing how she interacted with a variety of people. She thought she would try the prison again and see if she could find out more about the relationship between Patmore and Burns while they were both inside.

*

DI Carlton Payne was under no obligation to keep Dennis Walsh up-to-date with his investigations but he thought that Dennis who had pushed against official indifference or outright disbelief for so long deserved to hear where things were at. He rang one evening and said, "Dennis, is this a good time to talk?"

"You've got someone for James McCormack's death?"

"Not exactly. We've got Nottidge but that's not his real name. He was Jacob Palmer and wanted for questioning over a homicide in Tenant Creek twenty years ago. Seems he changed his name and went to ground here so it might mean that he already knew the Plowmans or he just came across as a man who didn't blab. The NT cops want him back for questioning but we're still hoping he can tell us when the body in a crate was brought there for burial. The only thing he has admitted is that he'd met Willy Jackson a couple of times. Still, early days. And your young man did a good job in Rocky."

Dennis was about to say 'which young man' when he realised Payne must be talking about Brosnan, not Waters.

"Terry Fulcher was very cagey but we looked at his phone calls for the days after Brosnan called by. And he rang both Ainslie Harris and someone listed as Jefferson Harris who also goes by the name of Todd Vercelli, the same guy Fulcher supposedly sold that green ute to. And it goes on getting better. We persuaded both Alvin Massey and James Harris to do DNA tests," Dennis wondered what sort of 'persuasion' had been necessary, "and they both have the same father. So the man who called himself both Richard Massey and Richard Harris and who died near Winville were all the same man. That takes him out of the equation although how many other aliases he went through we don't know. We have now told Ainslie Harris that she committed bigamy when she married him as he hadn't divorced his first wife. It may be why he made a point of divorcing his second wife, even though it left a trail of documents. We're hoping to do a deal with her. She had three brothers and a sister and she says they used to tease her about not finding a bloke and when her brother introduced her to Richard Harris and said 'grab him' she agreed and said she wouldn't hold it against him if he was often away while the kids were little. He said he was a mining engineer. But she said she never had more than the three children, she doesn't know a Jefferson Harris. So I've got Jay on to trying to find a birth registration, possibly under a different first name. If he had a different surname to begin with that's going to make it a lot harder."

"Still, that's a lot of good work." Dennis was not only sincere in this but had the related thought that he would never need to think about any of the Plowmans again. "But maybe he was born to the first wife but if Massey had become Harris by then he took Harris—so he might of been registered as Jefferson Massey."

"Certainly possible. And another thing. The Nebo Agricultural Company didn't close or go bankrupt. It simply merged with Northern Agricultural Supplies. They'll probably wish they'd had a fire sale and made sure it disappeared absolutely. Because we can now claim that NAC is still responsible for Nebo's actions and Nebo's debts. Mrs McCormack might be able to claw back the money they still owe her. And it puts Nebo and NAC very firmly in the frame for the death and disposal of her husband." It would not be an easy case to put before a jury but it could be done; after all, NAC had two directors who were both seen at the business at various times …

When Dennis went to bed it was with a sense of vindication. It didn't tell them who killed Willy Jackson or Edwin Morton but once some cracks started to appear it got harder

for these people who had operated in the shadows for so long to stop everything turning into some crazy paving.

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Walsh's cheerful mood evaporated next morning when DSS Sullivan rang him to say they'd got permission to send him to Long Bay to try and get Ross Gorringe to talk. "Nope. Send one of your young ones. I was planning to be out with the speed camera later today."

"Bad luck, mate. It's you they've given the okay for so get packing. Fly out of Toowoomba tomorrow. I'll get Jake to send you someone." Greg seemed to get an added pleasure in making it look like everything was organised and there was no wriggle room. Dennis, though, let fly with some choice words. Then he said, "Sorry, Ben, but Sydney's the last place I want to go—and why should the sod talk to me if he won't talk with anyone else? Doesn't make sense."

"But—they must think—well, that you can do things they can't."

"Doubt it. And who says I can even find my way around Sydney." As he spoke he thought gloomily of all the rushing and bustling and everyone apparently in a 90-mile hurry. "Still, no choice. So I'd best duck home and get a few things organised then we'll go out later and see if we can catch a few of the hoons."

Fiona was out so he got down a bag and began throwing things into it. With luck he'd only need to be there a couple of days. Then he went back to the station to look at their appointments and plans for the next few days and run over things with Waters.

Fiona said she would drive him to Toowoomba. He had thought to insist that someone from Winville do the honours, seeing they were the ones who had dobbed him in, but then he'd thought it was probably best if he simply took the ute. But to have Fiona to himself for an hour was a pleasant thought and the children were quite capable of getting themselves to school.

Far less pleasant was getting to Mascot and wondering if Greg was right in saying someone would meet him there. As he came out and collected his bag he saw a youngish man in uniform coming towards him. "Sergeant Walsh?"

He introduced himself as Constable Rick Porter and said he had instructions to take him straight out to Matraville, "unless you'd like to stop somewhere for lunch first?"

Dennis checked his watch and said, "No, let's get it over with. If he won't talk, I can be on the next plane home."

"You don't want to do anything else while you're here?"

"Nope. If I can't help to find those kids I'd rather be back at work."

Rick Porter found this hick sergeant slightly intimidating but it wasn't something he even wanted to admit to himself. He wondered if their thinking had been 'maybe one gorilla can get another gorilla to talk', not that Dennis Walsh precisely suggested a gorilla, not in his colouring anyway, but not someone you'd want to run into in a dark alley.

As they drove into the prison compound Dennis looked around and thought 'so this is where Patmore and Burns met'. He was taken into an office and introduced to three men. It was obvious that they held no hope that this stranger could succeed where prison officers, chaplains, psychiatrists, lawyers, and several prison visitors had failed.

"Has he been told Patmore's dead?" Dennis hadn't tried to decide how best to tackle the man.

"These days he's simply left alone. No one tries to get a word out of him."

"He never speaks with other inmates?"

"No. A couple have tried to give him a hard time over the years but he simply ignores them."

"No violence?"

"No."

Dennis was escorted to a small room for visitors after they'd taken his luggage to store in the office. A couple of minutes later they escorted a man in. Dennis, from Burns' description and from Gow's information that Gorringe had grown up in institutions, had wondered if Gorringe could have been an Aboriginal child removed from his family. After all, he was now in his fifties and kids were still being removed in the 1960s. But the man who came in, large but unhealthy-looking with lank black hair, had curious light amber eyes and his face with its sharp planes and angles vaguely hinted at some eastern European ancestry.

Gorringe sat down but didn't look at Walsh. After a minute's silence, Dennis said, "You know Robin Patmore's dead? He was killed in Queensland and his body burnt. So if he's been bothering you, well, you never need to worry any more."

Gorringe turned and seemed to briefly study Dennis then his eyes shifted away and he whispered, "Dead?"

"Dead as a doornail." Dennis sounded quite cheerful.

He let another long silence grow, not least because he hadn't decided whether to go straight on to the missing children or just talk more about Patmore.

"How?" It was still a whisper.

"I'm a cop from Buckton in Queensland. You probably never heard of it but it's out in the country. I much prefer the country to the city. This place is a madhouse."

Gorringe ducked his head slightly.

"Anyway, Patmore and a bloke called Dave Burns were in a campervan and parked by a creek, and Burns got fed up with Patmore wanting to go out and grab some other little kid, like he did down here in New South Wales, so he whacked him and burnt the body. So that's the end of Robin Patmore. Did you like Patmore?"

Gorringe mouthed something which Dennis couldn't guess at then his eyes grew moist. Dennis sat there not looking at Gorringe and waited in vague hope. "Said … said … said he liked me."

"So you liked him?" Dennis thought that Gorringe probably hadn't received much love or even liking in his life. If Patmore had said he liked him that had probably made Gorringe his slave for life.

Again that little duck of the head. When Dennis turned back and looked at Gorringe it was to see his eyes were wet with unshed tears. "Said … he said … mustn't talk or they'd give him a hard time … little guy … hard on little guys … he said … " He seemed to give up the effort to describe anything.

Dennis nodded. A kind of twisted loyalty. But according to Gow Patmore had survived his years in prison by his expertise in making the tough guys feel good. After another silence Dennis said, "You and Robin grabbed other little boys. We need to find those other little boys so their parents can know what happened."

Gorringe didn't seem impressed by this reasoning. Dennis finally went on, "Yeah, I know you didn't get to have parents who wanted you back, did you, or maybe they did and someone else, some lousy bugger, stepped in and took you away. But we need to find those kids. So you're going to have to help us find them."

Gorringe shook his head slightly.

"You remember where you put them so you'll need to show us where because we're the idiots that don't know where they are."

This got no response from Gorringe.

Dennis sat there in silence. Normally he could wait out recalcitrant suspects. But this man had got silence down to a fine art. And he had nothing and no one waiting for him. After a while Dennis said, "If I can get them to let you out for a while can you take us to where the kids are?"

Another long silence.

"It'd be nice to get away from this bloody place, be out in the fresh air with the sun shining and no one bothering us."

Dennis was talking for himself but to his surprise Gorringe nodded. "Can you," he said in another whisper.

"D'you remember the kids? There was a Billy Woodburn and a Sammy Klein and a Jonnie Shaw. All little boys of about seven."

"Nah. Jonnie was more." Still that whisper. "Wouldn't admit it, no matter what Robin did. Broke his fingers, still said he was seven. Big big liar."

"No, he was seven. Must've been big for his age. Like you."

Gorringe seemed to slowly process this. It seemed to upset him. "He wasn't lying?"

"No, he wasn't lying."

A peculiar expression came over Gorringe's face as though a settled fact had suddenly been undermined and he didn't know what to think. He rubbed his moist eyes. "You wanta find Jonnie?" Still a whisper. Dennis felt fairly sure it was Patmore he was grieving for, if this was grief rather than self-pity, not the little boy.

"Yep. We want to find Jonnie. And Sammy and Billy."

There was another long silence then Gorringe whispered, "Dunno if I can find him now." He tapped his forehead. "Not without Robin."

"But you're prepared to try?"

"He wasn't lying? Jonnie?" He pressed a hand to his chest as though something was hurting him. "Robin said … Robin knew … "

"He wasn't lying."

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It was one thing to have a tentative agreement from Gorringe to try and remember. And quite another to have to try to convince key peple in Corrective Services to let Gorringe out. Dennis offered to have him handcuffed to him. He said he would make himself responsible for Gorringe's good behaviour. Neither argument worked. "He'll get a trip around the countryside and he won't give us anything. Moron like him's probably forgotten or wiped it out anyway."

"Maybe. But any description we're going to worm out of him, like 'near a creek', isn't going to help. We need to take him there and see if that brings back memories."

He could go on arguing but he was reluctant to do so. There was absolutely no guarantee that they'd get anything from Gorringe if they took him out to central western NSW. "Up to you. If you're not prepared to try anything, I'll be on the next plane home." He got up.

It seemed to be the catalyst. The obvious fear that Gorringe would speak to no one else would send them back to Square One. Or perhaps Square Two, considering his apparent admission about the little Shaw boy. Walsh, though, thought that it was knowing Patmore was dead which had loosened Gorringe's tongue. He didn't know enough to try and unravel their relationship. Loyalty? Fear? Love? Shared guilt?

"If the Governor okays it, we'll get him out soon's we can arrange transport and security." This seemed to be a step forward though Dennis could see the prison director putting forward the same arguments his minions had.

"Tell him I'm keen to get home."

"To Hicksville? Sure."

Dennis gave the officer a long considering look which seemed to disconcert him but there didn't seem to be anything more to do but wait. He picked up his luggage and went to book into the motel one of the officers said was "okay". He rang first Greg and then Fiona to say that Gorringe had talked to him but he couldn't guarantee that it would go anywhere.

"Did he admit anything?" Greg said immediately. It had worried him, Winville apparently taking the things Dave Burns said as gospel truth.

"Admitted that they killed Jonnie Shaw apparently because he wouldn't admit he was older than seven."

"Well, that's something. But I still don't trust Burns and the things he told us."

"Doesn't matter. Not at this stage." He rang off. Greg felt like saying to his wife, "Fine for him to say it doesn't matter" but it seemed to be too much trouble to explain. And he wasn't sure why Dennis didn't think it mattered.

*

"Yes, take them for a run around the state," the Director said drily. "And let's just hope the taxpayers never find out we let prisoners out for little jaunts." The likelihood that it would achieve anything struck him as grasping at straws. Gorringe had never been any actual trouble but neither had he ever co-operated with anything.

Dennis Walsh was not privy to any of the arrangements. But he was dubious about them locking Gorringe in the back of a prison van. He thought it could be much better to let him see the countryside passing and start to get a feel for it after more than a decade inside four walls. He was offered a seat in the back of a car with a security guard and a police officer up front. In a way he was glad to be able to simply sit and watch the scenery as he'd never been over the Blue Mountains and could only guess that the western plains were similar to the Darling Downs and points west.

They had left Jonnie Shaw to last. This had been Dennis's suggestion for the simple reason they knew or had a very good idea where Billy Woodburn had disappeared. His parents had originally given a detailed statement to police. Billy normally took his cattle dog bitch with him when he went down the gully but she had just had four pups so he had gone without her and perhaps gone further than the main stretch of water where he usually went, down to the road or near it where there was another pool under the bridge. They knew when and where he had disappeared within a radius of about a hundred metres.

"Somewhere here," Dennis came over to Gorringe who was looking round with puzzled eyes. "Little boy called Billy. They found the bucket he'd brought with him and a string with some meat tied on to it. So where did you take him?"

Gorringe stood there looking round the countryside as though he had forgotten what grass and sky and sun were. At last he gave a small gesture towards the way they'd come.

"Back this way?"

Gorringe nodded. "Okay, you'd best come in the car with me and tell us where to stop."

It was a strange experience sitting with a man who kept swiveling his head as though trying to bring back something buried and forgotten. But after some miles he said suddenly in his strange whispering voice, "There."

"By that creek?"

A little nod. It was a risk to let the man out to wander along the creek bank beyond a layby and among a slim fringe of gums but Dennis thought Gorringe had been inactive for too long to be able to outrun the younger security men. As the man walked he seemed to be assessing the trees as though he might recognise one of them. He finally stopped and turned round and said, "There." He sat down on the rough bank and put his head in his hands.

Dennis came over and looked around before saying to the constable who had joined him, "There, you can see the bit of subsidence. That'd be your best bet."

"Should we get the Forensics people?"

"No, just do a bit of careful digging to see if there's anything there." It was always possible that it was natural subsidence or that an animal had pulled the body out and taken it away. The young man, unenthusiastically, perhaps seeing criticism down the road, came back

with a short-handled spade and began to ease it in. Fortunately the soil here was not hard-packed. Dennis wondered if this gully had flooded since Patmore and Gorringe had possibly been here. But it was worth a try. Gorringe stood there staring at the place as though he could see something the others couldn't see. The security guards and the sergeant came over to join them.

After about half-an-hour, Constable Dillon leant forward and lifted something out. He sounded surprised as he said, "I think it might be a finger." He tried to brush the earth from the object.

"No, leave it." Sergeant Grose took it carefully from him and placed it in a bag. "We'll need to get the experts in, see if there's anything more there."

He turned back to Dennis. "Let's hope it's human. But it's out of our hands now."

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Maybe that was the easy part, Walsh thought, when they headed away from the town of Parkes mid-morning next day. Dillon had told him about the Elvis festival but Dennis could only hope that Gorringe really did remember where they'd put little Sammy Klein and whether the makeshift grave remained undisturbed. He wasn't interested in celebrating the life of Elvis Presley.

It turned into a long day with Gorringe whispering something about 'along the road' but 'the road' was hardly a precise location. Gorringe said they'd buried a kid beside the road and put down two planks over him. He and Dennis walked for hours not finding any planks. The road was deserted for much of the time as they walked along the gravel verge looking down into the dry grass of the slight ditch beside the road. Maybe they were in the wrong place. Maybe the planks had rotted away or someone had moved them for some reason. Maybe Gorringe had got it mixed with another burial …

The day clouded over. A sharp wind got up. Grose came up to them sometime after 3 pm and said, "Do you want to call it a day?"

"No. We'll keep going." He had tried to get Gorringe to link the spot with somewhere on the landscape, a tree, a sign, a shed, a gate, anything which might help, but Gorringe had only kept whispering "two planks".

It was gone four o'clock when Dennis said, "What's that down there?"

It looked like a piece of timber at the bottom of the shallow ditch.

Gorringe turned to him and said with the first sign of animation Dennis had seen, "I did good, didn't I? Two planks."

It might be closing the net of guilt tighter around him but Walsh could only think 'Thank God' because he had not been looking forward to another day walking with Gorringe. But it was too soon to get any hopes up. The timber might've fallen from a truck years ago. It could've been there for decades. But the men went down and lifted it out of the way and brought the small spade. It was getting cold and dark by the time they gave up for the day.

"So what's the plan for tomorrow?" Dennis said as they drove back to Parkes for the night.

"We'll get the professionals in. You and that bastard can go on to Cowra, see if he remembers anything there." The scepticism which had been very evident at the beginning of the exercise was slowly changing. Whether or not they managed to find the three boys they would still come out of it with something. It would make everyone involved look good. Because they all knew that despite the vigorous initial searches no one had ever linked the cases or sought a common denominator and no one had ever said 'If Patmore and Gorringe could abduct and kill a kid near Bathurst then could they have been involved in these other disappearances?' The disappearances were spread over a wide area but for two men willing to travel widely for itinerant work that wasn't really an issue.

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Dennis knew nothing about Cowra except that some Japanese had been interred there in World War 2 and had broken out of the camp. So he just hoped that Gorringe knew more and remembered more. But they immediately ran into a problem. The town had spread out with some new houses built along the road where Gorringe thought they had come.

"You mean—the poor bloody kid's under a house?" Dennis said grimly. But surely he would have been found when builders were working on the foundations of these houses. Then he cancelled that hope. They wouldn't have dug up the whole area, just the places where they'd built this row of new houses, and maybe to put in fences and garages. The body of a young boy could easily have been missed.

But after wandering round for nearly an hour, Gorringe whispered, "Think it was near a culvert."

"You think. Well, take your time." They had crossed several culverts in their walk away from the edge of town. "Look for something, trees, gullies, anything. Which side of the road were you on?"

Gorringe waved an arm in a slight gesture.

"Okay, this side. How far d'you think you were from the nearest … buildings?"

It didn't seem to get them very far. They left the road at the next culvert and waded through dry grass. "Were they actually working on the culvert then?" Disturbed soil would have made burial easier, if they were in a hurry, but slightly more likely to be found.

"Road work. Yeah. Road work."

It might be possible to check records for anything being done back there. The men on bulldozers or trucks might remember when they were here and if they'd ever noticed anything. A smell. A rock moved. Anything.

Dennis was getting tired of the tramp through the verges and his socks were prickly with grass seeds when Gorringe said, "Dunno. Was a rock, I think. Maybe it was a stump. Dunno. Robin was getting … "

"Getting what?"

"Wanted to be gone."

"So the boy maybe wasn't buried properly?"

"Dunno. We put something on top."

"So we need to mark every possible thing you might of used?"

"Dunno."

"Did you bury him at night?"

"Nah. Day."

This struck Dennis as flirting with danger but perhaps that was part of the attraction. A kind of brinkmanship. But if it was light there was still a chance Gorringe would recognise something. One of the security guards caught up with them as it was growing dark and said they needed to get Gorringe banged up for the night. Dennis agreed. They hadn't managed to pinpoint a likely spot. But by asking round local police just might get someone who remembered seeing or hearing something useful.

"Barring some info, maybe try for a cadaver dog."

"Do you trust Gorringe's memory?"

"No. And I think maybe we're still too close to the town. If they were driving around for a while with the little boy they probably went out of town a way. Try him again tomorrow. Just being here might spark something."

As he wrote up his notes for the day Dennis felt deeply drained; it wasn't just the sense that he hadn't achieved anything, he thought it also had something to do with being in Gorringe's company. When he sat down to dinner with the two security guards they said, "Why d'you reckon he talked to you and not to anyone else?"

"The two men should've been separated right from the start. Different jails. Don't think Gorringe was ever going to speak while he saw Patmore every day. They could pretend to themselves—and everyone else—that one kid had died accidentally but if Gorringe started talking about the other kids then there was no way either was ever going to get any sympathy."

"You mean, people were sympathetic to Patmore because they thought he'd been carried along by Gorringe. But if there were four kids it would start to look like two killers on a long spree?"

"Something like that. I think Gorringe would of started to talk if they'd convinced him Patmore was dead. So nothing he could say would have any impact on his partner."

"They said Patmore was scared of him. But maybe it was the other way around?"

"I don't know anything about the institutions Gorringe was stuck in as a kid but they were mostly tough on the kids and then they used to just open the door when you got to about eighteen and let you out, no support, no help in getting into a job or learning how to deal with things. Gorringe strikes me as someone who never really grew up. He learnt to do enough to get by but that was about it. Then this clever kid comes along and tells him he's a great guy and they're going to have lots o' fun. So Gorringe thought Patmore was the best thing since sliced bread. Yeah, something like that. So he wasn't going to do or say anything to dob Patmore in."

*

The next day was equally frustrating. Dennis had the feeling he had investigated more culverts than he'd ever seen in his life. They had widened their search. Gorringe thought that from Cowra they had made their way towards Bathurst all those years ago but he wasn't sure. "I wanted to see the cars," he told Dennis as they stood by yet another culvert.

"But Robin didn't?"

Gorringe shook his head sadly. But as they hadn't been there at the time of the Bathurst One Thousand maybe there wouldn't have been any racing out at Mount Panorama anyway. "So you took another kid?"

Gorringe agreed without showing any remorse or regret. It probably wasn't provable but for someone who had grown up the hard way there was probably no genuine sympathy and maybe some envy or resentment for kids who'd apparently had happy childhoods. He had noticed Gorringe sort of mentally draw back as soon as he had mentioned trying to find the other missing boys. He wasn't here for the sake of the boys. Dennis wondered if he hoped that some benefit would accrue to him. Or was it simply the chance to be away from jail for a few days. For someone who apparently hadn't had a visitor in more than ten years it probably had some novelty value. There was something immature, even childish, about the man which probably made him think of this as an unexpected treat.

Dennis finally said to him, in the hope that it was time away from prison that was the chief pleasure in this trip, "Seeing you can't or won't help us it's back to Long Bay for you, mate."

Gorringe seemed to consider this in silence then he said suddenly in a whisper in Dennis's ear, "Was a tree near." He mimed a tree with long drooping branches.

"A willow?"

Gorringe gave a slight nod. Willows were now often seen as nuisance trees near watercourses but someone might remember one. When they packed up for the evening, Dennis passed this on "for what it's worth". He had desperately wanted little Jonnie Shaw found but it would have to be left for other people to do the finding. He had done his best and he had tired legs to prove it.

But police in Cowra had been energised by having Gorringe there. It had to be possible to find the missing boy with these vague clues about the burial on the one hand and

the knowledge that Patmore and Gorringe had been here and might still be recorded somewhere. Had they found casual work here? They would like to be able to return the body or what was left of it to the Shaw family but if not they probably now had enough circumstantial evidence to make sure Ross Gorringe never walked free.

"Is it worth keeping him here longer?" Cowra Police did not particularly want to arrange the security to keep Gorringe longer but there was still the tantalising possibility that the man would remember some other little detail.

"I'd say so," Dennis said wearily. "And so far he's been treated like my best buddy. You may have to get tougher with him to get him to see it's not a game."

"You don't think he's been taking it very seriously?"

"Nope. He doesn't care whether you find the kids or not. But a trip in the country is a novelty. If he wants to stay here, and maybe you should look to hold him in a jail other than Long Bay, then he's got to get serious about helping you."

"But why would he want to stay here?"

"Country kid. You could see he liked being out in the sun and fresh air by the creek on that first day. He's spent twelve years looking at walls."

He wasn't sure if he had convinced them but he found next morning that he was to go back to Sydney with the security guard he'd come up with while they kept Gorringe another day or two in custody. He accepted the arrangement. It felt a bit like going away from a half-finished job but the Sergeant Garland who saw him off said, "They've found skeletons from those other places, we heard this morning that they're definitely human though they might not be the missing boys."

"Well, that's something." Dennis sounded non-committal but inside he felt a sudden sense of satisfaction. Even if by any chance it wasn't those boys it would lead on to 'something'. Garland shook hands and Dennis got back in the car for the long drive back to Sydney.

Case No. 4: A Drive in the City

As nobody seemed to have any more use for Senior Sergeant Walsh, if anything there was a feeling that he was an embarrassment showing up more professional officers, Dennis thought he would just go the following morning and try and talk with David Burns' family or at least his mother. He could track down the father but he thought the mother was more likely to tell him something about Burns' childhood.

He had left it with Sullivan and his team to decide whether they wanted to query anything about Burns' conviction for assault. But surely the mother would want to know, if not to help, her son in his predicament? Of course, if the father was a domestic tyrant then the mother might be too afraid to speak. He asked at the motel what was the best way to get to the Burns' family home. The mother, with her children grown up, might now be working full or part time in which case he thought he might try around the neighbourhood for a bit of gossip.

It was a neat and substantial brick house sprawling over a big block with shrubs in the front yard clipped to various shapes. The garage door was closed. But there was a glimpse of washing on a back yard hoist. Walsh went up to the front door and pressed the bell. He thought he could hear the faint whine of a vacuum-cleaner so unless they ran to some kind of help it suggested Mrs Burns was at home.

The front door opened and a woman stood there. But the minute she saw a large man in uniform her hand went to her mouth and she said, "Is it—my husband?"

"No. You're Mrs Burns?" She nodded. "Mother of David Burns?"

"Oh dear, is he in more trouble?"

"I'm Sergeant Walsh from Buckton in Queensland. Can I come in for a moment?"

She opened the door wider and waved him in. "But if Dave is in trouble we don't want to know about it. He has already shamed my husband by going to jail here." Dennis thought it was odd that she was only suggesting her husband was ashamed. Though she had big brown eyes she was a faded rather apathetic woman, at least at first meeting.

"Yep, he's in trouble so he needs some family support."

"Oh no, we can't do that. He's made his bed, he has to lie in it." Dennis wondered if this was more of her husband's 'wisdom'.

"Well, tell me a bit about David."

"There isn't much to tell." She went over and sat down in a brown leather armchair and waved him to another chair. "He was a premmie baby. That must be why he was never a bright boy. Kyle, my husband, is a really really clever man. It was so hard for him to have a son that never did any good at school. We tried, we really did, we pushed him, we made sure he really worked at his homework, we thought of getting extra tutoring for him but Kyle, that's my husband, finally decided it was a waste of time and better to spend that bit extra on the other boys because they would get somewhere. It wasn't David's fault, really, though Kyle, my husband, did think he wasn't even trying sometimes."

"So the day, or the evening, when he was supposedly out somewhere bashing an old pensioner, he wasn't, was he? Was he at home with you?"

"What date was that?" He was surprised that she would not know. He told her and she said, "That was my birthday so I'm sure he was here. I had a cake, yes, and other things." For the first time a bit of animation came into her lifeless voice.

"So you think he would've been here? Would you be prepared to do a statement to that effect?"

"Oh no, I don't think so. Dave has done his time, it's all in the past now."

"Not if he was wrongly convicted."

She gave him a searching look then shook her head. "My husband was so upset by his behaviour, he's not going to change the things he said then."

"It doesn't bother you that a wrong was done to your son?"

"Oh no, Sergeant, you've got that all wrong. He was out with a gang. I mean he wasn't out when he was here for my birthday but most of the time, my husband was so angry that a son of his could behave like that."

"Was your husband ever violent towards your son?"

She stared at him. Then she said, apparently affronted by the question, "Of course he wasn't. Kyle, that's my husband, is a top police officer. He really knows what the law says, and he knows what kind of discipline a boy needs. You can't come in here and say things like that."

"So you don't want to do anything for your son?"

"If he's got himself into more trouble then it's up to him to take the consequences. That's life, Mr Walsh."

"Maybe it is. So just a couple more things before I go. The court has asked that Dave be physically and mentally evaluated so can you give me the name of your doctor."

She looked dubious but said, "Dr Treece. Here at the Medical Centre."

"And did your son ever need to go to hospital?"

"I don't think so. Oh yes, I think he went once to Westmead Hospital."

"Why was that?"

"I think he had an accident."

"You think? You mean your husband was being too hard on him?"

"Oh no! That is a terrible thing to say! Kyle, my husband, knows more about what boys like David need than anyone else I know."

"Does he?" He got up. "Well, if you change your mind and decide to act like normal decent parents and help your son, he's at the Watch House in Winville."

She didn't respond to this and he simply turned and walked out. Out on the street he began walking in the vague direction she had indicated for the Medical Centre. The whole thing was very strange. She had never even asked why David was in trouble. That struck him as odd but then the whole brief meeting was odd. Why did she keep telling him her husband was Kyle. And why hadn't she appreciated the importance of what she had said about her birthday.

Was she afraid of her husband or merely a very submissive wife, brought up to put the man up on a pedestal. She gave him an uneasy feeling. But he walked briskly and then asked a passer-by for directions. Doctor Treece was on the list of names at the front of the building and he went in. Dr Treece had a waiting room with three women in it, one with a young child, and a middleaged receptionist/nurse who immediately said she couldn't give out any confidential details of a patient.

"David Burns is up on a murder charge in Queensland. The court wants his physical and mental state evaluated. I need to know why his parents brought him to you."

Of course he probably was taken to a doctor for immunizations and childish ailments but he felt sure there would be more than that. But the firm woman at the desk was not going to be moved to get out any records. "In that case, I'll sit down here and wait till I can see Dr Treece." And he suited his words, sitting down and looking round the small waiting room. Mrs Teasdale had never come up against a Dennis Walsh before but she intuited that he probably would sit there until she either gave him the information he wanted or sent him in to see the doctor.

When the current patient came out she said to the next waiting patient, "Would you mind if the police just had a quick meeting with Dr Treece? It won't take long." In thought she added 'I hope'. She opened the door into the doctor's consulting room and said, "The police, Doctor."

Dr Treece was in his sixties. He had a rotund cheerful look as he waved Walsh to a chair. "So how can I help you, Sergeant?"

"Sergeant Walsh from Buckton in Queensland. I'd like you to tell me why David Burns visited you over the years. He is in custody in Queensland for murder."

Dr Treece looked rather startled. "Murder? Young David? Well, I know he's been in trouble but that's … well, he was an accident-prone child, very clumsy, came in with a broken arm from falling down the stairs at home, dropped something on his feet, all bruised, and he got hit by a car, I remember, ran out on to the road, not serious but some nasty bruises. Not the brightest button in the drawer, young Dave, and I told him to be more careful, to think before he did things."

"What did his parents say happened when he broke his arm?"

"His mother said he'd been running round and didn't look and fell down the steps." Dennis had been making notes as the doctor spoke. Now he said, "Odd, there's no steps at their house."

"Well, maybe it was a friend's house or he was playing with local kids. I may have misunderstood his mother."

"You didn't query anything?"

"No. And I don't like your aspersions. His father is a senior police officer. A very well-known man round here."

"Well, we'll probably have to subpoena your records but that'll do for the moment."

Walsh looked at his watch and got up. He wasn't sure where the hospital was but presumably a taxi driver would know. He had no intention of asking Dr Treece.

The feeling of oppression grew on him as he got dropped off at the front of the hospital and went in. A youngish Asian woman was at the front counter and he introduced himself and explained that he needed to know if a David Robert Burns had ever been treated here. She didn't say anything about patient confidentiality but said she would check their records. She appeared to think that he wouldn't be asking if it wasn't important.

"Yes. He was treated as an outpatient and he also was here for three days. Yes, he suffered burns and I see he was also treated for a badly-cut leg. Would you like a copy of his records?"

"Thanks. That would save us having to subpoena them. Did he ever see a social worker or anyone from Child Protection?"

"There's nothing listed. Why do you think he should have seen someone?" She looked a little nervous as though she thought he was accusing her personally of a dereliction of duty.

"He was also taken to the family doctor with a broken arm and severe bruising. There's a good chance he was being abused at home."

She nodded cautiously. She had only been here six months and all the visits were well before then. "Would you like to discuss it with someone from the Child Protection Unit?"

"If there's someone handy."

He got to share his suspicions with an older woman who seemed sympathetic until she realised Burns' father was a senior police officer. "Are you accusing his father of abuse, Sergeant Walsh?"

"I am suggesting that the medical history of David Burns should be thoroughly investigated." He continued to explain why he thought she should be suspicious.

"Children do have accidents, Sergeant Walsh, and we do have a large caseload. Mr Burns is now an adult. So we would need more than your say-so and more than the records we have here. Why are you so sure Mr Burns was a victim of abuse?"

"David Burns told police while he was under hypnosis that he was regularly abused by his father."

"Hypnosis is unreliable, Sergeant. A person can be led into saying something. It has to be recorded and carried out under rigorously controlled conditions."

"He was being questioned by police in regard to information he might have about crimes committed by two other men. The information about abuse suddenly came out. Queensland Police are now following it up." He wasn't sure that Winville had made looking into Burns' childhood or previous jail time a priority. But he trusted they would get there before Burns came up in court.

She seemed to retreat slightly and said, "Well, I will look into it."

"Then can you contact DSS Greg Sullivan in Winville CIB with anything you find." He gave her his card with Greg's number on the back.

As he went out he had the feeling that fishing was an exhausting occupation. And had no one had the slightest suspicion about a boy's injuries? Maybe Dave Burns *was* accident-prone but surely a good family GP would do more than simply write a child off as accident-prone? And what of Gaynor Burns? Was she so afraid, or so in thrall to her husband that she could tell bare-faced lies to that GP instead of wanting to protect her child? 'It isn't my business from here on, but surely someone could have prevented the whole bloody mess?' And all the time he sat in the plane he continued to go over and over things.

He tried to pin down why he was sympathetic to David Burns. Just the kid alone or because Andrew McLaren liked him and he respected McLaren's views? But it came to him eventually that the kid reminded him of Russell Tripp. Russ was slow but despite being teased by some other kids he had found a job, found himself a nice wife and now had a baby daughter. And there was another key difference in the two lives. Even if his family had

occasionally got impatient with him they had never stopped loving him. And from there he went on to Gaynor Burns. He found her a difficult person to try and understand. It was a nice house, expensive furniture, not a suburb with harbour views but surrounded by other solid brick houses. So the Burns family weren't just scraping by. And then he wondered if he had asked the right questions. Were there things he should've seen and hadn't …

The relief of seeing Fiona waiting for him, Fiona in a bright red-and-white Fair Isle cardigan and grey slacks, but even the relief couldn't dispel the bleak sense of depression which had gradually enveloped him. He didn't feel like talking about anything and just said to her when he'd stowed his bag, "You talk."

She was slightly dismayed by his mood. He had seemed upbeat about finding some likely skeletons when he'd rung a few nights ago. But she understood. This was Dennis. She said briskly, "We've been busy. Elise and Rob want to go out to see Justin and his horse at Harry Kuhl's on Saturday. Ellie tells me she has entered for 'everything' at the Buckton Show so I suppose the poor pony will be worn out by the end of the day. And there was apparently a big argument or something in the pub when Lynnell came in and yelled at Glen Archer that she was going to make Ben's life a misery because he took Shona away somewhere. I don't know what she has in mind. And Ellie says she has started writing a new book." Elise had written a book about a girl and a pony, a very sophisticated book for an eight-year-old and Fiona had sent copies to the grandparents. Elise had realised when she saw her mother's book in the shops that she still had a long way to go. And when she saw her mother starting on her second financial thriller she had seen that she needed to start her second book too. She had taken home every astronomy book she could find in their local library and at school but whether that would inspire a story … "Julie asked Rob if he would like to be a library monitor. He was a bit reluctant but finally said he could. I told him it would be exciting but I'm not sure if he really believed me."

No, Rob wasn't the sort of voracious reader his sister was. He liked books with animals in them but didn't specially seek them out.

Dennis dropped his bag in the bedroom then went over to the station to see what had been happening. Both Archer and Waters were there. "Everything okay?" They said it had been fairly quiet. "No trouble with Mrs Morton?"

"Not so far." Dennis nodded and went out again. He knew they were both curious but he didn't feel like talking. Elise and Rob were coming home from school when he walked out of the station. He made the effort to be cheerful with them as they walked back together. He told them their racehorse was running on Saturday and Ellie immediately said, "But we're going to see Justin ride his buckjumper on Saturday. Couldn't you come with us, Dada?"

It was a relief to talk about horses but he knew Winville would be wanting to know what went on down south and he was still struggling to process it all but he would finish up the bare bones of his report and they would have to be content with that. And in a way it was like a bridge across this black abyss of bleak thoughts, this need to get work finished. And he owed it to Fiona to try and tell her … tell her …

Late in the evening she came and sat down beside him and put on some soft music. After a couple of minutes of silence he said gloomily, "What a mess. But I s'pose something useful'll come out of it, don't know what."

"But that man did talk to you. That must be something."

"After being handcuffed to that creepy bastard because they thought he'd do a runner … s'pose he had a miserable childhood but he was like something empty … nothing there … no remorse, no sympathy, maybe he didn't kill those kids but he didn't really care … they were kids with happy families and nice toys and I don't reckon he cared a jot what Patmore did to them. It was Patmore he was a bit sad about. And Mrs Burns … she was sort of creepy too but I can't work her out, she might be frightened of her husband but it was like she had

him up on some pedestal, like he could do no wrong, and I reckon she just stood by and let him abuse their son because she'd told herself he knew best. She kept telling me how clever her husband was and how Dave was a premmie baby, like that explained everything. I'm sure he was getting abused, not just the occasional whack but broken bones and burns and cuts."

Fiona hoped he had misunderstood something … and some children did get themselves into continuous scrapes …

"What would you do if you saw me abusing the kids?" he said rather brusquely.

"Mmmm … I think I'd wait till you were asleep then I'd press down gently on your carotid arteries until you expired and then if they didn't accept it as a natural death I'd say I'd had a horrible nightmare and must have done something in my sleep. I would be very remorseful and you would be very dead. Problem solved."

Dennis gave that a reluctant grin. "Should I be scared?"

"I think you need a good long sleep with no interruptions." She thought he still looked rather tired and down in the dumps.

"A good long sleep might mean something else, like a coffin."

Fiona smiled at that, glad that he could manage a whisper of a joke.

*

Glen Archer occasionally enjoyed a day at the races and a flutter—and more so now that his current girlfriend had a member of the Winville Racing Club for her dad. When Dennis said he couldn't make Winville on Saturday and would Glen like to do the honours if … He liked the idea of leading in Dennis's horse if it won in Winville on Saturday. But after Dennis had said he would let Dave Hickman know that Glen would be there if … yes, if … Hans should win … and after Dennis had gone out again Glen turned to Ben Waters and said, "What's the name of Dennis's horse? I've forgotten."

"Hansom Days."

"Of course." He considered Ben and wondered what Lynnell Morton might be cooking up as 'trouble' for him. But he would be gone back to Winville and Dennis could probably handle the woman. And he would be glad not to have to work with Ben any more. There seemed to be a lot of things Ben didn't approve of. It didn't occur to him that his colleague's strict beliefs would be his best defence against the insinuations of a woman like Lynnell Morton who had years ago accused Dennis Walsh of raping her daughter Tara. Any claim that Waters had been fooling round with Shona Webb would get no traction in Buckton. Though if Mrs Morton knew Waters was dating Jenny Applegarth she might well try to break that romance up with her insinuations.

And to Glen Archer's delight Hans ran his usual game race to get home by a nose. Glen felt a secret thrill as he led the horse in and knew that his potential father-in-law was there, watching. And there was his betting slip in his pocket which would net him a hundred dollars. But when he went into the station on Monday and Jake Moss said, "So what did Walsh have to say about Sydney and the search for those missing kids?" Glen could only look rather blank and say, "I didn't actually ask him."

*

It wasn't hard to see why young Justin Castley wanted them to see what he had done with his 'buckjumper'. The horse he called Kenny was still no oil painting but his feet were well trimmed, his coat, just starting to get woolly for winter, shone, his mane and tail were neat, and Justin had borrowed the electric clippers from Mrs Burkett to trim his fetlocks and under his chin so he looked less like a cart horse. And the work he had done on lunging him had made the horse begin to flex his neck so that it looked less of a ewe neck.

"Not bad at all," Dennis said after he'd looked him over. "And what's he like to ride now? Any pig roots?"

"No. Nothing at all."

"So I wonder what they did to spark him off?"

But Justin couldn't guess at other people's actions. He saddled him up and rode round the yard then went out into Harry Kuhl's small paddock and cantered him in a couple of circles. The Walsh children always loved coming out to Harry's farm, just as they loved visiting his cousin Chris Kuhl's farm. Both men seemed to have an affinity for animals, and certainly for animals needing special care. Part of Harry's menagerie, a donkey, two old ponies, a nanny goat, and his pet fox all watched on with interest as Justin showed them what his horse could do.

As the children stood round and watched Justin unsaddle, Dennis and Fiona went over to the house with Harry for a cup of tea. When they were out of earshot Dennis said, "So what's happening next door?"

"Y'know Justin was there when that bloke came out from Toowoomba to see Peter?"

"No. What was that about?"

"Bloke from *The Chronicle*. Seems he thinks Barry Woodbridge is a crook, Justin didn't understand it all, but Peter got suspicious so someone came round and bashed him, don't think he knew who it was, but he thinks Woodbridge swops horses around."

"Could be."

"And then Pete got bashed again. Don't know if that was more of the same."

"No. Think that was Peter Robey, thought Darcy was carrying on with his wife."

Fiona had been surprised to find Harry's house was quite neat and clean and the mugs didn't need a second washing. She had her suspicions of old bachelors, some old bachelors. "I've heard that Marita Robey plans to leave him when the children have finished school."

"He's got a woman he goes to see over at Norwilla, don't know how serious that is. But I reckon he's one of those blokes that don't mind to play around but don't want their wives doing the same thing."

"But—do you think Mr Darcy is safe? Might he get attacked … if not by Peter Robey then by someone about the horses?"

Harry Kuhl didn't know a lot about racing but he said, "I s'pose it's up to the stewards to check things out. They're s'posed to keep racing clean."

"The trouble is—if this's been going on for years—they're going to look very bad. So does Justin like going over there to do some ploughing?"

"Yeah, he does. He and Pete seem to get along. But then Pete's the silent type, don't think he expects Justin to talk all the time. Though he is getting better, think it's having the horse has made him more … y'know, he likes to talk about Kenny, when he gets going he gets quite chatty."

It was hard to think of Harry Kuhl as devious in the way that putting a spy into the 'enemy' camp suggested but undoubtedly Harry was curious to know what went on next door. And it didn't answer all Walsh's questions about the women who'd come to see Peter Darcy, the nature of any possible ring-ins, why he would say he hadn't been attacked, whether he really had been going over and vandalising Peter Robey's mailboxes, but he thought he could probably leave things to be sorted out by other people. He assumed that 'the bloke from *The Chronicle*' was Chris Weaver and he thought that regardless of whether Weaver was just after a story or whether he cared passionately about making racing squeaky clean he was likely to follow through and finally get some things properly checked out.

The back door opened and Justin and Elise and Rob came in with Benny the fox trotting at their heels. They immediately eyed the packet of biscuits Harry had put on the table. But Elise said cheerfully, "He's really like a different horse from the one we found on the road, isn't he, Dada?"

"He certainly is." He thought back to the animal they had rescued. Skin and bone, long cracked hoofs, a tangled burry mane and tail. "Justin has done wonders with him." Long

after the Walsh family had left and Justin had gone back to the vet surgery to feed and bed down their current lot of patients the words stayed with him, ‘done wonders’, and he found himself saying them over and over in his mind.

*

A couple of days later Dennis had an unexpected call. A woman introduced herself as Adele Woodburn and said she was ringing to thank him. Police there had identified the skeleton buried by the creek as their son Billy. Dennis said, “Well, that’s sort of good news. I’m glad they could get something definite for you.”

“Yes, we’re very grateful. Now we can give Billy a proper burial. But my husband also has something he would like to talk to you about.” She handed the phone over and a deep voice said, “Pat Woodburn here, Sergeant Walsh. The thing is, we put up a $40,000 reward when Billy went missing. It was all we could come up with. We went and talked to all the neighbours, drove all over the place looking for something, we even went to a psychic.” His voice suggested the desperation which had driven him to do such an unusual thing.

“And what did she say?” As he said it Dennis realised the psychic could as easily have been a ‘he’.

“She said there were two men involved, one large with dark hair, the other smaller with fair hair. She said she was sorry that she couldn’t get anything more for us, she felt sure they were in a vehicle but she couldn’t identify it, possibly grey.”

“Well, she was right as far as she went. Gorringe is large and dark, Patmore smaller with fair hair, and they did at one stage use a grey van.”

“We couldn’t get the police to follow it up.”

“I guess it sounded too vague.” Even so, Dennis thought it might’ve helped.

“The thing is—we’d like you to have the reward.”

“No, sorry. I can’t do that. Just doing my job. Thanks anyway, but the man who gave us the info that led on to the search is the man who killed Patmore. As he is before the court I don’t think he’d be allowed to accept a reward. We’d need to get legal advice on that.”

“Killed Patmore?”

“He said he killed him to stop him abducting any more kids.”

“Well, I’d say ‘good on him’, I wouldn’t want any other family to go through what we’ve been through, but I s’pose I shouldn’t say that.”

“I’d suggest that you talk to Greg Sullivan in Winville who’s in charge of the case, I’ll give you his contact details, but if it was okay with you, I think you could offer David Burns some legal help. I don’t think he’s got a lawyer. Dale Kennedy would probably be willing to offer some legal advice.” Kennedy had been good with someone slow like Billy the Lad, though Billy was slow because of being shot in the head as a kid and Burns … but then if his dad had been hitting him round the head Burns also might’ve suffered brain damage. He gave Woodburn Dale Kennedy’s phone number. “I’ll leave it up to you if you want to do that.”

“Thanks, and when does this—Burns, did you say?—come up in court?”

“The twenty-fifth, in Winville.”

*

Dale Kennedy had had nothing to do with the case, assuming that Burns had help from Legal Aid though he wasn’t sure that the young lawyer there now was coping, but he had heard some of the stories swirling round town and how they’d sent Dennis Walsh to New South Wales to find the missing kids.

He rang Buckton after he’d talked with Legal Aid and been told that although they’d originally suggested Burns plead Not Guilty as a way to get attention to—“but then we suggested he just plead guilty and draw attention to the help he’d given police”—and asked Dennis Walsh if there was anything he should know about Burns.

"Get a copy of his interview with me. There's two other things to follow up. I'm reasonably sure he did three years for an assault he didn't do. And I talked with his GP and the Westmead Children's Hospital in Sydney and I'm reasonably sure he was being abused by his father."

Kennedy asked for more details and also said, "Did the person he assaulted survive?"

"Old man, yep, don't know how much he remembers but you could get the court details."

When Kennedy went into the Watch House and said he'd like to talk to Burns because the Woodburn family had offered to pay him to represent Burns he felt that although 'mitigating circumstances' should be brought up he wanted to come at the case from a different angle.

When Burns came into the small visitors' room with Landy he was carrying a half-grown grey kitten which he tucked into his shirt after he'd taken the chair opposite Kennedy. Dale looked at him surprise before saying, "I'm Dale Kennedy and is that your kitten?"

"Yeah. Sooty."

"Well, that's nice." He went ahead and explained about Billy Woodburn being found and how the family had offered to pay him if Burns would like some legal advice or help. He had decided not to mention the reward money as there seemed no point in letting Burns know what he was missing out on.

"Nah, I done it. I whacked Maddy."

"I know. But why did you do it? That might give us some leverage."

Burns looked a bit blank but finally said, "Because he kept wantin' me to help him grab another kid, like we'd sorta look for a kid out somewhere, an' we'd get him in the van an' I said I fuckin' well wasn't … and he kept on an' on, like it'd be fun, an' I reckon there's no fun in hurting a kid, I got hurt an' I sorta know what it's like but he never let it stop. I sorta knew he'd done it lotsa times before … yeah, so I punched him an' he fell down an' that was it. So I put him under the van, first I was goin' to leave it then I knew they'd find me, so I burnt it an' I sorta went off. It was all I had, that van, but like I said, he was never goin' to hurt another kid so, yeah, I'm sorry but I'm sorta not."

Dale said calmly, "You knew he was responsible for the deaths of at least four other little boys?"

"Yeah, s'pose so, he liked to talk about them, I told the cops an' they sorta said they'd check it, dunno what they did."

"Yes, they followed up and they've found Billy Woodburn's body and another body which hasn't been identified yet."

Burns had spent most of his time looking at the table in front of him but now he looked up. "You're sure?"

"That's what I've been told by Sergeant Walsh."

Burns suddenly clasped both hands together to stop their shaking. "You're not kidding me?"

"No, of course not. So although there is no doubt that you killed Robin Patmore—"

"She was Maddy, Madison Brown, like a girl, y'know."

"Well, let's stick with Patmore seeing that he was Patmore when he was involved in those crimes. You believed he was asking you to help him commit another crime? Is that correct?"

"Yeah, yeah, on an' on an' on, like I didn't like him if I didn't help him."

"You liked him—her—in the beginning?"

"Yeah, sorta cute, an' she liked me, yeah, I dunno when I stopped liking her, like I was jus' there to do what she wanted, not like a friend or anything. In the end … " he looked away to the door, "yeah, it was sorta like I really hated him, cops said I shoulda said

something to them but why should they believe me, an' if I drove away then maybe he'd sorta find someone else to help him, d'you reckon he would, like it was what he wanted to do all the time, hurt kids … "

"Maybe. We can't know for sure. But you can certainly plead provocation. Being asked to help someone commit an offence—well, that's serious. Did you mean to kill Patmore when you punched him?"

"Dunno. Just stop him maybe. It was only one punch, I didn't know I was any good at punching, my dad always said I was the most useless kid at everything he ever knew, like I couldn't tie a shoelace or add two an' two, an' I never punched anyone before."

"Did you hope to destroy the body so it wouldn't be recognised?"

"Dunno. Just the van, I shoulda taken the plates off an jus' gone but it's like my dad always said, I'm stupid."

"Well, you did a good job of destroying everything," Dale said drily. "Police couldn't identify the body or the van."

Burns looked a bit dubious. "But I always felt bad, what I done, y'know."

"The van or Patmore or both."

"Dunno. Like I never hurt anyone before then."

"Not the old man you went to prison for?"

"Nah. But Jelly an' Ned was happy when I said I done it, I knew my dad'd go after me if I ran away from home but he'd sorta … not wanta know if I was in prison."

"So Jelly and Ned got away with a serious assault?"

"Yeah, s'pose they did." This aspect never seemed to have occurred to Burns before this moment. It seemed to buttress the fact that Burns wasn't in the habit of thinking anything through deeply. Yet he gave the impression of always trying to be honest with the things he knew. It was only when he was asked to speculate on more difficult dilemmas that he was all at sea.

"Would you be willing to have me represent you in court using the defence of provocation?"

"But I said I done it an' that's the truth."

"I know. But if we can prove that Robin Patmore was trying to get you to help him commit a serious crime then you may be able to get a lesser sentence."

Burns seemed to chew this over before saying "Okay, but I haven't got any dough."

"Mr and Mrs Woodburn have offered to cover all my costs because they are grateful that they can now give their son a decent burial."

Case No. 5: Convergence

The small court room in the Winville Magistrates' Court was crowded when Dennis walked in with Fiona. He had been told that he wouldn't be called as arresting officer but that his interview with Burns would be played. He always hated hearing himself on tape. The thought that he could've done it better always came back to haunt him. Fiona had come in the effort to understand the case which had clearly been bothering him for the last couple of months. He was a conventional man who looked at life in conventional terms. Just as he couldn't understand the motivations of the Plowman family the motivations of someone like Robin Patmore were difficult for him to unravel.

She suspected that although as he said no one could be allowed to set themselves up as 'judge, jury and executioner' he felt a degree of sympathy for Dave Burns who had found himself in a situation he didn't know how to cope with. And she wondered if even deeper was the knowledge that he had never got any justice for the deaths of his first wife and baby

daughter. He had got to bury them, yes, but the six men involved in that 'spree' had all walked free. Perhaps by helping to get some justice for other parents it helped to assuage that long-buried sense of hurt and failure. She wasn't sure.

Marian Vohland had been given the case. As Burns had already signed a confession she hoped the session would be fairly straightforward but as she came in and looked round the crowded room she had a moment of sudden doubt. She had heard that there were some journalists from Sydney likely to attend but most of the people crowding in were strangers; she couldn't guess which ones were here to write about the case and which ones merely to stickybeak. It was almost a relief to see the solid figure of Dennis Walsh sitting to one side. Burns was brought in and placed in front of her with Dale Kennedy to one side of him and the prosecutor Wesley Jones on the other. Her assistant handed her the papers for the case.

She looked at Burns and said, "You are David Robert Burns of no fixed address?"

"Yeah, I am."

"Mr Jones."

Jones stood up and laid out the simple case for the Crown, that "on or about the 18th of November the previous year, David Robert Burns killed Robin Patmore *alias* Madison Brown and destroyed the body by burning it". He then proceeded to read Burns' confession into the record.

She said to Burns, "You agree that you wrote that confession without any help or coercion or influence?"

"Yeah, I did it. That's what I done, killed him."

She accepted the confession into evidence and asked Dale Kennedy if he wanted to contest it.

"No, Your Worship, it is a true statement of fact as far as it goes. But I would like it placed on record that Robin Patmore *alias* Madison Brown was a party to the torture and killing of Craig Allan Lamb and that he had told David Burns that he and his partner had also tortured and killed three other young boys in New South Wales. Police have now confirmed that as fact. Although it is not backed up by witnesses or other evidence I believe that Robin Patmore *alias* Madison Brown did ask David Burns to help him abduct another child and that Burns' reason for killing him was to prevent a further crime. I understand that my client has told this to police and has also confirmed it under hypnosis. I would therefore ask that this court take that very important fact into consideration."

"Thank you, Mr Kennedy. Mr Burns, do you wish to say anything."

Kennedy had done his best to prepare his client to make the most of this opportunity but for a moment the young man simply looked around with scared eyes and his mouth hanging open. Kennedy gave him an encouraging nod. "It's true," Burns suddenly blurted out. "Everything I told the coppers. I punched Maddy. I knew, like she wanted to take kids, she said she liked taking kids, like it was sorta fun. I told that copper. You can listen to what I told him, that's what Mr Kennedy told me. I *know* what it's like getting hurt when you're sorta too little to do anything. I told her I'd never hurt a kid an' she said I didn't need to do anything, jus' drive, an' I said no, an' she kept on about it, said Ross useta help her so why not me, she'd never sorta split on me. So I whacked her an' she fell down."

Mrs Vohland asked if he would like his interview with Sergeant Walsh played to the court and he agreed. Everyone in court might be enthralled. Or confused. But Dennis Walsh as he always felt listening to himself wished he'd done a better job, asked more questions, sounded more professional. At the end of the interview, Mrs Vohland said to Burns, "Is there anything you wish to add to that account?"

"Nah. I know I gotta go back to jail."

"Mr Jones, do you accept there was provocation?"

Though hypnosis was not evidence he had listened to the tape carefully and thought Burns genuinely believed he was being asked to become a party to a potential crime.

"Yes, the Crown accepts there was some degree of provocation."

Mrs Vohland conferred briefly with her clerk before saying, "I understand Robin Patmore's mother is in court and is willing to present a Victim Impact Statement." She looked around the court and said, "Mrs Brenda McNabb?"

A woman sitting beside a middleaged man stood up and came forward and Mrs Vohland waved her to a chair near the bench. The court saw a woman in her late fifties, neatly and quietly dressed, with a pleasant face and a slightly apprehensive look in her eyes.

She took a sheet of paper out of her handbag and said, "Thank you, Mrs Vohland. I and my husband were deeply distressed to hear of my son's death. I have spent many years agonising over why he chose to do the things he did. I still don't know if it was something I did or didn't do or other influences. But I did hope that he would have the time to come to an understanding of himself, to feel remorse, to undergo rehabilitation, to make whatever reparation was in his power to do. That last hope is gone now.

"But I do not hold it against the young man who is before this court. I think I can even understand why he acted as he did. I certainly do not hold it against him in any way and I hope this court can be lenient with him. But I always remember Robin as my beautiful little son whose potential for goodness and success was never realised. And I can never stop thinking of the young lives he took and praying for their families and wishing there was something I could do to make amends. Thank you for giving me the chance to say this."

She had started to choke up at the end of her short statement.

Mrs Vohland thanked her and said that she accepted David Burns' guilt but before sentencing him she understood a pre-sentencing report had been done. Wesley Jones agreed that the police had prepared a report and he could read it to the court. It ran to two pages and was mainly concerned with the information that Burns had given them about other crimes and that that information had proved extremely helpful. At the end it stated that police had asked the DPP in Sydney to look again at the assault charge which had seen Burns do three years. "So far we have not heard anything back but we understand the victim, Eduardo Carvalho, has since his recovery told police that two men were involved. This was confirmed by Burns under hypnosis and we were able to pass on two names. We also understand that the Child Protection Unit based at Westmead Children's Hospital in Sydney has been asked to review all David Burns' medical records with a view to laying charges of prolonged child abuse against another party. This matter, too, is ongoing."

Mrs Vohland felt drained when she finished up by saying she would hand down sentence on Wednesday morning at ten o'clock and rose. The emotions in the small court room were almost palpable and she was relieved to step out into the small office behind the court and get a glass of water.

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Her husband was sympathetic when she came in and sat down and said, "I feel like a worn out rag. People urging me to have mercy as though they think I am some sort of old-fashioned hanging judge. It's ridiculous." He went and poured her a drink and came over and sat down beside her.

"Yes, there's seems to be quite a lot of sympathy for the young perp around town."

"I know. But he did kill another human being. He did dispose of the body in such a way that police wasted many hours trying to identify the remains. He waited five months or more before coming forward with key information on other crimes. And if he hadn't come forward under pressure from Andrew McLaren the body might've remained unidentified."

"Yes, sympathy can only go so far."

“He obviously isn’t very bright and I will take that into account and he may well have good reasons for not trusting police. But someone who is willing to use violence as the way to supposedly solve problems may well use violence again if placed into a difficult situation.”

Even so, she spent hours going over everything before facing court again on Wednesday morning. “David Robert Burns was charged with murder rather than manslaughter. Although it is only on the cusp of the more serious charge which normally implies serious planning to carry out a homicide it is more than a fight outside a pub where someone is killed in the heat of the moment without any form of planning taking place. I will therefore let the original charge stand. Given that there appears to have been a degree of provocation I am reducing the normal sentence for murder to twelve years with a non-parole period of ten years. On the second charge of the illegal disposal of a body which meant that police were severely hampered in their search for an identity I am sentencing you to one year to be served consecutively. I also note that your actions put police to considerable time, trouble, and expense in having to remove your burnt-out vehicle. I am also recording that if at some stage in the future the court system in New South Wales should quash your original sentence for assault I will permit the time served there to be deducted from this sentence.”

Burns ducked his head slightly. He had keyed himself up to accept twenty years or more and there was a sense of relief in her words.

“I have also had an application made that David Robert Burns should be allowed to accept some of the reward money on offer for anyone helping to find the body of William Harris Woodburn. After consultation with those offering the reward money I will allow ten thousand dollars to be set aside in an account to become available to David Robert Burns on his release from detention.”

Dale Kennedy had not had any inkling that this might happen or he would have told his client not to say “Wow!” and give a sudden grin. Mrs Vohland looked at the young man sternly.

Burns seemed to realise he had done the wrong thing. He ducked his head and mumbled “Thank you”.

Mrs Vohland seemed to sense a degree of satisfaction in the court but she knew it was possible the justice system would see her as being too lenient on too little proof. But she was content to leave that to the future.

Burns told Joe Landy he had never had that sort of money. But then he sobered at the thought of leaving his kitten behind. He knew from experience that there were men inside who would have no qualms about giving a pet, even if he could get permission, a hard time. He had asked Landy if he would look after Sooty for him.

“Sure, he’ll be okay with me, mate. I’ll drop you a line now and again to let you know how he’s getting along. And he’ll still be here when you get out. Cats usually live fifteen or sixteen years.”

Burns hadn’t known that. Nor could he really picture himself in the far future. But Joe seemed to think it would be perfectly natural for him to come back here and have Sooty again. He gave his kitten one last pat before going out to the prison van.

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Cristina Bow had come back to Winville to see David Burns in court. She recognised Cameron De Witt there and wondered if he was thinking of writing a book too. There were several other people she assumed were from the media though Winville didn’t provide a separate press section in the court. But the people who interested her most were the parents, or parent and step-parent, of Madison Brown. She had been putting long hours into working on her book both to bring it up to date and also to rethink all her material on Robin Patmore.

It had been hard to face: the knowledge that she had written the book Patmore wanted her to write, which was basically a sympathetic biography of his life so far. She understood

better now that she had thrown objectivity to the winds as soon as she met him and had not done the sort of background research she would ordinarily see as vital. When she saw and heard Brenda McNabb present her statement to the court she had wondered if another approach to her would be worthwhile. She couldn't remember exactly what she'd said when she had rung Mrs McNabb but she thought that she had raised Robin's claim of an abusive childhood. Now she understood why that had ended Mrs McNabb's willingness to share anything with her. It wasn't her partisanship that Mrs McNabb had objected to …

She had been taking notes all through of things to follow up and she planned to incorporate David Burns' confession. But she understood now that she also had to try to both research Ross Gorringe's background and to try to incorporate the things he had apparently said recently to police. She could see that it was a much more complex and interesting book. And by moving away from her position of sympathy for Robin as a victim of Gorringe she also raised complex psychiatric questions about development and motivation. She remembered thinking when she'd first met Robin that she would not have been surprised if he had told her he was gay. She had also pondered on whether he might have cleverly chosen this way so he could get out of jail and have 'real' sex with men. Since then she had wondered if it would also make it easier for Madison to take more children. She hoped one of the prison psychiatrists would agree to share some updated thoughts with her.

She had approached Dr Watling to ask if he could share something of the original investigation. It had come to her that the difficulty in identifying the body might have something to do with the incompetence of the doctor and the police here involved in the case. They probably did not see very many 'serious' crimes. Dr Watling had said he could spare 'a few minutes' and she thanked him when she sat down in his office at the hospital and said could she ask him about the difficulty in identifying the body initially. In response he had opened a drawer and taken out a dozen photos. She found his cool reserved manner slightly off-putting but she took the photos eagerly and went through them.

They quickly put her doubts to rest. The charred mess with bones showing was hardly realisable as a human being. "It must have been hard for you to face … this."

"In a way it was a puzzle that the van had burnt so fiercely. Petrol burns fiercely but quickly. So we looked for an accelerant but the only addition seemed to be the gas bottle they were using for cooking and the oil, the van was old and there had probably been some leakage while it stood there and possibly on to the body. And there would have been things like cooking oil in the van. But it was a very thorough fire. The body had obviously twisted and turned with the heat and the force of the explosions—as the back of the body was also thoroughly burnt. We got a couple of hairs and threads of denim. But I took bone marrow for the DNA tests."

As well as Watling she contacted Brent Kelly and asked if she could buy him dinner. Brent wasn't wild about more chat with her but he was never averse to a free meal and he assumed she was just wanting a final comment on the court's findings. He suggested the town's only Chinese restaurant because it had a quiet back room and he met her there in the evening. Her first questions were just routine but then she asked him why he seemed to be sympathetic to David Burns. Kelly wasn't sure that he was precisely sympathetic, understanding perhaps, but he said after thinking it over, "I was abused by my dad so I sort of understood what Burns had gone through."

"You believed him?"

"It's hard to describe, just a hint, but you can see it in the way people look and talk, it's that kind of deep guilt that children carry. You know, as an adult, that you were never responsible for the abuse but you get told over and over that it's because you're naughty or stupid or useless or bad and even when you try to blot everything out, to forget it, you still go

on thinking it was your fault, that you were to blame for your own abuse, and it is very hard to go back inside and sort of wipe away that sense that you brought it on yourself."

As he spoke in a slow considering sort of way she thought back to the almost glib way Patmore had spoken, almost as though … yes, as though he had carefully chosen stories that would prompt sympathy and belief in those he spoke with.

She went on to ask him why he thought Ross Gorringe had spoken with Dennis Walsh. "Is he someone people chat with easily?" That had not been her impression in their brief meeting.

"Dennis?" Brent gave that a bit of a grin. "Not exactly. But Dennis is passionate about justice and he never gives up. A lot of cops just treat it as a job but to Dennis it's more than that. I think maybe Gorringe felt he had come up against someone who would never give up on him. But Dennis thinks it is because he realised Patmore was dead. We don't really know what kind of relationship they had—but whatever it was it had come to an end. Gorringe was on his own now."

"Yes, that makes sense." She went on to ask Brent a bit about what had brought him to Winville. He said he'd come to Buckton originally, and before training as a detective.

"So you had Walsh as your boss? Did you speak much about Ireland?"

"No. I know his granddad came from the South, from Wexford, but he doesn't talk much about personal things. It was Dennis who suggested I learn to ride seeing I'd come to the country. I'd had nothing to do with horses, I barely knew one end from the other, but it was the best thing I ever did. I went and bought an old horse and it changed my life."

"Could I get a photo of you and your horse?"

"I've got two now. I go out to the paddock before going to work, if you want to go out at about seven."

Cristina Gow thought she should now, perhaps with this heightened understanding, try to speak with Daniel McNabb, seeing that the McNabbs were staying at the same motel. She went and knocked on their door, apologised to him for coming by so late and said quickly before he could close the door on her that she had spoken with two of Robin's teachers, neither of whom thought he was being abused. "Why do you think he went round telling people he'd had an abusive childhood?"

"I've no idea, I never understood Robin, but maybe it got him some sympathy in a tough jail. But it is no good asking me to see into Robin's mind. Not many people ever managed to do that, I don't reckon. And now poor Brenda is getting abused day and night by people who think she should've seen what was happening and stopped it. We've even been getting messages from people saying if we had let Robin transition when he was young he probably would not have taken his frustration out on anyone. That's total rubbish. I just hope it will stop before Brenda gives way under the strain."

When she got to bed it was with the thought that she had to try and tackle Ross Gorringe no matter how difficult this might be. Brent Kelly, however, took a different thought to bed as he went back over the long road to riding with confidence; maybe he should not give up so easily with Naomi, maybe they could resurrect something of their friendship even if it could never be more than that.

And then he thought back to the things he had told that woman about Dennis Walsh. He rather hoped she would not quote him on anything. It was true that his life with Dennis had been difficult. It was also true that Dennis had a beautiful wife and also true that Dennis had succeeded with cases … he wondered now if he should have told the story of Dennis 'getting' Doug Towner for murder, giving that he suspected she didn't have a very high opinion of police at the best of times. And maybe he shouldn't have told her when she said maybe Doug Towner would make a book, "Be careful then. Doug Towner still has some

powerful mates on the outside." It might look like warning her off or implying there were still plenty of dangerous and corrupt cops around …

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Fiona was in two minds about letting Dennis just spend his holidays quietly in Buckton. She knew from experience that holidays or not someone was quite likely to want Dennis to come and do something for them. She could see how the case of the missing children had taken it out of him. And she understood better than most people that it resurrected memories for him of his own failure to keep his first wife and baby daughter safe from predators.

"I really would like you to spend a bit of time away, sweetheart, just relaxing, not on call, not at the end of a mobile phone, just doing exactly what you feel like doing."

"I know. But I don't really want to have too much time to myself to be thinking back over things."

'Then I think you need to take up a hobby or a new interest. Is there something you've always wanted to do and didn't have the chance?"

"Knitting?" he said with a sudden grin.

"Very funny. A model railway? Tenpin bowling? Some flying lessons? Polishing gemstones? Breeding budgies?"

"Wouldn't mind to learn how they train the police dogs."

She thought he would probably be good at it, he was good with most animals. "Then see if there is a course coming up that you could sit in on."

But any such possibility went out of his mind the next afternoon when he was at the newsagency getting some stationery items and several children from school came in. He recognised them as the Hamilton children and discreetly watched them as they picked up and put down items. He didn't know if anyone from the church had spoken with their parents but reports of small thefts continued to circulate. The things they stole weren't valuable and these children were only seven or eight years old but he took the simple position that theft was theft. These were not children starving in a famine …

He stood back behind a rack of greeting cards and saw the oldest child give a quick look around then slip a satchel of textas into his schoolbag and turn to go out.

Dennis blocked his way. "Paid for those, sonny?"

The boy gave a startled squeal as Dennis propelled him over to the counter where Mrs Wilson was just finishing with a customer. "This lad has just put something in his bag for which he owes you. Take it out and hand it over, son."

The boy reluctantly fished the item out.

"That will be $3.60," Mrs Wilson said briskly.

"Haven't got any money." The boy sounded sullen.

"Right then. You stay here while I go and fetch a parent to pay for it. You sit down here with your brother and you don't move. Got it?"

He went out, glad he'd come by in the car, and drove away. He didn't know if one or both parents were likely to be home at this hour but he knocked loudly. There were sounds inside and a minute later the minister opened the door. People were a bit puzzled by what he did all day. Certainly he visited the hospital and Annexe and did a bit of gardening and sometimes played the organ when the churh was empty but it didn't make for a full workload so there was a general assumption that he did a lot of child care.

"Oh, it's you, Sergeant Walsh."

"Yep. I need you to get in the car and come down to the newsagency. Your son has just been caught stealing."

"Oh no, that can't be right. My children don't steal."

"Just get in the car, I haven't got time to waste."

Drew Hamilton had not previously seen Dennis Walsh in a bad temper. It seemed easier to do as he was told. He got in but said, "It must be an unfortunate mistake."

"Nope. Kid put the item in his schoolbag and told Mrs Wilson he didn't have any money. Do you give them pocket money?"

"A little. We aren't very well off."

"Anyone who chooses to have five children has to be well enough off to afford them."

"No. We have five children because we love all our children, Sergeant."

"Then why the bloody heck don't you love 'em enough to supervise them? They're out round town all the time being a bloody nuisance, stealing, getting up to mischief. It only takes one predator like that man killed at Six Mile Creek for your children to disappear."

"Our children are brought up to be responsible and polite."

"Polite maybe but if stealing is responsible then I'm a monkey's uncle." Dennis still felt himself boiling inside.

"A seven-year-old child is *not* a criminal, Mr Walsh, and no responsible magistrate would see them as such."

"A seven-year-old child regularly getting away with stealing is a right little criminal in the making." Too young to be charged or taken to court, yes, but not too young to start believing he could always get away with it …

"Children grow more responsible and understanding of right from wrong as they grow."

"So that's why you supervise your kids when they're little. But you and your wife seem content to let them run wild. God knows why."

"I would prefer that you didn't take the name of God in vain, Sergeant."

"Well, if you don't know why your kids are right little shits and I don't know why—then I just hope God does."

He parked outside the shop and waited for an affronted minister to get out. He wasn't sure why Drew Hamilton was so unwilling to take more care of his children but people said he was very vague, "he seems to go round in a dream" one person said, and Dennis suspected he avoided the unpleasant choices life required by simply going off into a pleasant daydream where difficult things didn't intrude. Clergy might be expected to visit other realms but it didn't give them the right to abdicate their responsibilities in this realm. Not in his book.

He had heard that people from the church were going to speak to him about his children but there was no sign that that had changed anything. And if Dennis had seen Martin Applegarth being assured that it was all a misunderstanding and politely accepting what the minister said to him with such assurance of love and care for his children, he would have understood that 'a quiet chat' simply didn't work with a man who believed his children could do no wrong.

The children, to his relief, were still sitting where he'd told them to stay. Mrs Wilson was looking slightly frazzled trying to deal with other customers and keep an eye on them at the same time.

The children immediately jumped up with pleased grins on their faces and said, "Daddy!"

"What seems to be the problem?" He gave them a gentle fatherly sort of smile.

"Your son removed these textas from a shelf," Mrs Wilson said quickly, "then said he didn't have any money to pay for them. It is not the first time your children have stolen from the shop but I have let it go by because they are so young. But I am trying to run a business here. Shoplifting is a crime, you know, and it eats into our profits."

"I'm sure it was all a misunderstanding," Hamilton said in a way which had probably led people to agree with him at times. There was something so gentle and guileless in his demeanour that it was hard to associate him with any form of wrongdoing.

"What kind of misunderstanding?" Mrs Wilson said in a puzzled way. "If you want to get something from a shop then you have to pay for it. How is that difficult to understand?"

"But they are only little children."

Dennis stepped in before Mrs Wilson could weaken and let another potential theft go by. "Yep, they are. So from now on they are to be supervised by you or your wife or a designated carer or adult friend every time they are not at school or at home with you. With luck we can nip this thieving and naughtiness in the bud."

"That is quite unfair, Sergeant," Hamilton drew his children into his embrace. "You are treating my children like potential criminals and they are nothing but high-spirited little boys."

"They are crooks every time they steal or damage other people's property. People may be willing to cut them a little slack while they're small but there is a limit. So if I find your children out anywhere without an adult I will start to record all their thefts and they will be delivered straight home to you. I will also make sure that your superiors in the church are aware of your lack of supervision of your children and the simple fact that their misbehaviour is damaging the reputation of your church. It may be that you and your wife need counseling. It may be that you need help from your church elders. Whatever is the reason for your lack of care for your children I expect to see you doing something about it. Is that clear?"

People in the shop had all stopped to listen to Dennis Walsh. "Now, pay for the thing your kids pinched and take them home."

Drew Hamilton might look like a gentle St Francis feeding the birds most of the time but now he looked embarrassed as he took some small change out of a pocket and paid Mrs Wilson for the textas. Then he said with obvious irritation, "Come, children, it is time to go home for tea."

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"It wasn't just their petty thefts," Dennis said later to his family. He knew some people, like Lynnell Morton, would take pleasure in saying he had been bullying little children. But if he could make their parents take more responsibility and keep the children safe then he didn't care what people said. Those little boys down south had been in places their parents probably regarded as known and safe, a gully on the farm, a local park, coming home from school, going to the local shop—but it hadn't been enough to keep them safe from the naïf and practised charm of a Robin Patmore. All it took was a few minutes and they were gone for ever …

"No, I can understand that they are at risk." Fiona had wondered about their relationship with other kids at school. "Ellie told me they are rather sneaky children, sometimes dobbing in other kids—"

"For things they've done?"

"I'm not sure. But it might just be currying favour with the staff."

"I wonder if Robin Patmore was like that as a little boy and his mother could see no wrong in anything he did."

"Perhaps. And it grew and grew like something growing wild underground, like cooch grass, and there was no Dennis to step in … "

"Don't know. Maybe there were things that made people uneasy but they felt sorry for his mum left a widow with a young boy. But, yeah, things grow if you keep giving kids the benefit of the doubt. And it shouldn't be police business to bring kids up to be responsible for their own actions. But I think there was something more to Robin Patmore."

"A psychopath? Someone born without the ability to empathise?"

"Sweetheart, I honestly don't know. I'm not sure I even want to know but I'm just so glad I've got you and two good kids and whatever worries we ever have—well, they won't be those kinds of problems. I never stop thanking—whatever—that you said you would marry

me. I kept thinking it must all be a beautiful dream and I would wake up … but you were still there next morning … ”

THE END