

# The Lighthouse



A novel by  
**Andrys Onsman**



## Prologue

In the darkness the three figures were shadow puppets, silhouettes moving quietly into the dense scrub at the side of the road. One, young and strong, held up a second man, stumbling, unsteady on his feet, both arms pinned behind his back. When they stopped moving, the third man, older and shorter, waited until the captive looked up, dull-eyed and uncomprehending, then punched him hard in the throat, his silver signet ring crashing into the man's voice box, crumpling the cartilage like cardboard. The blow forced the young man who was holding him up from behind, to stagger a couple of steps backwards and he let the man he was holding collapse to the ground. He looked down at the fallen man, watching as he tried to breathe through the blood gurgling in his mouth but he made no attempt to lift him up again.

In a low voice, the older man issued a command. "You leave now. You don't know anything. You were never here, understand? Go!" Everything had already been agreed, there was no point in arguing. The young man looked at his father, acknowledged the directive with a nod of his head, then walked back to where two big black utilities were parked side by side in a small muddy gap in the sea-side bushes on the Coles Beach Road. Without looking back, he reversed out and turned left, bumped across the railway tracks, then drove up Nixon Street into the night.

The hard, grey haired man, dressed in dark clothing and unidentifiable in the cold quarter light, took out a black silk cravat and after pushing the

bleeding man's face own into the dirt, slid it around the barely conscious man's neck. He wrapped each end tightly around his hands and using a knee in the man's back to keep him down, pulled the ligature tight, holding on as the man's despairing twists turned into uncontrolled spasms. When there was no more resistance, no more movement, he uncoiled the scarf, neatly rolled it up and tucked it back into a pocket of his trousers.

As he had been taught to do, he turned the lifeless body on its back and felt for a pulse. When he was sure there wasn't one, he picked up what had once been a man and lifted it like a slaughtered sheep onto the tray of his ute. He got into the cab of his vehicle and reversed out of the lay-by. His intention was to take the corpse up to the Bluff and drop it into the sea from the highest cliff. Let the fishes eat him, he thought. Those who dishonour my family have forsaken any claim to honour in life or death.

Once out of the bushes, he turned the ute right, the headlights opening up the road ahead. The Bluff Reserve's boom gate that should have been down across the road during the night was still pointing towards the sky, a disinterested sentinel. He had never known it to be lowered. At the end of the road, he drove over the curb and guttering, past a picnic table and benches and onto the grass until he was right under the lighthouse. He lifted the body across his shoulders as if he were a fireman and headed towards the gap in the ti-trees that would take him to the edge of the cliff. There was no one around, and the sound of the sea gently, regularly slapping the basalt cliffs far below reassured him.

Suddenly he stopped moving and stood perfectly still. There, half-hidden in the foliage behind the picnic table he saw a police car, clear enough in moonlight for him to be sure of what it was. Still carrying the body on his shoulders, he crouched down and moved sideways, aiming for the shelter of the bushes, away from the car. When he dropped his load, it thudded dully onto the grassy ground. He moved nearer, getting as close as he dared, keeping in the shadows and peering at the car but nothing moved. There was no one in the vehicle. When he moved closer he saw that it wasn't even locked.

Trained to operate effectively in a brutal, dangerous war zone, a place where survival depended on putting that training into effect and making good decisions, using whatever was at hand to work in his favour, the hard, grey, bitter man considered his options. If he was going to take advantage of what God had provided, he'd have to act fast. There was no way of knowing how much time he had.

It took less than three minutes. He cleaned any surface he'd touched with the same cravat he had used earlier. He closed the back door of the police car softly, using only his thigh but wiped the handle anyway. Out of habit, he crouched as he jogged back to his own car, easing it in first gear around the empty carpark and not turning his car lights on until he passed Meercroft Park on the Bluff Road. He saw no one, which meant that he could allow himself to believe that no one had seen him, and finally he could let the night swallow him.

## Chapter 1.

Most of Devonport is hemmed in by two rivers. On the eastern side ferries do cross the Mersey while on the western side the Don does flow quietly. To the north, the city edges up to Bass Strait, named after a man who proved that a sea separates Tasmania from the mainland of Australia, even though the people who lived there had known that for thousands of years. To the south, it is held in by the craggy bluffs and deep gorges rebranded with Scottish names by those who having ventured to the furthest reaches of the British Empire, wanted it to be like the place they had left, even though it wasn't. The old names, along with people who spoke them, were pushed aside to make the place less foreign for the newcomers.

The Mersey Bluff juts out into the Strait like the knob of a jigsaw puzzle piece; a circular headland of basalt with an isthmus of low-lying land that kept it attached to the rest of the island, at least for now. A red and white striped lighthouse is perched on its highest point, furthest out to sea, reached by a road that ends in a carpark and a picnic table. Along the edge of the headland on the eastern side, a walking path meanders up the cliff face from the Surf Beach, close to the water's edge. During the daylight hours the path can get crowded with the active elderly, the occasional tourist and the purposeless unemployed but no one goes there at night. Well, no one without a reason for being there. The occasional hoon roars up the access road to burn a couple of donuts onto the tarmac before racing off again, and the midnight pharmacy is known to open shop in the carpark when the darkness makes it difficult to see who is

buying what from whom but on most winter's night, the place is deserted.

Everything was quiet and Constable Craig "Henny" Pennicott was bored in his police car, imperfectly hidden in the ti-tree and horizontal scrub of the Bluff Reserve. His bladder was telling him it was time to stretch his legs, so he eased himself out of the vehicle and pushed his car door shut without making a sound. A split second before he pressed the remote control, he realised that locking the doors would set off the vehicle's piercing electronic acknowledgement and alert all nearby wildlife and any villains that they were under surveillance, so he pocketed the keys and pointed a finger at the windscreen as if he were telling a dog to stay and headed to the walking path.

He paused for a moment to watch the lighthouse sweep the sea with a long beam of light. The dark grey waters rolled to shore in regular, meter high barrels, steadily, unhurriedly as if the sea was completely at ease with itself at this time of night. Hen took it for what it was; the other, benign side of an unpredictable coin. He'd also seen it pounding the beaches and cliff face with a fury that went beyond human comprehension, when foaming sea-spray flew higher than the lighthouse itself, when the wind screamed like a banshee, when vessels stayed at sea, well away from landfall because there was no guarantee of a safe passage to dock.

Hen followed the path from the lighthouse down to the caravan park, his eyes getting used to the dark shadows that moved around as the ever-

present wind swayed the trees. Even now, when it was cold and spring was little more than a false promise made by flowers blooming far too early, there were still a few caravans and motorhomes in the park, all of them indistinct shapes in darkness. The luminescent green eyes of wallabies, potterooos and possums watched him stride past, only moving out of his way when he threatened to run into them. Three or four widely spaced streetlights shimmered in the night sky. Each was surrounded by an eerie halo but at least Hen could just about see where he was going.

As they do at night in any caravan park anywhere in the country, the fluorescent lights in the ablutions block flickered and buzzed. In summer they were mozzie traps but at this time of year they just added to the feel of cold. Still, when you've got to go, you've got to go and Hen had to go. Relieved, he washed his hand, rinsed the soap off with ice cold water and dried them with the roughest paper towels in Christendom. He inspected his face imperfectly reflected in the scratched, stainless steel mirror before his breath fogged it up, ran his hand through his dark curls and replaced his hat. Good to go!

Rather than retrace his steps back up the path, he returned to his car through the scrub, allowing his eyes to get used to the dark again before setting off across the neck of the bluff, a wide expanse of grass where avoiding stepping in wallaby shit was impossible. It didn't bother Hen. It didn't stink and a twig or ice cream stick got it out of the work-issue boots' treads without too much effort. He walked around the back of the small, squat Aboriginal Heritage museum that seemed to be permanently closed to visitors; skirted the wrought iron fence around the tiny



graveyard and when he reached the tarmac road jogged back up to the car park to get warm. The whole expedition had taken less than half an hour. He checked his watch. Three thirty. Half an hour and he'd head back to the station in Wenvoe Street to clock off and then home for a kip. Hen didn't mind night shift but sometimes it could bore you shitless. He sauntered back to the car, humming a tune that he didn't recognise.

When he reached the vehicle, he sensed immediately something was wrong. He paused with his hand hovering over the doorhandle. Fingerprints. Just in case. But then, how could he open door without touching it? He decided on minimum damage and curled one finger under the latch, pushed the bar inside it up and pulled the door open. The internal lamp burst on, flooding the cab with artificial light, suddenly making everything abnormally bright, everything including the body slumped unnaturally on the back seat.

“Jesus fucking Christ!”

Hen bashed his shoulder into the frame of the door as he recoiled and pushed himself backwards out of the cab, staggering a couple of paces away from the vehicle. In the cold night air he took a few deep breaths to steady himself, then scanned the immediate area. Nothing else stirred. He left the door of the ute open as he called the station on his mobile. The duty constable had a hard time firstly understanding what Hen was telling him and secondly believing it when he did.

“All right, Henny. I'll call the sarge right away. Sit tight, mate.”

Hen didn't have a chance to say anything else. He line was cut and he was alone again. Him and a dead bloke, in the back of his car. Bloody Hell, this is Devonport: people don't kill each other here. And if they do, they don't put the body in the back of a police vehicle. Surely not! He peered in through the window to make sure but the man was still there in the back of his car. Even in the shadows, the man's face seemed familiar but it was too difficult to get a clear look at him. He twisted himself in through the open driver's side door, trying not to touch anything. He saw two things. First, there was an ugly red welt around the body's throat but there was no blood. Second, even though the body was in plain clothes, it was undoubtedly Lyndon Ryan, a police sergeant stationed at Burnie, Devonport's rival city further along the coast.

Hen backed out of the cab, feeling physically sick and his mind swirling. Fuck, he knew Ryan to nod a g'day to, nothing more than that, not his kind of man to be honest, but he was a professional colleague and he was dead in the back of his police vehicle. What the Hell? He had no idea what to do, what to think. There'd been nothing about this in his training course. He got out of his car, needing to sit down.

From the bottom step to the lighthouse he answered the call from his team leader, Senior Sergeant Ian Fleming, and outlined the situation. Having calmed down he spoke more coherently than his first report. The sergeant listened and told him not to touch anything, he'd be there in a minute.

While he waited for him to arrive, Hen had a systematic look around but found nothing, no trace of anyone having been there in that last half hour. He decided that the best thing was to do nothing until the sarge arrived. He sat down and shivered.

Technically, Senior Sergeant Ian “Flem” Fleming wasn’t on duty but because the station was short staffed, he’d put himself on stand-by, just in case of emergencies, and this definitely qualified as an emergency. Having been alerted by the night shift’s desk officer, he had telephoned Hen from his home in North Street and he was at the scene in less than ten minutes, there being little in the way of traffic to get in his way at four o’clock in the morning. He found a distressed young constable, standing near the lighthouse, away from a police vehicle parked in the shadows. “You all right, Hen?” he asked. “What’s going on, mate?”

“I’m all right Sarge but he isn’t!” Hen pointed to the car. Flem touched the young man’s shoulder, then walked over to the vehicle, the driver’s side door still open, the interior light still on.

“Fuck!” Flem muttered. “Did you touch anything in there, Hen?”

“No, I just opened the door, Sarge. One finger. I don’t think I touched anything inside. Bashed my shoulder against the door frame on the way out, that’s all, I think,” Hen replied, not wanting to seem to have been unprofessional.

“Why the fuck is he in the back of your truck?” Flem’s question was bemused thinking aloud rather than an accusation but Hen answered anyway.

“Buggered if I know, Sarge. Nothing to do with me personally, I hope. He wasn’t there when I went for a slash, I can tell you that.”

“He’s obviously been strangled, poor bastard.”

“He’s that officer from Burnie, isn’t he?”

“Yeah, as far as I know. You all right? You’re shivering, mate”

“Yeah. Sorry. I’m cold.”

“Bloody shock, I reckon. Anyway, you get yourself down to the station and write it all up while it’s fresh, eh? I’ve asked Francie to come up, she’s on her way right now, and I’ll get her to take you back. She’s about to finish her shift and she can knock off straight away afterwards. I’ll wait until Barry and the lab coats get here.”

“Yeah, all right. Thanks, Sarge.”

When Senior Constable (Qualified) Francesca Pisarelli arrived a few minutes later, she opened her car door but didn’t get out, waiting as Flem walked with Hen to the vehicle. When the sergeant had deposited the shaken-up young constable into the passenger seat, he walked around to her side of the car. Francie looked up and listened as he quietly outlined the situation.

Although it was dark and whatever light there was cast unnatural shadows, Flem knew what she looked like: her dark curls tied back with a regulation blue ribbon, an olive complexion courtesy of her father’s Italian heritage, but thanks to her mother’s Slovenian ancestry, she was also tall and lithe, and still a good middle-distance runner. The reason why she wasn’t as vain as she might be, was the small scar left by the surgery to correct a hare lip. It took a harsh light to show it up at all but for Francie it was an unsightly blemish that loomed hideously large

whenever she looked at her face in the mirror. Flem was certainly not unaware of her good looks but professionally he valued her as a very competent police officer who took the job seriously and was quite capable of standing her ground when she needed to. Flem appreciated being able to rely on all the people in his team but she was, he thought, a really nice person as well. And she always smelled good. There were moments when it was a bit of struggle to keep it professional.

She nodded when he instructed her to take Hen back to the station in Wenvoe Street and to hang around with him while he finished his notes, and then to take him home.

“Keep an eye on him, Francie. You never know with shock and stuff,” he said quietly, before saying to Hen who had put on his seatbelt and sat quietly staring ahead. “And I’ll get onto Personnel for counselling to make an appointment for you as soon as. No, matey, there’s no arguing. Everyone has to after a major incident. Go on, bugger off. I’ll talk to you later.” He watched the taillights disappear down William Street in the direction of the police station in Wenvoe Street.

In the half light of the dashboard’s lights of the police vehicle coasting away from the Bluff, Francie snuck a sideway looks at Hen as she steered the patrol car through the empty streets of Devonport on her way to the station.

“Are you sure it was that Ryan bloke?” she asked.

Hen nodded, not really wanting to conjure up the image of the dead man again.

“Well, just between you and me, Hen, I reckon there’d be a fair few people who won’t be too unhappy. And I’m not just talking about the low life. He had a go at me once. Soon told him where he could go, the creep. I seriously thought about reporting the incident. Or belting him right there and then.”

“Didn’t really know him all that well myself but yeah, I have heard that. Still, he was a cop and he’s dead.”

“How did he, you know, how did he die?”

“Someone strangled him by the looks of it. Big bruise around his neck but no blood. Then they must have killed him and then dumped him the back seat of my bloody truck,” Hen replied. Suddenly he was struck by what he’d said. “Jesus, it’s not looking good, is it Francie? I mean, I left it unlocked when I went to the toilet in the caravan park. How bloody stupid was that?”

“Good grief Hen, we all do that. It’s Devonport, eh? No one’s going to have a go at you about that!” Francie sounded as if she meant it, and that calmed him down a bit.

“Yeah, probably not. I’m just shaken up.”

“Shock, I reckon. Bound to be.”

She drove down Gunn Street, turned into Wenvoe and pulled up outside the brand spanking new, architect-designed police station, turning in her seat to look at him as the door to the underground garage slowly raised in response to her remote control.

“It’ll be fine, Henny. Flem will have your back, you know that. Don’t worry.”

“Yeah, thanks, Francie. I’ll go and write it up and then go home. You don’t need to wait around. I’ve got my car here and anyway if I feel too

shit to drive, I'll call Keith. No point in you hanging around, it could take hours."

"Okay Hen, if you're sure. I'll make us a cup of tea before I go."

On the Mersey Bluff, the shadowy darkness of a cold coastal night dimly lit by a half moon took a moment to settle, and when it did Flem was aware that he was alone, looking unhappily at a police vehicle with a dead colleague in the back seat, now in darkness because he'd carefully shut the door. He was a broad-shouldered man who solo-parented his two boys, took them out on the water in his tinny whenever he could, went to every parent teacher meeting, and watched them play sport on the weekend as often as he could, even when he should really have been catching up on sleep. He coached the local football team and when occasion demanded and time allowed, he laced up his footie boots for a run in the twos himself. His passion though, was rock climbing: he'd traversed Barnes Bluff in both directions, twice. A judicious but determined climber, he enjoyed relying entirely on himself: on his strength and on his judgement. The north west corner of Tasmania was rich with unclimbed crags and challenging rockfaces and he had tested himself on many of them over the years.

Essentially, he was North West Coast through and through, a bloke who could have gone on to higher ranks in Police Tasmania if he had been prepared to move to Hobart, down south. But neither big desks nor shiny uniforms were for him. Up on the Coast, he knew every inch of the local rivers; knew where the best fishing spots were, where the best camping

spots were and he could walk around Devonport with his eyes closed and not bump into anything. He just about owned his house on the hill overlooking the Strait, the Bluff and the lighthouse he was now leaning against. The place suited him down to the ground. His mother who conveniently lived next door was looking after the boys and the dog as she did whenever she was called upon. Why would he want to be somewhere else?

Except tonight. Tonight he'd rather be anywhere else than on the Bluff, standing guard over a police vehicle in which the body of another cop was fast succumbing to rigor mortis, waiting for other police personnel to arrive before the sun rose and before the fitness fanatics started on their daily routines.

He'd been friends with Hen for years, genuinely liked the bloke but he knew that questions would be asked, accusations made, mistakes accentuated in the inevitable enquiry. Police Tasmania wasn't forgiving when it came to one of its own being murdered. Even though it was impossible to stop his brain from doing it, he knew that there was no good to be had from running possible scenarios and predicting what may or may not happen. He admonished himself for letting his mind wander in that direction.

Flem sat down on the plinth of the lighthouse, his back against the round concrete wall, keeping his eyes on the police vehicle as if he were hoping that Ryan might yet emerge and they'd have a good laugh about it. Oh god, it must be the cold and dark that's making his brain go off on stupid



tangent. He was relieved when the headlights of an approaching police vehicle threw some light into the darkness.

The forensics team got out of their 4-wheel drive truck, cursorily acknowledged him when he pointed to Hen's police vehicle, and then set up the crime scene with practiced efficiency. Within minutes they had a large canvas tent erected over the vehicle and a wide area around it was cordoned off with blue and white checked tape with multiple "do not cross" signs at regular intervals even though there was no one around. Flem watched as the two officers dressed in white coveralls, white slipovers on their shoes, faces hidden behind masks and wearing blue latex gloves started their work, opening metallic flight cases and assembling an assortment of instruments. One of them started to dust the car for prints while the other photographed every detail.

When he arrived in his flashy black BMW shortly afterwards, the pathologist silently and without challenge claimed seniority and investigative pre-eminence, and gently pushed either of them aside if they got in the way as he prodded and poked at the body in situ, taking his own photos and speaking into his phone. The flashes fired off without a break for a quarter of an hour, until eventually he stepped back, pulled his mask down below his chin, pulled his gloves off with a snap and ducked down under the tape to make his way up to where Flem was standing watching proceedings, fascinated by what was going on. These people knew what they were doing. It was reassuring.

"G'day Flem. How are you going, all right?"

“Apart from this, real good, Barry. Yourself?”

“No use complaining, is there? No one listens anyway. Do we know the body?” he asked, pulling off his cap to reveal a mass of untidy, greying hair. Short and stocky, Barry Streznicki patted his pockets through the protective gear, looking for his cigarettes. He’d been smoking for almost forty-five years and promising to give it up for more than forty. Part of the problem was that his wife, one of the local GPs, was also hooked on the darts. It seemed incongruous for two highly experienced and capable medical professionals to be addicted to nicotine while sternly advising their patients against smoking but no one who knew them would bet on either of them actually heeding their own advice.

Flem replied, “Can’t say for sure but it seems that it’s Lyndon Ryan a sergeant from the Burnie station. Keep that under your hat, though.”

For a moment it seemed that the Barry had heard. “Shit, I must have left them at home. I’m not used to these call-outs in middle of the night!”

Then, as if Flem’s words had penetrated his nicotine deprived consciousness, he suddenly stopped moving, looked up at Flem and said, “One of your lot? A colleague from Burnie? A policeman?”

“Looks like it.”

Barry raised his eyebrows as if considering this new information, then refocussed his attention back onto more important matters.

“I don’t suppose you’ve taken it up, have you?”

“No. Sorry, mate.”

“Not to worry. I’m going to give up. Anyway, I’m just about done here, so I’m off. The ambos are on their way. No hurry now, I suppose. They’ll take him down to the morgue. I’ll get onto the post-mortem as

soon as I can tomorrow. Today. I'll give you a bell if there's anything important comes up, all right?" Barry sauntered back to the car to go home and light up, and presumably tell his wife that the dead person was a copper who'd been strangled and whose body was dumped in a police car on the Bluff.

"Anything important?" Flem said to himself. "God, I hope not."

## Chapter 2.

When the station rang him, Flem had darted to the house next door, woken up his mother and asked her to come over and go back to sleep on the spare bed and if he wasn't back by breakfast, to feed his sons and get them off to school. She hadn't bothered to get dressed, just wrapped herself in her warm old housecoat, pulled the front door shut behind her and by the time Flem had set off to the Bluff, she had been asleep again. Flem wasn't sure that she had actually woken up at all. Mrs Fleming had done it before. He wasn't surprised that when he eventually managed to get home, she'd fed the boys, got them dressed and had walked them to the primary school in Nixon Street.

“Good morning, Ian!” she shouted as he came in the front door. She was wiping the kitchen bench, having dressed and by the look of her, showered as well. For a woman in her sixties, she was a powerhouse. Flem had worked out ages ago that she was happiest when he asked her to do something. It made her feel useful, he supposed. At least he hoped so.

“How were the boys, Mum? Did they get to school all right?”

“Good as gold. We walked because it's such a gorgeous day. We took Charlie. He's getting old, the poor thing. I think he may have a touch of arthritis in his hips. You should probably get him checked out.” As she talked, she started up the coffee machine on the newly wiped bench. They had to pause while the machine ground the coffee beans.

“Thanks, Mum. I really appreciate you doing this at the drop of a hat.”

“It’s nothing, love. You know I enjoy it.” Then, with an abrupt change in tone, she added, “You look worried, though. What’s happened?”

Flem screwed up his face and replied, “It looks like someone’s murdered a sergeant from Burnie and dumped his body in the back of Hen’s police car. But don’t you say anything, Mum. Not to anyone!”

“You knew that Hedley Pennicott’s in hospital, didn’t you? Silly old coot fell off his quad bike last Sunday. Probably after a few too many.”

Immediately she admonished herself, before going on with the gossip.

“No, I shouldn’t say that. Anyway, Daisy is with him in the Launceston General. That’s it, for what it’s worth. Have you had breakfast, Ian? I can make you some eggs and bacon on toast. Poor young Henny Penny. He’s a nice boy.”

“Thanks Mum but I don’t feel like eating at the moment. Just coffee will do but I’ve got to make a call first.” He took his coffee through to the dining room.

Flem rang Judith Taylor, Commander of the North West Region on her direct number. He was momentarily taken aback when a male voice answered him by bidding him good morning by name.

“I’m sorry. Who am I speaking to?”

“It’s Stuart Belbin, Senior Sergeant. I’m acting Commander while Commander Taylor is on leave. I’m assuming this is about the murder of Sergeant Ryan.” Bloody Hell, a new boss who already knew what had happened. Maybe delaying the call hadn’t been such a great idea.

“Yes sir. How do you want us to proceed, sir? Seeing it involves one of our own.”

“Yes, yes. It’s a bad business. A very bad business. First things first. We need to contain it as much as we can. I’m assuming the Advocate is running with it on-line today?”

“Yes sir. But no name and no mention of him being a policeman as far as I can see,” Flem replied as he was scrolling on his laptop.

“Good, good. Any chance of keeping it quiet?”

“You know the Coast, sir. The only thing we can be sure of is that the whole town, both towns, will know before the mainland media does. Once it gets out that it’s a police officer, the nationals will pick it up.”

“Yes, yes. Understood. So, can we at least tie it down quickly, Sergeant?”

“I don’t think so, sir. We’ve got nothing, no motive, no suspect, nothing, sir.”

“Not yet, not yet. But we need to move fast on this. Senior Sergeant Fleming I want you to be the senior investigation officer. We obviously can’t have anyone from Burnie being the SIO. Take yourself off night shift. I’ll find someone else to assist you with your normal duties. And I think it would be better, less prone to accusations of bias, to get an Officer in Charge from out of the region. I’ll get someone from the South. Leave it with me.”

“Yes sir. It’s your call.”

There was a slight pause. Belbin must have picked up an undertone of reluctance in those few words. Flem wasn’t keen on leadership roles at the best of times and this was a bloody murder investigation.

“Try not to sound quite so happy about it, Sergeant. You’ve been recommended. No, I won’t say who. But someone in the force thinks you’re a very capable officer regardless of your attempts to keep your

head down below the parapet. Frankly, if you wanted a quiet life, you shouldn't have joined the force.”

“Yes sir.” Flem shouldn't be surprised. He knew that no one gets to be a Commander without knowing what they are doing. Belbin had in the space of a few hours done his homework, made up his mind and waited until Flem rang, already resolved how the investigation was going to run. None of this was off the cuff. Despite his reluctance about the task ahead, Flem was impressed with the way Belbin had set him up.

“So Senior Sergeant, first an official reminder. Everything has to be done by the book. Records made of everything. No corner cutting, no technical mistakes, no bullocking your way through, no running off half-cocked. I've been on the Coast long enough to know how it can go up here. Not this time. Understood?”

“Yes sir.”

“Now. I suggest you go over to Burnie yourself, have an ask-around, see if there is anything obvious. Get the lay of the land, that kind of thing before you tie things down officially. But it's your call. You are in charge. I'm confident in your abilities, Senior Sergeant. And your discretion”

“Thank you, sir. I'll do my best.”

“I know you will. And Flem, if you need anything from me, just ask, eh? If necessary it'll stay between us.”

Without giving him an opportunity to reply or argue Belbin hung up, leaving Flem to sit with the phone in his hand, staring at it intently as if he were examining it for Covid viruses. Belbin had changed tack from official to confidential in a split second: the man knew what he was

doing. He obviously knew exactly who Flem was, but Flem didn't know much about his new boss. The name was familiar because Belbin had been appointed as the officer in charge of the official response to the COVID-19 pandemic in the state and Burnie had been at the heart of that fiasco, but he couldn't put a clear face to the name. It seemed that a changing of the guard was happening and Flem didn't know how he felt about that. His relationship with the present Commander of the North West region had been cordial and mutually respectful even if it had been a little distant at times. Judith Taylor was a very competent officer who managed her staff well but lately she was looking tired, worn down by the ever-present battle against sexism and misogyny in the force. Now that things in the command structure as well as in the field were starting to change, she was easing herself towards retirement and her shack at Hawley Beach. After blazing trails and being instrumental in real improvements in the force, she could now leave on her own terms and with the respect and affection of her colleagues, and there were few senior officers could say that. Flem, for one, would be sad to see her go. But as Belbin was acting in the role already, you could bet on him being announced as her replacement before too long, so he was determined to keep an open mind about his new boss. Well, at least not to piss him off too quickly.



## Chapter 3

Devonport is small enough for everyone to know everyone else's business. When Keith Burke, aka the Legend, opened the closet door and stepped out, it caught no one by surprise because most either knew or suspected that he was gay and while a few hopeful females still believed they had the wherewithal to change his mind if given the chance, the time for being indignant, repulsed or surprised had passed quite a while ago.. Regardless of who he slept with, he was still Devonport Football Club's best player by a country mile.

Flem had been head coach of the Magpies last season when it became public knowledge that the senior side's star player was not only openly gay, he was about to shack up with one of the local coppers. He had immediately told everyone in the club that he would stamp out any homophobic bullshit but Keith had told him not to go too hard, that he was fine with it as long as it was nothing more than the banter he'd heard in the past. He enjoyed the funnier comments and it kept everything close to normal in the sheds. And he pointed out that if anyone on the opposing team said or did anything on the field that crossed the line, he'd personally have to hold back seventeen teammates from starting a major melee on his behalf. It was all part of the deal and he was big and ugly enough to look after himself. It had proven a good strategy because nearly a full season later, it was old news and Keith copped more shit for being a librarian than for being a homosexual.

Of course, there had been a few die-hards for who it had been too much. Young Alistair “Rocky” Rockliff’s father had come down from the hills behind the small town of Sassafras and informed Flem that his son would not be playing for “a team of poofters”. Flem was direct in his response to the old farmer. “We don’t tolerate that bullshit here anymore. It’s 2020, Mister Rockliff.”

Others were quick to join in. “Not up where Rocky lives, it isn’t Flem. Still last century up there!”

“Hang about, Mister Rockliff. It’s not the whole team. Last time I looked a few of us were still straight!”

“Trust you to be looking!”

Sitting on the wooden bench, getting changed for training, Jason “Piddles” Pidd looked up at Rocky’s old man and said with a serious face, “There’s no need to worry Mister Rockcliff. Rocky’s pretty safe because gay blokes only chase good-looking young fellas, like my good self.” It took quite a while before the rest of the boys finished responding to that particular self-assessment, with Piddles having to fend off the bits of kit as well as the disparaging comments about his physiognomy that were flung in his direction.

In the middle of it all, Mister Rockliff stood confused. This response wasn’t what he had expected and he hovered in the doorway to the change-room uncertain as what to do next. Then Rocky almost stood up to his old man.

“Come on Dad. I’ll be all right.”

“Yeah. If Keith puts the hard word on Rocky, I’ll get the law onto him.”

“Fuck, you’re an idiot, Piddles!”

“Yeah but pretty funny, eh Ledge?”

Keith had sat quietly throughout the whole scene, feeling sorry for Rocky, a boy whose future had already been decided and whose only relief from the grind of near-subsistence farming was playing football. It worried him that he was the cause of that being taken away from the boy. Piddles’ question brought him back into the change-room. He looked up and with a wry grin, shook his head. “Sorry Piddles. I can give it no more than one and half stars.” Piddles feigned disappointment and opened his arms in a begging motion but Keith wasn’t budging. “I’ve heard it before, mate. You’ve got to come up with something original to get over four stars!”

“See, I told you that you are an idiot Piddles!” Everyone seemed to agree.

As the banter and laughter bounced around the room, Mister Rockliff looked at Keith, at the other boys in various stages of undress, none of them bothered, then at his son, keen to stay. He turned to Flem and said, “I expect you to keep an eye on him all the time. If he turns into a poofter, it’ll be your fault, Flem!” He turned and walked out, leaving Rocky to make up his own mind. As the boy threw his gear bag onto his usual place on the bench, he said, “Sorry Ledge, he just doesn’t understand. He’s just worried, old-fashioned, I guess.”

“No worries at all Rocky. I’ve copped a lot worse, mate.”

So, Rocky kept playing for the Magpies and his old man came down from the hills to watch them play in the Granny that year, winning mainly because the Legend ran himself into ground for four quarters.

Even the Burnie boys who'd abused him and belted him non-stop during the game applauded him when the Darrel Baldock Medal for best and fairest was hung around his neck for the second year in a row.

For the most part, LGBTQI issues take second place to the weather in Aussie Rules on the north west coast of Tasmania. And then, the following season everything was over-shadowed by the Covid pandemic. Without spectators, the Pride Round in 2021 had been a non-event. To make matters worse, the brutal north west coast winds had ripped the rainbow banners apart before the bounce. And then, when the rain started, the officials and coaches pushed their soggy masks under their chins so that they could breathe, and then when the rain got ridiculous, abandoned their places on the boundary and sought shelter in the clubrooms or the shipping container that had been turned into a bar, and finally the umpires had called the game off at half time and the Wynyard boys went home. By quarter past three anyone left at the ground was in the clubrooms watching the AFL on the big screen and drinking beer. The whole event had been a disappointing fiasco. Flem had said to Keith that he was sorry but Keith had replied that he wasn't sorry at least; that he could do without having the spotlight shine on him; that he didn't want to be a spokesman for anyone. "What do you reckon, Flem? Tomorrow's headline in The Advocate. "Gay librarian footballer shocks Devonport's woke elite by preferring just to play in the normal guernsey rather than wearing a rainbow tank top and tight gold lame shorts." "I see your point. Let's have another beer."

Keith wasn't the only one wanting just to get out on the ground and play. Looking disappointedly out the window at the sweeping torrential rain curtaining over the sodden oval, Big Barry Millhouse, a solid half back flanker, slow but strong and reliable as a Malley bull, shook his head and said, "Pride round, my arse!"

Piddles looked up from the table where he was building a beer can tower and said, "Don't be homophobic, Mouse. Today of all days!"

"Fuck me, I can't say anything anymore!" Mouse wasn't the quickest at detecting sarcasm.

"Technically, 'Fuck me' is also homophobic," said Piddles, pretending to be studying his engineering marvel. "Unless you're flirting."

"Flirting? What the fuck are you on about, Piddles?"

Faces turned towards them. Piddles smiled beatifically, having achieved exactly what he set out to do.

"Say an attractive lady says to you, 'Fuck me'. How would that sound to you, Mousie? A bit dirty flirty, don't you think?"

Ben looked at Piddles, shaking his head. "You think you're funny but you're not. You're a fucking idiot!"

"All right, all right, that's enough. He's just winding you up, Mouse. Piddles, you know the rule. Don't be a dick!"

Piddles timed his response to perfection.

"Are you sure that that's not a bit homophobic, Coach?"

Piddles was triumphant but the Legend trumped him. Speaking just loud enough for everyone to hear, he said, 'In that case, Piddles, don't be a cunt', which although it was against the house rules, earned him a round of applause, not to mention highly unusual giggles from the ladies in the canteen, and the hubbub quickly rose back to its normal level. Even

Piddles laughed. Until Mouse accidentally knocked over his beer can tower and then things got serious.

Towards going home time, Piddles approached Keith as he was getting ready to leave. He anticipated another one of Piddles' barely amusing ripostes.

“Ledge, a serious question. I need some advice and seeing you're the number one role model around here, I'm asking you.”

“Mate, I'm not a role model for anyone but ask away,” Keith replied, slightly worried by the approach. God, he really hoped Piddles wasn't going ask about sexuality.

“Well, you've been to university on the mainland, haven't you?”

“Yep, to Monash,” Keith affirmed, relieved.

“Well, I've got into Physiotherapy at Southern Queensland. Fuck, Ledge, I know it's a shock but you don't have to look so surprised!”

“Yeah, right. Sorry Piddles. Go on. What do you want to know?”

They sat down at a table near the bar. A few other ears were tuning in.

“To tell you the truth, I don't know if I should go. My mum and my sister are telling me to take it up but my old man is dead set against it, even though he doesn't say anything directly. It's five years. Bloody long time to be away from home, eh?”

“Yeah, it is. I was about your age when I left. Didn't come back for another six years. Not to live anyway. But one thing you can bear in mind is that I came back to work at Harvest Moon, picking spuds every off-season. My mum passed away during that time, that was hard. And you know my father, not the easiest of men, right? I think if I'd become a physio, he wouldn't have minded but a bloody librarian? Not something

he can boast about at the bowls club, is it? But here's another thing to keep in mind, Piddles, everyone got used to it pretty quickly, even Dad did. Look, I'm just one voice. In the end you've got to work it for yourself. Ask yourself if you really want to be a physio and if you do, then go for it. It's a bloody good career, for sure. For me, going to the mainland was really good but I'm very different to you. And you will have noticed that I am back here now."

Piddles smirked, then said, "Actually, Legde, I knew you were going to say all that. So, here's the real question, what I'm really asking. Do you reckon you could you have a word with my old man? He thinks you're the best footballer on the coast, on a par with Gypsy and the Doc and himself of course, and he'd listen to you. I do really want to go but I don't want to become estranged from him. He's a good bloke, really. What do you reckon, could you have a go at talking to him?"

As he thought about what Piddles had asked, and what the question actually meant, Keith noticed that it had become quiet around the table. People were waiting to hear what he had to say, as if his response really meant something to all of them, as if it were important to them. He felt uncomfortable with the attention but also pleased that they valued his advice. The trouble was that he wasn't sure that he wanted to talk to Piddles' old man. Fortunately, Mouse eased the tension. "What the fuck does estranged mean, Piddles?" he asked seriously and Keith had to laugh. And, in par for the course among his team-mates, once the point had been allowed to be made, the shit-stirring started up again. Flem looked at Keith, rolled his eyes and made the motion to get them a road

beer. Keith nodded, turned to Piddles and said quietly, “Of course I will, mate. I can’t guarantee anything, though.”

Piddles replied with all seriousness, “Mate, you got your old man to be proud of you despite you being gay. If you can do that here in fucking Devonport you can do anything.”

Keith didn’t want anyone to see his reaction so he stood up and quickly walked over to the bar where Flem was getting the beers in. When he got a chance, he would talk to Jason’s father using the hints that Piddles had slyly provided. He would do his best because the young fellow deserved the chance to stretch himself. When Flem asked him what he was smiling about, Keith shook his head.

“Yeah, I know,” said Flem. “What would you rather be doing on a Saturday afternoon when the weather is pissing down than having a few beers with this bunch of lunatics, eh?”

Their stubbies made a little clinking noise when they touched. Neither Keith nor Flem would forget that afternoon in a hurry.



## Chapter 4.

On a still day, Mrs Fleming would refuse to say the “w word” out loud because the mere mention of wind might well annoy the weather gods and before you knew it the clothes on the Hills Hoist would be spinning like a rotisserie, and woe betide you if you didn’t have them securely pegged onto the line. Right in the path of the Roaring Forties, the Coast is renowned for its gales and when they blow offshore, you could probably long-bomb a torpedo punt kick from the centre square of the Devonport Football Club’s home ground into the sea. Despite or maybe because its proximity to the sea, the oval was one of the most picturesque grounds in the state. It was close to the swimming beach on one side and still within walking distance from the CBD on the other. Across the road from the entrance gates in James Street, the wide tracts of grass that made up Byard Park were used for training, practice games and under-age competitions. Three football ovals were marked out but occasionally other sports were played there because the park had been bequeathed to the city years ago as a gift that was to benefit the locals in perpetuity. The whole complex was about a square kilometre of prime real estate, which with sound strategic development, would be worth millions.

Kevin Formby was the man with a vision big enough to make such a development a reality. His heart attack a couple of years ago had made no difference to his lifestyle. He was still overweight, still on the durries, still on the full-strength beer and still on the take. Women were still girlie, darling or sweetheart and were still, as far as he could manage it,

excluded. Deals were done with a handshake and a man's word was his bond. Except when it didn't suit him, and then he'd simply deny that he'd ever agreed to anything in the first place. How he'd become the mayor of Devonport was a hot topic of conversation amongst the citizens. They addressed him as "Kev, mate" as he approached and "you fat prick" after he'd gone, because even though everyone knew he was dodgy, he still wielded enormous power in the city's business and social lives and getting on his wrong side was ill-advised.

As well as mayor, Kevin was the president of the Devonport Football Club and a life member (past president) of the Devonport Bowls Club. As far as Big Kev was concerned, footie, cricket and bowls were the only true sports, with cycling and woodchopping allowed the occasional look in. Oh, and netball for the sheilas. So, despite the fact that most boys and girls played soccer and the Devonport Strikers were the best team in the Tasmanian Premier League, the sport got no funding from the Council at all because Big Kev especially hated wogball. He had even made a point of not going to see any of his grandchildren play. He'd expected that his second son's two boys would not be playing footie because not only was Jason a librarian, but he'd gone and married some Indian bird. Kevin had gone to the wedding but had only shown his face at the reception for a minute or two. Since then he had hardly ever spoken to Priti or her family; happy that they all lived in Burnie, a place he did his best to avoid for any reason. Devonport was good enough for him, thank you very much.

Ever since the accident that took his eldest son, his daughter kept to herself for reasons that she never divulged to him. He'd tried to reach out to her, had bought presents for her children at Christmas, had even put up with her fuckwit husband's Greenie bullshit, but even though she didn't say anything, he knew that she didn't think much of him, that she didn't respect him as a daughter ought to respect her father. He hadn't yet got to the bottom of why she didn't. The problem was that because she didn't want to speak to him about it, Kevin had no idea what made her so stand-offish. Every time he tried to bring it up, she'd change the subject or say she had a headache or something. At least she did still talk to him, so he was sure that she'd come good eventually.

It was rumoured that Kevin had a safe concreted under his bedroom floor. In that safe he had substantial cash and a folder of incriminating evidence on a vast array of people who might at some stage need to be brought into line. Kevin often talked about carrots and sticks as his preferred business strategies, and he was, as he liked to emphasise, Devonport and surrounds' most successful private real estate developer. So he needed plenty of untraceable cash and as much dirt on everyone in his compass as he could glean. He was one of the major players, probably the major player and he knew how to operate in the place.

Standing under cover in the carpark at the back of the Paranaple Centre, he took a last drag of his cigarette, dropped onto the tarmac and ground it out under his shoe. He exhaled a lung full of smoke and headed back to the council chambers. He would have preferred to duck down to The Alex for a couple of beers with his mates but duty called.

Once a month on a Saturday evening, the Council was open to questions from the public, and as much as he knew it to be a waste of time, it gave the impression that local government was open and transparent, that everyone could feel to be a working part of it. The reality was very different. Punters got one question; couldn't speak for more than three minutes; were not allowed to ask follow-up questions and invariably the aldermen and women took every question on notice, promising they would look into it and then letting it die a quiet, unlamented and unanswered death. It was a system that served everyone well: as long as you didn't have a real issue.

As mayor, Kevin had asserted that he could not be asked direct questions and therefore his main concern on open nights was to stay awake. To that end, he didn't allow himself to have a drink until the ordeal was over and every hour there was a toilet break of ten minutes so he could have a smoke. The meetings also let him know who was stirring up trouble. There were punters he needed to keep an eye on, townsfolk who would question decisions that the council had made, people who gave themselves bullshit reasons for not adhering to council regulations and by-laws, people who made noises about standing for council themselves. Do-gooders, pinkos and deviants would be the death of him and he needed to keep a close watch on them, just in case. Kevin planned to stay in office for the next term as well. After that he could retire to the Gold Coast in comfort, if all went to plan.

Tonight's questions focused on law and order. What was the Devonport City Council doing to protect its citizens from crime? Kevin looked at his GM who shrugged. He nodded to Councillor Graham Bates, an experienced alderman who spoke with a reassuring veneer of efficiency. "Thanks for that question, Terry. It's a good one, mate. Well, first of all you can rest assured that Council will cooperate fully with Police Tasmania, whose responsibility our safety and well-being is. But, and let me be quite clear about this, Council does not condone any vigilante groups going off half-cocked on some wild goose chase that ends in disaster like those bozos in Penguin last month. What? Yes, yes, scrap that last bit off the records please. But I reiterate that Council does not condone anyone taking the law into his or her own hands. If you saw or heard anything, if you know anything about any crime in our city, not just last night, please contact the police. And finally, let's all keep that in mind this latest crime involves people from Burnie, not from here. The fella was a Burnie man, murdered there and dumped here afterwards. So I strongly believe that the people of Devonport can feel quite safe as they go about their business." Bates sat down and looked pleased with himself when Kevin gave him the thumbs up.

There were a few more questions relating to street lighting, cars hooning at Coles Beach carpark and the importance of subsidising tourism now that Covid had destroyed so many businesses on the coast. Every one of them was either deflected or noted for further action and at nine o'clock the meeting was closed. Tea and biscuits were served downstairs and could everyone make their way down there as soon as possible because the chambers and the public gallery needed to be deep cleaned as per

regulations. Within ten minutes the room was empty except for two figures still sitting at the front of the room.

“It’s a terrible business, Kev,” said Jeanie Norris. “Last thing we need right now.”

A middle-aged, dumpy woman, Jeanie considered herself Kevin’s right hand woman. They had tried to have sex one drunken evening but it had turned into a fiasco that they both preferred to forget, and ever since they concentrated on business rather than pleasure. Unbeknownst to her though, Kevin, as was his want, had discovered something about her he could file away and use should she ever stand in his way.

“I thought Batesy handled it well, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, he’s good at that kind of stuff. Just wind him up and let him go,” replied Kevin, but he was looking away, his mind not on the conversation.

“What’s up, Kevin?” Jeanie asked, looking at the Mayor with concern.

“You seem a bit pre-occupied. Anything wrong?”

“No, I’m fine,” he replied brusquely. “Let’s go and get a cuppa.”

## Chapter 5

It was mid-morning when Flem entered the Devonport police station in Wenvoe Street, on the edge of what passed for the city's CBD. His team having been on night shift, had left to get some sleep. Flem didn't doubt that they'd be on the phone to each other to talk about last night's events. He checked and made sure that Hen had filed his report and thought about ringing him to tell him to turn his phone off but decided against it. Most likely Keith would have taken the day off and be there to look after him so he'd be right. There was nothing new in the incident book. He fussed about, trying to find anything that would delay the inevitable but eventually he had to hit the road to Burnie.

Flem knew that he had definitely not had enough sleep when he set off but the double shot espresso he had gulped down for morning tea kept him nervily awake. He turned his unwashed police ute onto Don Road, negotiated the roundabout, swung onto the highway and then put his foot down until he hit the speed limit of a hundred and ten clicks per hour. If he exceeded it by five kilometres or more, an annoyingly loud beep would let him know.

The road to Burnie climbs steadily past the satellite township of Don, up Tugrah Hill until it reaches the Cutts Road intersection where it crests the peak of the hill. The gun-barrel grey water of the Bass Strait edging up to the mixed greens of the rolling hills under a vast cyclorama of blue sky brought scale and perspective and it never failed to calm his thoughts.

He overtook a couple of big lorries as he sped down the other side of the hill and along the Lillico straight, casting a glance at the pebble beach on his right. There had to be a geological reason why some beaches had large pebbles while other beaches had sand but he had never found out what it was. It wasn't a matter of concern but the view of the sea kept him from thinking about who he would ask what when he got to Burnie. The normal protocol would be to phone ahead and arrange a formal meeting with the station's chief officer but that was Belbin himself, so in effect they already had that meeting. Flem had the impression that the Commander would prefer the investigation to keep the personnel at the Burnie station at arm's length, which was understandable if he really wanted everything to be transparent and open. On the other hand, he had definitely said for Flem to have an "ask-around", which seemed to Flem to mean a less formal approach, a background gathering exercise rather than recorded interviews.

By the time he passed the turn-off to Sulphur Creek he'd changed his mind and decided that he'd phone ahead to make a formal meeting with Belbin so that no one could accuse him of not following the rules but his primary purpose was to go and talk to a couple of officers at the station on the quiet first, see if there was any truth in the rumours about Lyndon Ryan. He'd play it by ear after that.

In the outskirts of the city, Flem turned off the Bass Highway and followed the signs to the CBD, coasting down Wilson Street to the police



station. He parked his vehicle on the street in front of the building. There are always parking spots outside police stations.

“It’s Senior Sergeant Ian Fleming to see the Commander if he has a minute.” Flem was invited to take a seat by a young female police officer he didn’t recognise but who seemed to know him, if her smile was anything to go by. When she disappeared through a door at the back of the station’s reception area, he wracked his brain. Before he had time to come up with an answer, Belbin came out of door to the right of reception, snapping, “Two minutes!” He stepped aside to let Flem into his office and closed the door. His tone of voice changed immediately.

“Why are you here?”

Flem wasn’t invited to sit down.

“Two reasons, sir. One, I’m following protocols and procedures as you emphasised this morning. Everyone here will take note that I’ve talked to you. Two, I’ve heard whispers that Sergeant Ryan wasn’t the most popular man around here. I intend to find out why. My first port of call is you, sir.”

“Good thinking, good. Well done, yes. All right. Officially Ryan was a respected member of the CIB team here. That is it. Any unofficial commentary is irrelevant scuttlebutt. I suggest you keep any such rumours to yourself. Have I made myself clear?”

“As a bell, Sir.”

“Keep me informed, Senior Sergeant.”

“Yes sir.”

Belbin remained seated as Flem turned on his heels and left his office, closing the door behind him. Who the Hell says scuttlebutt?

On his way through to the exit, Flem stopped at the reception desk. There was no time like the present to start sniffing around.

“I know I know you but I can’t for the life of me remember your name.”

She took off her mask.

“It’s Michelle Flint. We’ve only met once, at Buttons Brewery, so you’re forgiven.”

“At the Brewery? God, I hope I behaved myself.” She laughed and replied, “You did. Very polite but you left early. Very disappointing!”

“I’ll stay longer next time!” She seemed delighted with the conversation until Flem mentioned Lyndon Ryan and Constable Flint’s face fell. “So, that’s why you’re here. We’ve got the email this morning to say we have to cooperate with any investigation.”

“I’m not really investigating anything yet. Just sticky-beaking really.” It was a small, white lie. “He was found by a young fellow in my team, that’s all. I expect they’ll send someone up from the big smoke to head up the investigation proper but I want to support him as much as I can. Finding a dead body can really mess with your mind.” He hoped she didn’t pick up on his deflection.

“Well, I’ll tell you what I think as long as it isn’t on any record, eh?”

Flem nodded and with metaphorical fingers crossed, said, “Of course not!”

“Well, as far as I’m concerned, he was a creep who no one liked, especially not his wife and no one is going to be too surprised about him being knocked off. I reckon any one of a dozen angry husbands would have done it.”

“He sounds a winner, Michelle. Did he hit on you?” He hoped he was hitting the right sympathetic tone.

“He hit on everyone in a skirt, Flem. He wasn’t fussy.”

“Maybe he was sick. You know that thing where you can’t control yourself?”

“That’s just a male excuse. No means no, Flem. If a copper doesn’t know that, who would?”

Flem nodded in agreement. “You are right, Michelle, absolutely. No excuses.”

A small pause, then Flem said, “Well, I best be on my way. A lot to do.”

“No worries Flem. Maybe we can catch up sometime, eh?”

“That’d be good. I know a bloke who sings in a band that plays at the Buttons every now and then. Might see you there, eh?”

“You never know your luck in a big city,” she said with a coquettish smile, then added seriously, “I know who found Ryan, Flem. We all do. Hen’s a good bloke. He has to put up with a lot already so I’m really glad you’re looking out for him.”

Flem grinned as he said, “I’ll do my best, Michelle. But anyway please don’t repeat anything I said, will you?”

“Your secrets are safe with me, Flem. Bear that mind.” She was better at it than he was. “See you!”

It wasn’t until he was out of the building that Michelle Flint realised that Flem had not divulged anything. It made her smile.

He sat in his car for moment to line up his thoughts on what the constable had told him. The deceased had a bit of a reputation as a ladies’ man. A jealous husband somewhere, she reckons. It was

definitely a possibility but he needed more, otherwise it would be needle in haystack time. He knew he'd have to talk to Ryan's wife but it wasn't something that he looked forward to. She would have only just learned that her husband had been murdered, so she was unlikely to be in top form anyway, let alone hearing that her husband played away from home. Still, it had to be done, and he was the man who had to do it. He started up his vehicle, trying to not think about what he was going to say until he had to say it.

He parked outside the house, walked up the path to the front door and knocked. A woman in her late thirties answered. Not the grieving widow by the looks of her, probably a friend or relation there to support her, Flem thought.

"Oh, hi. I'm looking for Mrs Ryan. Lyndon Ryan's wife."

"I'm Pat Ryan. And you're another bloody copper. What do you want?"

Flem, taken aback, stammered, "You? You're his wife? I mean, yes, I'm a police officer, you're right. Would you mind if I asked you some questions? Unless you're too upset. I know it's really soon and you must be traumatised. I could come back later, if you like?"

She looked at him, looking uncertain and let out an amused snigger.

"You're not very keen about doing this, are you? No, don't worry, it's all right. Come in. I'll make us a drink."

"Thanks, Mrs Ryan. A coffee would be good," Flem said automatically, sounding relieved. He needed to get his mind back on track.

Barely a day after the murder of her husband, Pat Ryan didn't look like a grieving widow. Her face was carefully made up, perhaps a touch too

much rouge but he'd seen worse. She was trim and muscular, looked like she ran long distances or swam a lot. She wore tightfitting jeans and a pristine T shirt and had pinned up her hair. He followed her into a neat kitchen, perching himself on a stool by the breakfast bar. 'Nice place,' he said. 'Just white, no sugar.' She leant against bench by the kettle, waiting for it to boil, watching him as if she was appraising him. 'So, what do you want to know, Mister Policeman?'

'Sergeant Ian Fleming, Mrs Ryan. And let me say first that we are doing everything we can to catch the person who,' Flem paused for a second, 'who did this. We'll find him, you can be sure of that.'

'Well, if you do, let me know and I'll shake his hand.' She looked up at him, watching him for his reaction. It caught him by surprise, so he played it with a straight bat.

'Ah. I take it things weren't rosy.'

'Things were definitely not rosy, Sergeant. I'm sure you've heard that he was not a nice man. It wasn't a secret around here.'

'I have heard that, yes.' Flem spoke carefully. 'And yet you stayed together.'

'Because I genuinely believe he would have killed me if I'd tried to leave him. He was pretty quick with his fists when he got angry. And where could I have gone? To the police? Do you think you lot would have protected me?'

'I would have, yes.'

'Ha! You'd be the only one, Sergeant. And it could even be true because I don't think you're actually from here, are you?'

Flem shook his head and said, 'Devonport.'

'Here's your coffee. It's hot.'

They blew and sipped in silence, neither of them quite sure of the other. He wished he could assure her that she would have been safe even here in Burnie if she had reported him but he knew that she probably wouldn't have been. No wonder she wasn't grieving if he had been bashing her as well. She spoke with a bitter edge. "You know when that Commander bloke came around in the morning, with a woman copper of course, and he told me that Lyndon had been found dead, and I said, 'Are you sure?' they thought I didn't want to believe that my darling husband was dead but really I was making sure that he was gone because I didn't want to give myself false hope, like when you know you've got seven numbers in Lotto but you recheck them three times just to be sure. I couldn't wait for them to leave the house so that I could dance around in happiness."

She looked at him, defiantly. "You look shocked, sergeant but I've had to live with him for more than twelve years. All those years of getting more and more afraid every minute of every day. Are you married?"

"My wife died seven years ago."

"Do you want to know how bad it was for me? I wish I had died seven years ago. And don't think that it never went through my mind, either. But then he would have been alone with our daughter, she's the reason why we got married in the first place, and I couldn't do that to her. And what will you lot do? You'll protect him even though he's dead, won't you? Nothing about what he was really like will get out, will it?"

What could he say? He knew she was right. Stuart Belbin had told him as much. He now realised that the Commander knew all of this, knew exactly what Ryan was like, and he had, in his own way, tried to prepare

him for it so that he wouldn't jump to conclusions without giving the investigation its due diligence. For Flem, being a police officer in his hometown was exactly what he had always wanted to be, nothing more, and he wanted to be good at it. He knew the Lyndon Ryans of the world existed, even in Police Tasmania, but he would never understand them as human beings. He wanted Pat Ryan to know that he for one wasn't like that but she spoke first. "Answer me this, Sergeant. Will Lyndon be buried with full police honours? You know, officers in full uniform lowering the casket while a bagpipe plays, his cap on the coffin, wreaths and all that? A carefully edited eulogy and a big ad in the Advocate? He will, won't he?"

Flem turned his face away, didn't answer, swallowed. He put his cup down, half drunk, on the bench. Then looked at her and said, "I am so sorry."

Pat Ryan nodded but said nothing. Flem felt physically sick.

"I'll go now. Thanks for the coffee."

"I'll see you out."

At the door, Flem said earnestly, "Thanks Mrs Ryan. I mean it, I'm grateful. I don't know if I would have been so cooperative in your position. I reckon the funeral will be official and formal rather than heartfelt but you are right. If it's any comfort, I won't be attending." It sounded pathetic, so little in the face of so much, but Pat Ryan appreciated his awkward attempt to be on her side.

"That will make two of us. I've booked in a bad migraine on Friday. And just to let you know, as soon as I can change it, my name will be Pat Polden again. That's my maiden name. Miss Patricia Maria Polden. And

if I can possibly manage it my daughter will be Linda Polden. And as soon as we can, we'll be out of this shithole town. I don't want him to be just dead, I want to be completely rid of him. Do you understand?" She looked hard at him as she spoke.

"Yeah, I reckon I do," he replied quietly. Yes, even if he couldn't understand her husband's behaviour, he could understand her reaction. In that moment there was nothing to say. It was time to leave.

Flem sat in his police ute, thinking that he was far happier doing normal, everyday stuff than this detective business. Ryan hadn't been the most popular bloke, that much was obvious. Therefore, it was most likely that this was a crime of passion, revenge of some sort, and by the sounds of it, the possibilities included the husband of any good-looking female on the north west coast that he had had a go at. On the other hand, you wouldn't expect someone to strangle him to death over that. Get a couple of mates together, give him a good belting after dark for sure but not murder. And Ryan was a police officer, which would surely make any angry partner think twice about revenge, especially here on the Coast where everyone knew everyone.

He couldn't see any reason to stay in Burnie, so after picking up some lunch, he headed back to Devonport. The Commander had said that he would get someone senior from the Southern District to come up as Officer in Charge, and although Flem wasn't looking forward to being told what to do by some know-it-all from Hobart, he was the Senior Investigating Officer and he would have to work with whoever got



tapped on the shoulder. Past experience told him that most officers from the big smoke considered the North West Coast, and Devonport in particular, as a backwater awash with uncouth yokels who ought to be grateful for any leadership from the south but who rarely were. It was a misapprehension reinforced by the fact that a few of the young police officers who were appointed to the Coast put in for transfers as soon as they could, unimpressed with the slow pace of life. In his experience, the people who came up from the south were rarely attuned to how things were done here and there were memorable occasions when he had had to pour oil on waters set bubbling by their arrogance and condescension.

Having someone who didn't want to be here lording it over him was another bloody thing to look forward to.

## Chapter 6

As soon as he walked into the station, the constable on desk duty warned him that some bloke from the south was waiting for him in the cubicle that served as his office. Grumpy bugger, too. “Oh joy,” said Flem wryly, “Divine guidance from the great south!” He went up the stairs, expecting the worst but when he saw who was waiting for him, he broke into a relieved smile.

“I thought they were going to send up someone who knows what they’re doing. Instead they send me you! Did you draw the short straw?”

“What are you talking about? I had to fight the others off to get this assignment, matey!”

“Yeah, right! Good to see you, Whitt. How the Hell are you?”

“Not bad, all things considered. What about you?”

Detective Chief Inspector Alan Whittaker wasn’t used to sitting on the other side of the desk but seeing it was Flem, he said he’d put up with it. They had gone through the Rokeby Police Academy together, had even chased the same woman for a while until she had decided on Flem. Whitt had stayed in the south, carving out a career in CIB while Flem and Ivy had gone back up the coast as soon as they could. Whenever they had crossed paths, Whitt had reminded Flem that Ivy’s choice had been a travesty, that he’d obviously had something over her, that one day he’d investigate it properly, but all banter ceased when Flem and Ivy were told that the cancer had already metastasised, that it had already invaded her lymphatic system, that it had already exploded into her liver, and that there was no hope. Flem had been left with their two young boys. Rufus

was three; Raphael not yet one. Whitt had driven up to Devonport for the funeral and they had wept together.

Since then, they had kept in touch through the occasional email. As is the way of these things, contact became less frequent but they had never had a falling out over anything and had remained mates even though Whitt was likely to become a Commander before he was forty while Flem had peaked at Senior Sergeant, a promotion he had only reluctantly accepted and he showed no inclination to go any further up the greasy pole. Neither men were given to articulating such thoughts but had they been questioned about how their different life trajectories had impacted on their friendship either one of them would have said that they were confident that one would always be able to rely on the other.

“You’re looking well, Flem.”

“You too, Whitt.”

“Well, we both know that’s a crock. I look like shit. I’ve put on at least another stone since going off the smokes. You look like you could still lace up the boots.”

Flem smiled.

“What? Oh, don’t tell me you’re still playing? We’re pushing forty, mate. Leave that to the kids!”

“Yeah, whatever! How’re things with you really?”

“Great! The job’s giving me ulcers. Lynnette’s cleaning me out in the divorce and Jason has stopped talking to me because I’m a fascist pig, apparently He’s eight years old, for God’s sake. Where does he pick up

shit like that? I'm living my life in soap opera clichés and social media memes.”

“You should get yourself transferred up here, mate. Enjoy the quiet life. Come fishing.”

“No bloody way. There is too much serious crime up here. It's safer in Hobart”

Flem shook his head in mock despair. “Getting someone topped is the only way I can get you up here, mate. I haven't seen you for ages.”

“I know, I know. I'm a slack arse. Anyway, what do you reckon about what's going on here?”

“I'm sure you know as much as I do. A copper from Burnie, Lyndon Ryan, a sergeant in CIB was strangled and his body dumped in one of my team's vehicles when he ducked out for a slash. Middle of the night, up on the Bluff.”

“What do we know for sure?”

“That he was universally disliked, especially by women. Ryan that is. Hen's gay, so all the women love him”

“Ah. Jealous husband, then?”

“Maybe. At the moment, we've got nothing. But now you're here, it will all be solved by tea-time, I'm sure.”

“Yeah, right. You are the investigating officer, remember? It's all up to you, big boy!”

“We're fucked then, aren't we?”

When Flem offered him a bed at his place, Whitt refused, saying he'd rather waste Police Tasmania's meagre resources on a room at the Gateway. He knew that all three bedrooms at Flem's place on North

Street were taken and he didn't want to upset the family's rhythm. "But I'll come and have a beer on the deck with you as soon as."

"Make sure you do! It's good to see you, Whitt. Whatever you need, just let me know and if we've got it, it's yours. Get yourself unpacked and I'll get an office sorted for you by lunchtime."

"Yeah, good to see you, too. And I'm happy to share yours, if you don't mind."

"Who'd have thought that we be working together like this again, eh?"

"And we both know you should be the O-i-C."

"Fuck no, I don't even want to be the Senior."

"You've got no choice, matey. You're Johnny on the spot. And you've got that little crown above the stripes, eh? Never thought I'd live to see you accept a promotion. Someone must have something over you, mate."

"It wasn't my choice, I can tell you that. And I hear you're about to get Commander. The big time, mate. You won't have to get your hands dirty ever again!"

"Nothing's sealed yet." Whitt had the grace to look bashfully askance. They both knew that barring any major stuff ups, it was a done deal.

When Whitt left to get himself sorted at the nearby Gateway Hotel, Flem considered what needed to be done next and stopped smiling. When things go to plan in a major investigation, there is an obvious suspect and you go as hard as you can in the first couple of days; put as much pressure on as humanly possible but in this case there was absolutely no one they could immediately put into the picture. The morning's close search of the area around the lighthouse, an exercise referred to as an

emu bob and to be avoided as much as possible, drew a handful of spectators but found nothing of any consequence.

Anyway, tomorrow was a new day and surely he was bound to come up with something after a night of decent sleep. Surely.

## Chapter 7

When Flem arrived at Wenvoe Street in the morning, two take-away coffees in hand, he was greeted with “Sarge, I don’t know if it is anything but this morning a woman handed in a phone. She reckons she caught her son with it and he said he’d found it near the lighthouse yesterday. I thought it might be Hen’s.” Constable Aaron Reeve was on front desk duty, doing his best to interact as little as he could with the public. A tall, athletic young man, he was not yet used to sitting behind a desk or sitting anywhere come to that. Front-desk duty was his least favourite part of the roster, even though he knew he had to do his share. He preferred to be out doing things, running around like a kelpie at a sheep farm or riding the trails on his BMX like a maniac, looking like he was too old and too big to be on a bike too small. Despite all the ants in his pants, Flem was sure that if Aaron stayed in the job, he would make a good, hard-working country cop.

Flem wandered over to have a look at the mobile. “Hen hasn’t said anything about losing his phone, has he?”

“Not to me, Sarge,” Aaron looked up at Flem, trying to work out if he’d done the right thing in mentioning it. It probably had nothing to do with the murder or with Hen, but you never knew.

“You did the right thing, Aaron. Always better to be safe than sorry. Where is it?”

“In the Lost and Found box. I don’t know if there’s any charge left in it but someone will have a power lead, though. It’s a new Galaxy. Pretty flash.” He was going to add that it was password protected but thought

better of admitting that he'd already had a play around with it. It could be evidence and tampering with it could have repercussions down the line, and anyway Flem would soon enough find out for himself that it was locked.

"Thanks, Azza. Where's the book?"

Flem signed the phone out and slipped it into his pocket. It was probably nothing. He'd get to it later. It was typical though; an entire parade of bobbing emus found nothing but some bloody kid manages to find a mobile phone.

When Whitt arrived he handed him a coffee. "White, no sugar, same as me. Memory like an elephant."

"Thanks, mate."

"So, what do you want to do first?"

"Have my coffee. Set up the incident room. Work out what to do. You're the SIO: what do you want to do?"

"Yeah, set up the room. Not that we've got anything much to put on the whiteboard yet, though. Lyndon Ryan sounds like he was a bit of arsehole. Apparently he came on heavy with anything in a skirt."

"Jealous husband?"

"Possible, strangling him though?" Flem sounded dubious, Whit nodded in agreement. He took another sip of coffee and studied the cardboard cup intently, before asking, "But what makes you think it wasn't?" He made it sound like it wasn't a challenge, more of a spark for discussion. At least that's how Flem took it.

"Two highly inadmissible ideas. First, when you find out someone's having it off with your wife, you may well go mental and have a go at



the bloke, but actually kill him? Have you ever actually heard of anyone doing that? I mean it's possible but how likely? A hiding yes, and that often that's only because the husband has to save face." Still studying the take-away container, Whitt nodded again, so Flem went on. "Second, I get the impression that this was a clean hit. There are no prints, no context, no evidence of Ryan trying to fight his assailant off. You know and I know that strangling someone the size and strength of Ryan isn't going to be easy, especially if Ryan is fighting back."

Whitt looked up and asked, "Are you suggesting it was a professional hit? In which case, it could well be someone paying someone else to do it, which takes us back to aggrieved husbands. Any known professional stranglers in the area?"

"No, I'm not saying that but I'm also not ruling it out."

"Fair enough. But at this stage, the most likely bet is a jealous husband, agreed?"

"Hmm," said Flem, which meant that he wasn't convinced.

"A crayfish says that'll be what it was," Whitt proposed.

"I'll think about it. Let's go and see what the pathologist has come up with. You never know, there might be some DNA under the fingernails."

"I bloody hope so, otherwise we've got nothing"

On the way down to the carpark, he introduced Whitt to Aaron. "This is Constable Aaron Reeves, he's in my team. Azza, this is Detective Chief Inspector Alan Whittaker. We trained together, years ago. Despite appearances, he's a good bloke." The constable stood up to salute, "Pleased to meet you DCI." Whitt gave a half smile in return, and briefly

touched his temple with his index finger, then followed Flem to the basement carpark.

As they got into the vehicle, he said, “Still over-sharing, I see.”

“What do you mean? What over-sharing?”

“And bit casual with the troops, eh? I’m surprised you didn’t tell him to call me Whitt!”

“Geez! What’s wrong with what I said?”

“You can’t get too close to your subordinates, mate. You are the only sergeant who gets to call me Whitt. I’d have the balls of anyone else who tried that.”

“What? Do you want me to call you ‘sir’ now?”

“Just keep yourself at a bit of a distance, that’s all. Trust me, Flem. When the shit hits the fan and you haven’t built yourself a good fence, it will be you that gets thrown under the bus.”

Flem pressed the remote lock to his all-wheel-drive police utility which dutifully responded with the appropriate beeping noise.

“Still mangling your metaphors, I see.”

Once they were seat-belted, they set off for the Mersey General Hospital, a rambling, shambolic, puce-coloured building situated on the highway near the Latrobe roundabout, each man keeping his thoughts to himself for the duration for the ten minutes it took to get there. Despite the hospital having been stripped of many of its medical functions due to governmental rationalisations, it boasted an impressive helipad that was only called into action for serious road accidents and when injured bushwalkers were choppered out of the state’s many perilous gorges and

ravines. In the hospital they were assessed and stabilised there before being either carted off or flown to somewhere else where the real doctoring happened. It no longer had a fully functioning A&E and the number of ward beds had shrunk after every election. Very few specialists bothered to use its consultancy rooms but Barry Stresnecki used the pathology theatre next to the morgue whenever he had to perform an autopsy. He just about had the basement to himself.

When they pulled into the carpark, Flem said, “Just the man we’ve come to see,” pointing to small knot of smokers standing huddled out of the wind, under a concrete cover way at the back of the building, the obligatory distance away from the rear entrance. As a recent ex-smoker, Whitt was very familiar with the feeling of being outcast that united the nicotine addicts.

“I reckon the medical profession has the majority of smokers left,” Whitt said. “I wonder why that is.” He didn’t sound as if he really cared at all. He sounded like he wanted to join them.

“You’d think they’d know better, wouldn’t you?” said Flem with the empathy of someone who had never smoked in his life. “Let’s go and see what the good doctor has to say.”

Whitt gave a little shiver as they strode towards the pariahs. No wonder everyone wore puffer jackets in this place: the cold wind blew right through you. He could see why Flem preferred his padded bomber jacket and boots: when they talked about crisp clear winter days on the coast, they meant bloody freezing. He put his hands into the pockets of his suit jacket to keep them warm.

Flem made the introductions and after the how-do-you-dos, Barry pinched out the butt of his cigarette, discarded it in the sand-filled bucket and said, “Right, gents, follow me.” Inside the building, the ambient temperature was marginally warmer than outside. “There are a couple of interesting points with this one,” he said as they entered his office, a small space with a window into the autopsy room. The stainless-steel dissection table was devoid of corpses and scrubbed clean. It looked like an empty kitchen in a large restaurant. “Some of this you already know but let me run through the list. Full report in due course. Take a pew. Just chuck those folders on the table there.” Everybody got themselves seated.

“First off, there was nothing to suggest that the locus of the death was different to where he was found, so I’d say that he was murdered where he was found or near to. Obviously not in the police vehicle but in that area. Also, the mortises suggest that he hadn’t been dead for long before he was moved.”

“The mortises?”

“Rigor mortis, muscles hadn’t stiffened yet except his eyelids and a bit around his jaw, I’ll get to that in a minute. Now I know he wasn’t killed in the car, just to set you minds at rest, because of livor mortis, blood pooling, what they call lividity, had started when his heart stopped beating and it wasn’t where it would be if he’d been sitting in a car. It would have pooled in his buttocks, right?”

“I guess so, yeah”

“Yeah. And the third mortis, Algor Mortis, the changing of body temperature confirms both of them.”

“How do you know that, Barry?”

“Because I stuck a thermometer up his arse the other night, Flem. Jeez, you’re funny!”

“Thanks mate, I really needed to know that.”

“Next, he was asphyxiated with a cloth of some sort, probably silk, to be confirmed. Made a mess of his larynx, so whoever did it was strong.”

“Okay. He was strangled and moved to Hen’s truck shortly before he found him. Small window, eh?”

“I’d bet on it. But there are a couple of other things. First toxicology analysis found, alcohol and benzodiazepine, which suggests he had trouble sleeping. although mixing booze with sleeping tablets often keeps you awake rather than send you to sleep. And it can really go wrong as well. If you take too much of them together, it can kill you. Of course, I have no idea if that is of any importance or not, seeing as the cause of death was asphyxiation. I’ll leave that to the experts.”

“That’s us, Flem,” replied Whitt.

“You said a couple of things. What else has caught your eye Barry?”

“Well, it’s this. Why was the body moved? In every other case I know about, it’s either because of fear of being found out or trying to shift the blame, the attention away from the murderer, right? But not in this case. It’s like the opposite of concealment, wanting it to be found. And there was no post-mortem abuse, no trying to disfigure the corpse, no burning it, no dismemberment, nothing. A couple of marks where it had been moved but overall the body was treated with what I can only describe as respect. And that makes me wonder in what scenario would that happen? The only thing I can come up with is that it was done without passion, that it was done, how can I put this, calmly and professionally.”

The three men looked at each other without speaking, letting that sink in, considering it and its implications.

“Anyone spring to mind, Flem?”

“If it was a professional job, there’s no one around here. I mean, we’ve got a couple of head cases for sure, but no professionals. No, I can’t see it.”

“Well, it was just an impression. Like I said, I’ll leave all that stuff to you boys. Anything else you want to know before I kick you out?”

Only Whitt knew how close he had come to asking the doctor for a durry.

In the warmth of four-wheel drive, Flem asked Whitt what he thought.

“It seems pretty far-fetched to me. I suppose it’s possible. He was a police officer after all. Someone may have had it in for him for something, I suppose. Does this kind of thing happen often up here?”

“There are no professional hitmen here, as far as I know. And there haven’t been any professional hits either. Oh, I don’t know. Stranger things have happened, I suppose.”

“At least we can write something up on the white board. Victim was an insomniac. What we need is a big clue, like in the movies.”

“There’s one basic problem with that, Whitt. This ain’t no movie.”

## Chapter 8.

After work, sitting at the cluttered table in his dining room, Flem spun the phone around in his hand as he thought. Hen had confirmed that it wasn't his, and that it wasn't Keith's either. It seemed to him to be too flash a phone to be written off by whoever lost it but no one had come in to ask about it. It probably had nothing to do with the investigation but he really wanted to have a look at what was on it, see who it belonged to, even only to let them know that they'd found it. Just a quick squiz before anyone else got to it. It was frustrating that the bloody thing was locked and there was no way he'd guess the password in three goes.

"Nice phone, Dad. When did you get that?" At eleven years old, Rufus was all long thin limbs, long unkempt hair and cheek. He glanced at his father sitting at the dining room table, twirling the Galaxy as he cruised past on his way to the fridge.

"Don't eat now, you gannet. Tea's half an hour away."

"I'm starving now!"

"Starving, Jesus! God knows where you put it all! The amount you eat, you should be as fat as a pig."

Eating two slices of cheese, Rufus joined his father at the table. "So, what with the fancy phone, Daddio?"

"Lost property, mate. Someone brought it to work but it's password protected. Very annoying!"

"Can I have a look?" He reached across and Flem handed it over. It wasn't likely but you never knew with kids these days. He watched as Rufus looked at the screen, then handed it back to his father.

“You need an ADB on your computer, I reckon.”

“A what?”

“An Android Debug Bridge. It’s just some software that lets your computer talk to the phone. But you’ve got an old Powerbook, Dad, so it’s not compatible. Bad luck, rubber duck!”

“How do you know this stuff?” Flem asked, impressed and concerned in equal measure.

Rufus smiled at his father. “Jeez, Dad, everyone knows how to break into a phone.”

“Well, I bloody don’t!”

“That’s because you’re not in the business of stealing them and selling them, are you Dad?”

“Big market for that in Devonport Primary School, is there?” Flem’s sarcasm was met with the same from his son.

“Huge! Especially by kids whose fathers refuse to let them have a phone.”

Flem watched with exasperation as his eldest casually strolled out of the room without looking back, having made his point and now undoubtedly on his way to torment his younger brother. He’d give it fifteen minutes before the yelling started. In the meantime, he considered if there was anyone who’d be able to do that bridging thing and who he could trust. One obvious name sprang to mind.

He picked up his old I-phone and called Hen.

“G’day Sarge. What’s up?”

“I’m after Ledge, Hen. I want to ask him something about computers. Is he about?”



“He’s right here.” He heard Hen telling Keith that Flem wanted to talk to him.

“Evening Coach. How’s it going?”

“Yeah, good thanks, Ledge. Listen mate, do you know anything about ADBs?”

“Er, I’m going to need some context, Flem.”

“Computer shit. To get an Android to talk to my laptop.”<sup>[1]</sup><sub>SEP</sub>“Right. Android Debug Bridge. Yeah, what about it?”

“Jesus, how come everyone knows about this stuff except me?”

He could hear Ledge laugh. “Not everyone, Coach. Craig wouldn’t know either!”

Flem heard Hen saying, “Fuck off! Coppers don’t need to know that because we’ve got an entire Forensics department to do that for us!”

Flem interrupted.” “Listen Ledge, put Hen back on for a minute,” he said urgently. “Hen, don’t tell anyone about this. I could be contaminating evidence here so just for the moment, keep it under your hat. All right?”

“No worries, Sarge. Especially as I haven’t got a clue about what’s going on. Here’s Keith back.”

“So, I’m assuming you want to break into a phone or another laptop or something. What brand is it, Coach?”

“It’s a Galaxy phone.”

“And what kind of computer have you got?” Ledge was in business mode.

“An Apple Powerbook. Rufus reckons it won’t work.”

“Rufus is right. You need a PC. Plenty at the station, I reckon.”

“Bugger! I’m trying to do this on the quiet.”

“Right, got you. What about if I come over this evening and bring my laptop? I’ve got some semi-legal software that allows me to mirror image whatever’s on the phone. That way, whatever happens you won’t leave any clues that you’ve been tampering with it.”

“Is that legal? I mean, I don’t mind stretching it a bit but I can’t break the law, mate.”

“As far as I know, it’s a grey area. All we’re doing is copying what on the phone to have a look. If we can’t find anything, we wipe the copy and you can hand it to the technical people to look for hidden files and stuff and no one will know that you’ve had a sneak peak.”

“That sounds all right. Let’s do it. Come over after tea, eh?”

Later, when the boys were pretending to be asleep, Hen, Ledge and Flem sat around the dining table. The pendulum light made it look like they were the last remaining players in an all-night poker game. That Hen and Ledge had been sworn to secrecy added an undercurrent of tension. Ledge turned the phone by pressing both the power button and the volume button at the same time, holding them down until a list of options appeared on the small screen.

“See this, Coach? If you ever want to completely erase everything on your phone, choose the factory reset option. It will wipe everything.”

“We’re not doing that, are we?” Hen asked.

“No. The plan is to access the source code and remove the password. Then open the phone and copy everything that’s on the phone onto the laptop. Then put the password back and close the phone again. No one will be able to see that we’ve snuck in and out.”

“You make it sound easy, Ledge.”

“I knew my degree in IT would come in handy one day.”

Ledge scrolled down to the developer option and enabled the USB debugging. Then he plugged one end of a lead into the phone and the other into his laptop and transferred the ADB from the toolbox onto his laptop. Flem and Hen watched intently as his fingers confidently pressed various keys. He paused, looking at his screen. Flem thought he looked anxious. He relaxed when Ledge gave himself a little fist pump in response to a command prompt opening up on screen. He ticked the box that said “administrator”, pressed another key and made a note of a series of letters and numbers and then typed in “adb shell rm/data/system/gesture.key” in the command box and sat back in his chair, looking pleased with himself. Flem looked at him uncertainly and asked, “What did you just do?”

“Had a bit of guess and it worked out, by the looks of it. Usually passwords are stored in the data system as a gesture key. So basically what I’ve done is remove the whole file. That’s what rm means. Remove. So now there is no password. We can shut down the phone down the phone, then fire it up again, no password required, copy everything onto the laptop, then shut the phone down again and then put the password back. Easy peasy!”

“And what if your guess had been wrong?” Flem looked at him.

“We’d have been up the creek.”

“Fuck, now you tell me!”

“I had this coach once, who said if in doubt, give it a go and we’ll discuss options later. No one, he said, gets anywhere without giving it a

go. I seem to remember we won the premiership and the Grand Final that year.” Keith sounded pleased, as if he had been waiting to say that since starting the exercise.

“That coach sounds like a fucking idiot! I’ll make a cup of tea while you put everything back as it was, eh?”

“I’ll give you a hand, Sarge.”

In the kitchen, when Flem had put on the kettle, Hen asked him how illegal what they had done actually was, whether it could be seen to be contaminating evidence.

“It depends. First, if there’s nothing there, which is most likely no one needs to know anything about it. Chances are no one will claim it anyway. But say in the unlikely event that there is something incriminating that links it to the crime, we’ll get a warrant and hand the phone over to the lab, and the white coats will examine it and find it and the whole thing will be a continuous part of the investigation. If it goes to trial it’s up to the judge if he accepts it.”

“So, we say nothing, eh?”

“Why would we say anything to anyone?” Flem challenged.

“No reason at all, Sarge.” Hen nodded his head as if he were agreeing with himself rather than with Flem.

“Don’t worry, Hen. It’s not going to affect your sergeant’s exam, mate. We’re not doing anything bad. We’re investigating the murder of a fellow officer. That’s the focus.”

“Yeah Sarge. I get it.”

When they brought the tray with cups and chocolate digestives from the kitchen to the dining table, Keith was done.

“There you go, exactly as it was. No one will ever know that we snuck in and out. Digital ninjas!”

“Don’t ever go over to the other side, Ledge. You’re enjoying your nefarious activities far too much.”

“I just love a plan coming together, Coach.” Hen snorted, then turned his face away from Flem.

“What?”

Hen shook his head without looking up..

“God, you’re puerile!” Keith said admonishingly but he was giggling as well.

“What? I have no idea what you’re on about!” Flem was genuinely confused by their sudden change in behaviour. Both of them suddenly seemed very young.

“Small things amuse small minds!”

“Not that small!”

And they laughed again.

“Jesus Christ! Will you two settle down? Let’s have a look if there is anything that helps us. If not, we wipe everything.”

Flem and Hen moved their chairs to either side of Keith, watching the laptop screen where the phone’s directory was winking at them.

“What do you want to see first, Coach?”

“Messages, emails, that kind of stuff, I guess, Ledge. See if we can find out whose phone it is.”

Keith followed the directory down to ‘messages’ and opened the file. Not sure of what he was looking for, he opened a recent message that had numerous photos attached and clicked on the file. The attached photos took a while to open but when they filled the laptop’s screen Keith screwed up his face and asked, “Is this what you would call typical police behaviour Coach?” He held up his computer so Flem could see what the photos were of.

Each one was of Lyndon Ryan having sex with a different woman. Flem was the first to speak, “Bloody Hell, that’s not normal, is it?”

“Why would he take selfies? I mean, he was a policeman; he’d know that if anyone found these, he’d be in deep shit!” Hen said, fascinated despite himself

“Sexual predators do that though, don’t they? Like trophies or something. There are websites where they post shit like this. Christ, let’s hope he’s not part of an organised sex ring or something. That’s all we need!”

“I’d heard he was a bit of a creep but this is something else, Sarge.”

“Sure is, Hen. And it’s provided us with a bloody long list of suspects. I imagine there’d be quite people in and around Burnie who’d like to see him dead.”

Keith suddenly stopped scrolling through the photos. “I’m pretty sure I know her!” he said, pointing to one of the women, the one whose skin was darker. “I mean, I’ve met her. I can’t remember when or where but her face is familiar.”

“Her face?”

“Shut up, Hen. Are you sure, Ledge? Can you remember who she is?”  
Flem pressed him. Keith covered his face with his hands, pushing them into his eyes and sat without moving, ignoring Flem’s unsaid entreaties while he worked through his memories.

“She is,” he said slowly at first but then with increasing certainty, “she is the partner of one of the librarians at Burnie. That’s how come I recognise her. Yes! There aren’t too many Indians in Burnie, so she stood out a bit. We met her at a function, a book launch or something. You were there too, Craig.”

“Gawd, I don’t remember that at all. But if you say so.”

“You sure, Ledge? Do you remember her name, by any chance?”

“Don’t think I ever heard it. But I do know the name of her husband. It’s Kevin Formby’s son, Jason. Librarian at Burnie, I’m sure that’s his wife.”

“Fuck me! Big Kev’s son? The president of the football club?”

“And mayor of this fair city, Coach.”

“Fucking Hell, when he finds out, he’s going to be pleased, isn’t he?”

“Well, I don’t want to perpetuate unsubstantiated rumours, Coach, but I’m not sure he’ll care that much. As far as I know, he has nothing to do with her because, allegedly, she didn’t pass the skin colour test, and therefore he didn’t have much to do with his son or grandkids anymore either. That’s just goss, though”

Flem looked at him with admiration and said, “You really are a bloody legend, mate. If you’re not single-handedly winning grand finals for me or finding ways to get into locked telephones for me, you’re providing

key information about a serious crime investigation for me. I owe you, mate. I really do!”

“Aw shucks, Coach!”

“Not only that but he’s also really good in bed.”

“Too much information, mate. Far too much!” Flem made a disgusted face. “And remember you’ll be back at work in the morning.”

“If not before. We’re not all of us deliberately celibate like you.”

Flem laughed. “Right! That’s it,” he said, shaking his head in mock exasperation. “Get out. Go home, the pair of you.”

As he saw them out of the door, he said, “I really can’t thank you enough, Ledge.”

“No worries, Coach. If there’s anything else I can do to help, just let me know.”

When they’d gone, Flem closed the door and switched off the porch light. He went back to the dining table and reactivated his ancient Powerbook. Keith had sent most of the recent messages and emails to him as soon as he’d hacked them. He hoped there would be something more there that he could use, something that would point him in the right direction. He wasn’t overly confident because people who are active in these sorts of activities only go so far in terms of revealing their identity. Generally they wanted acclaim but not to get caught and Ryan would be well aware of how traps are set up to be sprung on the unwary.

He looked more closely at the photos. He wasn’t averse to a bit of porn but training and experience allowed him to become detached when it was for work. He increased the size of the photo that Keith had identified so



that he could see everything clearly. He started by examining the room where the show had been staged. It looked like a hotel room, nothing much to identify it. He cut any wall decorations he could see, the bedclothes, bedside lamps and dropped them into folder he called “place”. It would be a sizeable task to track the locus down: there were rooms like that in dozens of hotels along the coast, and that was assuming it was somewhere local. It could be anywhere. But although it was telling him nothing, he kept going, kept searching for anything that would tell him something.

Next, he looked more closely at the two people involved. Ryan’s face was smug, triumphant but the woman was different, less engaged. He noticed that although it was obvious who she was, her face wasn’t clear, and the more he looked at her, the more it seemed that she’d been carefully positioned for effect. She showed, as far as he could tell, no affection, no pleasure. Maybe the woman was drunk. After a while, Flem closed his eyes, not wanting to see the image anymore. “You are a disgrace, Ryan. I don’t know what this is about yet but whatever it is, you are a fucking disgrace,” Ryan said to himself. He looked at his watch. It was a quarter past eleven, probably too late to call Whitt but he needed to tell someone.

“Sorry to wake you, mate, but I’ve got something. I thought you’d want to know immediately.”

“I wasn’t asleep. What’s up?”

“I think I’ve just found us a suspect. One with a good motive.”

There was silence as Whitt waited.

“Short version is that Lyndon Ryan was involved with a woman called Priti Formby, wife of Jason Formby, son of Kevin Formby.

Flem paused to let Whitt assimilate this new information.

“And Kevin Formby is?”

“The Mayor of Devonport. The president of Devonport Football Club. And of the bowls club. Real estate salesman. Property developer. Precious few members of the local business community who don’t owe him a favour or two. Old school operator. Get the picture?”

“A question. How the Hell do you know this?”

“Ryan has an entire library of happy snaps of him having sex with different women, none of who look like his wife. I don’t know who the others are yet but I do know that Kevin Formby has the ability to hurt people, Whitt. And murder wouldn’t be beyond the bastard.”

“You’re not going to tell me how you know this, are you?”

The pause threatened to extend to breaking point.

“Shit! You’ve got the photos, don’t you? How? What are you up to?”

“I’m going to send a phone that was found near the Bluff to the Forensics Unit in the morning.”

“I don’t want to know anything else, Flem. Just don’t fuck this up.”

“I’ll do my very best not to.”

“Good,” said Whitt. “Flem, whatever you do, I’ve got your back but just don’t make it hard for me, eh?”

“Appreciate it. Hey, Whitt?”

“What?”

“At least we’ve got a big lead now, just like in the movies, eh?”

“Good. Now get some sleep. We’ll talk in the morning.” And he hung up. Flem smiled to himself. He hadn’t realised how much he had missed

having someone on the same wavelength, someone with a shared history, someone who he didn't have to explain everything to. A mate.

## Chapter 9.

The next morning they were sitting in Flem's office with the door closed, waiting impatiently for the lab coats to go through their procedures and processes and tell them officially what they already knew. Neither were naturally inclined towards patience but there was little choice.

While they were waiting for the call, to kill some time Whitt suggested to Flem that a move to Hobart was the only way for him to advance his career, pointing out that most officers relocated at some stage and some spent their entire careers moving from place to place. "Even I did my time on the East Coast, in Swansea."

It wasn't the trump card he thought it would be. "Wasn't that when Lynette stayed in Hobart and you commuted for a year or two?"

"The beginning of the end, yeah. But there were other factors involved. In the end, to be honest, it was probably a relief for both of us. We only stayed together for Jason's sake, really."

"Sorry, mate, I didn't mean to be a dick, shouldn't have brought it up."

"Don't worry about it. It was always on the cards and in the end it wasn't that horrific really. Sometimes people just slip away, drift out of your life bit by bit until you get to the point where you no longer include them in your plans for the future. There's no hole that needs filling with grief or anger or whatever, not like if someone's torn out of your life when you're not prepared for it, like you and Ivy."

"Yeah, I get that."

“Anyway, you’re probably better suited here, where they turn a blind eye to your creative interpretations of standard policing process and procedures”

“Not me, mate. I do everything by the book, unlike you cowboys down south. And anyway, Ivy’s here, mate. I can feel her everywhere I go here. And I still need to feel her, to get my boys to feel her. That’s more important than any job to me.”

“That was exactly what you two were about, wasn’t it? For ages, I thought it should have been me, that she should have picked me but there’s no way I could compete with what you two had. I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again, even though I was cut up about it about at the time.”

“And I’ll say the same thing again as well. Both me and Ivy knew that. That’s why I thought it would be best if I put some distance between us. But then one day Ivy told me that I didn’t have to worry about anyone else, including you and that you were my best friend regardless and I’d be stupid to give that up. And she was right, of course.”

“To be fair, I didn’t make any effort to keep the friendship going either. Wasted years, eh? Still, I was sort of glad for you two as well. Everyone thought you were the perfect couple”

“Jeez, Whitt, don’t overdo it. We were far from perfect. We had our ups and downs like anyone else. There were a couple of times when it got a bit ropey. Having Rufus changed things too. God, and then when she got pregnant again when she was already sick, I was really worried about whether she could handle it but nothing was going to stop her having him. And I still wonder if having Raphael weakened her immune system. Stupid, I know”

“Yep, really stupid! She got a really aggressive cancer, mate. It had nothing to do with you or Raphael. It’s a bloody lottery, that’s all it is. And don’t take this the wrong way but it was nearly eight years ago. Might be time to get back in the saddle.”

“I don’t know. I still love Ivy, I suppose. It’d seem like a betrayal”

“That is plain silly, if you think about it. I can guarantee that Ivy would be nothing but happy for you and the boys if you found someone else. Or allowed yourself to be bloody found!”

“Thanks, Mum!”

“I know you don’t want to hear it but give it some thought, Flem. Just make sure you’re not stopping yourself from committing to a new relationship because you’re afraid that she might leave you as well, eh?”

Flem started to feel uncomfortable with the conversation. He didn’t need telling, and he didn’t want it either. He swivelled in his chair and looked out of the window.

That was the end of that.

“Stubborn bastard, aren’t you?”

Without looking at Whitt, he said, “Well, anyway it’s been good to talk to you about it. I really appreciate it, mate.”

Whitt didn’t push the issue any further. He said, “No worries, mate, any time. I love talking to brick walls.”

Flem looked away, let a moment of silence put an end to the conversation . Whitt took a deep breath and refocussed on the task at hand by asking, “All right. Where are those bloody lab coats? I’m going

to give them a hurry up, tell them to pull their fingers out, we are pursuing enquiries.“

Just then the landline phone on Flem’s desk rang. “Yes, it’s me. What have you found?”

Whitt raised his eyebrows.

“Really? Would you be able to send me all of them as Pict files? Great, that’s fantastic. And thanks for prioritising, I really appreciate it. Whitt? Yeah, sure. I’ll tell him. See you.” He replaced the phone in its cradle.

“You owe James Bond a drink. Is his name really James Bond?”

“Yes, it actually is. He’s a good bloke, looks nothing like a secret agent but refuses to be known by any other name.”

“Brave man. Anyway the photos are on their way.”

“And you’re convinced that it involves the mayor somehow because one of the photos show Ryan with the wife of his son?”

“It’s got to be, doesn’t it?”

“It’s possible but we keep an open mind, yes?”

“Of course. Everyone is innocent until proven guilty, right? Anyway I reckon we should pursue our enquiries by asking the fat prick to come in for an informal chat. Let’s see if he knows anything.”

“Good oh! I love an unbiased fishing trip!” Whitt replied. “Especially the dangling of the bait. And by the way, when I get back to Hobart and have that drink with James Bond, I’m going to tell him I was working with Ian Fleming.”

Kevin Formby wasn't at all happy to be asked to come to the station. It didn't befit a man of his stature. "What's this about, Flem?" he demanded but Flem said nothing, busying himself with recording equipment that needed only the touch of button to start. Whit looked coldly at the agitated, florid man sitting on the opposite side of the desk, his bulk spread uncomfortably on a plastic chair on the opposite side of the table. When Flem pressed the record button on the video machine and said in a clear voice, "Wednesday the thirteenth of July, twenty twenty-one. Interview with Mister Kevin Formby. Present are Senior Sergeant Ian Fleming and Detective Inspector Alan Whittaker, Criminal Investigation Branch. Interview commencing at two fifteen." Kev smiled uncertainly.

"That sounds very formal, boys. Do I need to get my lawyer in, Flem?"

"It is just an informal chat at this stage Mister Formby, but you are always free to ask for a lawyer to be present. Should you exercise that option we will suspend the interview until he or she is present. It's up to you." Whitt's reply didn't sound informal at all. He spoke clearly, deliberately without any soothing inflection, to let Big Kev know that this wasn't a friendly chat between mates. Flem said nothing. Formby toned down the bonhomie a notch. "No, no, there's no need for that. Always happy to help the police," Kev paused to ensure that everyone was on the same page as to how he was prepared to help, then added, "In any way I can. Anyway, I've got nothing to hide, so let's get the show on the road".

Even as he spoke, he seemed to realise that Flem wasn't looking at him while the other bloke was sizing him up like a hungry grey nurse at a



crowded beach. He looked from one to the other and could see that the tried-and-true matey jocularly tactic wasn't going to work at all, so he put on a serious face and asked, "So what do you want to know, Flem?"

Whitt went in brutally hard right from the off, stating that they had reason to believe that he had seen images of his daughter-in-law Priti Formby engaging in sexual acts with a man who was subsequently found murdered. Would he care to tell them what he knew about that? Formby rocked back on the chair, his eyes opening wide in confusion, his mouth opened but no sound came out.

"What? What are you talking about? What images? Jason's bloody wife?"

Formby seemed genuinely perplexed. "What the Hell is he on about, Flem?" Flem didn't respond, leaving the pushing to Whitt.

"Photos that were sent to your son Jason. Don't bullshit us Formby. You've seen them because your son has shown them to you, hasn't he? The photos are disgusting, aren't they? Your daughter-in-law doing stuff like that. I get it that you'd be badly pissed off. I would be, in your shoes. Angry enough to do something about it, eh?"

"What are you talking about? Jason hasn't shown me any bloody photos of anything. I hardly see him. But I'll tell you one thing; if someone had photos of my idiot son's ugly fucking wife at it with someone else, I'd shake the man's hand and hope Jason comes to his bloody senses and gives her the flick once and for all. I couldn't care less. Do you understand me?"

A quick glance between Whitt and Flem.

“Yeah, no. I’m not convinced, Mister Formby. Not convinced at all. Let me repeat the facts. A man was having an affair with your son’s wife and recording it for posterity. He sent the happy snaps to your son, maybe even to you. That man is now dead, murdered by person or persons unknown. Who do you think is our chief suspect?”

“I’ve already told you that I didn’t get any bloody photos. I didn’t have anything to do with that bloke’s murder. This is harassment. You’ve got nothing on me!” When he leaned back heavily in his chair, it threatened to collapse under him.

“Except that you are a prime suspect in a murder investigation,”

“This is bull shit! I’m going. You can’t stop me. And you Fleming, you’d do well to remember your place in this town!” Kev pointed his finger at Flem as he stood up, the plastic chair toppling over behind him. Flem remained impassive. Whitt said, “Your reluctance to assist our enquiries is noted, Mister Formby. However we do have more questions.”

“Do you, now? Well, I know my rights. I’m not going to say anything else. I want my lawyer here now!”

“As you wish, Mister Formby. For the record, please note that you haven’t been charged with any crime at this stage but you may be held for further questioning.”

Kevin Formby stood up, pulled his phone out of his pocket and scrolled through his contacts for his lawyer. When he was connected, he turned his back to the men sitting at the table. He ended the conversation with, “As quick as you can.” He turned around and looked at Flem, shaking his head with apparent sadness. “After everything I’ve done for you. I can’t believe it. I really can’t.”

Flem looked at the greying bulk looming up in front of him; a man well past his prime, trying to make himself bigger than he was, to impose himself on the situation. It was pathetic and he had to stop himself from either laughing or belting him. Formby hadn't ever done anything for him except try to get him to drop Keith from the side when he was coach. He'd tried to rattle Flem with an increasingly desperate list of threats, none of which had had the slightest impact. It had only been when Big Kev had mentioned his sons and the school they attended that Flem lost his smile. He had not said anything at the time, allowing the moment to slip by, almost unnoticed in a torrent of abuse and finger pointing but it had registered and Flem would never forget it. Or forgive it.

Kevin Formby walked out of the station when Alison Baillieu announced that his client had cooperated fully with the enquiry; had answered all questions and unless he was charged, the interview was now done and dusted. Both Flem and Whitt knew that there was nothing they could charge him with without any actual evidence. When she and Formby had departed after making their displeasure known to all within earshot, Flem closed the door of his office and he and Whitt sat down.

“Fuck!” Flem slapped his hands down onto his desk in frustration

“Yes, not our finest hour, was it?”

“That old prick is in it up to his neck.”

“That may well be but we've got nothing that we or the DPP can use. It'd never get up, mate!” Whitt said, eyes closed, leaning back in his

chair, legs stretched out in front of the desk. “I think I went too hard, too early, Flem.”

“It was joint decision, remember. Anyway the media will have a field day with this. He’ll make sure of that. He’s mates with Bradley Beach, the dickhead reporter from the Advocate newspaper. Fuck!””

“So? All that means is that the politicians and those jokers on the ABC will go on about law and order instead of jobs and growth for a while. It’ll blow over. It always does,” Whitt said, sounding big city cynical and unconcerned. It was probably true in the big city but for all its worldly aspirations, Flem knew that Devonport still operated with a small-town mentality. He could see that Formby’s way of doing things was a remnant from time when Devonport like every other town on the coast, was isolated and run by a handful of families at the time when the place had a big carpet with plenty of room for things to be under it. The problem was that people like Formby couldn’t or didn’t want to see that not only were those days long gone.

“He’ll divide the community even more than it already is. Formby still has a lot of clout here, Whitt. And him slagging off the cops is the last thing this place needs. It’s already haemorrhaging good young people, most of who bugger off as soon as they can. No, mate, it’s true. We have a few well-off retirees who buy their groceries at the Hill Street Store but there are far more pensioners who shop at Woolies and Coles on pension day. And we’ve got shitloads of young kids who just don’t give a fuck anymore, mainly because there’s nothing here for them but they can’t just pull up stumps and leave. So they get off their faces on cheap drugs, play on their computers all day and eat shit food. I know that happens everywhere but the only traffic jams we have in this place are around

Maccas and KFC. You can look at me as if I'm carrying on about nothing but my boys are growing up here and I don't want either of them becoming another statistic. We've got more youth suicides here on the Coast than anywhere in the world. And more fucking meth labs than anywhere else in the state. And arseholes like Formby exploit the situation. He talks about doing stuff for the community and how he loves the place and shit, and people believe him but all he's interested in is making a shitload of money for himself."

Whitt let the silence settle before responding with a studiously calm voice. "Correct me if I'm wrong here but I'm getting a faint impression that you're not the Mayor's greatest fan."

"People like him shit me, that's all," Flem said, less vehemently now that he'd got it off his chest. "They think they're maintaining the great Aussie tradition but they're just exploiting the shit out of people who aren't capable of standing up for themselves."

"All righty. Now that we've got that off our chest, shall we go on with the task at hand?" Whit looked Flem with a wry grin.

Flem took a breath, calmed down and replied, "Yeah, sure. Listen, I know that there are plenty of good people here too. A lot more than flogs like Formby."

"It's good to see that you're still prone to the occasional burst of over-excitement, Flem. I'd hate to find out that you've become sensible or anything."

"Oh, fuck off. Anyway, I'd better go and have a chat with Formby junior."

"Rather you than me. Use your natural charm, mate."



## Chapter 10

Driving back to Burnie on the Bass Highway again, Flem cursed himself for the mess he'd made of the interview with Kevin Formby. He'd been so sure that the mayor had been involved somehow but with the benefit of hindsight, he realised that there were at least two dozen other candidates. Not liking the bloke was hardly a sound reason to be putting him into the frame for murder. Flem didn't even know if Jason, let alone his father had actually seen the photo of his wife with Ryan. And he felt like he had railroaded Whitt into going along with his stupid idea. God, he hoped that any backlash wouldn't interfere with Whitt being promoted. He had to get back on top of this.

He considered how to go about talking to Priti and Jason Formby. The standard technique was to get people to open up in any way that worked, so he could simply bowl up to their house, take out the photo he had printed and ask them to explain themselves. But he wasn't at all sure that the shock tactic was going to work any better in this scenario. The problem was that he didn't know enough; he didn't understand; he had no strategy. Maybe the softly softly approach would work better. Although he never felt comfortable with trying to trap people into saying things that they ordinarily wouldn't reveal, he knew that he was quite good at gaining people's confidence and what had to be done had to be done. He was investigating a murder, after all. He really needed a coherent plan of action but nothing came to mind. Perhaps he was trying too hard. He turned up his radio and let Cold Chisel thump him in the chest for a few minutes. Who needs that sentimental bullshit anyway?

Instead of going to the Formby residence, he headed to the Burnie Public Library in the centre of town. He doubted Jason was at work but it might be worth having a chat with his colleagues. The library was housed in a modern, single story, purpose-built building on the edge of the CBD and according to the brightly coloured signage it ran children's hours three times a week and English conversation classes on alternate days, along with the usual array of regional library activities and guest talks. Apparently it was, or had recently been, Geology Week. Although the COVID pandemic had so far left Tasmania more or less unscathed, signs with QR codes decorated most walls and pump-action bottles of handwash were stationed on tables. It being a public place, Flem put on his face mask before entering, scanned the QR code and sanitised his hands. Police Tasmania had a duty to be seen to comply.

It was early afternoon and there were few people inside, none of whom bothered to look up as he walked up to the small customer service desk in the corner of the main room. The women behind the counter didn't stop their work but watched him approach. All three wore jeans and a windcheater emblazoned with "Burnie Public Library" and a badge saying "Reading Rocks". Dressed in his police issue black boots, blue pants and bomber jacket, Flem knew he didn't need to pull out his ID but he did anyway. The librarian closest to the desk gave it a cursory glance, then looked up at him, and asked how she could help.



“Hi. I’m Ian Fleming and I’m leading the investigation into a recent major crime. I’m looking for Jason Formby. I understand he works here as a librarian.” He smiled and hoped he sounded sincere and unthreatening.

“I’m sorry officer, Jason isn’t in today. He’s on leave. Started a couple of weeks ago and he isn’t scheduled to be back until the end of next week.”

“Not to worry, I’ll chase him at home.” He waited, hoping to be asked a question, or someone make some comment, anything to start a conversation.

“What’s it to do with? The murder of that policeman?”

“I can’t officially divulge that. But there haven’t been that many major crimes around here, if you follow my drift.” It was enough to open the floodgates.

“We heard he was strangled and his body dumped somewhere else,” she said excitedly, and pleasing Flem because no police car had been mentioned. One of the other women added, “It’s pretty scary when you think about it. You never think that it’ll happen in your own backyard, do you?”

The other two moved closer to the desk. One of them said, “Wasn’t it in Devonport?” Her colleague looked at Flem, “Was it?”

Flem smiled ruefully and replied, “I can’t really say.”

With a noticeable degree of rancour, the third, younger woman said, “If it was the man we all think it is, then I have no sympathy whatsoever. It wasn’t safe to go out anywhere with him around. If you wanted to see the atmosphere of a place go downhill fast, just let him in. You’ve never

seen so many women head to the toilets to hide as soon as he made an appearance.”

“I’ve heard that a few times, lately,” Flem acknowledged.

“He tried it on with my brother’s daughter, you know young Lisa, but Mitchell was there. Christ knows what would have happened if Mitch hadn’t threatened to punch his lights out there and then. The prick backed off pretty quick smart then. Funny that Mitch got pulled over twice in the next couple of weeks for traffic offences, though.” She turned her back on Flem, a tangible representation of what she thought about the corruption of Police Tasmania and went back to the sorting trolleys at the back of the workspace with a disproportionate level of aggression.

Flem felt obliged to defend himself and the vast majority of the force. “Look, I won’t deny there are a few bad apples but most of us try to do a good job.”

“Don’t worry about Janine, she’s a lovely lady really, just very protective of her nieces. I’m sure she doesn’t mean that all policemen are bad, do you, Neen?”

“Don’t I?” Janine wasn’t going to give an inch. “Well, Sergeant Fleming, if it were your seventeen-year-old daughter who he hit on, what would you have done? Reported him to your mates, knowing that nothing would happen?” Three sets of eyes regarded him as if it were a test and whether or not they would say anything more depended on his answer. He thought for a moment, the pornographic photos of Ryan with doped-up women pushing themselves involuntarily to the forefront of his mind.

“To be perfectly honest, I would probably not report him, no.” He paused, nodding his head as if he were agreeing with himself. “I’d probably belt the crap out of him. And then I would probably get suspended.” The two women at the front desk visibly relaxed. He went on, as if justifying himself for an as yet uncommitted crime. “What can I say? I only have boys but I love them more than anything but if I had a daughter I imagine it would be the same deal. And I am a long way from the getting a sainthood, I can tell you. So, no, I probably would not have reported him.”

“You’d be in the minority, though.”

“No, I don’t think I would, actually. And now you mention it, it would be different for me, wouldn’t it? I’m a policeman too, same rank, so it might be better if I did report him. He wouldn’t be able to intimidate me. But I might be a bit rough in arresting him, yeah.”

“Too many bent coppers, I reckon.”

”I don’t agree. I reckon the one eight one rule applies to the Force as it applies everywhere. One saint, eight ordinary people and one sinner. Hopefully I’m one of the eight.”

The two women standing at the desk nodded in agreement, Janine the book sorter was still unconvinced. Flem decide that no more was to be achieved here. “Anyway, I’d better quit before I get myself in more trouble. Nice chatting to you all.”

Before he’d physically moved, Janine’s voice came from the back of the workspace. “I’ll tell you one thing about Jason Formby. Just like you, he loves his kids. And he loves his wife as well. And everyone likes him.”

The other two both firmly nodded their agreement as she turned her back to signal that the conversation was over. But then she turned back around and added, “And don’t forget, your mate Ryan had a daughter who is nearly a teenager herself.” She slammed the book she had in her hand down on the trolley and stormed to the back of the library and out the door.

No one spoke. Flem stood for a moment, contemplating her words, fitting them into Pat Ryan’s anger. If this faintest of suggestions had any weight at all, then she was another credible suspect. He took a breath and pointed to the women’s windcheater and asked, “But now for something completely different. Here on the Coast, why are some beaches sandy and others right next to them are piles of big round pebbles?”

“The big pebbles will be sand when the tides are done with them,” replied one. “Grasshopper,” added the other with a giggle.

The first one said with mock solemnity, “Tides are like that.”

“Tides,” said Flem, tapping the side of his nose with his finger, “turn.” He looked over to where Janine had disappeared but she was gone. Apparently she wasn’t for turning.

He was about to drive off when a thought struck him. It would be good if he could confirm that Ryan was drugging women. It hadn’t come up in his interview with her but maybe Pat Ryan could shed some light on it. It was worth another quick word, seeing as he was in the vicinity anyway. He hoped she wouldn’t be too annoyed.

When she opened the door, she seemed pleased to see him. “Sergeant Fleming, how nice to see you again so soon. Have you come back for business or pleasure?”

“Still business, I’m afraid. Have you got a minute?”

“Sure. Come on in.”

She led the way back to her kitchen. This time he refused the offer of a drink.

“There’s one more thing I’m hoping you can help me with. Let me come straight to the point. Have you got any idea if your husband ever used Rohypnol.”

“Yes Sergeant, he did. They were to help him sleep, he told me. In fact he had a stash of them somewhere. You know that anyone can get them on-line, delivered straight to your door by Australia Post, eventually. Why are you asking?”

“Right,” he said, taking a deep breath. “Well, I’ll be blunt if you don’t mind. Your husband took selfies of the women he’s been with.”

Pat Ryan didn’t flinch. “That doesn’t surprise me.”

“Would it be asking too much for you to have a look at one of them to see if you can identify the woman? Just say if you don’t want to. I’d understand.”

“No, I’ll take a look. Nothing he’s done would surprise me.”

When he showed her the print, she looked closely at it. Her eyebrow lifted when she recognised the woman. “That’s Priti Formby, isn’t it? Well, that’s a surprise.” She studied the photo. “Actually, when you look closely at her, she doesn’t look normal, does she? Ah, that’s why you

asked about the Rohypnol, isn't it? She's been doped. Jesus Christ, he was an asshole, wasn't he? I know it sounds awful to say this about your own husband but I can't help being pleased that he's dead."

Flem smiled at her as took the photo and put it back into the pocket of his jacket. "I can't thank you enough. It can't have been easy."

But when she put her hand on his, he moved it away. "Ah, you have someone, sergeant," she said. "She's a lucky woman."

"I'd best be on my way."

In the hallway, she said, "If I were you, I have a chat with Priti's sister Rani. She's bound to know something. Her and Priti are close, I know that. I don't believe for a second that Priti was in this with Lyndon voluntarily. And it may well be related to the fact that Lyndon hated Jason Formby with a vengeance. I'm not sure why but Lyndon was ropeable anytime Jason's name came up. I'm no psychologist or anything but it seemed that he was in competition with Jason in some way. I'm not accusing anyone of anything though, you understand."

"Of course not, not at all. And thanks for your help. I am really grateful. I'll leave you alone now. Time to look after yourself and your daughter, eh?"

"I intend to, Sergeant. I intend to," she replied with a grim smile and closed the door.

The thoughts sparked by the conversation refused to line up in an orderly fashion in Flem's mind because they created more problems than they solved. On the one hand, he now had a definite connection between

Jason Formby and Lyndon Ryan. He had Ryan drugging Priti Formby and having sex with her that she couldn't possibly have consented to. And taking photos of it. Motive enough for anyone. But he couldn't entirely shake off the fact that Keith Burke had assured him Jason Formby was a good bloke, nothing like his old man. On the other hand, he knew that Keith's assessment was based on a casual acquaintance and being a fellow librarian was hardly a reason to exclude him from the list. But the staff at library, Formby's workmates, were equally convincing in their opinion of him as a good bloke. No one so far had had a bad word to say about the man. Still, he wouldn't be the first nice person who surprised everyone by committing a major crime. Someone raping your wife was a damn good motive.

Another issue he had was that Jason and Kevin were according to all accounts well and truly estranged, and perhaps there was something to be gained in that. The enemy of my enemy is my friend, or something like that, but was their estrangement real or simply something Kevin had perpetuated in public for some other reason? Flem was convinced that Formby senior was a devious bastard but no one gives up on their children in real life, do they? No matter how much you might disagree with them, how stupid they think you are, they are still your family. Flem couldn't imagine it, not even from Big Kev. There was something wrong here. It was time to have a chat with Formby junior.

He pulled up outside a neat, brick veneer house in Paraka Street. The front yard was securely fenced, the gate closed, the trampoline on the lawn a repository for a soccer ball, a plastic skateboard and other toys.

There was no car in the driveway and the venetian blinds shuttered the windows. From the outside at least, the place looked abandoned. Flem doubted that anyone would answer when he rang the bell. He counted to twenty, then rang again and restarted his counting. When he got to fifteen, the door opened a couple of centimetres through which two sunken, bleary eyes in an unshaven face struggled to focus. A hoarse voice asked, “What d’you want?”

“I’m Sergeant Ian Fleming. Can we have a word?”

“Jesus! What do you want to have a word about?”

“Can I come in?”

“If you must.” Jason Formby opened the door, turned his back on Flem and padded into the living room. Flem shut the door and followed him. The room was dark and stuffy but apart from an empty wine bottle and smudged glass on the coffee table, it wasn’t particularly untidy. It looked like someone had sat up watching television and drinking red wine all night.

“Excuse the mess.” Jason opened the blinds to let the light in, then asked whether Flem wanted a coffee.

“Sure, white with no sugar.” He followed Jason into the kitchen. A single plate, a knife and a fork and a cup had dried on the rack over the second sink. The benches had been wiped clean and the tea towel had been hung neatly over the handle of the oven door. Apart from the fact that Jason Formby had slept in to well after noon, everything seemed normal for a man living on his own.

Flem watched as Jason microwaved two cups with a couple of centimetres of milk in each while the Nespresso machine warmed up.



After thirty seconds, he dropped a coffee pod into the machine, placed one of the cups under the spout and pressed the button. He repeated the process another three times until both cups had two shots of coffee mixed with the warm milk. Without speaking he handed Flem one cup, and with the other in hand, padded back to the living room and sat down on one of the leather recliners. Jason sat on the matching sofa.

“Nice place,” Flem offered as a conversation starter.”

“Hm. How can I help you, sergeant?”

“You know a friend of mine. Keith Burke. He tells me you’re a good bloke.”

“I know Keith, yes. Not sure how he’d actually know that I’m a good bloke or not but I’ll take it,” Jason wasn’t going to be soft soaped. He waited a moment, then asked again. “What’s this about? You’re not here to tell me what Keith thinks of me, are you?” He didn’t strike Flem as being overly anxious, a reaction that threw him off balance. To be truthful, the conversation wasn’t panning out anything like how he’d imagined it would go. Time to change tack.

“Your wife not about, Mister Formby?”

“My wife, sergeant, hasn’t been about for more than a week, nearly two now. Not that it’s any of your business.” Jason sounded resigned rather than angry, which threw Flem even further off balance.

“Well, it might be,” he replied, reluctantly diving into the deep end before he felt comfortable in the shallows. “I’m investigating the murder of Lyndon Ryan.”

Jason’s reply again wasn’t at all what Flem had anticipated. He seemed more annoyed than anything else when he said, “I’d worked that out for

myself but what does that have to do with Priti leaving me? Are you suggesting that she's involved somehow?"

He was either telling the truth or he was a brilliant actor. Flem could do little else but plough on but he wasn't as confident as he'd like to have been.

"We're following up a few different lines of enquiry, Mister Formby, but yes we have reason to believe that there may be a connection," Flem said, hiding his lack of confidence behind a more official tone because the casual chat wasn't getting him anywhere.

Jason put his cup down on the coffee table. "Absolutely not. She, like every woman in Burnie, was afraid of him. Yes, I know he was a copper, one of your lot, but he was an absolute asshole. And none of this tells me why you are here, asking me vague questions."

There was a pause, a catching of breath. Flem knew that eventually he would have to confront him. The man seemed totally unaware of what was coming. Flem laid out the ground rules.

"First, just let me say that this is nothing more than a friendly chat before the serious investigations begin. I'm not recording what is said, so nothing can be used in evidence. I'm trying to get an overall picture. I accept that Sergeant Ryan was far from universally liked but he has been murdered and we need to find out who murdered him."

"Okay but what does that have to do with me? I hardly knew the man."

There was silence as Flem studied his coffee cup, letting the silence do the work. Eventually the penny dropped.

“What? You’re not suggesting I had anything to do with it, are you?”

Flem still said nothing.

“Oh for Christ’s sake! Why on Earth would I have anything to do with that?”

Again Flem thought the man seemed genuine but he couldn’t let it rest there now. Whatever his intuition was telling him couldn’t be allowed to stop him bringing out the heavy artillery at the appropriate time but something about the man made him keep his powder dry for the moment. The photo stayed in his pocket. Instead, he took another sip of his coffee, appreciating its bitter taste on the back of his tongue, aware that Jason was looking at him, waiting for what he would be asked next. Just that was enough for Flem to feel that he held the upper hand again. Time to forge another path.

“So, where is Mrs Formby?” Flem emphasised the verb.

Jason looked up at the ceiling, as if contemplating his answer but didn’t reply, so Flem went on. “And where are your kids?”

Jason took a deep breath. The realisation that the policeman wasn’t pointing the finger at him but that there was an implication that his wife was involved somehow, changed the atmosphere in the room. Jason had neither intention nor reason to obfuscate now.

“The kids are at my sister’s place. I don’t know where my wife is. Probably with her bloody sister. We have, according to her anyway, split up.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Any reason why, especially?”

“Especially,” replied Jason, “especially because of her bloody sister.”

“Her sister?” This conversation was definitely not going how he’d expected it to go, and Flem was glad that he had kept his trump card up his sleeve for the time being. “Look, I’ll be straight with you, Mister Formby. I’ve had a quiet chat with your colleagues at the library and one thing they said resonated with me. They said that you loved your children. I know it’s wanky but I can personally relate to that. And as I said, Keith Burke vouches for you as well. Now, for reasons that I can’t say, not yet anyway, your wife may well be involved. So, can we start with when she left? I assume she left and that you didn’t kick her out.”

Jason looked up surprised at Flem candour, then rubbed his bristly face with both hands.

“To be honest, the whole thing came out of the blue. Priti wasn’t happy sometimes, mostly whenever she compared her lifestyle with her sister’s. How could I ever compete with that kind of wealth? As I said, she packed her bags nearly two weeks ago. She didn’t say anything, didn’t leave a note, didn’t talk to the kids, just up and left. It was bloody hard on the kids and I suppose me moping around, yelling, drinking too much didn’t help. It must have been horrible for them because when Sally offered to take them to give us some space to work things out, they had their bags packed before I finished asking.”

“Sally is your sister?”

“Yes. Sal’s the peacemaker in the Formby family. She still talks to everyone. I only talk to her, not to my father. You probably know that he is the Mayor of Devonport and that both my brother and mother are

dead.” Flem did not acknowledge that he had forgotten that Kevin’s eldest son had died in a car crash years ago.

“And your wife left the house nearly two weeks ago, you say.”

“Yeah. The kids say she hasn’t been in touch with them either . Not for the last few days anyway. That’s not like her at all.”

“So where is she now?”

“I’m assuming that she’s at her sister’s place. In Leith.”

“Right,” said Flem, trying to make this new information fit. Maybe Jason was making it all up but he was still inclined to believe him. His gut wasn’t warning him not to.

“Have you been there?” Jason asked, suddenly sounding hopeful.

“No, not yet but I will.”

“Let me know if you see her, will you?”

“I’m taking it that she’s not communicating with you. What about with the children?”

“As I said, not as far as I know.”

“Isn’t that strange?”

“Yes, it is. It’s completely out of character. I have no idea what is going on. Do you?”

This was the moment Flem was dreading. He was going to put a ton of pressure on another human being. It was his job. Right then and there, he believed that he had to do it. Later he wouldn’t be so sure.

“Okay, Mister Formby. I’m going to show you something that will explain a few things to you. But it looks bad, on the surface at least. And it’s going to upset you. Really upset you. But it may not be what it

seems. Keep that in mind, please.” It was all he could think of to prepare the man. He convinced himself that there was no other option, that he had to do it, that it was his job. He took out the photo and placed it carefully on the coffee table. What he was looking for was something in Jason’s reaction that would tell him that he had already seen them, that he knew about it. Flem was looking for an over-reaction of some sort.

But Jason Formby didn’t over-react. He didn’t react at all. He just stared at the image and Flem could see the man’s eyes losing focus, not seeing it anymore. His body seemed to deflate as if something tangible was leaving it, some essential spirit. Flem felt an urge to comfort him, to put an arm around his shoulders. No one deserved that. No one. But it was his job; he reminded himself that he had to do it. He scooped up the photo and put it back into the pocket of his jacket. Keeping his eyes on Jason, he said, “Now, before you say anything, it seems obvious to me that your wife was an unwilling participant. I have good reason to believe that she was drugged and she may not even remember what happened. But you’ll understand that I have to follow up all leads that come my way. If you actually did know about your wife and Ryan, you’d have to admit that it’s a strong motive for murder.”

Jason took a deep breath, then another and looking straight at Flem he straightened his shoulder, mustered a bit of defiance, as if he was glad to have something else to react to, and said, “So you’re saying that you don’t believe that I did know about it because if you did believe that, I’d already be arrested.” Flem didn’t confirm or deny the statement. Jason went on. “Well, I can tell you that I have never seen that photo before

but it does explain why she left, doesn't it? That's the first thing that springs to my mind!"

"Maybe so. But neither you nor I can be sure of what it tells us. If she was doped with Rohypnol, it's most likely that she doesn't remember anything about it. It also tells us that she didn't go along with him voluntarily. So, the reason why she hasn't been in contact with you or your children isn't as clear as you might think."

"In that case, what was the bloody point of showing me that photo, then? I can't unsee it now, can I? Was it just to see my reaction, to see if I knew about it? Well, I didn't but I do now. Except now you're telling me that it wasn't what it seems. What the Hell are you doing? What are you trying to achieve here?"

"I'm trying to solve a murder," Flem replied. It sounded like an apology. As Formby watched, he leant back on the couch and drained the last of the cold coffee out of his cup and carefully replaced it on the low table. It allowed him to breathe.

"To be clear, I'm not accusing you of anything. As I said at the beginning, this is not a formal interview, all of that might come later, soon but not yet. I'm hunting about, trying to get a clear overall idea. So, I'm not saying that I believe you or that I don't believe you, but to be perfectly honest, too much of this doesn't make sense. For one thing, everyone who knows you says you're a good bloke, incapable of committing such an act. I know that doesn't exonerate you, lots of good people do bad things, but it's enough to make me wonder and keep digging. For two, you say that you didn't anything about this at all. Chances are that you're lying to save your arse but as I say, there are too many odd things here."

Jason drew a big breath in through his nose, let it out through his mouth and leant back in the leather recliner. He seemed to accept that Flem's summary was reasonable. He said, "So, what's next then, if you're not going to arrest me? You have enough circumstantial evidence to, even I can see that. It's only my word that I didn't know about Ryan's assault on Priti"

"Yeah, no, not yet. This is where the pandemic comes in handy. You can't leave the state without a travel pass, and if you apply for one, you will be denied and we'll be notified. So you can't go anywhere except the South West Wilderness and live off the land until you freeze to death. And for the moment at least, I'm willing to bet that you wouldn't abandon your children. Actually, when I think about it, that's point three. If you had killed Ryan on the day before yesterday, with your wife and kids already gone, you'd have applied for a G2G pass beforehand and you'd have left the state by now. and disappeared. And yet, you are still here."

"I suppose so, yeah. It doesn't bring Priti back though, does it?"

"No, I suppose not. But it might give a reason as to why she left." Flem stood to leave. "Okay Mister Formby, that's it for now. I appreciate your cooperation. We'll leave it at that for the moment but don't think that you're off the hook. I'm still playing out the line."

"I don't think that at all. I think you're hoping that if you give me enough rope, I'll hang myself. But I can assure you, Sergeant Fleming, that I have no intention of hanging myself, either literally or figuratively."

"Just don't leave town, will you?"



“As you pointed out, I can’t, can I? Anyway, I’ve read in the Advocate that Ryan’s funeral is on Friday, isn’t it? I think I might attend. Pay my respects. I can’t kill him now but if I had known about what he did to Priti, I probably would have.” Flem stopped, looked at him to see if he was being serious. Jason Formby wasn’t smiling.

“Please don’t. I can’t stop you but I am asking you not to.”

“I’ll think about it.” He closed the door.

Five minutes later, Flem was admonishing himself for being so unprofessional; for blurting out what he should have kept close to his chest; for being a shit detective. Whitt would have had Jason handcuffed and taken to the station without blinking an eye. And yet, Flem thought to himself, he believed Jason and wanted to at least give the bloke a chance. He had picked up that the man’s pin for his phone spelled out his wife’s name, and he knew that because years ago Ivy had been delighted to show him that hers spelled Fleming and ever since he had automatically checked everyone’s pin to see what theirs translated to. But suspecting that Stuart Belbin’s support would go only so far, he knew perfectly well that he needed more than gut feelings. It was probably best if he redacted comments about phone pins from his reports.

He sat for a moment in the cab of his four-wheel-drive, staring out of the window as he put his thoughts into order. He was assuming that Jason hadn’t seen the photos. He was still on the list of suspects but unless he was lying, he was one of many. Flem reluctantly acknowledged that it was increasingly unlikely that the Mayor had anything to do with Ryan’s

murder. That development was step forward in the investigation and he should have been pleased but if he was honest with himself, it actually took some of the wind out of his sails. With Big Kev in the clear and his opinion of Ryan lessened even further after the chat with his widow Pat, Flem felt deflated. An absolute arsehole had got what he deserved, everyone was happy he was dead, he wouldn't be missed, so why bother? Turning the keys in the ignition, he said to himself, "Fuck it, you're a policeman and a man has been murdered. Do your job!" He rang Wenvoe and asked Aaron to find an address for Rani Patel. He thought that that would at least give a breather for a couple of minutes but he hadn't even made it to the corner of the street when Aaron rang back to tell him Rani Patel lived in one of the mansions on Beach Road in Leith.

"Thanks, Azza. You can go back to sleep now."

"Never woke up in the first place, Sarge." The cheeky young bugger disconnected before Flem could say anything. He was still smiling when he turned his vehicle back onto the Bass Highway and sped off to have a chat with Priti Formby's sister.

The tiny coastal township of Leith nestles at the head of the Forth River, opposite to Turners Beach, one of the most rapidly expanding residential areas on the north west coast of Tasmania. Leith on the other hand, remains undersized and contained in the corner where river meets the sea, protected by farmlands and native forests gazetted as untouchable. Its relative isolation suits the residents, many of whom are wealthy enough to hold sway whenever the local council tables a development

proposal. Black zodiacs launched from the theoretically public boat ramp take privileged fishermen to well-equipped cabin cruisers that motor through the heads to go on deep sea fishing expedition. A dozen sleek ocean-going sailboats shuffle at anchor in the lee of the river, not bothering to look inconspicuous. Most residents had both an upmarket sedan and a European off-road vehicle in the garage, and just outside the township the hangar at the airstrip housed a number of small aircraft. Schooling and shopping were done on the Mainland. Leith kept itself to itself.

Flem had passed the place he was looking for before he realised it. He stopped, reversed and parked on the verge of the road. Like many of the houses on Beach Road, there was nothing ostentatious apparent from the street but a hundred metres down the drive, he couldn't help but admire the house that appeared. It was obviously designed by a talented architect and built by people who were paid enough to care about quality. It rose organically to two stories, as if it were a natural part of the bush setting. Flem was impressed by the double glazed, wooden framed windows; the water tanks pressed demurely against the solid brick walls; the carefully manicured lawn that would provide an essential defence against bushfires as well as being a pleasure to be on during hot summers and the floor to ceiling double front doors, intended to be both beautiful and intimidating.

As he rang the doorbell, Flem was aware that cameras were trained on him. From a small grilled speaker at the side, a voice asked, "Yes?"

Flem held up his ID to the camera and said, "I'm after a word with Rani Patel, thanks."

After a brief moment during which presumably his identification was acknowledged, without the door opening as he expected, the voice asked, "In relation to what, may I ask?"

Maybe it was unfair to jump to conclusions but inhospitality afforded by wealth shielding the owners of a grand house irritated him and Flem was not amused by the woman's reply. He spoke in his most formal tone of voice. "I am not in the habit of conducting my business standing outside a front door. I'm leaving now to collect a warrant to gain legal entry to this house. I will be back in less than an hour. And please be advised that your refusal to cooperate with a police investigation is noted."

He turned on his heels and walked away, for an instant regretful at his impetuosity, praying that he hadn't over-cooked it. Within seconds the doors clicked and opened and the voice on the intercom said, "Please, come in!" Flem pushed one of the doors and entered into a beautifully proportioned entry hall, a large gilded mirror on one side reflecting a large David Keeling painting on the other. His all-terrain boots seemed out of place on the marble floor tiles, so he waited by the door.

An immaculately dressed and groomed Indian woman in her early thirties, strode down the hallway towards him, her dress and scarf billowing. As she neared, she extended her hand imperiously and said, "One cannot be too careful these days, officer. If it isn't beggars it's the bloody Jehovah's Witnesses, and quite frankly I don't know which is worse. I'm Rani Patel. How can I help?"

“Senior sergeant Ian Fleming, ma’am,” said shaking her hand less enthusiastically than she was shaking his. “We are trying to establish the whereabouts of your sister, Mrs Priti Formby. She hasn’t been seen recently and it seems her husband isn’t entirely sure where she is. He believes she may be in India, which seems unlikely as all outward flights are heavily monitored and her name is not on any passenger list. We have our Federal colleagues looking into it but as I said, it seems unlikely.”

“May I ask why the police are involved when she hasn’t been seen for only a few days?” Flem knew she was not nearly as calm as she made out to be. She knew where her sister was and she knew why he wanted to talk to her, he was sure of it. But he’d already cut off the readiest excuse. Until travel passports for fully vaccinated people came in, no one was going anywhere overseas without identification and permission. Even getting out of Tasmania legally required registration. No, he was sure that Priti was still here somewhere and that her sister knew where she was. And probably why she was hiding.

Flem decided that the brutal truth might shock Rani into being more cooperative. ‘We have evidence that Mrs Formby was romantically involved with Detective Sergeant Lyndon Ryan, who as you probably know, was found murdered last week.’ Rani Patel at least had the nous to make an attempt at looking shocked. “Preposterous! My sister had nothing to do with anything like that! How could you even suggest such a thing?” Flem didn’t reply, hoping the silence would discombobulate her. But within a heartbeat, she said firmly that she knew nothing about

this and she had no idea where her sister was. Blood, thought Flem, is thicker than water

Flem's failed attempt at the extended pause tactic showed that Rani Patel was used to getting her own way. The shutters were down and unlikely to be raised again, despite her smile. Flem turned around where he stood and opened the door, making to leave. At the last second, he turned back to face her and said, "If you hear anything, please let me know. Here is my number." She accepted the offered card with a gesture that suggested she would bin it as soon as he was out the door. Nonetheless he said, "Anyway, thank you for your assistance. Good afternoon, Ms Patel." Remembering the cameras, Flem didn't turn around as the door closed automatically behind him.

He walked down the driveway back to his car, sure that Rani would be on the phone to her sister as soon as he had gone, probably telling her that she had warned her not to marry an Australian. Or a commoner. Or a local. Or a bloody librarian. It wasn't his business, he supposed, and probably unfair. It was all about how far anyone would go to protect someone else, someone they cared for. It was quite possible that Jason Formby was protecting his wife by throwing red herrings in his direction and just because he didn't like Rani Patel's manner didn't mean she was guilty of anything. Pat Ryan could have snapped and set up her abusive husband's murder. Hell, she could have a boyfriend tucked away somewhere and as soon as the borders opened be heading for Hawaii with Lyndon's life insurance pay out.

If it did have something to do with the feud between Jason Formby and Lyndon Ryan, a fight that had gotten out of control somehow, it would have to be something really major for Ryan to go the trouble of abducting a man's wife, drugging her, taking photos of having sex with her and then sending them to him. Flem still thought that it was something an angry man might imagine doing but it would take a man well-practiced in violence to actually execute it. What in God's name could make someone do that?

Whatever it was, a police officer had been murdered in retaliation, and regardless of what kind of man he had been, what crimes he had committed, only the legal system was entitled to mete out justice. And it was his job to ensure that it was done according to the letter of the law. Or at least somewhere in the region of its alphabet. Whatever he thought personally shouldn't interfere with what he did professionally. But for a moment Flem considered driving out of town and leaving all of it behind. But he knew himself well enough to know that his brain wouldn't let it rest even if he did go back to bed and crawl under the doona.

On the way back to Devonport, Flem considered the very likely possibility that he had cocked things up, admitting to himself that he really didn't know what he was doing. He had interviewed three important persons of interest in the murder investigation and instead of coming up with anything that looked like it might solve the case, he had made it far more complicated. This was not how they did things on the television. Bloody Vera would have everything wrapped up by now, pet.

When he got back to Wenvoe Street, he found Whitt sitting in the open space, talking to Francesca. Whatever they were discussing was making her laugh. For an instant Flem was irritated, jealous even but he managed a smile when they looked up and greeted him. Whitt stood up as Flem went past and followed him into his cubicle.

“So what have you managed to accomplish today, Commander Whittaker? Anything useful?” It sounded a bit pointed but Whitt didn’t seem to notice.

“I’m not a commander yet and the way this investigation is going, I never will be because I can tell you that I have accomplished the square root of fuck all this afternoon. I rang a few people I know who’ve worked up here in the past to see if any of them could tell me anything about Ryan. A couple of them knew of him, much the same as we already knew.”

“How does someone like him get away with that kind of shit for so long?”

“I don’t know, mate. I guess it’s his business what he does in his own time. If no one makes a formal complaint he just carries on.”

“That’s the point though. These women he’s harassed and intimidated, who would they complain to? That’s always the problem in a small place, isn’t it?”

“Surely that’s changing now, isn’t it?”



“I used to think so Whitt but with people like Ryan and Formby, I’m not so sure anymore. People like that make our job so much harder, I know that much.”

“Come to Hobart, mate. There’s none of that provincial bullshit down there!”

“Yeah, right! Let’s just concentrate on this, eh?”

“Well, not to put too fine a point on it, we’ve got nothing to concentrate on, do we?”

Flem leaned back in his chair to look out of the window. The answer was obvious. “Not really, no. The bloke was an arsehole and lots of people wanted to see him dead but no obvious suspect is jumping up at us at this stage. But it has to do something with Kevin Formby. I’m sure of it.”

“You certainly seem to have convinced yourself that it does.” Flem turned back to see Whitt was looking at him across the desk

“What are you suggesting?” But before they could veer off on that tack, the phone rang. It was Rani Patel and she had something to say. Flem put her onto speaker phone so Whitt could hear as well.

“Can I assume that this conversation will go no further, Sergeant?”

“I can assure you that no one but us is listening, Ms Patel.” Whitt rolled his eyes but said nothing.

“I shall have to take your word for that, won’t I?”

“That’s entirely up to you. You rang me, Ms Patel.”

“Quite so. Well, let’s get down to it, shall we? First of all, I did encourage my sister to leave the man she married, as you no doubt suspected. From the outset I thought she was making a mistake, and so

did my parents who, as you probably also know, cut her off entirely from the family. It was entirely her own decision to go her own way.”

“Surely that was her decision to make.”

“Yes, quite so. But making that decision came with consequences, as I said. Look, I have no doubt that by Australian standards, Jason Formby is a good man but she was marrying below her station, everyone saw that.”<sup>[SEP]</sup>“Their children don’t.”

“Exactly. How are these children being brought up? What opportunities are they getting, being forced to go to a government school?”

Flem said nothing. He didn’t say that that wasn’t what he meant. He didn’t say that he’d gone to the local government school. He didn’t even say that that he was beginning to really dislike her. Instead he said, “The reason you rang, Ms Patel?”

He could hear her take a deep breath as if she was about to deliver a rehearsed speech. When it came it was carefully pitched and paced, as all good oratory should be.

“More than a week ago, Priti came here, to my house, distraught and begging me to help her. I couldn’t turn her away in the state she was in. Her story was that she had gone out with some girlfriends, mostly Australian women, for a night out away from their husbands, and to cut a long story short had drunk so much alcohol that she passed out and she had sex with someone but she couldn’t remember anything about it. Not who, not where or when. But she was desperately ashamed, as you can imagine. And she couldn’t face going home. Imagine having to confess that to one’s husband. And Priti is simply incapable of telling a lie.”

Unlike you, Flem thought. Whitt rolled his eyes.

“And what did you do, Ms Patel?” Flem asked.

“I did what any sane person would do, Sergeant. I advised her to stay with me until we get the details of what happened, some perspective when the dust has settled.” She sounded sure that that was exactly what sane people would do.

“And did her children come too?”

“Obviously it is impossible for them to be involved, for them to know what her mother had done. Imagine the shame, Sergeant. Not just on her, but on the family.”

“Hers or yours?”

“Both, of course. Both. So I have advised her in the strongest possible terms that she stay away from her husband and her children, and from her so-called friends, for at least a good while, and hope my parents and brothers do not get to hear about. I know that there are people who would love to embarrass my parents out of jealousy or for whatever reason. And although they are in India , communication is so easy these days, isn't it? A seemingly innocent comment on social media can erupt like a volcano and cause just as much damage.”

“So, I take it Mrs Formby is still staying with you?”

Another slight pause. Long enough for Whitt to raise his finger in a “here comes a lie!” gesture.

“We have decided that it's best for her to spend some time away from the North West coast. We have some good family friends in Hobart.”

Flem smiled at her obfuscation; not saying that she was still in Leith while implying that she wasn't. He decided to let it pass, not to force her hand.

“Well, Ms Patel, as you will realise, we will still have to have a chat with Mrs Formby, so I’d be grateful if you could text me the name and address of the people she is staying with.”

Whitt moved away so she wouldn’t hear it if he burst out laughing.

“Yes, of course. I’ll text it to you.”

“Much appreciated, Ms Patel. Thank you for reaching out to us.” Whitt left the room with a hand covering his mouth.

“You’re welcome, Sergeant.” She rang off.

Whitt came back in. “Hilarious! How long do you reckon until she sends you a name? Basic rule of bullshitting is knowing what you’re going to say when someone calls it out.”

“What a stuck-up cow! It was all about the family’s name and reputation. They must be loaded. I didn’t want to shut her down. Give her a bit of rope. It’ll be interesting to see how this plays out, eh?”

“Do you reckon she’s capable of having him knocked off?”<sup>[11]</sup> “Shit yeah! I got the feeling that nothing is allowed to besmirch the family name. That seems to be the major concern with her sister marrying an Aussie. That poor bastard, eh? He’s got a better idea of what happened to his wife than her bloody sister has but she’s still pulling the woman’s strings. I reckon that she’s going to use this to prise her away from him and their kids. Imagine how much control she’ll have over her if she can make Priti believe that she is the victim of her own actions.”

“Sounds like you’re on Formby’s side. That’s a turn-up for the books!”

“Jason, not Kevin. The old man is still on my list, don’t you worry about that.”

“Good to hear. Wouldn’t want you to give up on your obsessions, mate.”

“It’s not an obsession!”

“Of course it is. Anyway, it’s knock-off time. Fancy a beer?”

“A quick one. Mum’ll have the boys’ tea ready by now. Actually I’d better go home straightaway, sorry.”

“Fair enough. I might see if your girlfriend fancies a drink.”

“She’s not my girlfriend!”<sup>[1]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>

“Maybe not but you knew exactly who I was talking about, didn’t you? And you got a teeny, weeny bit jealous this arvo, didn’t you?”

“Fuck off, Whitt!” He laughed at his mate’s ragging but he realised that there was a kernel of truth in it. He didn’t always think of her just as a colleague. Maybe it was because she always smelled nice.

## Chapter 11

On their oversized, stuffed pillow-bedecked couch, Hen was lying with his head in Keith's lap. With dinner eaten, dishes in the machine, the television was on but neither were watching it. Instead, Hen was musing. "I don't know why but the Sarge's really got it in for Kevin Formby. He must have done something but I don't know what. Flem doesn't usually hold a grudge like that."

"I can't stand him either," said Keith. "Forget about not understanding; he hates anything he can't control. Including us."

"Yeah, I know that. But he's not the only one, is he?"

"No, but with him it's more like because he can't control it, he can't see a way to exploit it for his own benefit. That's probably more accurate. He can't see that the world has moved on, even Devonport has. He'll do anything to stay in control. I don't trust him one little bit."

"The sarge's convinced he's up to something that involves the footie club."

Keith lifted Hen's head, sat him up, then asked, "What about the club?"

"I'm not sure. I don't think he really knows either. But he definitely has a nose for stuff like that, doesn't he?"

"He does, yeah"

"That's what makes him such a good policeman, I suppose."

"So, my darling Henny Penny, what could it be about the Mayor and the club that's got the Coach concerned? Let's look at this logically. The first and most obvious thing is the land. It's prime real estate. Shit! Just imagine how much that's worth!"

“Yeah, but it’s the footie club. It’s been part of this town for ever. Surely, he couldn’t get his hands on that, could he?”

“I don’t know but it’d be a tragedy if he does.”

“Come on, love. Don’t get your knickers in a knot just yet. We don’t know if there is anything in it at all.”

But once his knickers were twisted, it took a long while to get them straightened out again. Even making love with Hen hadn’t calmed Keith down. He lay wide awake while his boyfriend slept like a child. He tried to relax but his brain jumped from one idea to another, always a step ahead of his meta-self, and always reverting back to the Club. When he saw the red numbers on digital alarm clock click over to 3.30, he gave up and slid out of bed. He grabbed his dressing gown off the hook on the back of the door and closed it gently behind him. In bare feet, he padded to the living area of their flat and before switching on the dimmed ceiling light, stood at the window and looked out across Beach Road, through the Norfolk Pines standing sentinel between him and the Strait, to where a couple of squid boats were bright lights bobbing in the darkness way offshore. Anywhere on the foreshore was beautiful any time of day or night. Standing at the window, Keith tried to put his thoughts in order

He wondered whether or not he had made the right decision to move in with Hen, to assume that Devonport would accept him as unconcernedly as Melbourne had. In the big smoke he had an army of hetero friends for who his or anyone else’s sexuality was of no consequence whatsoever; a topic of discussion that ranked well below football, politics and religion. In Devonport he felt like a controversy that everyone had to take a

position on. Even those who supported him made a point of letting him know that they were perfectly comfortable with him. He was absolutely sure they were genuine and intended to be supportive but nonetheless they invariably felt it necessary to let him know.

The only place he felt really free was on the footie field. There, once the ball was bounced up in the centre of the oval, he could fly, he could push himself to run all over the park with no greater purpose than to mark, gather and punt a football in one direction or the other. When the game started, he was unshackled, buoyed by seventeen other young men, none of whom were as good as he was in terms of skill or fitness but each of them was just as committed to a common cause. None of them would hesitate to put his body on the line to win the ball, to drive it forward. It was their commitment to the game rather their ability that motivated Keith. He had played with the Box Hill Hawks and been listed by Hawthorn. If he hadn't decided to return to the North West Coast when he graduated, there was every chance he'd be playing in the AFL right now. Most days, he was perfectly happy with the decision. He doubted that he would have enjoyed playing on immense stadiums with perfect surfaces in front of massive crowds any more than playing on the substandard ovals of the NWFU, in front of five hundred spectators if the weather was decent.

Off the park, in the sheds and in the bar, he enjoyed another kind of freedom. He was shit-stirred as much as anyone else, free to give as much sledging as he took, to deliver it in his own way, and by the virtue of that freedom he had become one of the boys. Rather than forcing him



to fit into what was always there, they had widened their rules of engagement so that he could fit in as he was. Not one of them would ever say that he treated Keith differently, knowing that that would be insulting but Keith was wholly aware that every one of them did. And he, in turn, loved every one of them. If Flem was right that Kevin Formby was out to destroy the Devonport Football Club, he had to do something to stop it.

He changed into his running gear, left a scribbled note for Hen in case he woke up and wondered where he was, and set off on his usual run. At four o'clock in the morning Devonport is a different place. He headed away from the Bluff, towards the river, to where the Mersey's mouth opens wide onto the sea. When the tides are right and the swell big enough, surfers and kayakers crowd onto the estuarine waves, riding them inland as far as they can, sometimes right into the river proper. And on days when the water is flat, fishermen in small boats float languidly into the small bays with rod and line in hand, patiently searching for fish and squid or simply enjoying the peace that being on the water brings. On a calm night, there is a shimmering light on the wide expanse of dark water, a smell of the sea that he breathed deep into his lungs. Neither the wild sea nor the tamed river, the estuary moves according to its own rhythms and if the people of Devonport have adapted to anything here, they've adapted to those. For Keith, it was an aperitif for the main course of the river.

Domesticated by a giant concrete dam up-stream, the Mersey has been altered to accommodate the businesses that raised the city. In the first

place. Giant ferries dock portside, bringing in and taking away people and goods to the mainland, a place that exists somewhere on the other side of Bass Strait, somewhere well over the horizon and out of sight and mostly out of mind. With each crossing taking ten hours or so, the feeling of being removed from the rest of the country runs deep in the psyche of Tasmanians. The people in the cars and caravans that roll off the ferries are inevitably tourists, visitors from elsewhere, grabbing any break in the pandemic to holiday somewhere overseas, even if overseas is still within the borders of the country. Along with the cargo ferries, the behemoth vessels dock on the port side of the river, where it is deep enough to allow them to turn around, churning up the dull, oily water as they manoeuvre their way back to sea. Keith ran past them, exhilarated by the gloominess of the atmosphere in the predawn darkness

At night, the Spirit of Devonport, a tiny pedestrian ferry painted in the same colours as its giant counterparts, lies tied up to side of the river. During the day it tootles from bank to bank, intending to give those living on the less salubrious eastern side of the river a sense of municipal belonging. In reality however, the ferry is a tourist attraction and no one from that side of the Mersey ever uses it to go shopping in town. If the intention was for the toy boat to unite the shores, its name is a vain hope. The suburbs of East Devonport are not so much the city's younger siblings as NQR relatives that no one talks about. Created as housing for migrants coming to work in the factories there, the estates there have fallen into disrepair as the mills and the works have closed down.

It is the western side of the city that lays claim to its reconceived history. The railway runs along the river's bank, leaving barely enough room for rows of giant silos. Produce, grown or manufactured, is loaded there either on barges or carriages and taken away. In the city's heyday, industry was complemented by a gallery of drinking houses and pubs, built on the other side of the road, with long bars where the workers stood with their backs towards the river, washing the grain husks from their mouths with beer and the cement dust from their lungs with cigarette smoke, happy to ignore the river. Now, most of the pubs have disappeared or been repurposed. Keith's gait assumed an easy rhythm as he ran past.

Further upstream, in the middle of the river and beyond the pull of the ocean tides, the Mersey harbours vessels that have a different purpose. Here the signs of a changing economy lie rippling at anchor. Although the boatyards are no longer viable, the seafood restaurant has closed its doors and those trying to earn living from the river are doing it tough, new, high-hulled cabin cruisers and sleek ocean-going yachts mingle with more modest, older vessels, small, tidy yachts and half-cabin cruisers under blue plastic covers that have been there for years. The new craft try not to be conspicuous because flaunting your wealth is considered uncouth. And dangerous.

Keith powered up to the giant concrete Victoria Bridge spanning high over the river, the bridge that carries all traffic into or past the city. Hardly anybody runs there during the day let alone at night, pedestrians wary of the lanes of traffic that race incessantly on the road, but its

footpath affords a glorious view along the waterway and its banks, out towards the sea. The view was a wasted opportunity, one of many littering the city. Keith always enjoyed running as fast as he could to the other side of the river but this morning, he stopped half-way across, stood there, leaning onto the handrail, catching his breath and looking down river, back over the water, back all the way to Melbourne. He didn't want to go back there, or more truthfully, he didn't want to be forced to go back. He needed to do something and as the dawn started to break through a faint line of deep pink in a dark blue sky, he came up with a plan.

He jogged home, had a shower and went to work to set it in motion.

## Chapter 12

David Murfett thought it was odd. Well before morning tea-time, he'd received a text from Keith Burke, suggesting they meet for a coffee in a café in the Rooke Street Mall. He had known Keith literally since birth; arriving a day apart at the Mersey General Hospital. They had gone to kindergarten together and then Nixon Street Primary School and finally to Devonport High and Don College. Both had benefitted from being academically able and not being sent to a private school. In high school, they had been two of the half dozen or so students who had received an excellent, personalised education from teachers grateful to have hard-working intelligent kids who enjoyed parental support and avoided the worst excesses of adolescence.

But unlike others in that coterie, neither Keith nor David had been bullied or derided for not succumbing to the pressure to conform with mainstream; Keith because he was a superb sportsman and David because he knew how to avoid confrontation. For a while his nickname had been "Periphery", because he was never completely removed from the social action but never actually joined in either.

But despite that shared history they had never become close friends. If he had to sum it up, David would say that throughout their schooling they had been mutually respectful allies whenever it was necessary. And as adults they made small talk whenever they ran into each other on social occasions, which in Devonport was inevitable but it never went beyond that. So, for David to get a text from Keith asking to meet for a coffee was unusual.

What made it really odd was that they worked in the same building and that there was a café on the ground floor, right next to the Devonport Public Library. The Council offices were spread over the second and third floors, an elevator ride away. Why on Earth would he want to meet in the Mall? There was only one plausible answer. Keith wanted this meeting to be clandestine. Well, that made it irresistible to David, even if he had no idea what it could be about. There was, he decided, only one way to find out and he pinged back a text saying he could meet at 11.00 in Café XoXo.

The café was long and thin: a front door and window opening onto the mall and a narrow floorspace that went deep into the building. When he arrived just before the appointed time, he saw Keith sitting as far down the back as he could get, two Turkish coffees and a plate of baklava on the table. Keith stood to shake his hand. The small talk was a perfunctory and over quickly, how are you going, good thanks, you? Then David asked what this was all about. Keith met David's querying look for a moment, then said, "To tell you the truth David, I'm not really sure myself. I heard a rumour at the footie club, that Devonport Football Club is in crippling debt and that it was going to amalgamate with East Devonport. It made no sense to me and then it me think about the grounds. If there was to be an amalgamation, what would happen to the oval? Would it be sold? Rezoned as residential? How would that work?"

To David's ears, Keith's question sounded too well constructed to be a casual enquiry but he answered anyway.

“In general terms, it depends on who actually owns it. It’s probably either the Tasmanian Football League itself or the Council, as a guess. You could find out if you really wanted to know; Professor Google can probably tell you. It’s not a state secret or anything.” Keith considered that reply but said nothing. David filled the silence. “But I can tell you that Byard Park next door was a bequest to the City and its use as a public facility can’t be altered except by an act of the State Parliament, something that would require due process and public consultation.”

“So, if someone managed to turn the club grounds into a residential area, it would have the sea on one side and a green recreation zone on the other. And still be a ten-minute walk into town.”

“Yep,” replied David. “It would be worth millions, for sure.”

“Anything like that being planned, do you know?”

David looked unflinchingly at Keith. “Mate, we’ve known each other thirty years. You are without doubt one of the smartest people I know, smarter than me but even I know there’s something you’re not saying. For God’s sake, we’re meeting in a café away from the bloody building that we both work in! Obviously, you don’t want anyone to know about it. So, what is this about? What am I supposed to keep secret here? Let’s get that out and on the table first.”

For a moment the silence threatened to stop the conversation in its tracks. When he spoke, Keith’s voice was deliberate. “Fair enough. You’d understand that for various reasons I trust very few people here. You can count them on the fingers of one hand, if truth be told. If it wasn’t for footie, I would have been run out of town for being openly gay. That’s the context, and in that context, everyone in the club has

been fantastic to me, protected me from all that homophobic shit, if you like. So, I feel a deep love and obligation to the club. But when I say everyone, I'm excluding Kevin Formby. He's been trying to get me thrown out since the day I came back from the mainland. And I have to say the feeling is mutual. I can't stand him either. When he said that the club was going under, it got me really annoyed. I just can't see how it's so far in debt that it has to sell the ground and the rooms. I'm sure it's bullshit. Then I asked myself, who stands to benefit? Obviously, whoever gets hold of the real estate. And who has the power to rezone it? The Council. And who controls the Council? The Mayor, Kevin bloody Formby. And you, being one of the handful people in this place who I trust, are also one of the people who might know if he's up to something."

David didn't move while he digested what Keith had said. "Yeah, I can see what you're getting at. If he was doing something like that, he'd have to keep it well hidden, sit on it for years. At least ten years, I'd say. That's a lot of hiding public records and stuff. He'd have to be super careful."

"But no matter how careful he was, he'd leave a trail, wouldn't he? Something you could find out if you knew what you were looking for?"

"I suppose so. The key is that you'd have to know what you were looking for."

"So, could you, now that you know what you're looking for?"

"I guess so. A bit of sleuthing's not going to get me into trouble, is it?"

"I have no idea, but don't do anything illegal, or anything that could get you into trouble."



“I think that I probably don’t need to do anything like that. I could just have a general look around, that wouldn’t raise any suspicion.”

“Mate, I’d really appreciate it!”

Deal done, they headed out to go back to work. In the mall, Keith said, “And by the way, you were way smarter than me. It was always a competition, do you remember? I was distraught for days that your HSC English Literature score was higher than mine. The Arts was supposed to be my domain, the Sciences yours.”

“Yeah, the Literature mark surprised me as well. And I won’t deny I was really pleased. Christ almighty, just listen to us. We were sixteen, more than twelve years ago and we’re still going on about it.”

“It was a big deal at the time.”

“It sure was. Anyway, I’ll have a discreet poke around about the football ground. I’ll let you know what I find out.”

“It’s probably nothing and I’m just obsessing about Formby because he’s your archetypical small-town bigot.”

“Surely he’d know that the Magpies would be nothing without you?”

“I don’t think he’d care. He’s a selfish mongrel at heart and I wouldn’t put anything past him.”

Walking back to his office, David realised that he’d been both surprised and pleased that Keith considered him to be someone he could trust. He was looking forward to honouring that trust, feeling excited to be part of something secret, like a private investigator on an important case. He increased his pace with a few skips. Then he caught himself and slowed back down to a normal pace. You have to laugh at yourself sometimes:

fancy being elated because someone who you admire thinks you're their equal.

## Chapter 13

While Keith and David were meeting in the café in the Mall, neither noticed Detective Superintendent Whitaker walking past on his way to the Paranaple centre. He and Flem had looked at the Council's chain of command to find someone they could talk to who would know whether Kevin Formby was up to something. They had made an appointment with the city's General Manager, a man called Hugh Warrington according to the website. Flem didn't think he'd ever met him, which was unusual but quite possible. He didn't know every one of the city's twenty-five thousand residents (according to the Council website), even if it often felt like every one of them knew him. Whitt said, "In that case, it might be best if I go and talk to Mister Warrington on my own. If that goes wrong as well, I can just bugger off back to Hobart and you'll be able to say it had nothing to do with you. We can't have both the Mayor and the General Manager hating you, can we?" It seemed like a sensible plan and Flem had other things to do.

Instead of driving, had Whitt decided to hoof it to his appointment with the city's highest ranked official, a man who Whitt hoped would give him a sense of how the Devonport City Council operated, how and where Formby could be taking illegal advantage. Walking through the Rooke Street Mall, he was immediately aware that there was hardly anyone about, even though it was quarter to three in the afternoon. At first glance, the only sign of life was a group of schoolkids in uniform mucking about on the benches instead of being in class. The shops were open, but only one or two customers wandered in and out. Perhaps he

was still used to the busyness of Hobart. He zipped up his polar fleece jacket and leant into the wind as he strode on. It was like walking through a graveyard. He couldn't see why Flem and Ivy had chosen to live here.

The Paranple Centre was a modern concrete and glass building erected on prime real estate behind the old council chambers and overlooking the estuary to house the local government offices as well as the library and the State's contact ports. When he entered the building, it was as empty as the Mall. Perhaps the Covid pandemic was keeping both customers and staff away. Whitt's footsteps echoed around the open spaces as if he were there on a weekend rather than a working day. He stood on the escalator and looked over to the Library and State Government offices before they disappeared and he was on the first floor.

On his left, behind a glass window, the reception area was unattended. He walked past and down a corridor. At the closed glass door, he signed in via the app on his phone and the QR code, then knocked. A man, neatly dressed in casual clothes, appeared from one of the offices, waved and walked towards him. When he pressed the green button, the door swung open. He held out his hand and said, "Inspector Whittaker, I presume. Hugh Warrington. Come on through."

Walking down the corridor to the General Manager's office, Whitt noticed that most of the other offices were empty. It added to the after-hours feel of the place. At least he didn't have to put on his mask: Warrington wasn't wearing his. Whitt assumed that it wasn't mandatory.

Hugh Warrington was immaculately groomed. Although Whitt wasn't a fan of the overgrown Euro-stubble look, he had to admit it suited the man's high cheekbones. He was a man who naturally looked good. And the man was polite. "Can I get you a coffee or a tea? Only instant, I'm afraid. We're a bit short-staffed at the moment." When Whitt declined a drink, Warrington asked him to sit in one of the two leather chairs around a coffee table, rather than being separated by the man's immaculately tidy desk. Warrington sat in the other chair and asked how he could help.

"Well, as you probably know, a police officer from Burnie was found strangled with a silk scarf and his body dumped in a police vehicle here in Devonport. To be perfectly frank, Mister Warrington, we have precious little to go on as to perpetrator and motive. So we are chasing up every lead, regardless of how unlikely. One possible thread may involve Mayor Kevin Formby. You must understand that we are in no way suggesting he had anything to do with the actual crime as such but his name was mentioned in a related conversation. I must add that he has already voluntarily answered some of our questions, for which we are grateful."

Whitt was an experienced operator in fishing expeditions, making what was public knowledge sound like confidences. His modus operandi was to observe reactions rather than listen to responses and he noted that Warrington's eyebrows shot up a millisecond after he mentioned his boss' name. Genuine surprise is difficult to feign and Whitt was sure that

this information was news to Warrington. “Kevin Formby? No, I can’t believe he’s involved in something like that. I’m assuming that you won’t be saying how his name came up but I’ll tell you something as long as it stays just between us,” Warrington leaned forward.

“As long as it doesn’t impact on the investigation, sure,” Whitt replied, the proviso justifying the fact that he had no intention of keeping his word if he needed to break it.

“Kevin Formby thinks he is a big man, in control, admired and feared by everyone but he isn’t. Not really. Most people here think he is a tool.”

“A big frog in a small pond?” Whitt encouraged him to go further.

“It’s actually a bigger pond than you think, Inspector. And Kevin Formby is a smaller frog than he thinks he is. Look, his idea of corruption is to allow a dodgy building permit to go through in return for a free meal at the pub.”

“Well, we weren’t suggesting that he himself was actively involved in any way.”

“I can’t think of any way he’d be involved, active or not. A sudden fright would kill him, he is that unfit. His biggest gripe is that they don’t make Turf uncorked anymore. Apparently, they were the best cigarettes money can buy. Like I said, he’s a tool.”

“So he’s not involved in any corruption, no major scandals in the wings, as far as you know.?”

“Ha, not as far as I know. And I would know if anything was going on. I know that this Council has a reputation for being corrupt but really, it’s no worse or better than any other local council. Big councils have bigger corruption but Devonport is a little city with a little council, and everyone in the place knows everyone else. You can’t hide stuff here;

everything bubbles to the surface eventually. That's why we in Devonport have pushed this whole murder business to being a Burnie thing, you know what I mean? We prefer to believe that kind of thing doesn't happen here."

"It does, though, doesn't it?"

"Of course it does. But we deny it for as long as we can. And even when it is undeniable, we just refuse to believe that it involves us individually."

Whitt nodded in agreement. Hugh Warrington was obviously an intelligent man who thought deeply about things, and what he said made sense. But it added nothing to the investigation. Whitt stood up and made to leave by shaking the man's hand.

"Thank you, Mister Warrington. I appreciate you giving me the time."

Warrington smiled and said, "You're welcome. Anytime, just give me a bell. It must be really annoying to not be able to solve a murder. But then again, I haven't got a clue what I'm talking about because I've read too many crime novels and you're probably well on the way to solving it."

"I'm not sure about that but we won't give up. You can be sure of that. Anyway, thanks again for your time."

"No problems. Like I said, anytime."

On the way back to the station, it threatened to rain. Whitt strode at speed back through the Mall, head down, not looking at anyone, around the corner and along Wenvoe Street. Meeting Hugh Warrington had confirmed one thing that Flem had said; that there were good people in Devonport, people who really cared about the place. He thought that he might suggest that Warrington was a man he could reach out to. Then he

smiled at the absurdity of that idea. He was sure that Flem could find his own friends.

His mind turned to Flem's dislike of Kevin Formby and it seemed to him that Warrington had shed some light on it. Formby was by all accounts a dinosaur, a throwback to an earlier generation but he wasn't alone in that. Unless Flem had changed dramatically over the years, Whitt wondered if there was something else at the root of it. In many ways Flem was exactly the same as he had been when they were at the Academy together, he was still laconic, fearless and confident when he was sure of himself, and he still played his cards close to his chest when he wasn't, but now Whitt saw something else as well, a determination to keep his own backyard tidy. Maybe that's why Flem stayed up here: the belief that he could control a small bit of the world, and thereby protect his family. It was undoubtedly a noble ambition but Whitt knew that it wasn't realistic, not anymore, not in this world.

## Chapter 14

Because Hugh Warrington was a tall man, when he sat down at his desk his legs tended to sprawl out untidily from the chair. Whenever he was wholly engrossed in what he was doing, his feet would beat a tattoo on the floor. He had returned to his office after dinner, well after dark. He had shut down his work desktop computer, looking instead at his personal laptop. He had unlocked and opened a folder named "FP current project", a folder that contained a long list of files, including



more than a dozen images, each of which was a photo of Francesca Pisarelli. Some he had downloaded from the internet but most he had taken and uploaded himself. Francesca had no idea that she'd been snapped coming out of the police station; or one crazy night at the Elimata Hotel; or going into the house she shared with another police officer; or at her Nonna's house in Smith Street; or, and he'd been really lucky with this one, in the swimming pool as she was heading towards the shower.

As well as the photos, the folder contained detailed records of her comings and goings in thick red lines on street maps downloaded from the internet, records of her coming from and going to the house in Gunn Street she shared with another police officer, her grandmother's house in Smith Street, the Wenvoe Street Police station, the pool and gym; all journeys dated and put in order. There were files that tabulated her activities and analysed the data for regular patterns of behaviour. He liked to be precise because being precise meant having control.

It's so easy to gather data on anyone these days. People volunteer personal details on social media while mainstream media is indiscriminate in what it lets loose. As General Manager of the Council, he had access to all news outlets and official websites. And with a little bit of foresight, it was child's play to set up surveillance mechanisms and unobtrusive access to data banks. If you were really keen you could buy anything that has a digital presence. Anything from anywhere that mentioned Francesca was automatically flagged, and if it suited purpose, he downloaded it and put it in the folder.

He thought of the folder as a blueprint, a map with as much information as he could gather. It would take careful planning and foresight to wear her down, he knew that, but she would succumb eventually and it would all be worth it when she did. The fact that she was putting up some resistance made the game more exciting. He wasn't man who backed away from a challenge. He was certain he would prevail in the end; it was simply a matter of preparation and persistence.

It was all innocent fun, of course. He wasn't doing anything wrong. He hadn't put any real pressure on her, only phoned her a few times to ask her out and they had played the eternal game of chasings; him inviting her, her resisting him. Lately however, it had become a bit annoying, taking too long and he was starting to wonder if all the effort was worth it, that he was becoming too pre-occupied with the whole thing. Maybe he was just tired. Sleep had eluded him lately. The more his brain was called upon to work, the less he could switch it off at night. The past few weeks had been particularly busy and he calculated that he'd been operating on four or five hours of decent sleep every day, including weekends.

He wasn't overly concerned about it because he'd been through periods of insomnia before. The main problem was that it interfered with his personal projects, the ones that stopped him going completely insane with boredom in this god-forsaken hole. The only solution was to resolve all issues at work, get a few nights of good rest and recharge the batteries. "Failure is not an option," he thought to himself and it made

him smile. He pushed the spill of curly hair off his forehead and winked at his favourite snap of Francesca as if he was talking to her. The endgame was getting closer and closer and he couldn't help being excited by the prospect and he reached down to his pants.

Unexpectedly, the sound of a computer being fired up in one of the offices down the hall snapped him out of his reverie, zipped his fly back up and closed the file and locked it, before closing the computer. Who the Hell was there? No one should be here at this time of night. The cleaners had finished their work hours ago. He stood up as quietly as he could and opened the door to his office. With the door to his office being closed, he hadn't noticed that the fluorescent light in the hallway had been switched on. It meant that whoever was there didn't know that he was in the building either. Without making any noise he walked towards the only office with its lights on.

## Chapter 15.

“What the Hell are you doing here, David?” Warrington’s unnecessarily loud and aggressive question startled him and made him look up guiltily.

“Jesus Christ, Hugh! You nearly gave me a heart attack!” David Murfett clutched his chest and took a deep breath. “I’m just looking for something,” he replied to the question, sounding uncertain.

“What?” Warrington asked. “It must be really important if you’re looking for it at this time of night.”

“I’m looking for,” David said, “for the folder with the stuff for the development for Meercroft Park.” Seeing that he had been in charge of the recent redevelopment of the old hockey fields into soccer fields and a new change rooms complex, it sounded at least plausible.

“Really?” Warrington said, not sounding convinced. “Surely you’d have all the documentation on that, seeing you have already signed off on the plans.”

“I thought I did too, but there seems to have been an application by the Devonport Strikers to have their training ground there. And I don’t have it with the other documents. Do you have it?”

“No, I don’t. I don’t know anything about any such application. Why would they want a training ground so far away from their Valley Road ground?”

“Exactly what I thought, Hugh. But if they submitted it, we should have addressed it. My question is when they submitted it. I didn’t receive it. You say you didn’t receive it. So if they did put it in, the date is important. That’s why we have to find it and if it was lodged in time, I have to show that their proposal was addressed. But I’m hoping they

missed the deadline. Are you sure you haven't got it filed away somewhere?" David's confidence in the story was building as he went on with it. "I've been asked, unofficially of course, and I said we were onto it. A little white lie, I know. Sorry."

"Don't worry about that, David. Like I said, I haven't seen anything like that. Who was it sent to?"

Here it was! Warrington was providing him with a perfect way in. "That's a good point, Hugh," he said as if he were congratulating the man on his sharp insight. "Maybe it was sent to the Mayor in person." It was a question rather than a statement. "And if it was, he likely ignored it because for some reason he hates soccer. Maybe I should look there. Actually Hugh, you know more about where stuff is in his office. What do you think? Will we go and have a look, get it sorted tonight?"

"Surely it can wait until the morning," Warrington said dismissively, sounding keen to get home now.

"Oh come on Hugh, it'll only take a minute." David was reluctant to let this opportunity pass by. And as a bonus, if Hugh was there when he accidentally discovered that Formby was up to something illegal, so much the better. It wouldn't be just his word. "Ten minutes, I reckon, maximum. I really don't want to have to worry about it anymore."

Hugh looked at him, shook his head in mock exasperation and said, "Oh, all right. If you're that keen. And you can give me a lift home."

"No worries. Claim it as overtime."

"Well, you go ahead and see if you can find this mysterious application, I've still got some things to do in my office. Shout out if you need me for anything. I assume that you're going to look on his computer and that like everyone else in the place, you know his password?"

“I’m not about to go sniffing through his personal stuff, Hugh. If it isn’t anywhere in his work files, that’s it.” David wondered if Hugh could tell that he was lying, that he intended to open anything that looked like it concerned the footie oval but the GM said, “Do your worst” and walked out of out, presumably back to his own office. Feeling exhilarated, as if he had narrowly escaped danger, David headed to the Mayor’s office, relaxed because he was now free to have a good look around.

What David didn’t know was that when he turned on the Mayor’s computer, Hugh could see what files he was looking at. It had been easy to install remote eyes on the Mayor’s computer. Hugh believed in being prepared, being ahead of the game, especially if it might have an impact on him, so he had installed remote eyes on Big Kev’s computer. In theory at least, Formby could sack him or at least make life difficult for him if he chose to. Warrington liked to be aware of any rain clouds looming in the distance . Forewarned is forearmed.

That was how he had found out about Formby’s work to rezone the football ground as residential and buy it through his company. The plan was to subdivide it and sell it off as building blocks and thereby make himself a fortune. When Hugh had found out, he’d been impressed that the old man had been playing a long game that was now within spitting distance of coming to fruition.

It had, in retrospect, been a simple plan. Six and half years ago, Kevin had managed to persuade the treasurer of the club that as a Park & Recreation facility, the club didn’t need to pay rates, that the TFL was

taking care of that. He'd organised the service of a trusted local solicitor to exclude the rates from the club's accounts audit. And somehow he had convinced the council treasurer, Jeanette Soutar, to overlook that the Devonport Football Club was getting further and further behind in their rates payment. Within a few months, the arrears would be so great that the club would have to be sold just to pay them. Hugh had appreciated the simple genius of the plan. And then he had come up with a plan of his own, waiting until Kevin was committed and identifiable in the scheme before confronting the mayor and when he knew that he had the upper hand, he proposed a slight alteration, one in which an equal share of the substantial benefits of the subterfuge would flow to him. Kevin Formby had spluttered and raged but he had had no choice, and eventually agree to cut him into the deal, when Warrington had pointed out that half a fortune was better than none. It had, he remembered with genuine happiness, been one of the most satisfying moments of his life. And it was so simple. All he had to do was wait.

But now, just as the plans were coming to fruition, two or three years away at most, and he could start to think about how to spend the money, the bloody town planner decided to investigate. Not for a moment did he believe that the man was looking for a letter from any soccer club. No, it was obvious that he knew that something, that it involved the mayor in some way and he was looking for substantiation. That fact required some serious thought. He had been working with Murfett for more than two years, in offices next top each other, but he knew next to nothing about him as a person. Murfett seemed to be a mousy, deferential kind of chap, dedicated to his job but as far as Warrington knew, to nothing much else.

He rarely went to office dos and when he did he seldom stayed longer than protocol demanded. The more he thought about it, the less he realised he knew about Murfett. The man seemed to operate on the periphery of things, in the half-light where he was visible but not defined.

Such people are dangerous. They don't just keep things hidden, they keep the fact that they are hiding things hidden. But for this evening, Warrington knew that he wouldn't have given Murfett a second thought, probably not ever, and yet here he was, snooping around on Formby's computer, more engaged than he had ever seen him. There was no way that he was working late into the evening just to find some fictitious note from a soccer club concerning a project that had already been signed off on. If he hadn't come into the office to have a look at what Formby had been up to, he wouldn't have known anything about it. Warrington wished that he had put eyes into Murfett's computer as well. He would correct that mistake as soon as he could.

Or maybe he should take more drastic action. If Murfett finds out about the football ground, the whole scheme would be in danger of collapsing. First things first. Murfett was fiddling about on Formby's computer and he could see what he was looking at. As he suspected, it was nothing to do with the Meercroft Park project. He was looking at anything that referred to the oval. Warrington wasn't at all surprised that Murfett had hacked into the Mayor's emails. He closed his remote eyes and shut down his own computer: he had seen enough. Murfett knew. Warrington had to do something, and he had to do it right now.





## Chapter 16

Warrington stuck his head into Kevin Formby's office, interrupting Murfett who barely took his eyes off the Mayor's computer screen, and told him that he was ducking out to get something from home but he'd be back in less than half an hour. Murfett raised a hand in acknowledgement and went on with what he was doing. Hugh had seen what David was looking at, and it was inevitable that when Murfett discovered who the people who were involved in the plan were, he'd either blow the whistle or demand a share of the profits. Neither of those options appealed to Hugh.

There was another option, of course. One way or another, the Town Planner needed to be taken out of the equation. It was a simple enough conclusion to draw but making it happen was an entirely different kettle of fish. The most obvious solution required careful planning but that would take a great deal of time, and Hugh didn't have a great deal of time. He had to act quickly. But it could be done. If he kept a steady nerve, it could be done. Superintendent Whittaker had laid it on a plate for him. He just needed to get on with it.

After a quick word with Murfett, he walked quickly down the corridor and out through the glass doors. As he walked past the sensors, the lights flickered on. The escalator was faster than the elevator and he skipped down. On the ground floor, he went out through the emergency exit. His Saab was parked in his spot in the carpark and he swiped his card to raise

the toll bar, and headed to his house, working out the details of his plan for the evening as he drove. He was beginning to enjoy himself.

Hugh didn't possess a silk scarf but he did own several silk ties and he imagined that one of them would do the job equally well. He chose his least favourite one, planning to destroy after it had done its work. On the way out he dimmed the lounge room light but left it on and turned the heating up to 22 degrees. It was bit chilly at 20, even though it had come on automatically at four o'clock. He pulled the front door shut behind him, not checking the sliding glass doors. He had become a little lax about security but if anyone did come around the back the sensor would pick up the movement and the whole backyard would light up. Anyway he'd be back soon enough.

At nine o'clock in the evening, much of Devonport has retired for the night. A few stragglers walked from a pub or a restaurant to their cars but the combination of liquor laws and the pandemic had curtailed much of the city's nightlife. Perhaps things would pick up in summer but there were few good places for cruising. Before the pandemic and the rolling lockdowns and border closures, Hugh had flown over to the mainland whenever he needed to go hunting. In Devonport everyone knew everyone else's business and getting a bad reputation invariably meant social isolation but in Melbourne's plethora of bars and nightclubs he could relax. No one knew him; he was just another good-looking man looking for a fun night out, no strings attached and he enjoyed the chase, especially the more difficult targets, women who put up some resistance. There was nothing sinister in the sport.

Few of the women he had targeted failed to succumb to his advances but even fewer, if any, played by the same rules. Once he had seduced a woman, the game was over and he lost interest. He knew that he had to be careful in Devonport, that he needed to avoid getting a reputation as a serial seducer because reputations of that kind can make or break you in small towns. Occasionally he had been accused by a woman of being heartless, cruel or insensitive, which surprised him. No one had ever accused Roger Federer of being cruel in the days when he systematically, inevitably, artistically beat his opponents to win games. Anyway, it was all mainly academic in these days of restrictions and lockdowns. When he cashed in, the borders would be open and he planned to re-join the human race on the Mainland

For the moment, he still had one target that although still in the game was proving a little difficult to achieve, which made it so much more enjoyable. He smiled to himself as he reversed his car back into his spot in the carpark. Time for a little amusement before the business at hand. He stayed seated behind the wheel and pulled out his phone to ring a number he had on automatic redial. She probably wouldn't be pleased but that didn't fuss him.

She answered brusquely, asking what he wanted. When he told all he really wanted was a dinner date, she became agitated and told him to stop stalking her.

“You don't really think it's stalking, do you?”

“This is the tenth time you’ve asked me and the tenth time I’m saying no, I don’t want to go out with you. Not for dinner, not to a movie, not for a coffee, not for anything. So, yes, it constitutes stalking and it is an offence under the Criminal Code Act.”

“I’m just asking you out, that’s all! There’s nothing wrong with that, surely.”

“You’ve been officially warned and for the last time!”

“But I’m not stalking you, Francesca. No matter how much you’d like me to.” Hugh enjoyed their playful banter.

“If you call me again or knock on my door, I will have you arrested.”

There was an edge to her voice that excited him.

“Will you arrest me, Francesca?” he asked, playfully pushing the boundaries of the game. “Will you handcuff me to the bed posts?”

“You are deliberately and wilfully engaging in a course of action that is intended to intimidate me and you picked the wrong person this time,” Francie spoke deliberately, coldly and Hugh immediately knew that the game had changed. She had rung off; she had cut the connection and she had put their relationship at serious risk.

The more he thought about it, the more he realised that she’d been stringing him along for weeks and now, all of a sudden, for some reason, she had decided that they weren’t going to play anymore. Well, that wasn’t her decision to make. He rang her number again to explain the situation but annoyingly she had blocked his number. That was definitely not how the game was played. Lines of communication must be kept open.

There had to be a reason for her betrayal. It was obvious that there was someone else involved, someone he hadn't noticed. It galled him, infuriated him to think that she was sleeping with someone else. But who? The only people she ever had anything to do with were her family and her workmates. Therefore it would have to be a policeman, for sure. The only one he could eliminate immediately was the gay one. The others would need some investigation. The sergeant was a likely candidate, he was single. It could be him.

He would look into it later but for now there was a more immediate, more pressing matter that needed attending to. At least he had a clear plan to deal with that little problem, and that realisation relaxed him. He headed back to his office, knowing what he was going to do and sort of looking forward to doing it. If only all things were that simple.

“No, no, I insist. It's no trouble at all. I'll run you home. It's too late and too cold to be walking home now.” It was after ten o'clock and Warrington was standing in the doorway to David Murfett's office, watching him scribble copious notes onto a sheet of A4 pad paper. Who still does that these days? David put his pen down.

“Well, if you're sure. That would be great. Thanks a lot.”

Warrington was impressed that Murfett could maintain such an innocent tone. Luckily he knew exactly what he had found out and he wasn't fooled for a minute. He would make sure to extract the paper from the pocket in which he had put the folded paper.

When they got to the carpark, it was dark. Automatic sensors lit up small areas as they walked through, adding to the darkness elsewhere. There was no one else around, and David was quite glad that he had Hugh for company. Usually he was stand-offish but maybe he had misread the General Manager. He didn't seem to mind going out of his way for him now. Their footsteps echoed in the vast, empty floors of the concrete carpark. There, in the far corner, he could see Hugh's flash car. It was a bit of a relief, really.

Warrington pressed his remote and he heard the doors unlock. The headlights would stay on until they reached the car but that couldn't be avoided. It allowed him to visually sweep the area and confirm that there were no other cars parked nearby. By the time they got in, the lights went off again and the only illumination came from the dashboard. Warrington started the car but kept it in neutral. He turned to Murfett and said, "Oh, hang on a minute. My phone has slipped down under your seat. I'll just fish it out before we get going."

Although Hugh Warrington wasn't fooled for a minute, David Murfett was still talking about not finding the letter, saying that he was now convinced that no such letter had ever been received and therefore the Council had no obligation to act on anything in it, if it actually had been sent in the first place. He didn't notice that directly behind him in the backseat, Hugh had sat up and taken the silk tie out of his pocket. Murfett had had no time to react when he felt it glide across his throat, no time to call out, no time to get his hands under it as it tightened. And then he had no time at all.

Strangling David Murfett took much longer than Hugh had imagined. He'd thought that once the ligature tightened around the man's throat, he'd slump over, nice and neat, but there was much more commotion than he had anticipated. Even though he couldn't move his head because it was forced against the headrest, David's arms and feet were flailing around as if he was trying to get out of his seat, out of the car. Hugh held on, pulling harder even as he felt his arms weakening, his face grimacing with the effort, the silk cutting into his hands where he had double looped it. He lifted his knee up onto the back of the seat to get better leverage as he pulled. It was probably less than five minutes from go to whoa but it seemed a lot longer and every minute held the possibility of someone driving into the car park seeing them. He was relieved more than anything when the man finally stopped moving.

When he was sure that David was dead, he tied the silk tie around the top of the seat so that his head was held in a more or less upright position. A casual glance as he drove by would look like he was merely resting it or he had fallen asleep. Hugh got into the driver's seat, started the engine and drove out of the carpark. He knew exactly where he was going to plant the body. The neatness of his plan made him smile. Two birds with one stone. Thank you, Detective Inspector Whittington!





## Chapter 17

Francesca admitted to Nonna that she hadn't yet been able to ignore the feeling that despite his professional manner, Flem thought of her as more than just a dependable colleague. Somewhere under all that impeccably courteous behaviour, she was sure she could detect an undercurrent of a more intimate relationship. Although she wouldn't dream of talking about such things with anyone else, Francie was at ease opening up on matters of the heart to her grandmother because she knew Nonna was the best keeper of secrets in the whole family. She knew bits and bobs that no one else knew, things that even Mama didn't know. Occasionally, when perhaps they'd drunk a glass of wine too many, she would offer up a bit of information that would surprise Francie. Keeping secrets is a skill that is seldom wasted in a small city and as a consequence both were entrusted with many bits of information that they had been sworn to keep to themselves. It was, however, an unarticulated agreement between them that the rules of secrecy do not apply to them and because of that Francesca and her Nonna knew each other better than anyone else. At least that was what they told each other. Nonna knew that Francie wasn't at all keen to shake off her feelings for Flem. Nonna, for her part, had smiled and told her that Ian would need to realise that he was unattached before he could move on. She had patted Francie's hand and advised her not to waste her life. Francie had nodded but kept to herself that she didn't think she was and that being close to him at work was enough. Francie was just as good as her grandmother at keeping secrets.

Still on night shift, Francie had called into her grandmother's place for a late-night snack and to get warm. Nonna rarely went to bed before three or four o'clock and a light on in the living room of her house in Smith Street meant that the coffee was percolating. When asked how the investigation was going, Francie said that she thought Flem was onto something but he was only confiding in his friend who had come up from Hobart to head up the case.

"And how is the young man who found him, young Pennicott?" Nonna knew everybody in the place and Francie was sure that she knew how Hen was going but she answered anyway.

"He's okay. He's back at work but he's not saying much. I think it really knocked him about, even though it had nothing to do with him, really."

"Maybe he's a little too soft to be a policeman."

"Nonna! Are you being homophobic?"

"No, no, no. He's a nice boy," Then added confidentially, "Such a waste, though."

"Ha! His boyfriend is even better. Smart, handsome, nice personality, great sportsman and he has a university degree." Claspng her hands in prayer before her, Francie pretended to be mooning over her dreamboat

"A bigger waste, then," Nonna laughed, then added more seriously, "But that boy, he's not one of us."

"Not one of us? What does that mean? Not Italian? Not hetero?"

"No, no, no! He went to the mainland, didn't he? He was away for years"

"He went to the mainland to study, for Heaven's sake!"

"Tasmania University wasn't good enough for him, was it?"

“The course he wanted to do wasn’t available here!” Francie was getting annoyed. “God, it’s hard to keep up with your bigotry, Nonna. You’re usually dumping on the locals for being too local.”

“Was he a homosexual before he left? Who knows? That’s all I’m saying,” she said, her eyebrows arched. Francie gave up. “Time for coffee, Nonna. You’re being ridiculous.” Nonna smiled triumphantly.

Francie stayed at her grandmother’s a little longer than she had intended, a bit more than her usual half hour break. No one was going to have a go at her for an extra ten minutes, not at this time of night. But she was definitely past due to get back to the station. They exchanged kisses at the door, then Nonna went back inside where it was warm and Francie walked over to her patrol car parked on the footpath outside Nonna’s house. She opened the door of the vehicle, ducked her head and sat down behind the wheel, put on her seatbelt and out of habit, checked the rear vision mirror. She had already turned the key to start the vehicle when it registered that something behind her moved. Startled, she looked around and clasped a hand over her mouth because there on the back seat, slumped in a corner was a man, immobile, mouth open, eyes closed, a vivid scar around his throat.

She was about to scream but the same instant, the training kicked in. Don’t touch anything and tell someone. She unbuckled her seatbelt, got out the car without touching anything else and this time, locked the bloody doors. Then using her own key, she went back inside the little house and without saying anything to her grandmother beyond shaking

her hands with her index finger and pinkie extended, *fare le corna*, she rang Flem at the station.

“Hi Francie, what’s up? Shit, it’s after one o’clock! Aren’t you supposed to be at the station now?”

“Sarge, there’s another body. In my car. I just got in and it’s on the back seat. A bloke with his throat cut. Not cut, strangled. In my car. Just like Pen! Jesus! Sarge, what the Hell?”

“Slow down Francie. Where are you?”

“At Nonna’s”

“In Smith Street, right?”

“Yeah. Smith Street.”

“Are you inside the house?”

“Yeah”

“Have you locked the car?”

“Yes, I have now.”

“Okay. Sit tight. I’ll be there in five minutes.”

“Should I call it in, Sarge?”

“You just did. Just sit tight for the moment. We’ll do details when I get there, OK? Get Nonna to put the kettle on.”

He was there in exactly nine minutes, parking his police ute on the footpath opposite the house. Before he knocked on the door, Flem peered in the patrol car lit only by a streetlamp. Despite the dim light he knew immediately who it was. David Murfett, the city council’s town planner, had been a handy little rover in his school days, quiet but bloody determined, seemed to turn up at the contest from nowhere and he was

definitely dead. Judging by the ugly purple choker around his throat, he'd been strangled, in exactly the same way as Ryan had been. And like Ryan, this guy was in the back seat of a police car, obviously having been put there before rigor mortis had set in. There was no way in the world that it was a coincidence. Flem wondered how many similar murders in a row did you need for it to be a serial killer? Oh God, please don't let it be some psychopath with unresolved anti-authority issues. He covered his face with his hand and swore. If nothing else, maybe now people would get into the habit of locking their bloody cars. Yes, Ian, that's the take-home lesson out of this; locking car doors. Jesus fuck man, get a grip!

He took a deep breath and knocked on Mrs Pisarelli's door. The old lady herself opened it and beckoned him inside.

"Coffee's ready, Ian."

"Thanks, Mrs P. We're going to need it!"

He asked Francie to tell him everything, every second of her shift so far, checking every little detail, making her repeat nearly everything she said, looking for anything that might give a clue as to why her car was selected as a dumping place for a body but there didn't seem to be anything that he could grab hold of. She hadn't been at work for that long: her shift started at eleven. He knew that the only time it could have been done was when Francie was here at her grandmothers. There had been no lights on in any of the nearby houses when he pulled up but he would check with the neighbours in the morning anyway. He doubted he'd learn anything because neither Francie nor her grandmother had

heard anything, so it was unlikely that anyone else had. No matter which way they looked at it, there was absolutely no clue anywhere.

Finally, Flem said, “Right, let’s call it in and get forensics and Barry here. Maybe they’ll come up with something more tangible. Are you right, Francie?”

“Yeah sure, Sarge. Are you going to hang around until they come?”

“Of course. Unless you don’t want me to,” Flem replied without thought, his mind concentrating on how this murder could possibly relate to the Ryan case. Nonna’s raised her eyebrows and Francie hid her relief with a curt “Thanks, Sarge.” Flem looked at her, wondering what that was about, then got up to have a look around at the scene. At the door, realising that Francie was shaken up and that that was causing her unusual behaviour, he took Francie’s hand and said, “You’ll be right, Francie. You’ve done nothing wrong. If anyone gets in trouble it will be me for having missed something before. Don’t you worry.” She gave him a wry smile and closed door before ringing the desk at the station. She knew she’d be waking Aaron up, the lazy arse, but he’d be onto the local pathologist and the Forensics Unit in Burnie as soon as he heard what had happened. Everything would kick into action and they would be there within the hour.

When she disconnected the call to the desk, Nonna shooed her outside to help Flem with whatever he was doing. That woman, thought Francie, never misses an opportunity. But her grandmother was right. The nearness of him, his presence and heft as they slowly walked up and down the narrow street looking for anything that might be a clue, calmed

her. She didn't need his protection but she felt a comfort in the two of them sharing an experience before it became common knowledge, common property. For a few moments at least, it was just the two of them, regardless of the horrible circumstances that had thrown them together in the middle of the night. The fluorescent lights, police tape and procedural protocol, the inquisitive eyes of the neighbours would shatter the intimacy far too soon.



## Chapter 18.

Operating on less than four hours sleep and relying on his mother yet again, Flem was in at work by eight o'clock the next morning. He detailed the previous night's events in as much detail as he could remember. Whitt listened carefully and only arched up when Flem, determined to avoid a serial killer situation, proposed that the second one may not be related to the first.

"So, you're saying that the two murders aren't related?" Whit was looking at Flem with raised eyebrows

"Well, apart from that the second one deliberately copied the first," Flem said, leaning back on his chair. Whit took note of the fact that the door to his office was closed, meaning that Flem wanted to keep this between them. "That's what bothers me still. How did they know the exact details? The second one was an exact copy of the first." Whit wasn't quite seeing why Flem was emphasising the point.

"Someone must have told them."

"But who? Who, apart from the station knew? There were no details in the papers or on the telly."

"Where are you going with this, mate?"

Flem paused for a minute, choosing his words carefully.

"At best, there's someone here who is shooting his mouth off when he shouldn't. At worst, there's someone here who is part of it in some way."

"Shit, yeah. I see what you mean. Any ideas who?"

"None whatsoever." It sounded final but Whitt knew that even if Flem did have an inkling, he wouldn't announce it until he was certain. Not for the first time he looked at the big man and wished that he was in Hobart,

that they were working together. He forced himself to re-focus on the business at hand. He outlined a hypothesis.

“Let’s say for the sake of argument that Formby is telling the truth and he really knows nothing about the murder of Ryan. Okay, we know he’s involved somehow, so what’s his role? The one who orders the hit?”

“Definitely possible but not very likely, under the circumstances.”

“What about someone else who’s on his side, someone who’s taken it upon themselves with or without his son actually knowing about it?”

“Possible. But who?”

“Let’s park that for a moment. Murder two. The victim’s job was a town planner or whatever it’s called these days. From all accounts, a good bloke and a friend of your star player. What if, in the course of his job, he finds out about Formby’s scheme to sell off the oval and threatens to expose it? He’d have to be silenced, wouldn’t he?”

“Again, possible. If so, was anyone else involved in the scheme? And remember, it would have to be someone capable of actually murdering a fit, healthy young bloke. I can’t see Kevin Formby being able to do that on his own, can you? And, it would have to be someone who knew about how Ryan was done in, with enough detail to copy it exactly.”

“Agreed on all points. But as a general framework, what do you reckon?”

“Shit, yeah. Absolutely. Definitely possible. But how does that get us any further?”

“But you see what I mean? My point is that they both revolved around Formby even though it looks like he actually hasn’t done anything. Maybe he doesn’t even know anything.”

“Maybe not about the murders. But the corruption thing is still there.”  
Flem was determined not to let Big Kev off that hook.

“Sure. And we’ll get him for that, no worries,” Whitt agreed in his most conciliatory tone, which generally meant that he didn’t agree. “I reckon we need to find out who else was involved in the oval scheme. Start eliminating possibilities.”

“And we still need to find out who would go to that length to get revenge for what Ryan did to Priti Formby. There can’t be that many who’d have the wherewithal to go that far.”

“The thing is though that Formby at least knows something about both. We’ve got to put some pressure on him, get him to talk,” Whitt said. “What have we got? Anything?”

“Nope. He’s old school for sure but we know first-hand that he isn’t stupid. He will know that anything he says is going to lead back to him, so he’ll deny everything again. And, he’ll have his bloody lawyer in with him from the start next time.”

“Yeah, you’re right. We need more. Something else. Something we haven’t thought of yet.”

Flem didn’t want to give up on the Ryan murder but he saw the sense in the slight change of focus. He was still convinced Formby was involved in both, that Formby was the link. It was an obsession that had Whitt concerned and now was the moment for him to say something.

“By the way, mate,” Whitt asked on the way out of the office, trying to sound casual, as if it wasn’t all that important, “why are you so hard on Formby’s case? Something’s eating you, Flem and whatever it is, you know that it can’t get in the way.”

Flem stopped and looked at his friend, considering what to say. He knew Whitt well enough to know that he had sat on Flem's explosion earlier until it could be talked about calmly. He decided to be straight with him.

"He threatened to involve my sons when he was trying to force me to do something I wasn't going to do because it wasn't the right thing to do," he said quietly. Whitt looked at him without blinking, his lips pursed. "Of course, he didn't say anything directly, not straight out. It was all done by implication."

Whitt's gaze didn't leave Flem's eyes. He really wanted to know because an unhealthy obsession could easily cloud the analytical thinking an investigation relied on. Very few cases were solved by a flash of brilliant insight or the investigator's intuition. Cases were solved by meticulous attention to detail. Personal antipathies were enough to get you removed from investigations because defence lawyers loved to use them to sow doubt in the minds of a jury. Whitt needed to know.

"A couple of years ago. He wanted me to drop Keith from the side when I was coaching it and I wouldn't do it. But I know why you're asking and no, it hasn't affected my ability to remain unbiased in my work."

"Glad to hear it. All right then, that's sorted. No more to say."

"Pizza night tonight. Come around and renew acquaintances. The boys have grown a bit. Six o'clock."

"I'll be there. Now let's get back to work."



## Chapter 19

At six o'clock that night, Whitt knocked on Flem's door. When it opened, he could see a blond-haired boy peering at him from behind his father's legs. Accepting the wine still covered in a brown paper bag, Flem beckoned him in and led the way to the dining room. Pointing at each one in turn, he said, "Rufus, Raphael. This is my old friend Alan Whittaker. He was my friend when we were training together in Hobart, a long time ago. He's nearly a Commander now. A bigwig!"

"Hardly! And you can call me Whitt. Your father does, so you can too."

The boys politely greeted him. Rapha looked at Whitt, then almost as an accusation, said, "You're in that photo on the sideboard," pointing to it. Whitt took a couple of paces in its direction and looked at it, smiling and nodding. He recognised the framed photo of him and Flem with their arms around Ivy on top of Mount Wellington, with the city of Hobart and the Derwent River in the background. It had been taken years ago.

"Yes, I am. Well spotted."

Rapha shouted, "Dick!"

"What?" Whitt could remain unmoved by the worst of criminals confessing the most horrific things but he was visibly taken aback by an eight-year-old calling him a dick.

"That's what you say when someone says, 'Well spotted'. Well spotted Dick," Ru explained.

"It's a pudding!" Rapha wasn't going to have his older brother steal his moment of glory.

"Ah yeah, I get it. Spotted Dick. Good one."

“It’s a bit rude,” Rapha said conspiratorially, still young enough to be entertained by it.

“It’s a bit past its use-by date now,” said Rufus dismissively.

“Not for me. I think it’s pretty funny. It had me going for a moment,” said Whitt, flirting with danger by taking sides. Rapha beamed at his brother in triumph.

“Oh God, now you’ve done it. You’ll have a friend for life, mate,” said Flem. “And maybe an enemy as well.”

“No, I don’t care,” said Rufus. “Whatever.” He wanted it known that he had left such childish things behind.

They had barely settled onto the comfortable lounge chairs with beer and ginger beer at hand when the delivery man arrived with three large pizzas and a Cornuto for dessert, and they had to re-organise themselves at the dinner table. Flem put a pile of paper napkins in the middle of the table.

“Two four six eight, bog in don’t wait!”

“Over teeth, over gums, look out belly ‘cause here it comes!”

“Here’s the bread, here’s the crust...”

“Rufus!”

“If we didn’t have arseholes our bellies would bust!”

“That’s enough out of you, you cheeky bugger!”

But Whitt laughed and order was restored. Rufus hadn’t left all childhood things behind, after all.

“Sequence, Scrabble or Railroads?”

“Not Scrabble because Rapha makes up words that don’t exist.”

“No, I don’t!”

“Yes, you do, Raph. And Dad always allows it. It’s not fair”

“Okay, not Scrabble, then. Sequence?”

“Yeah, Sequence. Me and Dad against you and him, Rufus!”

“You’ll have to tell me the rules, Rufus.”

“It’s pretty easy. The board has two decks of cards on it. Everyone gets six cards and a bag of counters, and when it’s your turn you put a card on the table and a counter on the same card on the board.”

“Yeah, and you play in teams. And you have to get a sequence of five counters in a row.”

“Twice, to win.”

“That’s all there is to it, Whitt” said Flem. “We’ve just got to get all our ducks in a row twice to win.”

“Very metaphoric, Flem.”

“Let’s play!” said Rapha.

They played a practice round so that Whitt could pick up the gist of the game but after that, the gloves were off. When the game started in earnest, neither of the boys and neither of the men were happy to lose and because concentration levels remained high, conversation was sporadic. They played three rounds so that everyone played with everyone else and then debated who was the overall winner. Unsurprisingly, Rapha insisted that according to some highly suspect reasoning, he was the winner. “Chip of the old block with that kind of logic,” Whitt said, precipitating an in-depth discussion of genetics and parental influence. And that led to a collection of stories that may or may



not have been entirely true. It was fun but eventually it was time to call a halt to proceedings.

“Okay boys. Say goodnight to Uncle Whitt and don’t bugger around in the bedroom. I’ll be in in a minute.”

Rapha had no hesitation at clasping his arms around his new best friend with full force. “Good night, Uncle Whitt!”

Rufus’ handshake was more befitting a sceptical eleven years old. “Good night, Mister Whitt. You’re not really our uncle, are you?”

“No, but I’m a really old friend of your Dad’s and your Mum’s, so it’s close enough,” he said with a smile.

“Yeah, close enough!” Rapha agreed and he gave Whitt another hug to seal the deal.

“Fine,” said Rufus, and gave Whitt a more manly hug. “See you when I see you, Whitt.”

“Not if I see you first!”

“Right, you two. Teeth then bed!”

Sitting on the back deck with a final beer in hand, they watched the Spirit of Australia, lit up like Christmas tree, sail away from the port, around the Bluff where the lighthouse blinked every now and then, heading towards Melbourne, ten hours of cruising away, past the border controls and off the edge of the world.

“Not a bad spot here, Flem.”

“Yeah, it could be worse, eh? Every day’s different out there. As long as we don’t get built out.”

“I have to say that I really enjoyed myself tonight. They are great boys.”<sup>SEP</sup>“They are, yeah. They must have enjoyed themselves tonight because not a single punch was thrown and no one kicked anyone. Amazing. You should come more often.”

“I should. I will.”

It was too cold to stay out there for too long.

When Flem saw him out, they paused for a moment at the front door, and Flem said, “Good night, Whitt. See you in the morning, mate. Thanks for coming around. Top night. And we haven’t cracked that bottle of red yet. It’ll be here for next time.”

Whitt nodded, stopped at the doorway and said quietly, “So, the Mayor had a go at the boys, did he?” It came out of nowhere and caught Flem by surprise. “Well, that’s just not on, is it?” Whitt went on. “Don’t worry, mate. We’ll get him. One way or another, we’ll get him.”

“I have no doubt about that.”

In small places like Devonport nothing stays impersonal for long and inevitably sides have to be taken. Often sides are inherited, handed from parent to child, wrapped up in the colours of the local football team or religious affiliation. But sometimes a single incident can cause an instant rift. Whether or real or imagined, meant or accidental, a slight, against a family member can change the social dynamic forever. A wedding or a divorce, regardless of necessary either was, can cause a fall-out that reaches far beyond the families involved. Leaving town forever can be an unintended betrayal. But regardless of how much you’d want to, no

one is allowed to remain neutral. Blood is cheaper than petrol but thicker than water.

## Chapter 20.

Across town, Colin Middleton had something on his mind. As usual on a Friday night, he met up with his mates after work for a beer or two at the beer bar on Oldaker Street. If there wasn't a football game to be played the next day, they could put away any number of rounds of drinks without a problem but tonight they were taking it relatively easily. Even though it was cold, they'd commandeered an outside table, one that was out of the wind and away from the smokers. It was winter so all four had replaced their shorts and thongs with jeans and runners and over their t-shirts they wore puffer jacket, with or without sleeves. Baseball caps were optional.

When Adrien got up to get the next round of drinks, Col interrupted Matt and Jason's on-going argument about the merits of their respective Australian football teams. God knew what they would argue about if either of them managed to convince the other to change their allegiance, but part of the joy was both of them knowing that neither ever would.

"Hey fellas, shut up a minute. I need some advice. Serious. Before Ade comes back."

Matt and Jason stopped talking and looked at each other in surprise, then turned to Col.

"What's the problem, Col?"

"Last Saturday night, I saw Jana at Buttons and man, she was smashed. Couldn't stand up."

"So, she was there and you just happened to be there as well, eh? I find that highly suspicious!"

“Ade’s sister Jana? I thought she didn’t drink. Pretty strict religious or something, aren’t they?” Matt took it more seriously.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. I tried to keep an eye on her, you know, but when I came back from the toilet, she was gone. So, I went over to the bar where she had been and asked that fella who works there, you know, the one with the tats and the hair, and he said that she must have been sick rather than drunk because she’d been on the soft drinks all night. He reckons a policeman took her home.”

“A policeman? Really?”

“Yeah, the fella behind the bar said he showed him his ID and all.”

“So, what’s the problem?”

“He also said the copper was dodgy. Look out, here’s Ade. Took your time, didn’t you?”

“It’s packed in there, mate. Your shout next, see how you go.”

Some nights, for some reason the talk just doesn’t flow. Sometimes, people are tired or they’ve got other things on their minds, things that don’t belong in the conversation. People are distracted. Innocent comments incite unnecessarily sharp responses and noses get put out of joint. Adrien went on the offensive.

“What’s the matter, Col? You’re acting weird, mate!” Col flicked his errant curls away from his eyes. Adrien Nikolić was a good bloke but he did have a bit of temper on him, so Col turned to Matt and said, “I reckon it’s the second jab. The first one was nothing, a bit of sore arm but the second one is knocking me around a bit. Comes and goes, you know?”

“That’s why I’m not having it,” said Adrien with certainty. “It’s a waste of time.”

“No, it isn’t. It’s stupid not to get vaccinated,” Matt replied, certain of his opinion on the matter.

“I’m surprised you still have your job if you’re not getting jabbed,” Jason added. “I thought we all had to, being front line hero workers saving the economy, or whatever.”

“You don’t even have proper job, Piddles. Just work for your old man when it suits you! And you’re fucking off to Queensland as soon as the borders open up again!” Jason wasn’t going to respond to Adrien’s baiting.

“True but I’m getting vaxxed because my old man is immunocompromised. Yeah, yeah, I know I can still get it and pass it on, especially when other people don’t get vaccinated.” He swivelled his head around in exaggerated drama to look at Adrien.

“It’s all fucking bullshit! I’m fucking sick of it!” Ade stood up angrily pushing his chair back and stormed off in the direction of the supermarket carpark across the road.

“Jesus! What’s crawled up his arse?”

Matt looked at Col but he looked away. Like a dance, Jason looked at Matt, then at Col. “What’s going on?”

“Good question, Matty. What’s going on, Col?”

“I don’t know.”

“Yeah, you do. Spit it out, Col”

Jason and Matt waited with raised eyebrows while Col took a long swig of his beer.

“All right. I’m just guessing here but I told you I saw Jana off her face at Buttons, right? And that a cop took her home? Well, that was the cop who was strangled up on the Bluff. And you can’t tell me that Ade’s been acting normal the last few days. Half the time he’s really angry and the other half he’s either shitty or shit scared. Look at him tonight. That wasn’t normal, was it? Oh, Hell, I don’t know!”

“Shit!” said Jason. Matt, next to him, nodded in agreement.

“It’s probably nothing to do with that,” Matt said, but he didn’t sound convinced. ‘And he is our mate.’”

‘Yeah, but fucking Hell!’”

They sat and looked at their beers until Colin stood up and said that he was going home.

“Are you going to say anything to anyone?”

“I don’t know. Are you?”

“Jesus, I don’t know either.”

“Give me a ring beforehand if you decide on anything, eh?”

“Yeah, sure. See you, Col.”

“See you, Col. Take it easy, eh?”

“You too. See youse.”

Colin Middleton left the table, his beer glass still half full. Neither Jason nor Matt knew what to say.

When Col got home, his parents were surprised to see their son home so early on a Friday night. He avoided their questions by going into the bathroom for a long shower and to give himself a chance to come up with a plausible reason for this departure from the norm but nothing

seemed quite normal at the moment. He didn't know whether he should tell the police and put his best mate into the shit or keep his mouth shut and possibly be complicit in a murder. Even if he gave an anonymous tip-off and it proved to be important, it would spell the end of their mateship with the others. They would know that he had doxed. And God only knew what would happen to Adrien. No, it was best not say anything. After all he had no proof of any wrongdoing. Not real proof, anyway.

It was probably best not to say anything for the time being. What troubled him was that it is a fine line between the best thing and the right thing.

## Chapter 21.

The following morning when Flem knocked on Doctor Streznicki's office door, the pathologist had a theory and seemed keen to disclose what was on his mind. "Morning, Flem. I have found something for you. There is a difference between the two cases. Both are ligature strangulations but as I said before, the first one had something hard pressed into the larynx and the second one hadn't."

"Good morning to you too, Barry. What are you on about? In language I can understand, please."

"It supports your theory about the second one being a copy of the first one rather than done by the same murderer."

"What does?"



“Come outside while I have a fag. I’m gasping.”

“That’s because you smoke.”

“Yeah, I know. I’m going to quit.”

They had to walk away from the building to the public carpark before Barry was allowed to light up.

“So, we know that both victims were strangled by a rolled-up cloth, something not overly fibrous, silk most likely. And between you and me, I’d say it was done from behind in both cases, over the head, no nonsense, pull as hard as you can, no mucking about, no mercy. Both the victims were male, strong but they had no chance, so it was done very deliberately and done by someone strong enough to hold on, yeah? So far, the same. But here’s the thing. The first victim has a massive contusion right on the larynx, applied with enough force to completely smash the voice box. Not on the second one.”

“Right,” said Flem. “Okay. Obvious question. Who knows about this?”

“Me. My wife. You. That’s all, I think. Why?”

“Whoever knew enough about the first murder to copy it, but didn’t know about this,” said Flem and then added “Whatever it is.”

“I’ve got a hypothesis,” Barry said with more excitement. “Based entirely on a single Google search, so it may well be nothing. But hear me out anyway.”

Barry explained that the bruising on the larynx was more or less round, about three centimetres in diameter, the size and shape of a coin. So as a guess, he’d put in “silk, coin, strangle” into his search engine and one of the first sites that came up was devoted to a band of assassins who would strangle unwary British Colonials traveling through the Indian subcontinent in the time of the Raj.

“India?” asked Flem. “What’s India got to do with this?” He looked quizzically at the pathologist, then a light bulb moment. “Oh, shit!”

“What?” asked Barry, sensing that something was being connected even though he had offered his proposition more or less as a joke. “Can’t tell you, Barry. And it’s more than likely nothing anyway, like you say. But if it is something, I absolutely promise you that you will be the first to know.” As he was speaking, he was hurrying back to the station. There was a link. The odds on it being of any significance were about as long as those for winning the lottery but at least it gave him something to follow up. Barry ground out his cigarette and headed to the surgery. It hadn’t been the reaction that he’d anticipated. He’d have to wait and he was a man who didn’t enjoy waiting.

Walking back to the station, Flem considered what to do with this new information. If there was a connection, it would have to be with Priti Formby. Or was that just him being racist? In any case, it was the flimsiest of notions. Barry Streznicki comes up with an idea that even he thinks is a long shot, and here he is, tying that idea to something completely different. Before going back inside, he stood and closed his eyes for a moment and allowed the moment of darkness to relax him. Then he looked up at the window of his office on the first floor and said, “Summat’s better ‘n naught.” Lord only knew where he’d picked up that expression but it was enough for him to do a search on his computer for an Indian-Tasmanian organisation on the Coast. He was looking for someone to tell him whether or not there were secret Indian societies in Tasmania, given that if they were secret, they might be hard to find and unlikely to advertise themselves online. The only Indian Flem knew to

talk to was Nick Kumar and he was a third generation Tasmanian who played on the half back flank in the twos. Good player but too lazy to make the firsts, Flem thought to himself. He didn't think Nick would know anything about secret Indian societies, but the computer told him that Professor Javindar Singh whose expertise was on "Indo-Australian Social Interaction in the post-Colonial age" might, and that he had his office on the Burnie campus of the University of Tasmania. He rang and made an appointment to see the professor after lunch.

"Yes, the Thuggi traditionally placed a silver coin in a silk kerchief, spun it around into a ligature and used it to garrot wayfarers. They were Indian highwaymen, if you like. Not made out to be quite as romantic as Robin Hood or Captain Moonlight, even though they were essentially the same."

"Thugs?" Flem looked at Professor Singh with surprise. "From that I'm assuming you don't mean the term like we mean it. A bunch of violent dickheads who usually play for the opposing team?"

Professor Singh smiled, looking like Bishan Bedi at the top of the crease before bamboozling the opposing batsman with an unplayable googly. "You have an elegant way of expressing yourself, Sergeant Fleming. But yes, I'm referring to the secret society that the British tried to destroy two hundred years ago in India. That's where the word comes from."

"A secret society? That's not what most people of think when we hear the word 'thug'."

“Of course not. The British were very good at giving the native people of any of their conquered territories belittling names. Niggers, Boongs, Nignogs, need I go on?”

“So, are you telling me that these thugs weren’t murdering criminals?”

“It depends where you stand. As they say, ‘One man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter’”. Javindar saw Flem looking unsure and asked teasingly. “You seem doubtful, Sergeant Fleming. Wouldn’t you fight for your country, your people, your family?”

“My family, for sure,” Flem agreed, articulating his thoughts without guile because he was rattled by the unexpected direction the conversation was taking. A slight pause before he went on with, “I’m less certain about my people or my country. I’m not really sure about what that means here and now. I’m assuming that you’re a naturalised Australian, so are you my people?”

“Yes, but two centuries ago the world was different. And even now, you can see how passionate second and third generation Australian Indians are, how their loyalty is divided when Kohli brings his team out here to play cricket. And it’s not just Indians, of course. People cling to any ethnicity that they see themselves represented by when the mainstream is antagonistic.”

“Possibly. But how long does that last? I don’t reckon my mate Nicky Kumar clings to any ethnicity except Tasmanian but maybe his grandparents did. Maybe his parents still do. I’ll ask him next time I see him. Anyway, back to the topic. What can you tell me about this secret society? If they weren’t criminals, what were they?”

“Oh, make no mistake, Sergeant. The Thuggi are certainly not averse to robbing people. In fact, they saw it as a noble pursuit. And they are very efficient assassins.”

Flem looked up.

“Are? Is it still going? Does this mob operate in Australia, in Tasmania, here on the Coast?”

“Who knows? But wherever there is a sizeable Indian community that feels itself to be under attack, the youngsters will look for ways to assert themselves. Isn’t that the way with all youngsters who feel themselves to be unfairly threatened?”

“Possibly,” Flem said, “but doesn’t that also apply to groups that just want to conquer the rest of the world? To impose their beliefs on everyone around them?”

“Ah, I see you have thought about this before, Sergeant Fleming.”

“I always wonder about what motivates anyone who commits a crime, Professor Singh. That’s my job.”

“Yes, of course. Profiling they call that, I believe. Well, let me add another bit of information. I am, as you probably know from my turban, a Sikh. Sikhs and Thuggi are not exactly friends. In fact, we are diametrically opposed in almost everything. But we have our shared history of Colonial oppression which has given all of us Indians an almost genetic distrust and dislike of the British and often all Europeans. And, before you suggest that it is the same for Australians, let me point out that it isn’t, mainly because we have dark skin and the majority of Aussies do not. How much do you think the Aboriginal people of this country like what has been done to them? But while the power is held in white hands, the people of colour keep silent, often simply to stay alive.

And of course, Tasmania is the most anglophile state of the country and the most heterogeneously white. Your Nicky Kumar may simply be keeping his thoughts to himself rather than exacerbate the racism he encounters by responding to it. Perhaps one day he will lift his guernsey and point to his skin.”

Flem was impressed that the Professor knew about Nicky Winmar’s gesture against the racism he had been subjected to as an Aboriginal footballer, then immediately questioned himself as to why he had thought that Singh wouldn’t have known that. The man might well be a die-hard Collingwood supporter for all he knew. Annoyed by his baseless assumption, he was relieved when Javindar Singh pulled the dialogue back to the business at hand. With a wry smile, he said, “But I’m off on a rant; an occupational hazard, I’m afraid. Lecturers generally love the sound of their own voice, especially when we are talking about our pet subjects. Now, I suppose your next question will be if there are any Indian societies, secret or not, here on the Coast and I’d say not. Not enough people to hide in a crowd.”

“Maybe not an actual society, maybe just some people who are enamoured with that tradition, and who at least knowledgeable in that Thuggee throttling technique and who see it as an identity thing? Like Aboriginal people asserting their right to spear people who’ve broken their law.”

“Why are you asking, if I may ask?”

“Sorry, I can’t divulge that. But it may be really important.”

“In the business involving Priti Patel?”

Flem said nothing. Professor Singh went on.

“Or Priti Formby as she is also known, having married into Devonport royalty.”

Flem could have sworn that Singh’s eyes twinkled as he spoke. He shook his head anyway. “Sorry Professor, I can’t comment on that, no matter how much you prod.”

“Well, let me give you my tuppence worth. If whoever murdered that policeman did so in revenge for what he did to her and if whoever it was is a Thuggi assassin, he will be long gone from Tasmania, even from Australia by now, regardless of any border controls. I’d think that a paid assassin would have all that well and truly sorted, don’t you?”

Flem remained silent, trying to process it all. Was it really plausible?

“Of course, a Sikh would have ensured justice a very different way but the Patels are not Sikhs and do not share our customs or our ethics,” Professor Singh asserted, then added with a straight face. “We prefer to simply stab our opponents in the chest. Daggers are a part of our national dress!”

It made Flem laugh. He was warming to the big man.

“I’m being flippant of course but I meant what I said before. If it was an actual assassin, he will be well and truly gone by now, regardless of border shutdowns.”

“More than likely but assassins get paid, Professor. If it was a Thuggi, and that’s a bloody long shot, someone hired him. And I’m going to try to find out who.”

“Good on you! Let me know how I can help. I don’t know anything off the top of my head but I can quietly ask around. Someone may well know something about it and they may be more likely to tell me rather than you.”

“Thank you, sir. I would appreciate it.” Flem stood and shook hands with the Professor.

“It was a pleasure talking with you, thank you sir.”

“The pleasure was all mine, Sergeant. Let’s keep in touch.”

On the way back to Wenvoe Street, he was interrupted by a phone call coming through on his blue-toothed phone. It wasn’t a number he recognised. Flem pressed the speaker button on his steering wheel and barked, “Fleming.”

“Ah Sergeant, sorry to disturb you on your way home but perhaps you could ask your pathologist if there was any bruising on Ryan’s back, between his shoulder blades. Thuggees often applied force to their garrotting by way of pushing their knees onto the victim’s back to gain more leverage.”

“Thanks Professor. I’ll check it out. Thanks again for your help.”

“You’re very welcome. Bye for now.”

“Bye.”

Deciding that there is no time like the present, Flem pulled off the highway, scrolled through the names on his contact list and called Barry.

“Barry, it’s Flem. Listen mate, was there any bruising on Ryan’s back at all?”

“From memory, yes, I believe there was, but I’ll double check and get back to you as soon as I can.”

“Thanks, mate.” He hung up before Barry could ask any questions.

To himself he thought, “Plausible, then. What the Hell is going on here?”



He rang Whitt on his mobile. “Whitt? I’ve got something on the Ryan case but you may not believe it. I’m not sure I believe it!”

“In that case, it’s probably wrong.”

He related what he had learned from Professor Singh and how that linked to Priti and Rani Patel, who was as rich as Croesus and could have afforded to get something like that done. Whitt, who was a lot less enthusiastic than Flem had anticipated, said calmly he would see him when he got back to Wenvoe Street.

Driving back to Devonport, Flem considered how an assassin might be able slip into and out of Tasmania when the rest of the country was in and out of lockdown every second week. The more he thought about the more he was sure it could be done. It certainly explained a few things. He felt good, relieved that he was making progress.

Whitt was standing in his office, waiting for him when he arrived. As Flem passed by, he closed the door behind him. Before Flem had sat down behind his desk, Whitt said, “Yeah, nah. That coin thing doesn’t work in this scenario, Flem. The Thuggi used to sew a coin into the end of their scarves to weigh them down so they could swing them around their victim’s necks and grab the other end. Therefore, the coin wouldn’t be pressing onto their voice boxes. And therefore, whatever crushed Ryan’s Adam’s Apple, it wasn’t a silver coin in the scarf of a Thugee.”

Flem looked at Whit in stunned silence.

“Don’t look so surprised, mate. Everyone knows that.”

Whitt was keeping a straight face as Flem kept staring at him at him. Then he said, “You looked it up, didn’t you?”

“Yep. Sorry to burst your bubble but your theory doesn’t hold water, mainly because it was pretty fucking whack-oh in the first place. At a time when no one can travel anywhere, someone imports a paid assassin from India to take out a police sergeant in Burnie? Really? You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Yes, well, put like that, in the cold light of day, the whole idea does seem pretty whack-oh.

“And you know what I think? I think this is entirely because you saw the Formby name. Listen to me, mate. No matter how much you want Formby to be involved in Ryan’s murder, there is nothing to indicate that he was.”

Flem’s lips were a tight line but finally he nodded in agreement. He felt like a fool. “No, probably not. Maybe I am getting obsessed.”

“It sounds to me that he doesn’t warrant it but, you know, whatever.”

“I’m still going to get him for something, though.”

“I’m sure you are but for now let’s get back on track for this case, eh? While you’ve been off with the fairies, I’ve thought of something else that might be more useful. You know what we haven’t done? Looked at the last of his conquests. If it was a revenge killing, then we should work backwards from the last woman in his gallery. I assume you still have it?”

Only Whitt could get away with changing course by pointing out how bloody stupid he'd been and then acting as if it was of no consequence. Flem was annoyed that he had allowed himself to get seduced by a hobby horse that had no relationship to the facts and in the process had divulged information to people who would have been better off not knowing it. It probably would make no difference to Pat Ryan but it hadn't been up to him to show Jason Formby the photo of Priti with Ryan. He rubbed his hands into his eyes, saw Whitt looking at him.

“Come on, Ian. We do the best we can, that's all. No one is perfect.”

“Yeah, right.”

But Ian Fleming wasn't a man who lived comfortably with his mistakes and even as Whitt was talking to him, he was thinking about how he could make amends.

## Chapter 22.

As usual, Kevin Formby dropped into his office at the Council chamber on Friday morning, just to keep his finger on the pulse and noticed that neither Murfett nor Warrington was in his office. Ordinarily he probably wouldn't have given their absence a thought but the whole floor had a deserted feel, like the time they all had to be in bloody lockdown because some old chooks had come back to Burnie after being on the Ruby Princess cruise ship and brought bloody Covid into the state. No one wanted that to happen again, else we'd never get the mainland punters back into the state to spend their money. It felt strange to be the only one in his office and Big Kev didn't like things to feel strange.

He lowered his bulk into the padded chair behind the mayoral desk and switched on his computer, intending to have a look at how the Covid cases were going in the mainland states. It was a sure-fire way to make him feel good about living in Tasmania. As far as he was concerned, they could keep the borders closed to mainlanders and foreigners until the whole shitshow was over. He moved the mouse out of habit but before he could switch the computer on, it sprang to life. Funny, he was sure he'd turned it off when he last used it: he usually did.

He had convinced everyone that he didn't know his arse from a hole in the ground when it came to computers. In reality he was as tech-savvy as anyone else in the building. He opened his email and looked at the time when it was last opened. He had installed email tracking ages ago,

shortly after he saw that someone had put remote eyes onto his desktop. His first thought had been to squash the remote access but it struck him that him knowing that someone was spying on him gave him the advantage. He could feed whoever it was, and it was soon apparent who it was, misinformation as and when it suited him. He was deliberately lax with his password, inviting anyone who thought themselves clever, to look at what he left accessible and open on his computer. It meant that if he needed to, he could create wild goose chases at will.

Kevin was not surprised that someone had been opening his mail late last night. He knew that Warrington had an obsessive need to be know what was going on because the lanky bastard didn't trust anyone. Kevin thought he was wasting energy on all of his needless surveillance work because all he had to do was just sit back, let Kevin do the dirty work and in a couple of years, collect a bucket load of free money. In fact, the less Hugh was involved, the better it would be for him if the whole scheme went pear shaped because then he could claim that none of it had anything to do with him. Kevin was sure that the man would do exactly that. But, and it was a bloody big 'but', Kevin was certain that if Hugh had been sneaking peeks at his email, he would have washed and wiped his breadcrumbs. That certainty was enough to sow a seed of doubt. But if not Warrington, then who?

Kevin opened his browser and dropped down its history. Someone so careless might have left a footprint there. He looked at the list of sites visited by the intruder. Whoever it was, he had an interest in property law; especially how long rates and taxes on real estate had to be left

unpaid before it became claimable. Kevin stared at the screen because he immediately realised that whoever it was that had been rummaging around in his personal files was on the trail of his retirement plan. Undoubtedly it was someone in the council, either an alderman or a council employee. Shit! If he discounted Warrington because he had nothing to gain, there was no one who immediately sprang to mind.

Okay, let's be logical. Whoever it was already knew enough before he started to know what he was looking for. So, maybe this wasn't a careless mistake, maybe it was a message. Whoever it was would know that when he switched his computer on, he would see it. Now that he thought about it, it was obvious to Kevin that someone was telling him something and there was only one thing that it could be. They knew what he was planning and they were letting him know that they were onto him.

Who would want to warn him? It wouldn't be anyone who was going to take him down. It had to be someone who wanted to protect him, or at least give him a chance to clean his hands, without revealing their identity. He ran through a list of possible candidates but he couldn't think of a single man who wouldn't either have a quiet word or turn him in as soon as he could. But maybe it wasn't a man at all, maybe it was a woman. Of course! It was bloody obvious really. Jeanie bloody Norris. It had to be. If she had cottoned on, she'd give him a chance to clean up, for sure. Yes, it had to be. She was smarter than she looked, that Jeanie. Which wasn't difficult, seeing she didn't look smart at all. Kevin Formby sniggered at his own wit.

It was time to have a word with Mister General bloody Manager. Warrington might be running late this morning but he was sure to be in soon, he was that kind of bloke. Kevin decided he'd shirtfront as soon as he came in and let him know that it was time to change directions, or even maybe pull the plug entirely. In the meantime, he would check his correspondence. There'd be the usual array of mail from people who knew him by name, wanting some bloody thing or another. He usually only bothered with a chosen few, just enough to show him to be willing, and the ones he could make a big song and dance about in the media, just to show everyone how much a man of the people he was. He'd think of something to thank Jeanie later.

When his phone rang, he answered with "Speak of the devil."

"Kevin, isn't it awful? In our town. I can't believe it!"

"What? What are you talking about Jeanie?"

"Oh God, haven't you heard? David Murfett was strangled last night. Same as that other bloke. Left in a police car as well. I would have thought you'd know all about it."

"No, Jeanie, I don't. The first I've heard of it. Murfett? The town planner? What the hell happened?" Suddenly his seat was uncomfortable, his throat was dry and the buzzing of the fluorescent lights overhead annoyed him. One of his staff was murdered and he was the last to know. Even bloody Jeanie Norris knew about it before he did. What the Hell was the point of being Mayor if he was being kept in the dark about everything?

For now, he had no choice but to listen to the woman, sensing that she was thoroughly enjoying the reversal of roles. Apparently, there was a serial killer on the loose in Devonport. Whoever had strangled Ryan had now strangled Murfett. It was obviously the same person because Murfett had been strangled and left in a police car as well. The question was, according to Jeanie Norris if the two victims were connected but no one she had spoken to could think of any connections. Jeanie thought that that made it worse, that it was just some random attack, that no one was safe.

“You’ll be right, Jeanie. Don’t you worry. The cops will be onto it. That bloke from Hobart is still here, isn’t he? I’d better get off the phone in case they want to call me, seeing he was council employee and I’m the Mayor. Talk to you later.” And he pressed the red sign on his phone to hang up before she could say anything else.

He needed to think for a minute. Obviously, it hadn’t been her poking around on his computer but now there was a new candidate but he wouldn’t be answering any questions now. As the penny dropped, Formby swore. It had to be. And he didn’t want any part of it if it was. He’d better set a few self-preservation processes into motion. He thought for a moment, then made a call on his mobile, impatiently waiting for it to be accepted.





## Chapter 24

Flem looked at the name of the caller and was sorely tempted to ignore it but the man was the Mayor, so he answered it.

“Senior Sergeant Fleming,” he said, not wanting to give Formby the satisfaction of knowing that he had his name in his contacts.

“Flem, it’s me. Kevin Formby. Look mate, there’s something wrong at the Council, something that doesn’t look good,” Kevin was talking as earnestly as he could manage.

“Yes, I know Mister Formby. We’re well aware of what has happened, and we have put every available resource onto it.”

“Yes, no, there’s more, Flem. I know who did it. Well, probably,” Kevin said, his tone ignoring the fact that in the last conversation they’d had, he had threatened Flem with social ostracization if not actual bodily harm.

“Who?” Flem wasn’t having any of Formby’s games, not today.

“I reckon Hugh Warrington has something to do with it.”

“Your General Manager? And why do you think that Mister Formby?”

“You should have a look at some of the stuff on his computer files. He’s up to something for sure. Something to do with the footie oval. It’s a bit out of my league but it looks like he’s planning to sell it off or something. No, really Flem, I’m worried,” Kevin sounded like he really was worried.

“So, what does that have to with David Murfett being strangled?”

“I don’t know for sure but young David would be the most likely person to find that out, wouldn’t he? I mean, he’s the town planner. And someone hacked into my computer last night, looking stuff up about property law, and I can tell you mate, it wasn’t me. I wasn’t anywhere

near my office last night. But someone was and Warrington wanders in and out of the place at any hour of the day or night. And he hasn't been in at work today."

"All right, Mister Formby. I'll look into it," Flem replied, seeing the possibility of it being true but not wanting to give Formby the satisfaction of it.

"You do that, Flem. And let me know, eh?"

"Thank you for assistance, Mister Formby," he replied and disconnected. There was no way he would give him any information if he could possibly help it.

## Chapter 23.

Despite it being the weekend, Whitt said he had nothing better to do, so he came along when Flem went to see Hugh Warrington at his home in East Devonport. When they pulled up outside the address they had for him, Whitt whistled and said, “I thought you said the eastern side of the river is the Badlands. Bloody Hell, I wouldn’t mind this place.”

Warrington’s house was a modern, architect-designed, two story building on Melrose Street, overlooking both the river and the under-utilised East Devonport Beach, with a view that extended right out to the Rubicon River Heads on the right. To the left, if you ignored the Spirit of the Sea sculpture as everyone did, you could see up the Mersey Bluff and the lighthouse at its peak. Taking note of the surroundings, Flem said, “I suppose he got the inside running for this place when it came up for sale. Being General Manager of the Council comes in handy sometimes, eh?”

“This whole little area here is pretty good,” said Whitt, genuinely impressed. “It can only go up in value, I reckon.”

“Thinking of buying a place here, mate?” Flem sounded amused but Whitt was serious when he replied, “Might do,” as they walked up to the front door. Before Flem had the chance to knock, he added, “If it wasn’t for the serious crime up here.”

No one responded to the knock, no sound emanated from within. “Let’s go and see if he’s around the back.”

“We should really get a warrant, Flem.” Whitt said as they were walking around the side of the house because it needed to be said but neither had any intention to waste time, pulling on blue latex gloves as they spoke. The backyard of the house sloped very gently down to the highwater mark of beach. On a large wooden deck, a rolled-up umbrella was anchored between two reclining sun lounges. Even in winter it was a suntrap.

“Do you reckon he owns the joint?” Whitt asked, stepping up onto the deck, followed closely by Flem who replied, “No idea. Maybe. He’d be on a decent wicket at the Council, I reckon.” They shaded their eyes as they looked in through the double-glazed sliding doors. Nothing was moving. Flem tried the pulling on the handles, not expecting anything but this was Devonport and people not locking their doors seemed to be a common occurrence. “Shit!” he said as they parted without resistance.

Whitt stepped inside, calling out, “Mister Warrington!”

“Anybody home?”

There was no reply. They looked at each other. Flem said, “In light of current circumstances, I think we’re justified in looking around to make sure that nothing untoward has befallen Mister Warrington.” Whitt nodded, aware that should their intrusion be questioned, they had now agreed on a strategy appropriate to the situation. “Very official, Flem. Right, let’s go and have a look to see if he’s lying unconscious somewhere in the house.” Satisfied with their reasoning, they started their tour.

The back part of the house was one big space. On first impressions, the man had good if unadventurous taste and the funds to furnish his house

accordingly. A black leather Eames chair and footstool lined up with the biggest TV screen Flem had ever seen; so big, it needed to be curved, with a large Bang and Olufsen sound bar that seemed to be floating under it. There were no wires visible anywhere. Two soft brown leather couches, separated by a polished wooden coffee table, rested on an Afghan rug in front of a gas-fired faux open fireplace, even though vents in each corner of the room indicated a reverse-cycle heat pump somewhere. It was obviously on because the huge space was comfortably warm.

In one corner of the room was a kitchen, marble benchtops, shiny metallic appliances and wooden cupboards. Under the window, next to the double sink, stood a slick coffee machine, a jug and a toaster. In front of the island bench, a wooden table with six matching chairs was left bare, devoid of cloth or bowls of vases, just natural timber. Like every other surface, it was immaculately clean. “Bloody Hell,” said Flem, impressed. “Whatever he pays his cleaner isn’t enough! This place is spotless.”

“Bit weird though, don’t you think? It seems obsessive to me. No one I know is that clean and tidy,” said Whitt.

“No kids,” replied Flem wryly. “Anyway, let’s press on.”

Upstairs there was a large master bedroom, bed was perfectly made, clothes neatly arranged in drawers or hung in order in the dressing room. A large painting of a familiar landscape hung perfectly centred over a wooden dresser that matched the bedside tables. The only sign of life was a laundry basket half full of dirty clothes and even those were folded

rather than thrown in. The shower recess in the ensuite bathroom similar shaped bottles held shampoo, conditioner and body wash. All three were perfectly aligned, the spouts turned outwards at the same angle. The towels were hung over the rails so that each end was at exactly the same level. The bath salts and soaps were spaced equidistantly from the tap.

“Now you’ve mentioned it, it’s definitely a bit OCD, isn’t it?”

“It seems weird to me but apparently it’s more common than you’d think.”

“There’s naught as queer as folk, as they say in the classics,” Flem said, a touch envious as his own place was always messy despite his mother’s attempts to keep it tidy. His study in particular was a total disaster.

“Maybe he is queer. Any idea?”

“None whatsoever. I don’t reckon. I’d have heard, for sure.”

“Not that it matters.”

“No.”

They looked into the guest bedroom through the open door but it too was non-descript, anonymous. The third door was closed, the only one in the whole house that was. With neither hesitation nor expectation, Flem pushed the door open. Because the blind was down and the curtains drawn, it was difficult to see what was in the room. When Flem switched on the light, Whitt said, “What have we here?” and moved to the wall covered in dozens of photos, a couple of newspaper articles and numerous pieces of paper with words printed on them.

“Fuck! It’s your girlfriend, what’s her name, Francesca. Jesus Almighty!” For a moment Flem was too stunned to respond, trying to take it all in but his brain spinning. Francesca.

“Shit, this isn’t good, Whitt. Not good at all.” Flem was rivetted by the wall. Whitt grabbed his shoulder. “Quick, mate, give her a ring. You must have her mobile number,” Whitt said urgently. “Ring her now!”

Flem found her number and rang. The two men stood in the centre of the study, willing her to answer. It rang out. “What the Hell is going on, Whitt?” he asked but you didn’t need to be Sherlock Holmes to see there was some kind of link between Hugh Warrington and Francesca Pisarelli.

Pointing at the wall, Whitt, stated the obvious. “This shit isn’t normal, Flem. Shit, he had me fooled the other day, he seemed like a good bloke.”

“Maybe Kevin Formby is right. Maybe he is involved in a scam about the football oval and maybe he did find that David Murfett was onto him.”

“Alright, let’s say he strangled him to shut him up. So now we know why he dumped the body in Francesca’s car. He’s obviously obsessed with her. But say she’s not interested and say he’s pissed off about that. He’s under pressure now because his plan is coming apart at the seams. He wants to take it out on her. Or maybe he wants to take it out on you, through her.”

“Me?”

“Oh mate, that woman has only got eyes for you. And that’s not going to make this maniac happy, is it?”

“Shit, we’ve got to find her and get her out of harm’s way.”

“Do you know where she lives?”



“Yep. If she isn’t there, she’ll be at her mum’s, at the restaurant or most likely at Nonna’s”

“Let’s take some photos of the stuff on the wall and get the Hell out of here and find her!”

On the way back into town, Flem didn’t spare the horses, changing lanes at speed, racing over the Victoria Bridge.

“At least put the bloody screamer on!” Whitt was uncomfortably holding onto the safety strap. Flem obeyed and with the siren wailing and blue lights flashing he swung the car down the exit ramp, around under the bridge and up into Gunn Street to the share house where Francie lived. There was no response to their ringing of the bell. Neither man was surprised to find that there was no one home.

“Let’s try Nonna’s nextt. Leave the restaurant until last.”

Flem had them in Smith Street in less than five minutes, pulling up next to a hydro pole that still had some crime scene tape attached. Nonna opened the door as they walked up the path. “What’s happening, Ian?” she asked, sounding worried.

“Is Francie with you, Mrs P?”

“No, no. You know she’s on night shift. She should be at home in bed.”

“She’s not there. Listen can you do me a favour? Could you ring the restaurant and ask if she’s there? Try not to sound concerned, okay?”

She looked at him, understood that Flem wasn’t going to give her anything more, so she nodded and went back inside without asking any more questions.

Whitt looked at him with raise eyebrows.

“She’s tougher than she looks,” Flem said in reply. “If she rings it’s not as likely to cause chaos than if we go bowling in there with all guns blazing during the lunchtime rush. The Pisarellis can get a bit over-excited.”

“Good thinking, 99.”

When they followed her inside, she met them in the hallway. Shaking her head, she said, “She’s not there, Ian. What’s going on?”

‘I don’t know yet, Mrs P but I just want to make sure Francie is all right. I know she can take care of herself but I’m responsible for my team.’

“Yes, of course. Your team.” Nonna could say “That’s not it at all, is it?” without actually saying it.

“Don’t worry, Mrs P. Nothing to worry about. I’m just ticking the boxes.”

“Of course. If you say so, Ian. If you say so.”

“What?”

“Nothing! If I hear from her, I’ll call you.”

“Thanks, Mrs P. I’d appreciate it.”

“Yes. You’ll call me when you find her?”

“Will do. Ciao”

“Arrivederci, Ian. See you soon.”

As they got back into the vehicle, Whitt said, “Well, she’s got your number, doesn’t she?”

“Phone number? Yeah, she does.”

“God, you’re an idiot!”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“What?”

“There are none so blind as those who will not see.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Nothing. Let’s just go.”

Flem was about to ask again when his phone rang. It was Constable Pennicot

“What’s up, Hen?”

“Sarge, they’ve found Francie’s car. Her phone’s on the front seat but there’s no sign of her.” He sounded panicky. “What’s going on, Sarge?”

“Fuck! Where’s her car?”

“In that little carpark at Back Beach, the one with the big rocks.”

“Tell whoever’s there not to touch anything. We’ll be there in a minute!”

## Chapter 24.

Francie stood by the picnic table at the base of the Bluff lighthouse, looking out over the grey water of the Strait through the gap in the trees and bushes. She often wasn't able to sleep during the day and decided to come up for another look around, to see if anything had been missed. Approaching the scene from another angle might offer a different perspective. She'd parked her car in a layby at Back Beach, walked across the beach and clambered up the side of the table land. The track was rudimentary, and in winter it would be impossible to cart a body up it. She was reasonably fit but climbing up to the top without one on her shoulders had been a struggle.

Deliberately putting the victim, a corrupt policeman, into a police car had to be a message, surely. The big "but" was that no one could have predicted that Hen would be taking a toilet break right at that precise moment, that couldn't have been planned. Serendipity, then? It meant that dumping him in Hen's car was a spur of the moment decision, someone with a sense of irony grabbing the moment.

Of course, Flem had probably already thought of all that and more besides, probably. She knew that she had come up here to find something that would make him sit up and take notice of her. It was stupid, really because she was convinced that he did notice her but just not enough to open the floodgates. It was patently obvious that the whole thing was a giant waste of time because even if he did have feelings for her, he wasn't going to give in to them. "Bugger him," she thought.

“There’s no point flogging a dead horse.” She’d keep her feelings to herself until they dissipated into the bloody atmosphere. She told herself that she was going to waste no more time and effort on something that wasn’t going to go anywhere. And if it was time to move on, she knew that she was strong enough to plough her own furrow. The problem was that if is as big word as but.

It was time to go back down to her car, there was nothing to be gained up here. She walked to the edge of the grassed clearing, looking out to sea, to the grey horizon, to where the colour of the water matched the sky, both dull and distant. It was like looking into the future. When she felt an arm slide around her throat, she instinctively reached up with hands to grab hold of it before it could choke her, to tear it away from her windpipe, but in that movement Francesca left her gun exposed. His other hand moved to her right hip, his thumb flicked the guard button on her holster and he had her Glock in his hand before she could react. She started to squirm but froze when she felt the barrel press against her temple.

“Don’t shoot me!”

“New rules, Francesca,” he said softly into her ear. “My rules. I decide.”

“Please lower the gun. It’s loaded,” she said, struggling not to panic.

“You’re not listening, Francesca. I said we play by my rules now. Rule number one is that you never tell me what to do.”

“I’m not telling you, I’m asking you to please put the gun down before it goes off. Please.”

“I know what guns do, Francesca, they go bang! And then you’re dead.”

“Please just lower the gun, please.”

“Not so dismissive now, are you Francesca?” He pressed the gun harder against her temple, his left arm still around her neck. “Right. We’re going to go around there, behind the bushes. You’ll do exactly what I say because if you do anything that I don’t like, I will shoot you, I promise you that. I’ve got nothing to lose now, have I?”

He spun her around, made her look inland, away from the future, his arm around her neck, holding her close. From a distance, they could have been lovers, walking arm in arm, making their way back from a secret liaison. A closer look would have revealed the gun pressed into her side. But there was no one around because the wind was too cold; the sea too close to shore and the sky too low, even though it was only mid-afternoon and the weather could yet change.

Entwined, they moved awkwardly but steadily across the open grass away from the crowning tree line, towards the Lighthouse. Francie asked, “Why are you doing this? You can’t get away with it, Hugh.”

“Don’t talk. You don’t know what I am going to do.”

“And why do you have nothing to lose?”

“Keep moving. You’ll find out soon enough.”

He was going to hurt her. She knew that he would. She had to survive. She had to think. She had to stop shaking.

They reached the lighthouse from the far side, away from the walking track, away from the road and carpark. Not that it mattered, there wasn’t a soul about. The island’s lock out kept tourists away and the locals had seen it all before and knew better than to risk getting wet. Warrington

pushed the door open, pushed her inside the tower, slammed the big iron bolt across locking them inside.

“Up you go, princess!”

The concrete steps that spiralled around were barely wide enough for a single person and Warrington was close behind her, his breath warm on the back of her ears, his hand in the small of her back, urging her upwards. There was nothing she could do in the ascent. She had one chance. At the top of the steps there was a door to the gallery. She would have to open it and if she was quick enough, she could slam it into him before he got through, pushing him back down the stone steps. She could do it. She had to try. Please. A few more steps. She reached out to grab the handle, turned it without being told to, opened the door without being told to, stepped out onto the gallery without being told to, put all her weight into slamming it shut.

Nothing but the sound of the door closing. She stood up. Took a step back. The door opened. Warrington stepped over the lintel, her gun in his hand, pointing at her.

“Really? That was it? That’s what your police training taught you?”

And he lowered the gun and fired. For a second nothing, then a searing pain in her thigh and she sank down onto the boards, her back to the railings.

“I’d clamp that, Francesca. Try to stop the bleeding. But first, your handcuffs please. Now, or I’ll shoot your other leg. If the lesson hasn’t been learned, it needs to be retaught. Remember that from school, Francesca? Handcuffs please.”

One hand clutching her thigh, she reached around with the other and unclipped them from her belt.

“Thank you,” he sang. “Hand up please.” He cuffed her left arm at the wrist to the railing.

“Now, to answer your question. It was me. I put Murfett’s body in your car. Clever move, wasn’t it? Almost poetic, I thought. The two people who thwarted me: you and him. I like that word, thwart but I don’t like being thwarted, Francesca. Not by anyone. Hurting, is it?”

Francie didn’t bother replying.

“You see, Francesca, I know exactly what I am doing. I will get to the mainland and I will disappear and who knows where I will surface. And more importantly, who knows who I will be. All I have to do is get across that water and I’ll be gone. And that is where you come in. Everyone will be happy if everyone does what they are told.”

Francesca closed her eyes. The pain in her leg was throbbing and her wrist started to hurt as well. The raving of a madman was just the icing on the cake. It was difficult to see a happy ending. Concentrate on the present, she told herself, don’t panic. It was getting colder. Hugh was asking her something.

“Where is your phone?”

“It’s in my car,” she said hoarsely, her mouth dry.

“And where is your car, Francesca?” he asked as if he were talking to a child.

“Parked down at Back Beach.”



“Down there?” he pointed west, in the direction of Don Heads and smiled. “Well now, that’s lucky, isn’t it? See? The gods are smiling on us. We’ll just wait here until I see your boyfriend turn up. Which won’t be long I imagine. Make yourself comfortable.”

## Chapter 25

“Christ, it’s good that I’ve gotten used to your driving, mate. Try not to get us killed, ok?”

Flem didn’t respond, gunning the vehicle along Gunn Street. Not bothering with the flasher. When they reached the smaller of the lay-bys ringing Back Beach, they found Francie’s Rav was already taped off and Hen and another constable were keeping a small group of curious on-lookers at bay. Flem was out of his car and listening to Hen’s account while peering in through the windows, making sure not to touch anything, struggling to keep control of himself. He could see her phone

lying on the passenger seat. And when it rang, he opened the door and answered before it had the chance to buzz twice, fingerprints be damned. “Ian Fleming!” he barked.

The voice on the line spoke urgently. “Listen carefully, Fleming. Your girlfriend is safe for now but how long that lasts depends on you. Obviously, I need to get off this pissant island and you need to keep her alive. It’s a simple equation. If I get what I want, you get what you want. If I don’t get what I want, you don’t get what you want. I will take her with me when I jump, you know that I will. And neither of us will survive.”

“How the fuck am I supposed to get you out of Tasmania, Warrington? There’s a bloody pandemic on, if you haven’t noticed. No one is going anywhere. And even if you do manage to get to the mainland, every cop in the country will be looking for you. Jesus Christ, mate, think this through. And don’t do anything stupid, for fuck’s sake.”

“A bit late for that, don’t you think? Too much water under the bridge now.”

“Staying alive’s got to be better. Get a good lawyer, you get four years for manslaughter, out after two and half, fuck off to the mainland. That’s got to be better than killing yourself. And another police officer.” Flem knew it was bullshit but he had to keep Warrington talking. Calm him down. Find out where he was, at least.

“No, Fleming, that’s not how it would be, is it? I’ll get twice that just for assaulting a police officer. If David Murfett had kept his nose out of what wasn’t his business, none of this would have happened. Anyway,

you've got an hour to organise something or it's goodbye from me and goodbye from her."

Flem shouted, "Wait!" but the connection was broken. He looked at the phone as if he were willing it to ring again but it remained mute.

While Hen watched on, barely in control of his increasing concern and panic, Flem reached his tenth "Fuck!" at which point Whitt grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him. [SEP]"For fuck's sake, calm down, mate. Come on, let's go through everything he said. I mean everything, word for word."

Whitt had probably heard it all already but he needed Flem focusing on something else. He challenged every second word Flem said, getting him back on track. Finally, Flem said, "He thinks Francie's my girlfriend."

"It's your own stupid fault that she isn't. Alright, let's think! Was there anything in what he said that gives a clue as to where he is?"

"He must be up high somewhere. He said he was going to jump and take Francie with him."

"So where is high enough for that? That car park in the city? Fuck, any building would do it if he went down head-first. What about that bridge you nearly killed us on? No, that's stupid. Someone would see him,"

Whitt was pacing up and down in the lounge room. Flem was standing next to the car, looking out over the Strait without speaking.

"What about the police station? Could he get to the roof? I mean, that would be ironic, wouldn't it? He'd have the last laugh, he's the kind of psycho who'd enjoy that. Flem?"

Flem wasn't listening. He grabbed Whitt's shoulder and spun him around. "It's right in front of us Whitt, right there!" Flem said pointing up to the lighthouse. "I reckon he's there, up on the lighthouse. He can see everything coming at him from there, and there are hardly any people around, and he'll go out with a big bang. Fuck!"

"Right. Let's go and have a look," Whit said, keen to do something.

"And do what? Bowl up there and demand he let Francie go? Not likely is it? He'll jump straight down onto the cliffs and take her with him."

"All right, what do you suggest?"

"He doesn't know that we know where he is."

"If he actually is there!"

"I'd bet my life on it."

"You're betting your girlfriend's life on it mate, not yours."

"She's not my ... Oh fuck, whatever!"

"Come on, what's your bright idea?"

"I've got to get up there. And you've got to distract him. And no one else has to know what's going on."

"Is that all?"

Whitt looked at him as if he'd completely lost it but Flem was convinced it would work. The plan just needed a little bit more detail. "We've got an hour. We get the whole team to the Bluff. Hen, Azza, all of them know the place. Plain clothes, twenty minutes. First get the Joes out. Then we talk him down. What other option have we got?"

"Sniper? No, suppose not."

"I've got to get up there. That's the only way," Flem said, sure in his conviction that it was.

“Don’t be fucking ridiculous, Flem. How are you going to get up a lighthouse without being seen? Fly up?”

“I’m not. We clear the area. You keep him talking. I sneak around the back, in through one of the little windows, up the stairs.”

“No way, Flem. He’s got a firearm. He’ll shoot the pair of you and then swan dive into oblivion. And your boys will have no parents at all. No fucking way, I’m not allowing it.”

“It’s the only option, Whitt. I’m getting my team up here. And don’t you dare pull rank.”

“Would that make you see sense?”

“I’m seeing sense now, Whitt. I’ve got to try, mate. I can do it but I can’t do it without your help.”

“You are a madman. Always have been, always will be. Go on, get your team up here.”

“Rendezvous at the wishing well in 15 minutes.”

Not counting Francie, Whitt or Flem, there were four personnel in mufti to clear the area without raising too much suspicion and then to keep it clear. Aaron lived nearby Eugene Street, so he and another constable drove up to the lighthouse carpark and managed to convince the handful of people parked there to leave casually and without making a fuss. Deliberately not looking up, they strolled around, appearing not to be in a hurry, pointing at the sea. When everyone had gone, they casually returned to their car and drove down Bluff Road to Tiagara Aboriginal Centre where they made sure they couldn’t be seen from the lighthouse and strung blue and white chequered police tape across the road and

parked in front of it, ready to stop any cars that may be heading up. Azza rang Flem when it was done.

At the same time, Flem and the other two constables in his team walked up the cliff-side walking path, ordering people to leave. No tourists meant fewer people who didn't speak English and needed more time and effort to convince. When they were sure that there was no one lingering, the constables left Flem as close to the top of the Bluff as they dared, then jogged back down to the Wishing Well at the start of the path and taped it off and stood guard. The area around the lighthouse was as secured as it could be in the time and resources that they had

Whitt drove up to the carpark praying that Warrington and Francesca were the only ones there. He slowed down near the top of the Bluff, and rather than lining it up in a parking space, he parked the police vehicle in the middle of the empty cul-de-sac, waiting a couple of minutes before getting out. The setting sun made it hard to see anything to the east but looking up at the lighthouse, he could see two figures on its gallery, the circular platform high up under the light itself. One of them, Warrington he presumed, was standing and the other one presumably was Francesca, sitting with her back to the railing, head down, not moving. Whitt walked towards the tower and shouted up. "Warrington! Is that you up there?"

"What are you doing here? Where is Fleming?"

"Senior Sergeant Fleming is negotiating a way for you to get to the mainland. He seems to think that you will honour your word and release

Senior Constable Pisarelli unharmed.” Whitt tried to put as much scorn into his voice as possible.

“It sounds like you don’t think the same way. Why are you here, Whittaker?”

“I am here to try to talk some sense into you. But first things first, if you don’t mind, I need to make sure that she is still alive. Senior Constable Pisarelli if you are okay, please raise your hand.”

“She would be no use to me dead, would she?” Warrington replied as he nudged the seated figure with his knee. In response Francie slowly lifted her unchained hand, signalling that if nothing else, she was at least alive. The blood was still seeping out through her blue slacks; although it hurt, she quickly replaced the grip on her leg. She wasn’t sure whether it was doing any good but she had to do something.

Whitt saw a flash of colour: there was Flem at the bottom of the lighthouse, pressing himself against the stripes of red and white painted on the seaward side, so that Warrington wouldn’t be able to see him without leaning over the railing of the gallery, high up under the copula. Almost immediately he disappeared around the back of the building, out of sight. Whitt’s job was to keep Warrington talking, looking landwards while Flem climbed in through one of the small windows on the far side of the brick tower and made his way up the internal stairs winding to the top. He had decided to enter that way from the rear of the tower because the entrance door faced towards the caravan park and Warrington had deliberately placed himself directly above it on the gallery. Flem wasn’t sure whether or not Warrington would be able to see through the floorboards of the gallery but he wasn’t prepared to risk it.

Pressing himself against the cold, sea-sprayed brickwork, Flem took a moment to restore his breathing. He was confident that once inside, he'd have no trouble getting to the platform undetected, but he wasn't exactly sure what would happen once he got there, especially as it was probable that Warrington had Francie's own service pistol pointed at her head. He knew he had to be very careful but there was nothing like a firearm being pointed at someone you cared about to focus your attention. He could hear Whitt playing for time.

After a minute or so, Whitt shouted more loudly. "Senior Constable Pisarelli! Raise your hand if you are able to indicate that you are unharmed. I need to see you raise your hand! I will shoot if there is no response!" It was a deliberate ploy to gain a few minutes. Francie, prompted by another nudge from Warrington's knee, slowly raised her hand a bit higher than the first time, then she returned it to her thigh, hoping that Whitt would pick up on the fact that she was injured and would be of little use if it came to executing any escape plan.

"What's the plan here, Warrington? That we organise a submarine for you, to take you to China and you'll live happily ever after, out of our reach? And Constable Pisarelli will make a full recovery from the ordeal and go on to run a pizza bar in East Devonport? Is that your idea? Well, you might have fooled Fleming but you don't fool me. Not twice!"

"Being a smart arse won't help you Whittaker, that's for sure. I'll let her go as soon as I get free passage to the mainland. I can disappear there, no worries. I've done it before. See, you're not as smart as you think you



are, are you? You don't even know who I really am. You don't know what the name in my passport is."

Whitt could hear that Warrington was enjoying the situation because like any self-absorbed psychopath, he was convinced that he controlled it. The problem for Whitt was that he was right. If Warrington wasn't really his name, they had no idea what it really was. And therefore, if he did by some miracle make it to Melbourne, it would be possible for him to lie low until international flights resumed, which would be tricky but doable. The borders between the states may be closed because of the pandemic but closed doesn't mean they are impassable. In a week's time he could be anywhere in the country. On the other hand, the man could be making it all up, living out some kind of fantasy. He certainly wasn't the most rational of human beings as far as Whitt could judge. Just keep him talking.

"And?" challenged Whitt. He tried to keep Warrington talking to give Flem as much time as possible. What was taking him so long?

"And? Well, Detective Inspector Whittaker, the alternative is your beloved Francesca here and I swallow dive off from here headfirst, landing at your feet. Imagine that, Detective Inspector; her brains all over your shoes. Those are the two possibilities, as I see them. Either we both live or we both die. How's that for an 'and', Whittaker?"

"I don't think so, Warrington. I'm not nearly as kind and considerate as Fleming. If it was up to me, I'd shoot you right here and now, regardless of who you've got up there. Collateral damage happens, as you well

know. But it seems that Fleming has been given authority to procure a helicopter.”

“Good to hear that at least one of you has some sense. Of course, it’s not your girlfriend here, is it?”

Whittaker feigned indifference. “Even if was my first-born child up there with you, I’d still do the same. It really shits me that people like you get away with murder. Literally, murder!”

“He chose, Whittaker, he chose it himself. Even when he was found out, if he had promised to keep his mouth shut, he’d have lived and maybe even made some real money for the first time in his pathetic little life. But no, he had to be all moral. Stupid, really stupid!”

“Whatever you reckon, Warrington. When the chopper comes, I’ll be praying that the fucking thing crashes with you in it!”

Where the Hell was Flem? He should be there by now.

The reason for the delay was that Warrington might have been certifiably insane but he wasn’t stupid. When Flem tried to open the small window a few feet up from the base of the tower on the seaward side, he found that it was locked from the inside. Even if he had the strength to kick it in, it would make far too much noise. He swore silently. A trap for young players and he had walked into it because he hadn’t thought any of this through. The brickwork was perfectly smooth and the centuries of recoating the surface with enamel paint had filled in any possible toehold, making it impossible to scale. But he had to get up there somehow, to get to Francie before that maniac killed her as well. Flem knew that having killed once, he’d have no hesitation to do it again, not when he was trapped like this. And Warrington wasn’t going to believe

that a helicopter would be coming for him for very much longer. If he didn't get up there soon, he was sure that Francie would die, and there was no way he could let that happen.

But despite his exhortations and determination, there seemed to be nothing he could do. He was near to giving up on the plan when he noticed the power lines running up to the platform. For the first two meters, they were protected by a metal casing but above that, they were exposed. If they weren't live they might hold his weight. Even as he thought it, he knew it was a second stupid idea compounding the first stupid idea but he didn't allow himself to come up with reasons not to try such a risky manoeuvre. He had, after all, traversed Barnes Bluff both ways.

Using the plinth to push him himself up, he tested the first concern by reaching up and touching the wires with the back of his hand. No shock, so he grabbed hold and let himself swing across. The wires didn't snap and he wasn't fried. So far so good. Now all he had to do was haul himself up the twenty metres to the top without Warrington noticing. It was going to take a while, regardless of how fit he was and he prayed that Whitt could keep him talking for that long. He had to hold on with one hand while reaching up with the other and then raise his bodyweight without making a noise. He had to stop still whenever there was a pause in the conversation between Whitt and Warrington.

He wasn't even halfway up when the pain allowed doubt to creep in. Each metre was exhausting. His shoulders were aching and the wire was

cutting into his hand. Every time he moved he had to change grip to protect them. It was impossible.

But he couldn't let Francie down. Even if he didn't know what was happening to her, he had to try, he couldn't give up, not now, not on her. It was only a couple more meters to the floor of the gallery. He could hear Whitt and Warrington shouting. He forced himself up again and with adrenalin pumping, sweating, sucking as much air as he could, swung his right hand up and clasped the stanchion that supported the gallery. Letting his other go of the wires on the wall, he swung free, sixteen meters above the ground, and using that momentum, twisted himself around and grabbed the stanchion with both hands. He inched himself towards the outer edge of the gallery's support, released one hand, and with all his weight bearing down on his left wrist, twisted so that he could grab the bottom of the guard rail with his right hand, all the while not breathing loudly, not making any noise at all.

When Francie saw Flem's hand grabbing hold of the bottom railing, she screamed as long and as loudly as she could, mustering every bit of energy she had left, squirming, kicking her good leg out onto the planks of the walkway. Warrington moved towards her, yelling at her to shut up or he'd put a bullet into her other leg and let her bleed to death right here. Whitt couldn't see Flem hanging there, dangling and holding on with one hand, but he realised that Francie was up to something, creating a distraction, so he too started to yell at Warrington, demanding to know what was going on, threatening to shoot, threatening that all deals were off, that he was going to ring Flem and order him to stop all negotiation,

anything he could think of to make a noise, to create confusion, to keep Warrington concentrating on him rather than whatever Francie was distracting him from.

The shouting and clamouring lasted barely a minute but it was enough for Flem to pull himself up over the rails and up against the lantern glass of the lighthouse, staying out of Warrington's line of sight. His hands, ripped and bleeding, hurt like buggery, and he could hardly feel his fingers. He gave himself no more than a moment to catch his breath before sidling around. He could see Francie, handcuffed to the railing; he could see Warrington pointing her gun at her, looking like he was about to fire. Without thought or hesitation, he launched himself at him, clattering into him, onto Francie, the gun exploding, him grabbing whatever he could, pulling at Warrington arm, smashing his hand against the floor, ramming his knee into the man's groin, not letting go of the hand that held the gun, lying on top of him, seeing Francie's free hand reach for the man's face, his eyes and hearing him scream.

As soon as it was over, he couldn't remember any of the details but he could see that Warrington's hand had suffered major damage; the finger that had been on the trigger was barely attached. One eye was closed from where Francie had gouged it. The beating his groin had taken had left him lying in a foetal position groaning. It looked like one of his shoulder blades had been dislocated because he'd screamed when Flem pulled the gun out of his hand and cuffed his hands behind his back.

When he was sure that Warrington wasn't going anywhere, he crawled on his knees over to Francie, his hands and elbows hurting and his head bleeding from where he had hit it on something somehow without noticing. Francie's leg wound had started to bleed profusely again and her face was bruised from when the men fell on her. She was as pale as a sheet, her breathing was ragged and her eyes were starting to close. Flem sat down next to her. She whispered something.

"What?" Flem his ear close to her mouth.

"You're supposed to have a white horse."

Flem laughed. "I'm a piss poor white knight, Francie."

"Not to me. Never to me," Francie whispered, her voice rough and her eyes starting to close, just managing to whisper, "Unrequited love sucks."

"No, Francie. Stay with me. You'll be all right. Just stay with me! It's not unrequited, France, not unrequited! Keep your hand on the bleeding, love. Won't be long now."

He gingerly stood up and realised that Whitt was shouting at him. He waved at him, then yelled, "Get an ambulance!" He added, "For Francie!" Then, he turned to Warrington.

"Where are the keys, Warrington? To the cuffs and to the fucking doors."

"In my pocket, Flem. They're in my pocket. I'm sorry, mate, really."

Warrington was doing his best to sound contrite.

"Fuck off!"

Flem checked on Francie again. She didn't look good, her eyes were closed but at least she was still breathing. He went over to where Warrington was lying on his stomach, his hand cuffed behind his back.

He was reluctant to put his hand into the man's pockets. God only knew what was in there. And he certainly wasn't going to uncuff him. Fuck him! He could barely move himself, everything hurt and the blood from the cut on his head was dripping into his eyes. He slowly and painfully untied Warrington's shoelaces and pulled off his shoes, then ignoring the man's screams, turned him over, so he could undo his belt and pull his pants off. Keeping his eyes on Warrington, he retreated a metre and holding onto the trouser legs he tipped everything out the pockets. A phone, a wallet, some bits of paper, a pocket-knife but no keys.

"Where the fuck are the keys?"

"They're in my shirt pocket. Maybe they've fallen out."

"Fuck me! All this and you're still being a cunt?"

"I'm still confident I'll get out of this, Flem. Still confident. Are you?"

Never before had Flem felt so strong an urge to drive his fist into a man's mouth to shut him up. If he hadn't been in so much pain himself, maybe he would have.

"No, you won't Warrington. You're fucked. You're going to die in jail. Unless of course you accidentally fall off from here. That could so easily happen, you know."

"No, it couldn't Flem. You don't have it in you."

He didn't even hear Warrington's taunting him. Francie's breathing was ragged, she had lost a lot of blood. Flem reached into Warrington's shirt pocket and almost wept when it was there. He turned and unlocked the door to the gallery, then threw it down to Whitt standing and yelling below them. "Door key," he managed to shout. Whitt picked it up where it had fallen and tried it. "No good, it's not the right key. Just look after

Francie, mate. The ambulance and the fire truck are on their way. Five minutes, max. Hang in there, Ian.”

Flem crawled over to her, putting his arm around her shoulders, letting her head rest on his chest.

“Oh, how sweet. Anyway, it’s her own fault. I gave her plenty of chances but no, she refused every invitation, every time. And now we know why. Pity it’s too late, isn’t it?”

Too late? What was he drivelling on about. But two could play that game.

As Flem kissed the top of Francie’s head and gently stroked her hair, he had no idea if she was still conscious but he could see that it was irritating Warrington, a blatant display that emphasised his failure. Flem deliberately spoke softly but loud enough for him to hear. “We’ll be fine, we’ll all survive. And we’ll fix you up again, don’t you worry. Remand, the trial and the sentencing, that’s enough time for the scars to heal. Don’t you worry at all. You’ll be in one piece again in no time,” Flem spoke slowly, pausing for effect, listening to Francie struggling to breathe now. This was for her as much as it was to frighten Warrington. “When you get to the big house in Risdon you’ll be pretty again. Good looking boys like you, you know what the lifers call you?” he asked, looking up at Warrington. “Fresh meat. You’ll be in high demand.” Warrington sneered defiantly. Flem went on. “Some of the men there are a bit rough, though. You’d be surprised how much a ripped arsehole hurts, Hugh. And how long it takes to mend. Months with a colostomy



bag. Anyway, the guards will protect you. You'll be fine, Hugh," Flem was speaking in a monotone now, exhausted. But he could hear the sirens! He stroked Francie's hair again. The ambulance was here. Just a couple of minutes longer, darling girl. He saw that Warrington had seen the ambulance as well. With a burst of renewed energy, Flem said, "Oh, except that you've attacked the niece of the woman who runs the place. So, I guess that those guards won't protect you after all. No one will. And you've got years of that to look forward to. Tears and years. Your front teeth will go early on. When you're on your knees, it makes it so much easier. Spit roasting. Who knows, you might learn to like it."

The fire truck was extending its ladder before it stopped. Flem could barely move as the first of the firemen passed a lightweight, high-sided gurney over the railing of the gallery. He tried to lift himself up to receive it but was immediately told, "Stay there, mate. I've got it. Shit, it's you Flem!"

"Ricky, Francie's hurt bad. Fast as you can, mate."

"We're on it. Just relax, Flem. We'll come back for you in a minute."

"Just worry about her. I'll be right."

He watched as Richard Bennet and another firey who he didn't know by name, used a chain-cutter from his tool belt to cut Francie free from the handcuff chained to the railing; and then efficiently strap her securely into the stretcher and transferred her to a third man waiting at the top of the extended ladder. Ricky half climbed over the railing as he fed the stretcher to his colleague and as soon as the bloke on the ladder yelled, "Clear!" it started to retract. Flem watched as it descended to where the

ambulance's wheeled stretcher was waiting, an ambo on each side, and after a smart transfer, Francie was on her way to Burnie Hospital. The whole rescue took less than five minutes. Through the railings, Flem watched each person do their job quickly and efficiently, grateful to them and coming as close as he ever would to praying that she'd be all right. That thought was immediately followed by the resurgent feeling of frustration that the much closer Mersey General had been gutted while the Burnie General had been built up and expanded. Bloody Burnie thinks it's the centre of universe.

His mind's scattergun thinking was refocussed by Warrington talking to him. "Flem," he pleaded. "Flem, let me jump. I don't want to go prison. I'd rather die. Just give me hand, Flem. I deserve to die, don't I? You said so yourself." Flem felt a flash of triumph: his spiel had registered after all. But he didn't have time to gloat because the door to the lighthouse's gallery deck burst opened and Whitt emerged, ducking his head, breathing hard, just managing to rasp out, "You alright, mate?" before hunching over, legs apart, breathing hard.

Flem said, "What kept ya?"

"Fuck, I'm unfit!" he said as he sat down beside Flem, still puffing. He turned to look at him and said, "Geez, you look a mess!"

"It's only a flesh wound. No, seriously, it looks worse than it is. My hands are pretty sore, though. My knee too. And my shoulder. Not counting the cut on my head that's pissing blood everywhere. Apart from that, I'm fine and dandy."

“What’s he moaning about?” Whitt asked, pointing at Warrington, prone on the wooden floor of the gallery. “Please tell me that he’s badly injured or something?” He sounded hopeful rather than concerned.

“He bloody well shot Francie in the leg. And smacked her about the head when she was cuffed to the rail, the arsehole!” Flem finally allowed himself to get angry.

“Not to mention that he strangled someone to death,” Whitt reminded him.

“Yeah, of course,” he said, “of course. Mate of Ledge’s”

“But do you know what the worst thing is?” Whitt asked. “He made me look like a fool!”

Flem nodded his head sympathetically. “And now he wants us to let him jump. Apparently spending the rest of life in Risdon doesn’t appeal. I’ve told him we’ll pretty him up, ready for the boys in Max.”

Whitt grinned. “Some of those boys do like a bit of fresh meat for the spit, don’t they?”

Warrington groaned as his head fell back.

When two young women in full bio-hazard gear, face screens, latex gloves and aprons over their usual blue overalls, squeezed in through the door to the gallery, Whitt pointed to Flem and said, “Him first. Take your time. That prick there can wait. I’ll watch him.” With the support of the paramedics, Flem gingerly descended the winding internal stone staircase, one in front, the other behind him, allowing him to take his time. Ducking his head to get through the door, he was relieved that his knees hadn’t buckled on the way down. The achievement of making it back onto solid ground made him feel better. Even though he still felt

like he was on death's door, when the ambos asked, he told them that he was all right, no worries, good to go, just need a couple of bandaids. They nodded reassuringly, smiled at him, but kept him standing to check his balance and eye sight, asked him questions, then steered him towards to the waiting ambulance. He sat down under the ambulance's open back door, feeling overwhelmingly tired. He watched without speaking as first Warrington, cuffed and held by two constables, and then Whitt emerged through the lighthouse door.

It was getting more and more difficult to keep his eyes open as the flooding pain overcame the receding adrenalin. Whitt came and stood next him as the paramedics started to bandage his hands; to patch up the cut on his head and to check his shoulder and hips again. Every way they asked him to move hurt and although he was assured that nothing was broken was broken, he wished the analgesics would kick in, despite his insistence that he was fine, thanks.

Without him having noticed it, there were more officers and personnel moving around the area, taking photographs, measuring distances, and taking statements. Flem saw that a constable from a different team was standing guard over Warrington, handcuffed and head hanging down, waiting to be taken away. He had no idea who the officer was or where he had come from and it made him uncomfortable. He would have preferred one of his own team to be there but before he could say anything he was distracted by the sound of a helicopter coming from above. Whitt looked up, then at Flem. "Did you....?"

Flem laughed. "No, it's the television, I reckon."

Whitt sounded annoyed. “How the Hell do they know so quickly?”

Flem turned to him, “They’re just doing their job, mate. I can’t see this not being all over the news tomorrow.”

“Yeah, you’ll be a national hero, mate.”

“God, I hope not. The fewer people know what happened here, the better, I reckon.”

Whitt could see that Ian was genuinely worried. “You’ll get a commendation, mate, for sure. Picture in The Advocate and all.”

“Jesus, I’m shaking at the thought of it.”

“No, mate, that’s the shock! You need to get some rest.”

“I’m fine but fuck I’m glad it’s over.”

Whitt agreed, neither noticing there were no soprano singing anywhere.

Just because a man’s head is hanging down doesn’t mean he’s not paying attention. The instant Warrington saw neither Whitt nor Flem watching him directly he swivelled away from the constable who was also looking up at the helicopter and took off, running away from the lighthouse towards the Bluff trail. He had no more than a ten meters head start and the constable wasn’t worried he’d get away or anything because he was handcuffed, he was hurt and he had nowhere to run to because the walking path only went one way. So, it came as a surprise then that Sergeant Fleming screamed at him to give chase as if it was a matter of life and death. Next second, the CIB bloke from Hobart shouldered him out of the way as he ran past, pushing him off balance. At the same time, Flem shoved the paramedics away and even though his

legs were bruised and battered and his lungs were refusing to draw in air, he hared after Whitt as fast as he could.

They had no chance to catch him, no chance to stop him. Yelling at him to stop was never going to be enough because Warrington had no intention of running down the path towards the caravan park. His endpoint was a lot closer. Fewer than fifty meters down from the Lighthouse a small observation platform juts out over the water. Even with his hands shackled hands, he got there well before the officers could catch him. Without breaking stride and using the metal seat and railing as step-ups, he launched himself into the space above the rocky cliff base of the bluff.

Flem and Whitt saw him fly up, then fall out of their sight.

“Oh, fuck!”

One, only one man of the fishermen and women balancing on the lichen covered boulders near the waterline, rod in hand, about to cast his line back into the sea, actually saw Warrington launch himself from the railing of the platform high above where he was standing. There was little time between the shock of seeing him appear in the air and the moment he crashed onto the rocks thirty meters down, his trajectory a perfect arc, his skull bursting open when he hit the rocks below, splashing them bright red before a surge of water washed them clean again, leaving the fisherman standing with mouth open, aghast, in disbelief, turning to ask those nearby, “Did you see that?” even though

by then there was nothing to see but two figures high up on the platform, silhouettes against a clear blue sky, looking down at the rocks and waves. Afterwards, several eyewitnesses described the event in close detail to friends, to the press and to television, sure that they had seen it, but only one man had nightmares afterwards.

Two, if you count the constable.

## Chapter 26

Kevin Formby was unaware of the drama that was unfolding elsewhere. He was busy cleaning. There were three computers he needed to disinfect: his own, Warrington's and Young Murfett's.

He'd better take a look at Jeannie Norris' too, if he got a chance. Ten years ago, he'd put the wheels in motion. If the council sold both the Devonport Football ground and the East Devonport ground and Recreation Centre and used the proceeds to build a substantial Centre for Sporting Excellence, everyone would profit. The city would have large, desirable tracts of land on both sides of the river to develop as real estate, and it would get itself a brand spanking new facility, undoubtedly funded by state and federal governments, both of which were heading into elections. Formby would put his company forward as developers, and as a bonus, the land he owned on the other side of the highway would make a perfect place for the new centre. The scheme even bordered on the legitimate.

Not that he'd propose it himself. He had been an alderman at the time and not entirely certain of how far he could push something like this. Instead he'd convinced Jeannie to table the proposal, and when the opposition to it became insurmountable he'd spoken against the motion, referring passionately to 1959 when a Tasmanian representative team had taken on the VFL and thirteen and a half thousand people had crammed into the ground. The entire population at that time was fourteen thousand and Kevin had received a big laugh when he'd suggested that



the other five hundred had been in hospital or in jail, else the whole town would have been there. The footie ground, he proclaimed, was a part of Devonport's soul. Forgetting for a moment who had got her to make the proposal, Jeannie had joined in the applause. But even as he was talking, Big Kev was refining the plan. The key was to get hold of the football oval and to get that he'd have to become mayor. The contents of his safe had made that a doddle.

Young Murfett's computer was spotless. Everything was neatly organised, easily found and obsessively up to date. There were no ghosts, no locked files, nothing personal. It didn't surprise him in the least that Jeannie's was bare. She barely used it. Both were likely to have anything incriminating on their personal computers but he could park that for the moment. Any official investigation would have to find something before the police would be allowed to get a warrant to look in those. His immediate job was to make sure that there was no cause for an official investigation.

Warrington's required more decisive action. For once Formby felt that luck was on his side. The man had left his personal PC in the top drawer of his desk. Formby slipped into the bag next to his own. No one would ever find that. Next he booted up Warrington's desktop, holding down the Control C key. In for a penny, in for a pound. When the menu came up, he selected Factory Reset and ticked the box that indicated that he knew full well that all data stored on the computer would be irrevocably lost. "Oh, yes!"

He squeezed the bottle of hand sanitizer and used a damp tissue to wipe the keyboard and anything else that he may have touched. Undoubtedly the police would raise an eyebrow but nothing could implicate him. Even if he wasn't entirely out of reckoning he'd muddied the waters enough to create a grey area, and Kevin Formby knew how to operate in grey areas.

On his way to the control room, he waved at the camera in the hallway. He twisted his finger on each of the numbers he pressed on the keypad and the door clicked open. Any fingerprint would be smudged beyond recognition, just in case. The hard drive for the security system was third from the top in the rack, the reset button located on the bottom right corner, a click and it was done. He had a minute to get out and there would be no evidence of him having been there.

"No, just been a bit tired, you know. The business with the Burnie cop has got to me a bit."

"I know what you mean, Kev. You don't expect that kind of thing to happen here, do you?"

No, Jeannie, you don't. Anyway I asked you to come here to tell you something. I've decided to retire. I'm too old for this malarkey now. I've got my house, my boat, my super. I've got enough, love."

"That doesn't sound like you, Kevin. You've got plenty left in the tank, I reckon."

"No, not really. One son dead, the other one hates me. My daughter doesn't talk to me unless she has to. There's not much here for me now. I reckon I'll head up to Queensland. I've got a few mates up there."

"Well, I'll be sorry to see you go. When are you planning to leave?"

“As soon as, I reckon. And I’m going to put you forward as the next mayor. No, I mean it, Jeannie. You’ve always been on my side. I reckon I owe you that. Monday, first thing.”

‘Well, that’s a turn up for the books. I won’t say I’m not grateful. And we’ll let bygones be bygones, eh Kevin?’”

Two things. First, Formby has no intention of going to Queensland. Why would he when he had a very comfortable little house on the water at Fremantle? Second, he had enough on the new mayor of the city to ensure that any potential investigation into his affairs would meet with substantial resistance. He might not have as much as he’d planned but the proceeds of the sale of his house, his Superannuation and the contents of his safe, he would have more than enough.

“I’ve got to fly, love. No rest for the wicked, eh?”

Jeannie thought, “You’d know all about that!” But, she smiled at him and said, “You take care, Kevin.”

“You, too. See you when I see you.”

Jeannie Norris stayed where she was when he left. She looked out the window, watching the giant ferry turn in the river. It looked close enough to board from where she was seated. When she refocused, she saw her own reflection, looking pleased with herself. With all this political correctness, she expected that she’d be the mayor rather than the mayoress of the city.



## Chapter 27

On Monday morning, with the palms of his hands still in bandages, Flem drove back to Burnie. Over the weekend, he had slept, had watched both sons playing football, had been to see Francesca and had sent in his report, blind CCing Whitt, which was not strictly correct in terms of procedure, but he thought it fair. He'd left out both his mate's assertion that he had provided Warrington with the information that allowed him to copy Ryan's murder. He had also not mentioned that Keith Burke blamed himself for David Murfett's murder because he had asked him to investigate Kevin Formby, thereby setting off a train of unanticipated events. Nor had he included his notion that Ryan had been murdered by a hired Indian assassin. As far as he could, he had hidden everything behind terse police reporting terminology, all written in the third person, sticking to the relevant facts. It ticked the required boxes but it offered no interpretation or commentary. He hoped that it would do. In any case, there certainly wasn't anything in his report that wasn't true, just some things had been redacted. Anyway, there would be a whole folder of other statements and documentation from experts, from witnesses, and from other officers including a detailed statement from Whitt himself, and a heap of stuff from other sources that might be considered relevant, and all of it accumulated in as much detail so that as few mistakes as possible would be made. He added to the portfolio of facts but it wasn't his job to sit in judgement.

He knew that having put himself into a dangerous situation without thinking it through, without following proper procedure, had, now that it

was over, forced him to face up to the fact that it had changed some fundamental things within him. Some of those things were obvious, like how his relationship with Francesca had erupted into the open and how it felt like a relief more than anything, which initially had surprised him but had quickly become comfortable. When he saw her in the hospital, as bruised and battered as she was, he had felt that their relationship had aligned itself, that they would fit well together, that he didn't need to be afraid that his feelings for her were a betrayal of his love for Ivy. It felt almost overwhelming that she was as pleased to see him as he was her. It was the perfect kind of love for him.

And he realised that he was pleased that working with Whitt had reinvigorated their slowly dissipating relationship. They now had a new set of shared experiences to refer to and in the process had laid a couple of ghosts to rest. Mates, something different to friends, are people you could rely on; people who might punch in the mouth but never stab you in the back and afterwards wipe up the blood. He realised that he'd missed having a mate as much as he had missed loving someone.

But on the other hand, and it was a bloody big hand, Ryan's murder was still unsolved and Kevin Formby looked like he had wriggled his way out of any culpability for anything to do with the scheme to profit from the illegal sale of the football ground. Under the circumstances he could file those two losses as part of the job but he had no intention to give up on either. Even if Belbin closed the books and filed them as cold, he knew that he wouldn't be able to let either of them rest, if only because Keith Burke was convinced that, however unintentionally, he was

responsible for David Murfett's murder but when he got down to it, Flem realised that it had been him who had sucked Keith into the whole affair. With both Whitt and Keith feeling they were responsible for David Murfett's murder even though neither of them actually was, Flem convinced himself that if he could solve the first murder, he'd be able to convince both of them that neither of them was at fault. And maybe he'd be able to completely convince himself that he wasn't either.

Flem was convinced that whatever minor parts Keith and Whitt had played were inconsequential to the outcome. From his point of view, Warrington was the only person who was to blame because he had committed the crime for his own gain. Deliberately involving those nearest and dearest to him, had just made it worse. Most of all, Flem was frustrated that the man would not face trial. And, he was sure that Warrington's decision to kill himself rather than face justice had been entirely been his own, regardless of what he and Whitt had said to get him to confess. Whether that decision had been made out of remorse or from fear of going to prison, no one would ever know but neither he nor Whitt could be held responsible for it. They were doing what any officer would have done in that scenario, what they were trained to do, what they were expected to do.

By the time he got to Burnie, he almost believed his own reasoning. If there was still a smidgin of doubt, he knew that he would do whatever was necessary to protect them, and not only because they were his mates but because they were good people. He'd could face whatever the Commander threw at him during the debrief.

At the Burnie Station, Stuart Belbin shut the door. Flem knew that a dynamic had changed when he was invited to take a seat. Belbin sat behind his desk, steepled his hand in front of his face, looked seriously at Flem who remained silent. Never speak to superior officer until you have to.

“Looks like you’re on the mend. Good, good.”

Flem nodded cautiously. Something was coming. Belbin was pursing his lips as if he was deciding on the best way to say what was on his mind.

“Okay. Okay. Straight to the point, then. Two things. First, it has been suggested to me that you fill the vacancy in Burnie. Sideways move rather than a promotion but you’d be in CID, obviously.”

“No way!” Flem responded, face aghast, quickly adding, “Sir. Especially not the position of the man whose murder I’m still investigating, sir. No, thank you.”

“I thought as much. I won’t force the issue but apparently someone believes that you’d do well in CID, and I must say, from what I’ve seen and heard, I tend to agree,”

“Anyway, I’m happy where I am, sir. I like being in uniform.”

Belbin raised an eyebrow. He obviously knew all about that as well.

“We’ll leave that for the moment, then. Now, the second thing. I’ve read your report. My response is that it will do.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Oh, don’t thank me. You are now going to tell me the details you’ve left out and why you’ve left them out. Nothing you say here will be recorded and it may not have any impact but I want to know. The details,



including your opinions, your ideas, your suspicions, everything. Everything.”

“As if,” Flem thought to himself but he said, “As long as it remains confidential, I’m happy to share my thoughts, sir.” He was confident that he had them sorted, that he knew what would be included and what would be left out.

“You have my word, Flem, my word. I’m not out to throw anyone under a bus.”

When he finished his narrative, Flem nodded to himself as if he was sure that what he had said satisfied all parties, present and absent. Even if there was a bus coming, nothing he related would threaten the well-being of anyone involved. Belbin seemed pleased that he wouldn’t have to be doing any pushing after all.

“Well, it all sounds fair and reasonable to me. There is nothing you have told me that contradicts what you have written in your report. You did, if you remember, exactly as I instructed you to do. No cutting corners, no favours for friends, no taking the law into your own hands. I can accept that you improvised at times, but as far as I can see, it was for the right reasons.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Right, right. So, what’s next? Where do we go from here? We still need to find who murdered Ryan and it seems to me that you are keen to stay on the case.”

“Never thought I was off it, sir.”

“Quite, quite. What are you planning for your next move, Senior?”

Belbin made sure that Flem knew they were back on company time.

“Go through all of the photos of his victims. Look for connections.”

“Victims? Do you suspect coercion?”

“He used drugs, sir. Date rape drugs. So, yes, coercion.”

Belbin said nothing, rested his head in hands, closed his eyes for moment, then opened them to look at Flem and say, “He really was a bad apple, wasn’t he?”

“One asshole among many good cops,” Flem replied, quickly adding, “Sir.”

“Yes, yes. We need to remember that. All right, keep me informed, Senior Sergeant.”

Regardless of how much Belbin had assured him that he appreciated candour in the in-house chat, Flem knew when he was dismissed by a superior. One minute he was Flem, the next he was Sergeant Fleming again. They were getting to know each other.

“Yes, sir.”

He was relieved to be out of the office, shoulder muscles relaxed, feeling reasonably confident and glad to be back on the job but first things first. He drove to the hospital.

“How are you Francie? You look better.”

She was sitting up in bed, switched off the TV when he entered the room. Flem leant over and kissed her cheek.

“Everything is going to heal pretty well, according to the surgeon. The leg might be a bit wonky for a while but the bruises will fade quite quickly apparently. Good Italian skin. What about you?”

“Good as gold. Hands are still a bit sore and I’ll have a scar on my forehead to add to my rugged appeal,” he said, pulling the visitor’s chair as close as he could to the bed. He took hold of her hand, the one without a canula.

“There is a lot of stuff to say, isn’t there?”

“Yeah, but we don’t have to say it all at once, do we Francie?”

“Of course not. There’s one thing that going around and around in my brain, though. Nonna said that you had to realise that you didn’t have to forget Ivy to love someone else differently.”

For a moment, the sound of his new love saying the name of his old love caught him by surprise. “Pretty dramatic way of getting a man to see that, Francie. You could have just sent me an email.”

She smiled and said, “It did take a lot of planning, I can tell you that.”

“I’m going to have nightmares about it for years!”

She looked at him with a concerned look on her face and asked, “We’re going to be all right now, aren’t we? You and me?”

“Better than all right, love, we’re going to be better than all right.”

Her smile came back.

“That’s good because Nonna is already planning the wedding.”

Francesca smiled broadly, Flem a little less certainly. But on the way back home, he felt happy. He’d tell the boys. And his mum. “She,” he thought to himself, “will be beside herself!” But before he went to North Street, he drove to the Mersey Lawn Cemetery and had a quiet word with Ivy. Some days, you can convince yourself that the dead speak to you just to tell you that everything is all right.

## Chapter 28

Monday morning, when Flem walked gingerly up the stairs in Wenvoe Street, he was surprised to see Whitt sitting in the common area, talking to Hen.

“What are you doing here? I thought you’d gone back down south!”

“I did. Then I came back up north because we’re not finished yet, are we? We’ve got the Ryan case to finalise yet. I was just getting the drum on your star footballer slash librarian slash IT guru slash private investigator. It sounds like you should be putting him on the payroll”

“Worth his weight in bottle bottled quinces in a multitude of fields, that man. Right, let’s get back to work. Hen, can you nip down to the multi-story carpark? Apparently those little shits are chucking stones at cars again. They hit a lady in the arm and broke a couple of windscreens this time. Bring them in and charge them, eh? Not that it will do any good. They’ll get off with another warning, and the whole cycle will go around again. They’re a bloody reason to bring back the old kick up the arse, those two morons.” He turned to Whitt and said, “Step into my office, Boss.”

Whitt turned to Hen. “Hear that? Boss! That’s how you talk to a superior officer. Take good notice, Constable Pennicott.” Hen almost laughed as Flem rolled his eyes. Almost, because Whit didn’t.

“Thanks for sending me your report. I’ve read it and deleted it as you asked. No trace of collusion remains. What did the Commander say about it?”

Flem reported that Belbin had had no complaints; had seemed to take it all at face value; had been pleased that the case had been finalised.

“He was a bit pissed off at Warrington being allowed to jump but accepted that we’d done all we could. I didn’t mention anything about us putting the shits up him about going to prison.”

“Nor did you mention that it was me who told Warrington about how Ryan was murdered. That I gave him the modus operandi if not the actual idea.”

“No, I did not mention that either”

“Thanks.”

“No need to thank me. None of it was relevant, was it?”

“You sure you’re not just protecting my reputation?”

“I didn’t mention anything about Thuggi either. There’s no point in clogging up reports with unnecessary scuttlebutt, is there?”

“With what? Scuttlebutt? Who the Hell says scuttlebutt?”

“Simply following our Commander’s directions, mate. He’s big on not listening to scuttlebutt.”

“Gawd, the North West Coast is mental. You’re well suited up here, mate.”

“Idiosyncrasy is part of its attraction.”

“Another thing you didn’t mention is Keith Burke’s not insubstantial contribution. I was just talking to young Pennicott and he was telling me that the Legend is blaming himself for the death of David Murfett. He didn’t give any details but he was obviously worried about his boyfriend’s mental health.”

“Yeah, I know he’s blaming himself for Murfett’s death. I’m getting as many people as I can to keep an eye on him. He’s an amazing bloke but I think living in Devonport as an openly gay man is getting to him.”

“You didn’t mention that in your report either.”

“No, I didn’t. There may be openly gay police officers in Hobart living happily but this is Devonport, mate. Even someone as highly respected as Keith is going to be dragged down by it at times.”

They were interrupted by a knock on the door and Aaron Reeve sticking his head in.

“Sarge, phone call. Someone called Jason Pidd. He says it’s important. And he’s sure you’ll talk to him.” Aaron sounded sceptical.

“Yeah, all right. Put him through.”

“Coach?”

“Piddles. What do you want, mate? I’m really busy at the moment,” Flem said. Whitt made a drinking motion with his hand, Flem nodded, Whitt left the office.

“Okay, mate. I’m listening. Shoot!”

“It’s about the murder, Coach. That policeman from Burnie, that one. This may be something or it may be nothing but I talked to Keith and he said that I should tell you, just in case.”

Flem listened without interrupting, taking notes as Jason Pidd relayed everything he had seen, everything he had heard, and everything he suspected.

“His old man was in the war in the Balkans, a Serb in Kosovo and whatever Macedonia is called now. Ades says he never talks about it much but he did tell him that he had been in an SAS kind of unit. He’d

be used to killing people and stuff like that, wouldn't he? Anyway, I don't want to tell you how to do your job."

"Piddles, you're always telling me how to do my job as coach!"

"Just trying to be helpful, Coach."

"Anyway, I thought you were going to Queensland to study."

"I am doing it now. On-line. It's not as good but what can you do? I'll be doing face to face as soon as border restrictions ease again."

"Yeah, of course. Your old man will be happy you're still here, I hear he's been a bit crook."

"He is, yeah, though he'll never admit it. And I can help out at work a lot more this way. It's working out all right with the studying for the moment."

"All right, Piddles, I've got to get back to work. I'll check it out. Thanks for letting me know."

"No worries, Coach. But try to keep Col out of it if you can. He's shitting himself. Doesn't want to dob Adrien in."

"Don't worry, Piddles. Like they say in the classics, a policeman always protects his sources."

"Pity they don't say that in the canteen, eh?"

"What? Oh God, your brain! See you, Piddles."

"See you, Coach."

Flem sat at his desk, thinking things through and toying with the idea of taking a chance that he probably ought not to take. He decided that he'd broken so many rules, another one wouldn't hurt. He rang the front desk and asked, "Aaron, that last call. Have you got the number?"

When Flem rang Jason Pidd answered with a loud and cheery, ‘Hello!’

“Piddles, it’s me again, Ian Fleming. Listen mate, do you know what your mate’s sister looks like?”

“Jana? Yeah, of course. She’s hot!”

“Good. Can you meet me somewhere right now? Just for a minute.”

“Sure. Where?”

“Somewhere quiet. Outside the footie ground?”

“I’ll be there in five minutes.”

“Don’t tell anyone, Jason. Not a soul!”

“Yeah, I picked that up, Coach. Five minutes.”

It wouldn’t have been unusual for anyone to see a police vehicle parked in Byard Street but Flem came in his own car rather than his police truck anyway. He pulled up next to Jason who had parked his bright red ute close to the fence, away from any passing traffic. Jason said nothing as he got in on the passenger side, waiting for him to explain what this meeting was about. Flem wasn’t entirely sure that he was doing the right thing but he ploughed on anyway.

“Right, what I’m about to show is highly confidential and I probably shouldn’t be doing it. If anyone finds out I showed you I might even lose my job. But I haven’t got time to be doing things the proper way so I’m going to trust you. I’m relying on you not telling anyone, okay?”

“Of course you can, Coach. You have my word.”

“Good enough for me. All I want you to do is have a look at a photo and tell me if it’s the girl you were talking about.”

“Jana Nikolić.”



“Yeah, her.”

Flem unlocked his phone and scrolled down to the last photo in Ryan’s gallery and used the edit function to cut away everything but the female’s face. The pixilation wasn’t big enough to make the resulting close-up sharp but it was clear enough for her to be identifiable. He turned the image to Jason.

“Is this her?”

Jason looked at it for a few seconds then replied, “It’s a shit picture and her face looks weird like she off her face or something but yeah, that’s Jana.”

“Are you sure, Jason?”

“Yes, I’m sure. But it’s weird that she looks stoned because she doesn’t even drink let alone take drugs. Her father doesn’t allow it. He’s really strict on her. Adrien can get away with murder but Jana can’t do anything. Oh shit, this is about that murder, isn’t it? Ades isn’t involved, is he?”

“I really don’t know, mate. And neither do you, so don’t go jumping to any conclusions, eh?”

“Just because a policeman asks to meet me in secret to look at a photo of a person who I told him might be involved in a murder? Now, why would I jump to any conclusions?”

“I know you’re a smart arse but I also know that you’re very intelligent, despite your attempts to hide it. No one gets into Physiotherapy if they’re stupid, do they? But at least while I investigate, I need you to not say anything to anyone, you understand?”

“Got it. Nothing to no one.”

“I appreciate it, Jason.”

“No worries, Coach. Now I better go and get the papers for Dad, like I said I was doing. See you at training if you make it, eh?”

“Yeah, see you then.”

Flem exited Piddles’ ute and by the time he’d started his own car, his informant had gone. As Jason had said, it may be nothing or it may be something, but at the moment it was all they had. He hoped Whitt would still be there by the time he got back to the station; he could do with someone to bounce ideas off this time, rather than going off half-cocked again.

“No, don’t tell me how you know who that is and why we need to investigate it immediately. I have no doubt at all that you didn’t follow proper procedure and if this ever reaches court, the DPP will be shitting themselves. Let’s just do it.”

Flem didn’t think the tone of that response was entirely warranted. “It wasn’t that bad! Call it a short cut.”

“I don’t want to know. Right. Her name is Jana Nikoleć. She’s the last one on Ryan’s holiday snaps. Her brother is a mate of one of your players, someone you can vouch for. Their father is from the Balkans and very strict religious and has been in the army. So, the first scenario is father and or son find out Jana has had it off with Ryan. That’s bad. But it appears that she, like Priti Formby, has been drugged. She isn’t likely to remember much or anything about it. So, how do the Nikolećes know about it? Did they see the photo? Did someone tell them? If so, who? And why?”

“We don’t know for sure at this stage but we believe that Ryan took Jana home from Buttons Brewery when she was affected by the Rohypnol that we now suspect he had probably given her.”

“So, let’s assume they found out about Ryan somehow. How did they react? If we accept that the father is very religious, he may well be an orthodox extremist of some sort, possible at least. Add to that that he was a trained professional soldier, and we should consider if he has been affected by the Balkan war, maybe suffering PTSD. Pure speculation but if he found out that his daughter had been drugged and raped, he is most likely going to seek revenge. Motivation and capacity, right there. What do you reckon?”

“Very plausible, allowing for all the ifs.”

“Sure. But what’s the most interesting to me is that the son, what’s his name, Adrien, did not go through any war, is not a trained soldier capable of dispassionate killing and not suffering PTSD, and if he was involved in a murder, his behaviour would most likely be affected. Unless you’re experienced and trained, killing another person will inevitably have a noticeable effect on your behaviour. Anything on that?”

“Yeah, there is, actually. Piddles said that Adrien was acting weird and aggro and wound up the last time he saw him. Fits perfectly with the psychology, Whitt,” said Flem, excited at this concurrence of fact with theory. Whitt looked at him without speaking for a moment.

“Piddles? Your contact is called Piddles? Is he a fucking cat or something?”

“Kangaroo, I believe, so he may not be entirely sane. He’s a centre half forward, actually. Not a bad player when he gets interested.”

“You really are a unit, Fleming. Your policing methods are unique, to say the least. Not every policeman gets his intel from a cat that plays at centre half forward! But I’ll give you one thing, though. This is a lot more promising than your Indian assassin theory.”

“You’re going to go on and on about that, aren’t you?”

“Oh yeah, old mate. On and on and at every opportunity for years to come. Shall we go and have word with this Nikolić bloke and his son?”

“It’s a pity we don’t have enough to pull them in and keep them apart when we talk to them.”

“Don’t have enough? Mate, we don’t have anything, let alone enough!”

“Well, let’s see what we have after we talk to them.” Flem tried not to sound piqued.

Flem signalled to turn off at the Forth intersection and with a postcard view of Barnes Bluff up in the distance, they headed inland. The address they had was a slightly remote property near Wilmot, one of a number of small towns that had originally sprung up as farming communities and received an infrastructure boost when Tasmania started to dam its rivers for hydroelectricity. Few rivers on the northwest coast escaped being plugged by giant concrete barriers that now hold back vast reservoirs of water, carefully redirected to turn over generators. The trade-off for its environmentally friendly power is a vastly different environment in some of the island’s most pristine landscapes. Swings and roundabouts.

Once you’re past Forth, the road to Wilmot rises steadily, twisting and turning relentlessly. If you get stuck behind a truck or a caravan, a tourist

or a pensioner, you're stuck for the next half an hour but if it is clear and you're being driven by a good driver who knows the road like the back of his hand, if you can relax and enjoy the view, you'll marvel at the beautiful country, the high-reaching trees, the verdant, cleared patches, the occasional glimpse of the river. Whitt fell silent as Ian Fleming negotiated each turn with precision, confident driving. He had them in Wilmot in half an hour.

As instructed by the SatNav, they veered left at the road to Forth Creek Falls. Trees crowded them in as soon as they left the tiny township behind; there was less light coming through the canopy, the road was narrower and less well maintained with potholes in the bitumen. Whitt sat up. Flem slowed down.

“Jesus, it feels like Duelling Banjos territory!”

“Grow a pair, city boy!”

“A pair of heads, so I blend in?”

“Very funny. Is that the place there?”

They went up a long driveway, neatly trimmed shrubs on either side, to a double story, well maintained red-brick veneer house. The property backed onto Lake Barrington and when they got out of the car, they could hear a waterfall nearby. On a sunny day, it would be a very nice spot but on an overcast day in winter it felt gloomy. They knocked, even though Flem knew that they had been watched all the way up the drive and a young fellow opened the door. At first glance, he looked agitated, ready to be belligerent, then recognised one of the policemen.

“I know you. You were the coach of the footie team Jason Pidd plays for.”

“Not sure who you mean. I’m Senior Sergeant Fleming from Devonport and this is Inspector Whittaker from Hobart CIB. We’re here to ask you some questions about a major crime that happened in Devonport recently.”

“Right. Okay. What do you want to ask?”

“Could we come in?”

“I suppose so. Through here.”

Adrien Nikoleć led them into a neat, non-descript living room, furnished by a still functional but faded lounge suite, a large television on a pine stand, a coffee table and grey carpet. On the walls there hung two enlarged photographs of a house in a European countryside and a large portrait of a demurely smiling woman in her early thirties. The room had the feel of a place where guests were received rather than somewhere where a family might relax.

“Please, take a seat. I’ll call my father. You’ll have to excuse him, his English is not too good.”

‘And your sister?’

The slightest of pauses, almost unnoticeable, probably not registering with anyone not looking for it. “She’s not here at the moment. She’s gone to Hobart to stay with an aunt for a few days. Sorry.”

When Zlatko Nikoleć entered the room, he formally shook hands with both men and gestured for them to sit.

“You want coffee? Adrien, make coffee!”

“No thanks Mister Nikoleć. We just need to ask you a few questions.”

“Adrien, ti ostani ovdje. Ne govori ništa i slušaj me.”

“My father asked me to translate.”

“Of course, no worries. Could you ask him if he has heard about the murder of a policeman called Lyndon Ryan, please?”

Flem was happy to let Whitt take charge of the questioning, even if he was surprised at the tack he was taking. He watched the faces of both father and son.

“Šta želiš da kažem?”

“Bilo je u novinama.”

“He says it was in the newspapers.”

“Very bad,” Zlatko said with a thick accent. Flem thought it sounded exaggerated but Whitt didn’t seem to notice.

“Does he know anything about it?”

Zlatko shook his head. Adrien looked at Whitt in surprise. “Why would he know anything about that?”

“We have some reason to believe that it may involve your sister.” Flem thought to himself that this was not how he’d have gone about it but he said nothing. Whitt was the OiC after all.

“My sister? No way! I don’t know where you got that idea from but it’s bull shit”

Zlatko touched his son’s arm and looked at him with raised eyebrows. Adrien spoke urgently.

“Oni znaju za nju. U nevolji smo.”

“Smiri se, dečko. Nemaju dokaze za bilo šta. Stalno im govorate da nisu u pravu.”

“My father says that you are being ridiculous. Jana is a good girl. She is not allowed to go out without either me or him with her. It is an insult. That’s what he says.”

“And what do you say, Adrien?”

“Me and my family have never been in any trouble with the police. My dad doesn’t allow us to be like Australian kids. He’s really strict.”

Zlatko patted his son’s thigh and nodded. To Whitt he said, “My son is good boy! Girl is in Hobart.”

Whitt saw that this tactic wasn’t going to work. He sure that father and son had organised their story even though he had no idea what they had said. There was no use in getting a harassment complaint by pushing it any further.

“Okay. One last question. Where were you last Friday night?”

“Me, I was with a friend. You can ask him if you like.”

“Oh we will. Does your friend have a name?”

“Colin Middleton. We had a few drinks, played computer games all night. At his place.” As Flem made a show of writing the name down in his notebook, to let everyone know they were taking this very seriously and would be following it up. Whitt tried to wrongfoot the boy. “I thought you said your father was strict, that he didn’t allow that kind of behaviour.”

“Not from my sister he doesn’t, no.”

“I see, like that is it? Well, we’re done here for now but we might be back, so don’t leave the state, eh?”

“I didn’t think anyone was allowed to leave the state!”

“I was being funny.”



“Oh.”

When the policemen stood up to leave, Adrien rose to see them out but Zlatko remained seated. He acknowledged the officers' departure with a wave of his hand but said nothing. At the door, Flem turned back and said, “Hvala!” Zlatko politely bowed his head in response.

## Chapter 29

Upstairs, Jana couldn't hear clearly what the men were talking about but she got the drift. She was proud of Adrien, the way he'd stayed calm, how her father had orchestrated the whole interview, how easily the policemen had been fooled, but mostly she was being overwhelmed by the fact that she had caused everything, even though she hadn't done anything deliberately. Unwanted images kept bubbling up in her head. She remembered coming home the day after, met by her coldly furious father at the door, no chance to change or clean up, how she had tried to explain why she has stayed out all night and that her father hadn't believed a word of it, shouting at her, calling her bad names, and she knew that it was true. She couldn't remember anything but it must have been true. She knew that she was no longer a virgin. She couldn't recall anything that had happened during the night, no matter how hard she tried but she knew that.

She remembered how he had made her sit on a kitchen chair, away from the table, as if she were a prisoner being interrogated. With tears streaming down her face and breathing raggedly she had been afraid of her father who stood in front of her, his legs apart, weight evenly distributed, hands loosely at his side. Behind her stood Adrien, told to hold her up if she collapsed or hold her down if she tried to leave. He was under no circumstances to interfere. She hadn't expected her brother to do anything else. They both knew better than to defy their father when he was like that.

She remembered the coldness in his voice, nothing like how he was normally; how there had been no arguing with him.

“Tell me the truth!”

“I am telling you the truth, tata.”

“Why were you at that place?”

“I was waiting for my friends. Friends from school. I wasn’t drinking. Just a lemonade. You can check, ask the barman.”

“If you had not been at that place, none of this would have happened.”

There had been nothing she could have said to that. He was right.

“But I didn’t go there to drink, tata, just to meet my friends.”

“If you had not gone there, you would not be disgraced.”

“I know. I am so very sorry.”

Foolishly, she had begun to relax then, thinking she had convinced him, and when he had slapped her hard across her cheek, forceful enough to make Adrien stop her from falling off her chair, she had been shocked as much as hurt. There was a little comfort in how Adrien had flinched as he grabbed her, concerned for her, knowing that she didn’t deserve to be hit. He had felt his father’s fury for himself in the past and he knew this was only the start of it. Adrien had come home one evening after being told not to go out, and Father had lost himself, gone somewhere unreachable in his dark past, where the only way was brutal and violent, and Adrien had had no chance to protect himself against the onslaught. His father had known exactly how and where to hurt him. He had been in pain for weeks afterwards. Nothing was said, no apology, no explanation, nothing. And Jana was girl: it was going to be much worse for her.

As soon as she had regained her composure, her father had slapped her again, harder this time, her cheek exploding in pain, just below her eye. Again, Adrien held her up when the force of the blow threatened to unseat her. She wanted to let herself collapse into his arms.

Her father was working himself up, shouting at her in Serbian as well as English. “How could you? You gave yourself to a man! A man we don’t know. Not one of our faith! You’ve brought disgrace on our family. Do you know what that means? The Church will cast you out. You will be damned for ever. And us, you’re family? Your poo, poor mother, turning in her grave. How could you do this to her?”

“I don’t remember, tata. I don’t remember. I don’t remember anything until I woke up the next morning in the park. I don’t remember!”

She felt his fist then, her nose breaking, the blood on her lips, and then heard Adrien’s voice shouting in English.

“Rowies, Dad. Someone slipped her Rohypnol. That’s why she doesn’t remember! Jesus, that’s it. Bloody Rohypnol!”

She nearly fallen off the chair because Adrien had left her side to move towards their father, putting himself between them, taking a huge risk for her.

“What is Rohypnol?” he asked angrily

“A drug, Dad, a drug they use to knock out girls so they can have sex with them. They call it date rape drug. It’s true. We have to find out who gave it to her. Who it was who did this to her, who dishonoured her.”

She knew that he was pleading on her behalf, her lovely brother.

Her father looked at him and asked, “A drug?”

“Yes, a drug. Bad men slip it into the drinks of women they don’t even know. Then they take them somewhere. The women know nothing about it. It’s totally illegal, Dad. We can find out who did it, they’ll go to jail. It’s rape.”

It was as if Zlatko Nikoleć had stepped back into the real world, out of the warzone of the past and into the here-and-now. He looked at his son, holding his eyes, judging, evaluating, deciding, then turned to his daughter, still sitting on the chair, her head down, her face hidden by the curtains of her long hair, blood still dripping from her mouth onto her blouse. Looking at her as if seeing her for the first time. But he would not let her go, not yet. The point had to be made. The point always has to be made.

“Jana! Look at me! If you had not gone to that place, nothing would have happened at all. You will not go anywhere outside this house without me or your brother, do you understand? Ever!”

“Yes, tata,” she mumbled, more blood spilling out from her mouth.

“Go to the bathroom and clean yourself up. I will take care of this”

She had been relieved. It would have been much worse if Adrien hadn’t come to her rescue. She had kept her head bowed as her brother helped her stand up but her hand quickly squeezed his. She had left the room, walked past the loungeroom where her mother should have been. That day she had had no idea what her father and brother were going to do but

sitting on the toilet in the bathroom she decided that when she was taken to the doctor for her nose, she'd get tested for STDs and pregnancy. And, as soon as she could organise it, she would leave this God-forsaken little town in this God-forsaken island. As soon as the borders were opened again, she would leave.

She had quietly edged her way to her room, lain on her, hearing her father and her brother talk softly, unable to hear what they were saying. She assumed they'd be plotting revenge but she hadn't wanted to know. All she'd wanted then was for it all to be over, but now, watching the policemen leave their house, she knew what her father and her brother had done, what she had caused them to do. They had found out who had raped her and they had done what they had had to do. She felt the guilt inside her warring with the relief, enough to keep her anger and fear at bay. It wouldn't change anything about what had happened to her but it would stop it happening to anyone else. Her father had been right, and he had done what needed to be done and she would do whatever was needed of her.

## Chapter 30

The Lighthouse Hotel in Ulverstone is a mecca for a range of revellers, from pretty young things out for a good time with their friends to tradies having a beer after work. But after they have left, the gamblers remain, a rusted-on clientele of sad-faced people whose lives are sound-tracked by electronic beeps, buzzes and the occasional electronic jingle. They rarely talk to each other, more often to themselves and none of them notice that the carpet is worn, the drinks are over-priced and the house always wins. Nonetheless, hope springs eternal and they keep dropping coins into the slot.

Adrien saw him immediately, slouching sideways on a barstool, sullenly dropping dollar coins from a paper cup into a slot machine, seemingly mesmerised by the spinning tokens. Every Sunday night, he'd been told, when he came back from whatever he been up to, staying until well after closing time, immune from the legalities of after-hours gambling. Adrien couldn't remember hating anyone so much. It was just after midnight and there were more people in the gaming room than in all the bars combined. Adrien sat at a machine from where he could see Ryan, dropping a coin into the machine as infrequently as he could without drawing attention to himself.

When Ryan stood up to go to the toilet, he left his drink on the ledge of the machine, indicating that it was his machine and that he'd be back. Before he followed him, Adrien retrieved a plastic snap lock bag filled with crushed Rohypnol from his pocket and poured the powder into

Ryan's drink as he walked past on his way to the loos. If anyone saw him, no one said anything. Nor would they ever.

He stood next to Ryan at the urinal and relieved himself, then washed his hands while Ryan was drying his.

“Quiet night, eh?”

He hoped he sounded more confident than he felt. Ryan looked at him, a quick check-over, before answering. “Yeah, it's too bloody cold to be out. Anyway, I'd better be getting back to my machine while it's still warm.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

They walked out of the toilets and into the gaming room together, nodded to each other as they went back to their stools. Adrien waited and watched. Each swallow of whisky cost Adrien a dollar before Ryan shook his head like a dog with water on its nose, then stood up and staggered unsteadily. Within seconds, Adrien was there, putting one of Ryan's arms around his shoulders, supporting him around his waist, and with an audible, “Come on mate, I'll get you home, eh?” half walked, half dragged him out of the building to the carpark where his father, his breath like steam in the darkness, opened the door to the back seat of his big black utility and Adrien pushed Ryan in. When his father started the ute, he got into an identical vehicle parked in the next spot and followed him in the direction of Devonport. No one saw a thing. No one ever does.



## Chapter 31

“Col, it’s me. Listen, mate, last Sunday evening, not last weekend, the weekend before, I was with you until late, wasn’t I?”

“Yeah. You took off for a couple of hours, then came back and stayed for ever.”

“No, I stayed there the whole time, until nearly dawn. Playing Mortal Combat. You whipped my arse, remember?”

A pause. This was it. Right now, right here he had to make the decision.

“That’s right, I did.”

“Remember I said I may as well stay until it’s time to go to work, right?”

“Yeah, now that you mention it I do remember that.”

“Just in case someone asks you, you know.”

“No worries. If anyone asks I’ll tell exactly what I remember. We were playing Mortal Combat the whole night.”

“Great! Thanks mate. See you Friday arvo, okay?”

“Yeah, see you then.”

In Devonport, Colin Middleton pressed the red button on his phone, put it back into his jeans’ pocket and thought it through. Adrien hadn’t picked up that Colin hadn’t asked what this was about. Did he assume that Colin knew? He let his head fall back on the pillow of his bed, staring up at the ceiling. Don’t ask questions, don’t confirm what you suspect. Keep it simple. Just say what is necessary, don’t elaborate. Once it was done they would square, now and forever. It’s all so simple when you only allow yourself to see it from a single perspective. Just balances,

just weights, comfortable in the knowledge that he only had to play his part, nothing more.

Adrien threw his phone into the large metal bowl on the hall stand. One job done. When he entered the front room his father looked up at him, a good sign that he wasn't away with the ghosts of his fallen comrades.

“The police will be back, tata. We need to get our stories straight. I've got my alibi sorted. What about you?”

From the door, Jana said, “Dad was here all night, with me. I'll swear to it on a stack of bibles.”

For a moment Adrien thought his father was going to explode because she had mentioned the Holy Book in such a flippant manner but he just looked at his daughter and nodded. Adrien was relieved and with more confidence than he felt said, “Good. Sorted. They won't be able to touch us.”

## Chapter 32

Back at the station, Whitt started the post hoc analysis of their interview with the Nikoleć family with an acerbic observation. “Another highly successful interview. Is there any point in writing it up? Yes, yes, I know!”

“Well, there’s a few positives that have come from it. I know Colin Middleton and I can tell you that if he has been worded up by Adrien for an alibi, he will crack under featherweight pressure. Second, there is something not quite right about Nikoleć the elder. Apart from anything else, I’m sure he speaks perfectly good English.”

“Yeah, I got that impression too. What was that you said on the way out?”

“One of the two words I know in Croatian. I thought they may be similar enough to Serbian for him to think that I understood some of what they were saying. It didn’t get a major response though. It was worth a try.”

“Not from the old man but I saw that it worried Adrien a bit. His head turned when you said it.”

“If that’s true then it might have consequences. It might panic them into doing something”

“It might but it doesn’t really help us unless they actually do something stupid, does it? I got the impression that Nikoleć the elder is a pretty cool customer. He’s not going to be phased by it.”

“No, probably not but it was worth a try, surely.”

“Maybe. Anything else? Seeing we seem to be assuming that they’re guilty of murder without a skerrick of evidence.”

“The barman at the Brewery. See if he remembers Jana being there. And if Ryan was there, if he took her home.”

“I’m sure he was and she was and he did but that doesn’t put Nikoleć anywhere near Ryan two days later.”

“No, it doesn’t but it does provide motivation, big time, doesn’t it? If he drugged and raped your daughter, you’d be tempted to kill him yourself, wouldn’t you? Cop or not. And Nikoleć was a trained soldier, remember. He’s got the skills to do it.”

“All of that’s true but it’s only circumstantial at the very most , and even that is dodgy, so if we can’t place him or his son wherever and whenever Ryan was actually killed, it will never fly in a court of law.”

“Next, I’m sure Nikoleć was lying about his daughter not being home just then. As we left down the drive, I could see a curtain being moved in an upstairs bedroom. No, I couldn’t see who it was. But it’s another piece.”

“You’re nothing if not optimistic. It’s nothing, mate. We have nothing and it could well be that they have nothing to do with any of it.”

“Do you really believe that?”

“No. I think they’re lying which makes me think that they probably did it. But believing it is one thing. Proving it is another.”

“Worth persevering though, isn’t it?”

“Of course. You never know. Fourth time lucky, eh?”

“What are you talking about?”

“It wasn’t the Mayor who did it to get at his son. It wasn’t an assassin who was hired by an Indian woman to get justice for her sister. It wasn’t his wife who was worried about what he might do to their daughter. But

you never know, it could have been a Balkan war veteran exacting revenge for his daughter.”

“Yeah, not a good track record, is it? But someone did it and I’m going to find out who it was.”

“How many women were in Ryan’s phone? Anyone of them could have reason and cause. And knowing you, you will come up with, how can I put this, interesting scenarios for every single one.”

“Probably. But one of them will be right. And I intend to find out which one it is.”

“I have no doubt that you will get there, Flem. No doubt at all. Might take a while, though.”

“Modern policing is great, isn’t it? Nothing like the movies, just slow and methodical. Takes forever but gets there in the end.”

“It’s a good thing you’re not a modern policeman then, isn’t it?”

Buttons Brewery was on the way back, more or less, so they decided to make that their first port of call. Even though Flem was wearing his standard issue dark blue cap, pants and bomber jacket, they were asked for identification by a young woman restocking the bar fridges. They showed their IDs but she didn’t seem impressed.

“Yeah g’day. I’m Detective Inspector Allan Whittaker and this is Senior Sergeant Ian Fleming. We’d like a word with the manager.”

A heavy-set man dressed in a black polo shirt emblazoned with the brewery’s name and logo came out from a storeroom behind the bar.

“Russell Torrens. G’day Flem. Who’s the suit?”

‘G’day Russ. This is Allan Whittaker from Hobart CID. Listen mate, we’re looking in the murder of Lyndon Ryan. Apparently he was here a couple of nights before hand, up to his usual tricks.”

‘Nasty business all around, eh? I suppose you want to know who was on that night?’

“Just the fellow with all the tats and the Rasta hair. Him”

“They’ve all got tats, Flem. But you’ll be looking for Damian Aherne. Good bloke, good worker. He lives at Turners Beach, I think. Hang on, I’ll get his address and phone number.”

“He was a prick!” the bar staff said from the opposite end of the counter.

“Whoever killed him deserves a medal.”

“Yeah, we’ve heard that. Not our job, though, handing out medals to murderers.”

“His background will be taken into consideration,” Flem said, more tactfully.

The young woman grimaced and sneered at the same time. “As if!” and suddenly had work to do as far away from them as possible.

“Here you go, Flem. Damo’s back on tomorrow night if you can’t catch him at home now. Don’t worry about Lizzie there but she’s right about your mate being a prick, though. He tried it on with her one night and it got a bit toey until a couple of the boys stepped in. I really would have liked to bar him but you know what that would done to the business, eh? The other punters would have been happy for sure, especially the women, but how many speeding tickets would that have cost me, eh? Probably end up losing my licence or something.” Russell tried for a

light-hearted tone but it fooled no one. Flem took the proffered piece of paper and said, “Thanks Russ. He wasn’t our mate. We’re not all like that.” Russell looked doubtfully at Whitt and said, “Yeah, right. Whatever. We’ve all got our jobs to do, eh?”

Outside the building Whitt said, “Bloody Hell, everybody really loved Ryan around here, didn’t they? He had everyone running scared by the looks of it. And we’re all treated like shit because of him.”

“Yep, pretty much. There’s a lot of damage to mend and yet here we are trying to ping the person who got rid of him.”

“So we won’t be getting any help from the public, Flem?”

“I reckon people won’t go out of their way to block us but not many will volunteer anything either, especially not around here.”

“Well, that won’t help if we’re doing a deep field analysis.”

“Doing a what? Have you been doing a bloody training course again?”

“Sounds a lot more scientific than knocking on doors, doesn’t it?” Whitt replied and laughed.

“Modern policing methods, my arse. I’m happy as an old-fashioned country copper.”

“No such thing anymore, Flemmo. It’s twenty twenty one mate, time to step into the new millennium, baby!”

“Whatever you reckon, Rebus! What have we got so far?”

“What about this? Ryan picks up the Nikolec girl at the Brewery, drugs her, rapes her, dumps her. Her father and brother find out and decide to be judge and executioner. No thuggees involved.”

“Okay, it sounds plausible. The question is if we’ve got anything substantial to back it up.”

“The barman said he saw them, so we know they were both there.”

“And she’s in his photo album.”

“How do you know that? No, don’t tell me, I don’t want to know. In any case, that’s not enough, is it? We need to put father and son at the scene at the right time. Preferably with a signed confession.”

Flem broke the silence, “I’ve got an idea. I’m not all that happy about it but see what you think. We’ve got to put pressure on the old man. Now, why did he immigrate? To give his kids a better life. If he did kill Ryan it was because of what he did to his daughter, right? So, the man’s primary concern is for his children. So, that’s got to be his weak spot. If we put pressure on the son, threaten him with going to jail, whatever, chances are the old man will do anything to stop that.”

Whitt nodded slowly. “Right. What was the name of that boy who is giving the son an alibi? Get him to admit it’s bullshit and we’re halfway there.”

“Colin Middleton.” Flem pushed the memory of assuring Piddles that he’d go easy on his mate to the back of his mind.

“Right. There’s no time like the present. Let’s haul him in. And this time leave it to me, Flem.”



## Chapter 33

“Right. We’re going to start again. But before we switch on the cameras again, listen to me, son. I’ve been bullshitted to by really good liars, good enough to almost make me believe them. But you, you are the worst fucking liar I’ve ever had in an interrogation room. You’re so bad at lying that I’m taking it as a personal insult. Why the fuck would you think that I would be taking in by your bullshit even for a second? In fact, I’m seriously considering charging you with wasting my fucking time!”

Flem said nothing but watched Colin Middleton wilt under the barrage as Whitt worked up a good head of steam.

“For fuck sake boy, wake up to yourself, boy. I already knew where Adrien Nikoleć was that night before I asked you. But what you don’t know is that right now he’s probably saying you were there as well. How about that. eh? The bloke you’re protecting for whatever fucked-up reason, has probably already dropped you right into it. He’s probably pissing himself laughing right now because he knows he’s got you over a barrel. And there’s an image I don’t want to know about.”

Whitt drew breath, sat back down next to Flem and placed both his hands on the table. Looking hard at Colin, he dropped the volume to a normal level and said, “Right. Let’s start again. Where were you Sunday night before last. And don’t fucking lie, this time.”

Colin looked at Flem, who looked at him encouragingly as he pressed record.

“I was at home. All night.”

“So far, so good. Now was there anyone with you?”

“Adrien was there.”

“Good boy. Now, think about this next question very carefully. Answer truthfully and you will stay out of jail. Lie to me again and you’re on your own. Do you understand, Colin?”

In a dry voice he replied, “Yes.”

“Did Adrien stay with you all night?”

“No.”

“What time did he leave?”

“Just after eleven o’clock. Around then.”

“Did he come back?”

“Yes. After one o’clock in the morning.”

“Where had he been?”

“He didn’t say. No really, he didn’t say. He was upset, though. Really upset when he came back. He just wanted to play computer games. We hardly talked at all”

“Any sign of blood on him?”

“No, not that I could see. I didn’t see any blood, no.”

“We’ve talked about lying Colin. Don’t start now.”

“All right, there was something that might have been blood on his face. A splatter. I don’t know. Honest, I don’t know.”

“Thank you, Colin. You’ve been a big help.”

Colin Middleton hadn’t wanted to be a big help to the police. He had desperately wanted to be brave, to be a true mate. He hung his head, knowing that he had fallen well short. He knew how Adrien was going to

react when he found that he had been let down. Colin tried to but couldn't stop the tears welling

After Whitt had exited the room and Flem had switched off the recorders, he stepped over to the young fellow and put an arm around his shoulders and let it rest there for a brief moment before helping him to stand up.

“Don't beat yourself up, Colin. He's broken really hardened criminals, reduced them to tears as well, to the point where they started confessing crimes no one even accused them of. And you held your own for a good while. But no one can stand up to him when he goes hard, son, no one. I don't reckon I could have done any better.”

They were standing, Colin looking less fragile.

Flem spoke to him in a quiet, reasonable voice, “You have to appreciate that we needed the information, even if we may not even use it. We're not out to nail Adrien to the cross here, we just want to know what happened and who did what and then we'll build a case.”

Colin lifted his head but said nothing. Breathing deeply, he regained some composure before asking, “Am I really going to be charged with anything? Aiding and abetting or something?”

It sounded like a plea but Flem couldn't tell if the young man was scared or buoyed by the thought of it. Maybe he saw being charged as something he could point to and say, “See? See how much I was prepared to suffer for you?” Flem shook his head and said, “I can't rule it out completely but I seriously doubt it. You didn't do anything except

for spinning us a bit of a yarn to help a mate. I can't see that deserving a criminal record."

"What about Adrien? What will happen to him?"

"He'll have some explaining to do but even if he does get charged, I doubt any judge would go hard on him. Obviously he acted under the influence of his old man, didn't he?"

"Mister Nick?" The thought of it lifted Colin's spirits. "He's a strange bloke, for sure. I've seen him lose it for no reason at all. Not go mental or anything, not get violent but, shit, sometimes he'd just burst into tears and he'd really wail, you know, gut wrenching, like he was going to die. And next minute, he'd be right as rain again. But even so, he's a really good bloke. Do anything for you if you ask him."

"You reckon he killed Ryan?"

Colin Middleton paused and looked up at Flem and with no trace of bravado or guile, said, "I reckon he could have. I'm not saying he did or that Ades had anything to do with it but, yeah, I reckon Mister Nick could have taken him out."

"Well, thanks Colin. I won't tell anyone what you said, okay?"

Colin didn't get up. Instead, he kept his eyes on Flem and asked, "So tell me honestly. If he had drugged and raped your daughter, could you have killed him?"

"Could I have? Probably. But would I have, Colin? That's the million dollar question, eh? Everyone thinks about doing illegal stuff at times but very few people actually do it. That's the line we draw, mate. The line we depend on. It would all be bloody chaos if it wasn't for that line."

Flem opened the door to the interview room to let Colin out. He would keep his word and not tell anyone what was said because there was no need to side-track kids like Colin, or Adrien for that matter, onto a criminal pathway. It would be better for everyone concerned if they didn't become familiar with the system. Once you get them onto the treadmill, and they become inured to it, getting them off again inevitably proves to be a great deal harder.

Walking through the corridor to the stairwell to go back upstairs, he thought about what he had said when Colin asked him that question. It had been a satisfactory response, something for the young fella to think about, even if it was a case of "do as I say not as I do". He hoped that he wouldn't have gone to that extreme if he were put in such a situation but as Whitt had pointed out, he'd been prepared to bring Kevin Formby down simply because he had mentioned his sons in a litany of threats rather than because of any crime he knew for sure the mayor had committed. He didn't want to imagine what he would if Big Kev actually harmed either one of them but if it was put to him as an if-then hypothetical, it didn't take a great deal of imagination to predict which way he'd roll.

Part one of the plan had been easy. Flem was sure that part two wouldn't be much harder. Whether or not Adrien cracked wasn't as important as making his father think that he might. Nothing about this was making him feel good.



## Chapter 34

“Adrien, thanks for coming in. Sit yourself down.”

“What’s this about? I’ve already told you everything I know. I’m supposed to be at work.”

“Go on, have a seat. You won’t get in trouble with your job, mate. We’ll video record this interview so that everything’s nice and above board, okay? Of course, you can ask to have a lawyer present, if you wish.”

“Lawyer? Why would I want a lawyer? What’s this about?”

“Well, we’ve got a bit of a problem. You see, in the room across the hallway there we’ve got your mate Colin Middleton, swearing black and blue that you were at his house the whole night, last Sunday. But we’ve also got an eyewitness that saw you and another man down towards the Bluff on that night. So, one of them is bullshitting and that always gets our backs up.”

“What eyewitness? Whoever it is needs to get their eyes tested. I was at Col’s, like I told you.”

“Sure, sure. I’d be confident if I was in your shoes too. But here’s the thing, Adrien. Colin is going to be hard to crack, I grant you that. But his parents, well they’re old, frail and even if they stick up for their son, I wouldn’t be too sure that Colin would let them take that much pressure. And we can put on a lot of pressure. I reckon you wouldn’t allow it for your father or your sister, after everything they’ve been through, eh? Your dad with the war that killed your Mum. Your sister with that rape thing. Jesus, I’m sure you’d do anything to stop them getting more pressure put on them. And I reckon, Colin would be the same.”

“You’ve got nothing! Because we did nothing!”

“Sit down Adrien. We’ve got enough. Who do you think a jury would believe? Your mate or an uninvolved party who happened to be looking at stars in the night through her binoculars and spotted you in the bushes?”

For the first time, Flem spoke, softly, soothingly. “It puts you at the scene, Adrien. And you’ve lied to us. And your sister was raped by the man who was murdered. It’s more than enough. Despite what Colin Middleton says.”

“Before we charge you, you can make a phone call. You should probably call a lawyer now, mate.”

“Or maybe your father. Up to you. We’ll switch the machine off and give you ten minutes.”

They left him sitting, his head in his hands. Flem felt sorry for the young man and although he couldn’t tell what Whitt felt, his face was grim. Neither spoke. It had to be done but it didn’t mean they had to like it.



## Chapter 35

“You don’t understand. For you this is nothing, something you can overcome but for us, for me this is the past from which I escaped, from which I tried to save my children. To be a Serb married to an Albanian and living in Macedonia at that time was to face the hardest test every single day. Albanians in Macedonia, they don’t want war but then the stupid Kosovars come and they want to make Greater Albania. Any Albanian not wanting to join is a traitor. And my wife, she is married to a Serb, worse than a Macedonian. Kosovo Albanians fighting Serbs. Now the KLA want all Muslims to join and because she is Albanian, they want her to join the rebels. She says no. That’s all, sergeant. She wants to live quietly so she says no. She don’t care about politics but I was soldier. But they don’t attack me, they attack her. Why? What did she do? She did nothing. Nothing. Do you want me to tell you what happened to my wife when they take her? What I find in the hill, what was left for the dogs and bears? I can see in your eyes that you already know what I will tell you, that you have heard the stories, sergeant. But for me they were not stories, it was my life, my beautiful wife who did nothing ever bad, not anyone. I take my son and my baby girl and I leave because if I stay I will kill them all, even though they make peace agreement. Lake Ohrid. We leave it all behind. Everything. And we come here to be safe.

And then I hear what this man has done. Not only to Jana but to others, and that he is policeman and everybody know but they do nothing. Why not? This is Tasmania, not Macedonia or Serbia or Kosova where no one

can say anything from fear, because they will be killed. Here everyone is free and safe. So, why nobody does anything? Because this man is law, he is policeman and he does that to my Jana. She was a baby when we escaped, everything I gave up for her and the boy to be safe, so no one could hurt her, like they hurt her mother, so we be safe. There are three things I respect, sergeant, three. Church, family and law. But where is law when my family is hurt so bad? Law does nothing. But God tells me what to do. An eye for an eye, yes? This animal, how many eyes has he taken? Nobody does anything to stop him. But I do something. Yes, I do it.”

“With your son, Adrien, yes?”

“No. I tell him to go. He wants to help but I don’t need help. Have you ever killed a man, sergeant?”

“No Mister Nikoleć, I haven’t.”

“I pray to God that you never will. I have killed men. In the Kosovo war. Shot them, one I killed with a knife. Really blood on my hands. When you kill a man, sergeant, you change. You are a different person because now something sits in your head like a black demon, always there, coming into your thinking, night time, day time, never goes away. But if you kill one man, you can kill another man and another. I was trained to do that, not think, do it quick, move on. If we do not fight, we will all be killed. Adrien was three years old when we came here, Jana a baby, no mother, nobody but us. He doesn’t know about the war, he doesn’t know how to kill. I don’t want him to know. Only me.”

“You are saying that you acted alone, Mister Nikoleć? Whitt asked.

“Only me.”

Before Whitt could go on the offensive to challenge him, Flem said, “Mister Nikoleć, do you know about PTSD? Post-traumatic Stress Disorder?”

“What is that?”

“Soldiers who get traumatised in war, who get depressed.”

“No,” he replied with a snort of derisive laughter. “All soldiers get depressed in war.”

“Are you sure you acted alone, Mister Nikoleć?” Whitt was not giving up on including Adrien in this confession.

“No! I say already. Just me.”

“Well, I say that your son was there and that he was an accessory. In fact, we know he was there. We have witnesses who place him at the scene”

“No, you do not have witnesses. But now, no more talk.”

“Hey! Who do you think you are? I’ll decide when we’re done, all right?” But Whitt’s shouting at him, his face centimetres away, had no impact. Nikoleć looked at him impassively and then steadfastly ignored him. Flem, thinking to himself that Nikoleć probably knew more about interrogation tactics that both of them put together, swivelled to look up at Whitt, who responded by drawing down the corners of his mouth, acknowledging that there was nothing more to be gained. This shop had well and truly shut up. For the next fifteen minutes Zlatko Nikoleć sat still, staring straight ahead as if he were meditating, focussed on something outside of himself. Whatever was done to him now, if anything was done to him, he wouldn’t move, wouldn’t speak, wouldn’t cry out. He’d observe and externalise it. If nothing was done to him, he would observe and externalise that. Fascinated, Flem watched him. The

man hadn't drawn up defensive wall or barrier, he had simply become observant, monitoring what was happening without reacting to it. Eventually a legal aid lawyer scurried in and immediately requested time alone with his client.

“Did you see that?” Flem asked Whitt when they stood in the corridor to give the lawyer a private moment with his client. “I reckon he could do that until he died. Seriously. I reckon if we went in there with iron bars and telephone books, he'd just sit there, and let it happen. Jesus, I don't know if I'm impressed or horrified.”

“Buddhism 1.01,” Whitt replied. “Let's get a coffee while Rumpole of the Bailey tells him how he'll get him off a murder charge.”

In the interview room, the lawyer whose name was Terrence Henning and who had never in his life been in London let alone the Old Bailey but who was a top-notch lawyer nonetheless, asked Zlatko Nikoleć to tell him everything that had happened. He listened carefully, asked for detail, took notes and when he was done, leaned back in the uncomfortable aluminium chair. In turn Nikoleć listened carefully as the lawyer ran through all the options, nodding as each was explained. When the parameters of the case were clearly understood by both parties, Henning asked him how he wanted to plead and Nikoleć instructed him in clear terms that he wished to plead guilty on the condition that Adrien not be charged with anything, insisting that his son had done nothing.

After considering it for a moment or two, the lawyer sat up straight and said that he thought that they should argue for diminished responsibility on two grounds. “First, you reacted to extreme provocation which we will emphatically claim to be a mitigating factor. Second, you suffered an obvious bout of delayed post-traumatic stress, triggered by the specific and unique circumstances which are highly unlikely to occur again and therefore you present minimal threat to the community.” Nikoleć said nothing, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. Henning went on, telling him that he was sure the Department of Public Prosecution would not oppose either point if they indicated that they were intending to detail Ryan’s past behaviour, which may not be admissible as evidence in a court of law but would have unwanted ramifications for Police Tasmania in the court of public opinion.

Zlatko Nikoleć was focussed only one thing. “My son is not involved, you understand?”

“I do, yes. I don’t think that will be a problem. They haven’t charged him with anything yet, have they? I’ll find out. But for the moment let’s concentrate on you. I think we should aim for a minimum sentence, or with a bit of luck, a suspended sentence.”

“Suspended sentence? I don’t go to jail?”

“It’s the best possible outcome. I’m not saying that will definitely happen, you understand. Who knows which way a jury jumps or what a judge will do? All I’m saying, I think we should try for that, okay?”

“I understand, yes.”

“The only thing that worries me is the PTSD thing. The problem I have is that although it might stand up as diminished responsibility if we can

show that it substantially impaired your capacity to act normally at that moment, we would also have to convince the court that it was extremely abnormal and you're not likely to lose control again. If we can't do that, then they could decide that you losing your mind was a key factor that could happen again and they sentence you to a locked psychiatric hospital and it's a bugger getting anyone out of those. The other problem is that even if we get a psychiatrist in to say that you dehumanised Ryan because of your training in the war, what they call the soldiers' defence, the court doesn't have to accept the shrink's word at all. The jury could just say that they don't believe it. And that's going to make it look like we're clutching at straws, that we're making it up. So, I'd suggest we minimise that, or not even refer to it at all. I think it would be better to concentrate on the extreme provocation angle. A jury is more likely to understand that, to sympathise with you. Hell, I sympathise with you. Ryan was a vile human being. Are you with me, Mister Nikoleć?"

"I understand, yes. But Adrien, he won't go to court, right? That is the most important thing now."

"I'm convinced he will not. Especially because, as you say, he wasn't involved."

"Good."

"Okay, leave it with me for the moment. I've got to collect a few more documents and see when we are listed. Don't worry too much Mister Nikoleć, eh?"

"Sorry, forgive me but what is your name?"

"My name is Terrence Henning." He extended his hand. As they shook, he added, "Full disclosure. My mother's name was Antonija Vuković."

“Croatian name.” It was a statement that from thirty years ago and half a world away, still had the power to change the atmosphere. But Henning stood up and said, “Yes. Makes no difference here. We’re Australian now.”

“Yes, we are all Australians now. Thank you, sir.”

“Zdravo, Mister Nikoleć.”

“Zbogom, Mister Henning.”

Henning left the room and Nikoleć resumed his seat, waiting for the policemen to come back and take him to the remand cells.

## Chapter 36

In the tea-room, or to be precise in the corner of the open area where a kettle was starting to gurgle on an untidy sink, Flem and Whitt each held a cup with milk, coffee and sugar, waiting for the water to come to the boil. When the jug clicked itself off and they filled their cups, then walked back to Flem's office. When they had sat down, Whitt looked at Flem contemplatively, then said, "You really want the son to get off, don't you?"

"Not necessarily." Flem sounded defensive.

"Yes, you do. Come on, admit it."

"I just don't think he is a big enough part of it. I mean, I'd put money on him knowing what had happened to his sister and even on knowing what his old man was going to do, and if I was to go out on a limb, he may even have helped in the preparation up to a point. But in the circumstances, is that enough to destroy three people's lives? No, just listen for a minute. Try to see it from their point of view. He leaves Macedonia or wherever, his Muslim wife is butchered by her own kind, everything he knows is turning to shit, and to get away from killing and raping and stuff, he comes here and settles down, gets himself a job, looks after his kids, everything goes along easily and then one of us, a bloody copper, here in peaceful little Tasmania, drugs and rapes his daughter who was the actual reason he came here in the first place, to get her away from all that shit. It must be his worst fucking nightmare. And he responds the only way he knows, how he's been trained. And now, he's prepared to go down for it, for sure, but if we ping Adrien for what was, if anything, a minor role, then he loses his son and then what



happens to his daughter? I just can't see the benefit of chasing the young bloke down as well."

"Come on Flem, that's not our decision, is it? We just do our job, that's all."

"Sure, but I'm not convinced he was actually there when his old man murdered Ryan. Nobody actually saw him, that old duck on North street couldn't identify him as being there. Even Blind Freddy could tear that apart in a court of law. And it'd make us guilty of entrapment."

"He lied about where he was. He got one of his mates to lie about where he was, mate!"

"True but that doesn't place him at the crime scene, does it? We don't have enough evidence at the moment to charge him. You said so yourself!"

"And you're suggesting that if we stop digging, it will stay that way."

"I'm not suggesting anything. I completely agree that we have to do our job. I am simply musing on the benefits of fucking up a young bloke's life for being an accessory to his father's action. And you know as well as I do that even if we get him into a court, he'll get off."

"Yeah, but that's not our job, Flem. And by the way, wouldn't that achieve exactly what you want?"

"I don't know. It seems unnecessary to me. If everything is going to end up the same way anyway, why not give Nikoleć something? Let me know we know his son was involved but we're not going to go him. That young man will be the only thing Jana has when their old man goes into the big house. I'm not suggesting anything, I'm just wondering what the best outcome for everyone concerned would be, that's all."

Whitt looked at him.

“You know what, mate? You’re trying to set things right, everything that’s happened because of that asshole, you’re still trying to make things right again for everyone. That’s what eating you, isn’t it, that a policeman could do stuff like that? Well, let me tell you that you can’t make everything right again. He’s fucked people’s lives up and now he’s dead. You can’t make any of that all right again.”

“You’re right of course, but maybe I can help people to make it a bit better for themselves, Whitt. It’s got to be worth thinking about, doesn’t it?”

“Probably,” Whitt conceded, “but promise me one thing, Ian. Don’t do it at the expense of your nearest and dearest, eh? Your boys and your Mum, and now Francesca, your mates, me included. Just make us all your first priority from here on in. After that you can go off and heal the world, all right?”

“Whatever you say. You’re the boss,” Flem said with a smile.

“In this place? I don’t think so. And no matter what I say, you’ll go your own way anyway. Well, good luck to you. Anyway, it’ll all change when you get married, old son. I speak from experience.”

“What? Who said anything about getting married?”

## Epilogue

His request for a small wedding, preferably in the celebrant's office with the bare minimum of attendees had been completely ignored by everyone involved. For the past three months he had given up and simply let himself drift along in the current. At the last moment, his mother had pinned a white carnation onto his lapel. Then she had hugged him and told him she loved him and that she was so pleased he'd finally realised that she and he could still love the memory of Ivy and that the here and now love of Francie would not change that. Before he could respond, she moved away, saying hello to just about everyone in the church, little questions about their family punctuated with smiles or commiserations, eventually sitting down next to Keith and Pen in the front pew of the small church built high up on the western bank of the Don River. Next to them sat Jason Pidd and his girlfriend. Behind then, the ladies from the canteen were there, unrecognisable in their finery; the ground staff tarted up for the big do and just about every player from the club. And enough coppers to make him wonder who was actually running the station. Perhaps they'd shut up shop for the day.

On the other side of the aisle sat Nonna, regally observing the fruits of her labours, looking as if she had been solely responsible for all of it. Pisarellis filled up the rest of the pew and much of the one behind. Flem wasn't sure he knew all of them. Plenty of time, he supposed. He was pleasantly surprised that Commander Taylor had shown up, accompanied by a man he presumed was her husband. All these years, and while he knew she was married he had never met who to until today.

And next to her sat Stuart Belbin. Flem couldn't remember actually inviting him but there he was, sitting on the bride's side. The last to come in were the Doctors Streznecki who managed to almost get shut out because they were having their "last ever" dart around the back.

Flem's mouth was dry as he looked around the church packed to the rafters. He had chosen not to wear his police uniform, opting instead for a simple dark suit, dark tie and white shirt, and it added to the strangeness of it all. The last six months had flashed by in a couple of minutes while these few moments seemed to be taking months. When he'd married Ivy, it had been in the Registry Office, just the two of them, a couple of witnesses shanghaied from their desks in a nearby office, all over in ten minutes, done and dusted on the day they drove back up to the coast with all their worldly belongings packed into the back of their old station wagon. God, why was he thinking about that now?

When the music started, everyone turned to see the bride come in. On the arm of her father, the limp was barely noticeable as she, like every bride, seemed to float towards him, smiling and beautiful, dressed in a traditional wedding gown brought over from Italy two generations ago and carefully altered to accommodate a different shape. Her bridesmaid, almost unrecognisable with her hair done and in civilian clothes, made sure the train avoided any snags. Walking behind, the two ring bearers were having a little slappy squabble on the way up the aisle until the best man, in the dark blue police uniform that bore the badges of his recent promotion, pointed at them, then brought the finger to his lips and they fell silent under his warning gaze.

When she reached the altar and stood next to him, her father lifted the veil, beamed at her and kissed her, then turned to Flem and hugged his son-in-law to be. He'd have to get used to that sort of thing, he supposed, them being Italian and all. He was sort of looking forward to it. He wanted to tell her that he was. She was so beautiful. He wanted to tell her that too. There were so many things he wanted to tell her. So many things that he didn't notice that Ivy had left them alone to get on with it. That was then, this is now.

The fact that the majority of the attendees were either footballers or police officers didn't augur well for the reception, held at the newly incorporated footie club with catering provided by the Pisarellis. After the speeches and toasts to the happy couple, a dance or two, after the second barrel was tapped, there was just about enough light for a bit of a barefooted kick-to-kick on the oval. Rumour has it that the Legend punted a long-bomb torpedo barefooted over the Norfolk Pines and straight into the Strait but nothing that happened can be verified by eyewitnesses.

In this town there are a lot of stories that will probably never be verified by eyewitnesses.