

**Strange Land - Short Stories**

Rob B Sutherland

Copyright © 2019 Robert Sutherland

All rights reserved.

Zypian Books 2019

## Contents

Strange Land - Short Stories .....	1
The Joke .....	4
The Yew Tree.....	11
Say Something.....	18
Valmay's Dream.....	25
Haven.....	31
Dogs Life.....	38
Grey Days.....	47
High Road.....	54
Lucky Day.....	61
Apparition.....	66
Options .....	73
Toby.....	77
The Ring.....	85
A Dog's life.....	91
City Lights .....	100
Orchard Lane.....	105
The Leo Budge Files - The Finance Manager.....	114
The Leo Budge files - The Artist.....	122
The Leo Budge Files - The Jewel Thief.....	128
The Leo Budge Files - Missing Person.....	139
The Leo Budge Files - The Deli Purple Sapphire.....	150
The Leo Budge Files - Bathtime.....	160
Dunedin .....	170
Are you Awake.....	176
Diamondvale .....	183
Friends .....	190
Black Mountain .....	195
Alien Saviour.....	205

## The Joke

Dean was one of those people who attracted attention. It wasn't the way he looked, though his crooked grin and thick bristly hair gave him a distinctive appearance. It was his imposing personality and habit of doing or saying something out of place, that made him memorable. Older brother Ray was unlike him in about every way you could imagine and he had extricated Dean from difficult situations on many occasions with his calm persuasive demeanour.

Ray hadn't seen his brother for a couple of months and wondered why suddenly, at this time of day, they had to meet. Dean had sent a text message pleading with Ray to come urgently. It was a short drive to Dean's apartment and conveniently on the way to Ray's work.

Dean was waiting at his ground floor apartment door when Ray arrived. "Hey, you're not working today?" Ray asked as he walked inside.

"No, I'm really sick. That's why I called," Dean said.

Ray thought he did look pale. "Why did you call me? Go to the doctor."

"I've been, had tests and they can't find anything," Dean said.

"Had tests, what's the matter with you?" Ray asked with a concerned look.

"I've got this dull pain in the centre of my chest, and I feel tired all the time. Had this since I came back from holiday last week," Dean replied.

"Can you stay a little while? I'll explain what's going on."

"Yeah, okay, not too long - working you know." Ray sat down at the kitchen table. Dean sat opposite.

"I think I'm going to die." Ray was shocked and about to respond. "Hold on, let me talk," Dean added sharply. "I've been on leave - you know I said I was going to Uluru?" Ray nodded. "I was there last week with Jody. We decided to do a tour bus trip to an aboriginal camp not far from there." The details of the events flooded back and replayed in his mind.

Dean stared aimlessly through the coach window. The grey-green grass that grew in sporadic patches through the red desert earth flashed by.

"Not much to see here," Dean said to Jody who sat beside him in the aisle seat.

"Should be there soon," Jody replied. Jody had been friends with Dean since high school and he enjoyed her company more than his male friends.

"I can see another bus parked up ahead," Dean said as he peered between the heads of the passengers in front of them. The coach slowed as it pulled in and stopped beside the other bus. They disembarked in a disorderly fashion as the forty or so passengers stood, grabbed pack packs, water bottles, and checked cameras before moving. Dean had been planning this trip for some time. He had enjoyed his overseas trips and now felt compelled to see more of his own country and the indigenous culture.

There were six humpies dotted around the camp area in no particular pattern and two corrugated iron sheds. The tourists milled around. They were either listening to the guides talking, or speaking with the local camp aboriginal people. A young aboriginal man sat cross-legged in front of one of these

temporary structures made of bark and branches. The white ochre paint on his cheeks, forehead, and arms gave him a menacing presence. The stark red bandana and loin cloth completed the picture. He was holding a didgeridoo across his knees and using a small paintbrush to highlight carved patterns as Dean approached.

"I had one of those when I was a kid," Dean said looking down at the didgeridoo. "My Dad bought it, and a boomerang, at the souvenir shop in Brisbane. Where'd you get yours?" he asked with a smile.

"I made it." The young man stared at Dean with black piercing eyes and a heavily furrowed brow.

"C'mon you get everything from China now... don't you?" Dean's grin was widening.

The young man put the didgeridoo on the mat in front of him. He stood up to a crouching position, turned and went into the humpy behind him. He started to chant and sing in low guttural tones - the intensity rising and falling. Dean was puzzled. Was this part of the show? He stood there transfixed. The young man suddenly appeared in front of Dean, chanting, swaying back and forth, with the rhythmic stamping of his bare feet raising the dust. He clutched a thin pointed object, like a long pencil, in his right hand. The young man continued chanting, dancing. The tour bus guide appeared from nowhere and grabbed Dean from behind by the shoulders.

"What have you done here? Let's go...quickly," he screeched. Dean was made of stone, he couldn't move.

The swirling aboriginal man swung around to face Dean and stamped his feet as he abruptly became silent and went into a crouch. With his left arm across his body and his right arm stretched out with the thin object pointing directly at Dean's

chest. The guide managed to drag Dean away and back to the coach.

"Since that day I've been getting worse. I'm going to die Ray." Dean said with anguish. "You know what he did to me?"

Ray sat wide-eyed. If it wasn't his brother telling this story he wouldn't have believed it. "You're kidding right. Of course I know what he did. He pointed the bone - that's just superstition - like voodoo. You don't really believe he cursed you?"

"What else can it be? Jody and I laughed about it on the way back that day. But there is something powerful going on here - you know - metaphysical." Dean sighed deeply. "I have to go back there and get the bloke to undo it"

"You amaze me Dean. Did you try to upset the man on purpose? Do you not have any respect for aboriginal culture?" Ray asked with a touch of venom.

"It was a joke. How was I to know he didn't have a sense of humour?" Dean paused, feeling the weight of his brother's critical gaze. "I'm sorry and I want to go and apologise - put things right." He looked up at Ray. "You need to come with me."

Ray organised a few days leave from his work while Dean purchased plane tickets from Brisbane to Uluru and the four-wheel drive hire from there. Ray had helped his brother out of trouble before. This time he wasn't feeling confident.

"Did you know that the bone they use is a splinter from a human shin bone?" Dean said as their four-wheel drive was nearing the encampment.

Ray didn't answer. He was feeling jaded from the three-hour flight and apprehensive at what may lay ahead. They pulled up in the designated camp parking area. There were no other vehicles so they parked adjacent to the camp. There were two aboriginal men standing at a nearby humpy chatting animatedly in their native language. They were both dressed like stockmen in jeans, long sleeve shirts, boots, and brimmed hats. One of the men had an expansive grey beard and appeared much older than the other. As Ray and Dean approached the two men stopped talking and looked at the brothers.

"No tours on today," said the older man.

"We are not here for a tour," Ray said. "We are here to see someone about a curse."

The older man's name was John. He was an elder of the tribe and he listened intently as Dean relayed the events that led to his having the bone pointed and his ensuing illness. He described to him the young aboriginal man and pointed out the humpy where it took place.

"That was Sam," John said. "You must've upset him pretty bad."

"Can we talk to him please?" Ray asked. "Dean wants to apologise and ask him to undo the curse."

"He's not here - gone bush," John replied.

Dean hung his head in despair. "What can I do?" he pleaded.

"Well, you gonna die unless I help you." The old man paused to see the effect of his words. "Do you really mean it when you say you're sorry?"

"Yes of course. It was just a joke. I didn't mean any offence."



"You need to leave a token for Sam - to show you're serious," John said.

"Sure, money, how much do you think?" Dean asked.

"Doesn't have to be money - a token - your watch would be good," John said looking at the watch on Dean's wrist.

"Geez that's a \$400 dollar watch - Okay that's fine - no problem," Dean said as he slipped the watch off and handed it to John.

"Okay, I can get a message to Sam - to return. Then we will sing over the bone and undo the curse." John said.

"How will you get a message to him - smoke signals?" Dean asked.

"No, mobile phone," John replied with a puzzled look.

"How will I know that the curse has been lifted?" Dean asked timidly.

"You won't be dead," John said as if that was obvious.

The two brothers thanked John profusely before heading off in their vehicle. Dean was starting to feel better almost immediately.

John stood motionless and watched at the four-wheel drive disappeared in a swirl of dust.

"Sam, you can come out now," John called out in the native language. Sam appeared from the behind the nearby shed dressed in stockman's garb similar to John. "You pointed the bone at that white fella."

"Yeah, he was disrespectful and a smart arse," Sam said.

"He was sure he was gonna die," John said.

"Really, think he would know about that psychosomatic stuff," Sam said with a cheeky grin.

"I don't want you to do any more bone pointing. It can be dangerous to the simple white folk," John used his best authoritarian tone. "And where did you get the bone, by the way?"

Sam smiled "KFC."

### The Yew Tree

The narrow gravel path crunched under his shoes. The brick piers on each side of the open gateway were cracked and partially covered by ivy. The graveyard stretched up and over a hill with a black pointed picket fence stretching around each side. The fence was adorned by sporadic patches of green ivy with the surrounding sharp spikes like a prison for the dead. Graves and tombstones were a maze of granite and marble separated by patches of lush grass and a few wildflowers. The morning sun provided an intricate patchwork of shadows with the gravel path winding its way through the grave sites up the slope. A stately evergreen yew tree spread its foliage like a loving angel at the top of the hill. It provided shade for most of the grave sites around the pinnacle. The yew tree was common in the English churchyards and was a symbol of the immortality of the soul. Andrew stopped at the entrance and considered how he would go about his search. It was common for Australian visitors to track their ancestors in graveyards around the British Isles and Andrew had done his research. This was his first trip to England and he was determined to connect with his family history. At thirty years old, he had reached the stage where ancestry became interesting. The burial register had confirmed that his great grandfather, on his father's side, John Spence, was buried in this graveyard. He could find nothing on the burial information of his great grandmother, Bronte Spence. When he had arrived he had tried to find the Vicar of the adjoining church, to get a lead on where exactly to look. Unfortunately, there was no sign of anyone.

Andrew decided to work up the left side of the path and then down the right. The leather satchel slung over his shoulder contained his wallet, water bottle, the important details of his research and notebook. He felt well prepared. This may take hours or he could get lucky. He walked expectantly along

the first row of graves. The graves were primarily single headstones nowhere near as grandiose as the monuments and tombs at the top. The common attribute for all was their age. There were no new grave sites - some were over two hundred and fifty years old. The weathering of the stone made some of the inscriptions difficult to read. Andrew ran his fingers over the cold stone of those too cracked or eroded to read as if trying to sense those whose bones lay beneath. He continued... peering with expectation at the inscriptions on each headstone as he passed.

Andrew was making slow progress - wondering how long the search would take when he noticed the lone figure. He was dressed in long grey trousers, long sleeved pale shirt buttoned at the neck, red neck scarf, brown waistcoat, peaked cloth cap, and work boots. Like a character from a Charles Dickens novel, he stood, back turned, on the opposite side of the path from Andrew. He was standing under the shade of the yew tree towards the crest of the hill. Andrew could see that he was stooped over, using a long-handled implement - a hoe, to dig around one of the graves. This was a piece of luck... someone who may know where to look for his great grandfather. Andrew headed directly across the slope, zig-zagging through headstones and monuments up towards the figure. Hearing Andrew approaching, the man turned and waited for Andrew to arrive, using the hoe as a leaning post.

"Hi," Andrew said, short of breath from the hurried approach.

"Wonder if you could help me? I'm looking for the grave site of my great grandfather," he asked.

"Well, you've come to the right man. I know everyone that's planted here," he said with a broad Midlands accent.

Andrew looked at the bearded face of an old man, as weathered as the gravestones. Judging by the dirt on his britches and under his fingernails, he was the church groundsman.

"What name are you looking for lad?" he asked.

"John Henry Spence," Andrew replied.

"I know that one very well," he said as he walked off towards the pathway. "It's up top," he added not looking back. Andrew followed him up the path and then off to the left under the spreading yew tree. It would have taken hours to find without help. The old man stopped directly in front of two raised ledger monuments. "This is him,"

The monuments had flat coffin covering slabs of stone raised above the surrounding turf. The two graves were surrounded by a short, knee-high rusted iron railing with an upright at each corner. In the shadows of the beautiful tree, Andrew couldn't imagine a more serene resting place. "Thank you so much, it would have taken me ages to find it," he said.

"That's ok," the old man replied, standing and leaning again on his hoe.

Andrew expected the old man would go back to his chores - he stayed, obviously curious. Andrew crouched, as he removed his notebook and pen from his satchel, to get a better look at the inscription on the first stone slab.

He read out the inscription as he wrote in the notebook. "In loving memory - John Jack Henry Spence - 1838 to 1879," Andrew stood looking at his notebook. "Jack must have been his nickname,"

"Yes, it was," the old man said.

Andrew turned to the old man with a puzzled gaze. "Do you know anything about him?"

"I do," he said. "There is a bit of a story here," he added.

Andrew smiled at the old man. He was excited by the prospect of finding any information about the ancestors. "Great, I'm eager to hear anything you know. This grave must be great grandmother," he said moving over to the second slab and bending down.

"No, it's not her," the old man said.

Andrew, peering at the inscription read it out loud. "Lily Ryan - 1843 to 1878 - together forever at last. So who is this?" he asked.

"I can tell you the story - the locals know it well," the old man hesitated, looked behind him, lay down his hoe and sat on a convenient gravestone. Andrew, notebook in hand, squatted in front of him. "Jack Spence was a farm owner's son. He married young, only nineteen. It was an arranged marriage with one of the other land owner's daughters. They had a son - Henry. The three of them lived on the farm with Jack's mum and dad. The problem was that Jack had feelings for another - the maid who worked at the farm. Her name was Lily Ryan."

Andrew's eyes widened, "Lily is buried here...what happened to my great grandmother, Bronte?"

"Now that is a mystery... as it was back then. Bronte and the baby boy Henry just disappeared from the farm one summer's day. They were not seen again, and everyone was of the mind that Jack had murdered them. So as to be with his true love...Lily."

"And did he - murder them?" Andrew asked.

"Well, Jack professed his innocence, insisting that they had left of their own free will. No evidence was found to prove otherwise," the old man said.

Andrew was scribbling furiously in his notebook. He looked up, "How did Lily get to be buried here with John...Jack Spence, did he marry her?"

"Oh no, he was already married to Bronte. Lily left the farm to avoid any gossip about her involvement with Jack. Sadly Lily drowned in the River Trent not far from here. The circumstances of her death were judged to have shown it was accidental. She was laid to rest here in this graveyard," the old man looked wistfully at Lily's monument.

Andrew stared intently at his notebook. "Lily was buried here in 1878 and Jack Spence...only one year later in 1879."

"Jack was distraught at the death of Lily. You see that long branch?" the old man asked, pointing up at a long horizontal solid branch of the yew tree. "Jack hanged himself from that branch. He couldn't bear to be without his beloved Lily."

"Oh God - that's tragic." Andrew was stunned.

"But they are together forever now." The old man said as his eyes glistened with the welling tears. He stood up, straightened his scarf, composed himself and looked directly at Andrew. "I have always known Jack didn't murder his wife and son, but you've confirmed it."

Andrew looked puzzled. "How did I do that?" he asked.

"Because you're here," he said. "Jack had one son, Henry. He must be your grandfather and the line continued. Bronte must have left the country with baby Henry."

"Yes, of course," Andrew replied with a smile.

"I'll be off now. Got work to do," the old man turned and shuffled away.

"Thank you so much for your help," Andrew called out to the retreating old man.

Andrew was delighted. This was more than he could have hoped for. He stood looking at his notes for a few seconds. He wanted him to stay longer but the old man seemed eager to get away. Andrew made his way back down the path to the front entrance. He noticed the Vicar at the front of the church and decided he should inform him that he had been searching in his Graveyard.

"Hello!" he called as he walked towards the Vicar.

The Vicar, who was sweeping the church entrance paving, looked up. "Hello!"

"I've just been in your graveyard looking for my ancestors," Andrew said.

"Hope you had some success," the Vicar replied.

"Yes, I was looking for my great grandfather, John Spence. Your groundsman helped me. He knew a lot about the story with Lily Ryan. What a tragic tale." Andrew said.

The Vicar looked at him blankly. "We haven't had a sexton - groundsman here for many years. I don't know who you may have been talking too."

"But you would know the story of John or Jack Spence hanging himself from the tree in the graveyard?" he asked with a concerned look.

"No, I'm afraid not. I've been here fifteen years and I've not heard of it," the Vicar replied. "It may have been before my time."



Andrew was bewildered. He turned to look back at the church graveyard. He was sure he could see a figure standing in the shadows under the yew tree.

## Say Something

Daniel McKeon enjoyed his work. His analytic skills were perfect for it. He was relaxed with the separation his cubicle provided from his I.T. colleagues and the satisfaction of solving a problem and finishing a project, sustained him day to day. He was unaware that his problem-solving skills were about to be tested in a completely different and bizarre way.

Daniel's private life was quiet, by most thirty-year old's standards. He hadn't had much luck with girls and it didn't really bother him. The black rimmed glasses and plumpish figure gave him a nerdish look. He lived in a one bedroom apartment in Richmond, a short tram ride to Melbourne city. His live-in companion was Plato, his Burmese cat. He named him Plato because he thought the cat looked like he was always about to say something profound. One Saturday morning in June, following the usual long black at his favourite Bridge Street cafe, Daniel was on the lookout for homeware items - items that would stamp his own unique character on the decor in the unit.

The dingy-looking shop cluttered with all manner of old furniture and unrecognizable smaller items looked perfect. He walked in and moved slowly around examining pieces as he went.

*Something not too small... not too big ... unusual... perhaps from overseas,* he thought. He stared intently at a carved voodoo mask sitting on a wall shelf. He picked it up, noticed the 'made in China' sticker and moved on. A porcelain piece placed on an eye-level shelf attracted his attention. It was very much like a vase for long-stemmed flowers, similar size but with a flared opening. Daniel appreciated the exquisite Japanese-style decoration of animals and flowers. He looked at

the manufacturer's mark on the base. It was a simple blue line marked sun about the size of a ten cent piece with a smiling face in it. It didn't mean anything to him. He checked the price, 195 dollars. Quite a bit more than he wanted to pay but he thought it reflected his unique style. He bought it.

Placed in the centre of the coffee table Daniel thought it looked spectacular, a great conversation piece if anyone ever visited. "Plato, what do you think?" he asked glancing at the cat. Plato looked at him condescendingly, but, as usual, he didn't respond. Daniel sat on the sofa and lifted the vase to examine it closely. He heard a faint clinking noise from inside. Peering into the flared opening he could see a small round porcelain plate. It was a false bottom. He tried to manoeuvre it aside. He tipped the vase upside down with his hand held firmly over the opening. Two items fell onto his palm, a round cover plate, and a small flat half circle bottle. The bottle reminded Daniel of a perfume bottle but with a screw top lid. He held it up to the light that flooded through his glass patio doors. It was completely filled with a golden coloured viscous liquid. Floating suspended inside was what looked very much like, a human ear. Daniel wondered how you could put an ear into that type of bottle. *It would need to be rolled up and poked through the opening*, he thought. A small rectangle of discoloured paper was stuck on the flat surface of the bottle. The word 'BRODEUR' was written on it in faded black ink. *Was that a place - a person?* Daniel's mind went to overdrive. *Was it a fake - clue to murder - practical joke?* He thought about how to find the story behind this ear. Daniel smiled and looked at Plato. "I think we have a little mystery to solve here mate." He quickly opened his laptop and researched 'BRODEUR'. It was a common French surname - nothing notable about it. Next would be a visit to Daniel's doctor

friend Chris. He phoned and arranged to meet at Chris's place that evening.

"The liquid in the bottle is honey," Chris said. "The ear is a real ear that's been removed from a real adult's head, probably male from the hirsute appearance. It looks to me to be well preserved. Honey is a good preserving agent. It was used in some ancient civilisations to mummify."

"So it's an ancient artifact?" Daniel asked.

"Well no, I'm pretty sure it's not ancient. The bottle is relatively modern, so probably not Tutankhamen's ear. The Egyptian's approach was more holistic, not just ears," he said. "It could have come from a dead person or a live one; you can get more info from DNA analysis. It may relate to some criminal act - I would go to the police for them to check," he said, but Daniel wanted to do his own research.

Now that Daniel knew he had a real ear he decided that his next visit would be back to the shop where he bought the vase. The next opportunity would be next Saturday. So he had a week to contemplate the possibilities of the origin of the ear. He found concentration difficult during the days at work. He was itching to get to the shop on Saturday.

"Hi, I bought this vase from your shop last Saturday. Do you know where it came from?" He had his phone open showing a picture he had taken at home. The large bearded man behind the counter leaned forward and looked down at the phone.

"Well, Daniel when you say where it came from, do mean where it was made?"

"No, I mean 'where did you get it from'. I'm trying to trace the owner."

"Ok - and by the way, it's not a vase it's a spitting bowl," the big man said.

Daniel raised his eyebrows. "Really, spitting bowl, it looks Japanese I think they do a bit of spitting over there."

"It's not Japanese it was made in France around the time of Louis the fourteenth - made by Saint-Cloud and has a blue sun mark on the base. I remember it had a few chips and imperfections otherwise it would have been a lot more expensive," the big man said with a smile. He reached under the counter and produced a dog eared brown hard covered foolscap book. He flipped a few pages and ran his stubby finger down a list of names and item descriptions. "Yes, here it is. I bought three items, all porcelain French manufactured items, all average condition from a D Perrin. Daniel was disappointed that the name wasn't Brodeur.

"Any address?" he asked.

"No, but I've got a phone number," the big man replied.

Daniel wrote down the number, thanked the big man and headed back home. He phoned the number immediately on his return. An elderly female voice answered. Her name was Diane Perrin. She confirmed she had sold the porcelain items to the shop owner. She was very accommodating and was happy to speak to Daniel about the items. She confided that she lived alone and didn't appear to be the slightest bit concerned about having Daniel visit her. He set off to walk the few kilometres to her house in Fitzroy.

Diane Perrin lived in a typical single-level Fitzroy brick terrace house. The heavy dark timber front door was a metre from the wrought iron fence. The paved front area did not allow for vegetation, apart from a large clay pot containing a struggling spindly ficus tree. Daniel knocked and the door opened slowly.

"Hi, I'm Daniel. I rang you earlier."

"Yes, hello... come in," she pulled the door open wide and Daniel went inside. Her hair was styled, grey and short. She wore expensive looking ornate glasses with neat yellow slacks and a floral top. They walked down the narrow hallway past two closed doors on the left into a larger family room which opened on to a small kitchen area. The house was very neat with modern furniture pieces. It was remarkably uncluttered. This was unusual in Daniel's experience as the older folk tended to treasure their knick-knacks.

Diane directed Daniel to a chrome plastic backed chair at the kitchen table. She sat opposite. "What can I help you with Daniel?"

Daniel had thought about how to approach this subject and thought that showing the ear straight up was not prudent. He would ask about the name.

"Thanks for talking with me Mrs. Perrin, I really appreciate it."

"It's Diane, and it's no trouble," she said.

"I told you I bought one of the items you sold to the shop in Richmond - the spitting bowl. Well, it had a small bottle with a name on it, in a false bottom," he said.

"Ah, the spitting bowl, my husband Thomas had some porcelain handed down through his French ancestors. What was the name?" she asked.

"Brodeau," he replied.

"That rings a bell," she said looking at the ceiling. "Thomas had a document with his family tree. Just hang on a minute I'll get it," she stood up and quickly went down the hall to the first bedroom. She returned with a plastic folder open in her hands, removed an A4 single sheet of paper and placed it on the table. She sat and pointed. "See here if we go backward from Thomas, his Dad Edmond and wife Florine came out to Australia just before the depression in 1925. Before that Thomas's grandfather, Andre Perrin married Rachel Brodeur in 1890 - there's the name you're looking for," she said with a smile.

"So the porcelain bowl would have originally been owned by Rachel Brodeur?" Daniel asked.

"Yes, I would say definitely."

"Do you know if Rachel's husband Andre was in World War One," Daniel asked, fishing for something that may involve him losing an ear.

"I don't believe so. He was too old at the time," she replied.

Daniel was thinking he was at a dead end. "I wonder who had the bowl before Rachel?" he asked, feeling a little deflated.

"There is a colourful story there," she said. "Thomas would never tell anyone other than family about this... the bowl came from a brothel where Rachel was a prostitute. You can imagine a spitting bowl was probably well used."

Daniel sat up straight in his chair.

"Apparently Rachel was a beautiful woman. She took up the profession as a young girl before she met Thomas's Grandad. It was said that among her admirers were some of the well-known artist set in Aries - Paul Gauguin and Vincent Van Gogh."

Daniel was now sitting perfectly upright with eyes wide open, staring intently at Diane. "Vincent Van Gogh, who lost his ear?" he asked in a squeaky high pitched tone.

"Yes, Thomas told me the Perrin family believe that he either cut it off because Rachel rejected him for Andre, or Paul Gauguin cut it off in a fight over Rachel."

Daniel was stunned. The tingles were dancing up and down his spine. He had Van Gogh's ear. It had to be. Should he tell Diane? No!

The walk home was a blur - the fame - the notoriety - the money. What to do next?

He unlocked his front door and went through to the kitchen where he had left the bottle on the bench. The sparkling shards of glass sparkled on the floor tiles. Daniel stood motionless looking down. He fell to his knees. The honey was in a gooey puddle. The ear was not there.

Plato sat on the bench licking his paws and washing his face. He looked like he was about to say something.



### Valmay's Dream

Valmay clasped her hands tightly in her lap and stared sheepishly at Dr Mendes. "I think the drugs that you gave me are doing something very unusual to me," she said. "I have had dreams of things that have come true".

It was obvious that life would be a lot different for Valmay after husband Samuel went. He was a healthy 78-year-old when a heart attack took him suddenly. The kids had settled overseas in the UK years ago. Valmay was not prepared for the solitude that followed. Sam's musty odour still hung like old curtains around their small weatherboard house. The little noises from the floor boards and walls seemed so much louder now, especially at night. Valmay didn't have many people to discuss her issues and she kept her worries bottled up. The young Jensen couple next door were mostly at work but they were always eager to help her whenever they could. Ben Jensen regularly used Sam's old mower to mow the lawn for her when he did his own. Most of the other neighbours were in rental houses and she didn't see much of them. Her sister Bronte was a phone call away but an hour away on the bus. She now had feelings that were too intense to ignore and Valmay was unsure what was happening to her. She could understand being sad from the loneliness but the physical symptoms worried her a great deal. She started to have episodes where she became short of breath and felt like her heart was about to jump out of her chest. Valmay knew it was time to get some help.

It was a cool and clear autumn day, as Valmay walked the two blocks from her house to the medical centre. She often did this walk to the shops and usually took the time to appreciate the leafy suburban area that she lived in. Not today - today was different. She could only think about herself.

This appointment with Dr. Mendes was the first since Sam's death. The doctor had always been very attentive to Valmay's needs and they had a friendly relationship. She thought about what she would tell him and wondered if perhaps she had some life-threatening disease. Perhaps she had heart problems like Sam. The doctor was 20 minutes late seeing her, which was not unusual. *Why don't doctors just allow a little more time for everyone?* she thought. He showed her into the consultation room and she sat down. She liked the doctor, he made her feel important. He was always dressed neatly in a tie and smelled of aftershave. His name was George but she would never call him by the first name, always Doctor. He was past middle age with olive complexion with thick grey hair and neatly clipped grey beard. Valmay thought he was good looking for a man of his age. Valmay spent some time describing her feelings and symptoms while Dr. Mendes wrote notes and asked the occasional question.

"You've had a big change in your life with the loss of Sam," he said. "It is quite common to feel anxious and depressed in these circumstances. If you could spend more time with other family or friends that would be a benefit," he said.

"Unfortunately I don't get many opportunities for that," she replied.

"I'm prescribing an antidepressant for you Valmay. It will help you through this tough time and then we can reassess how you're going."

She would have liked to stay and chat longer but the allotted time was used. She left the medical centre, bought the pills from the chemist and headed off home. Hopefully, they would make her feel more like her old self.

About a week later Elly Jensen from next door asked after her health. "I'm good, better than ever most of the time." The medication was doing the job quite well. She was much more relaxed and the heart palpitations had stopped. There was, however, one particular concern. Valmay was having difficulty with sleeping. Mainly it was weird dreams waking her. The dreams mostly involved people and places from her past but the details faded very quickly as dreams generally do. The first of her special dreams, as she called them, surprised her with the power, and the clarity of detail. She had woken in her bed shaking. She sat up "Bloody hell, what was that." The emotion that gripped her was not fear but amazement at what she had seen. Valmay could remember every detail. She went over it again and again in her mind. She was standing outside the chain wire fence at the front of her old primary school. The cool evening breeze whipped her skirt around her legs. The flickering light inside the window rapidly grew into blazing yellow and orange flames. There was a shadowy figure moving through the yard and a faint odour of petrol. The fire spread from the old buildings to the new. It seemed like she stood there for ages watching. The smoke started to burn her eyes and a siren echoed in the distance. She woke, cold, damp and trembling.

The next day Valmay thought about going back to see Dr. Mendes, but it had been less than two weeks since the last visit. It was only a dream after all. The 6 o'clock news came with a shock. Her old school - Duke Street Primary - had been damaged in a major fire. The circumstances surrounding the blaze were suspicious. Valmay was not a person who believed in the supernatural or things happening without explanation. However, this dream seemingly became a reality and it made her wonder if this was a genuine premonition.

She quickly decided that a coincidence was, of course, the logical explanation. So when she experienced the second of her special dreams just two nights later, she was disconcerted, to say the least. This time in her dream Valmay was sitting at the bus stop at High Street where she often caught the bus to go to her sister Bronte's place. Directly across the street, smoke billowed out from under the eaves of the local community hall. She sat perfectly still and watched as the evening light slowly faded and the flames grew brighter. A darkened figure was standing inside the entry porch with an object in hand, swinging it to and fro. She smelled the smoke and heard the cracking timbers. Suddenly an explosion erupted at the back of the building and sent shudders through her body.

She woke with a start. "Oh no, not again," she blurted out loud in the darkness of her room. Valmay was worried. She sat upright in her bed. She started to question herself. *Am I losing my grip? Are these pills I'm taking some sort of hallucinogenic?* Valmay was debating with herself when she might go back to see Dr Mendes. She heard the wailing siren of the fire truck through her bedroom window.

She managed to get back to sleep after spending some time tossing and turning. As soon as she woke and got herself dressed, she walked down to High Street to find the Community Centre totally destroyed. She could not get too close to the cordoned-off blackened ruins. Valmay found the dream fires and actual events very difficult to rationalise. She was beginning to believe that she had some ability for premonition or astral travel. She had witnessed two separate building fires while physically being in her own bed. She decided to see Dr. Mendes as soon as possible.

Valmay was lucky enough to get an appointment that afternoon. She sat in the waiting room and flicked through the pages of a women's magazine without actually focussing on anything in it. She hoped the doctor wouldn't think she was foolish. She was contemplating leaving when Dr. Mendes called her into the consultation room.

"You think you're seeing the future?" he asked. Valmay knew the moment she saw that condescending smile spread across his face, that he would not be easy to convince. She gave him her best description of what had happened to her since her last consultation.

"Doctor, the things in my dream actually happened. I saw them. I saw the flames felt the heat, smelled the smoke. I even smelled petrol so I know someone started those fires."

"Valmay, let's just think about this for a minute. The mind can do some funny things sometimes, particularly when medication is involved," he paused briefly. "Have you had any traumatic or bad experiences involving fires?" he asked.

"No, not really, I spent all my early life in the country and fire was something we used, not something to be scared of," she said.

Dr Mendes stroked his beard and slowly gazed up at the ceiling fan. "You say you found out the fires actually happened from the TV news?"

"Yes, that's right, but the second time I went out and looked for myself as well," she replied.

"What I'm thinking Valmay, is that you've seen these events on TV and believed that you've seen them before, in dreams. It is like an intense déjà vu," he said. "It is very unlikely that you can see these events when you are not physically there."

"The best approach now is to reduce the dosage of your medications and if you continue to have worrying side effects we will try a different drug. There are quite a few options, so come and see me if you have problems," he said.

Valmay made her way home and thought about what the doctor had said. She could not escape the feeling that he did not believe her. This was a depressing thought. She had believed Dr. Mendes was on her side. "Déjà vu, really?" she thought. Valmay felt the need to convince him that she was not just a silly old woman. "I will be back to see you soon George," she muttered to herself.

Ben Jensen had seen Valmay leave the house earlier. It would be a good time to mow her lawn and not disturb her. He made his way around the back of the house. He just finished mowing his lawn and would quickly do Valmay's. Ben was surprised to find the petrol can he had filled only a few weeks ago, was missing.

## Haven

They'd only been out together a few times. The Friday night session at the local hotel was an obvious choice. It was a small town pub where the twenty-something-year-olds went. They both had friends there and enjoyed the company until late that night. After saying their goodbyes they headed off in Terry's Ute for the forty-minute drive to Ali's place.

"Slow down a bit... You sure you haven't had too much to drink?" Ali asked as she gripped her seat belt.

"I'm fine, had plenty of softies through the night," Terry replied, stretching his arms out straight - holding the steering wheel tight in both hands.

The night was black with a cloud covered sky refusing to allow through any semblance of light. The headlights of Terry's car strained to reveal the roadway ahead. The ghostly patches of bush on each side of the country road flashed by as Terry ignored Ali's plea to slow down.

"*Terry!*" Ali screamed. Suddenly the illuminated grey road bitumen in front of them disappeared. The car ploughed straight ahead as the road curved right. A flashing glimpse of long grass in the headlights - thumping bumping uncontrolled fear - then the sickening jolting impact with the tree stopped the wild ride.

The emergency vehicle arrived just after daylight to find the severely injured Ali unresponsive in the front seat and Terry sitting dazed beside the wrecked vehicle. The shredded gum tree was embedded in the front passenger side, with the twisted metal wrapped around it like soft clay.

A month since the accident and Terry had relived that night many times... day and night. Ali's older brother Dan had openly accused him of causing her death. Dan could be violent

- Terry had seen him in action before at the hotel. Terry had heard that Dan was looking for him. He closed his social media and thought about turning his phone off. The best option, Terry thought, was to disappear for a while - let it all settle down - country communities could be unforgiving.

This place was the haven he desperately needed. The small holiday cottage was owned by his father and was always in use by someone in the family. The isolated cliff top position provided stunning ocean and coastal views. Kelly's lookout was almost directly opposite the cottage and provided a perfect vantage point for sightseers. The waves crashing onto the jagged black rocks fifty metres below were an exhilarating spectacle. The pathway tracing the cliff edge was only metres from the cottage front fence and eventually found its way down to the beachside village.

Terry stood on the front veranda gazing seawards, the pulsing evening breeze cooling his face. He had always found the isolation and natural beauty of this place soothing and he desperately needed that feeling now. He'd only been here two nights and had finished his alcohol supply. His mood had darkened, his drinking was not helping and he had decided to avoid contact with friends and family.

He turned to go back inside the cottage when an old man walking slowly with the aid of cane appeared along the pathway at the front of the cottage. "Hello," he called out. "Is Bill Denison here?" Terry turned back to face him. "No, I'm here on my own. I'm his son Terry".

"Right... I know your Dad. Just wanted to check you weren't a squatter or something." The old man had a neatly trimmed grey beard and was well dressed in long sleeve shirt, jeans, and Panama hat. "My name's Ted, I live down in the village. I walk up here... you know, for exercise."



"Yeah, it's a good walk and a fantastic view. We love it here. Don't see many people. You come up often?" Terry thought he should be sociable with the locals.

"Yeah, couple of times a week. That's how I know your Dad. We'd have a chat from time to time when he was here - lovely bloke - how is he?" Ted asked as he leaned against his cane.

"He's fine - he'll be back here in December for a couple of weeks."

"Great, look forward to catching up."

Ted was about to turn away when Terry saw an opportunity and asked. "Say, would you be able to get something for me from the village?"

"Sure, what do you need?" Ted asked.

"Can you get a bottle of scotch from the hotel - anything around \$50 is fine. I'll get some cash" Terry said turning towards the door.

"Pay me when I come back," Ted paused for a moment. "Is that all you need?"

"Yep, that's it, thank you I really appreciate it," Terry replied.

The inquisitive expression on Ted's face prompted Terry to elaborate. "I came up here for some rest and relaxation and a bit of quiet time, to chill out. So I'm avoiding the village," Terry explained with a smile.

"Yeah, we all need that sometimes. Ok, see you about this time tomorrow," Ted chirped, turned and shuffled off back to the path.

For the last two nights at the cottage, Terry's companion had been Johnny Walker. Tonight he was alone and his mind was continually drawn back to the accident. The TV only provided a brief distraction and he switched it off. He sat back in the recliner chair and closed his eyes. The thought that he was in serious danger at the hands of Ali's brother, was haunting - that day at Ali's funeral - the deadly stony expression on Dan's face - those searing words, hissed through clenched teeth, *I'm coming for you - I'm going to kill you, you bastard.*

Terry was contemplating going down tonight to the village hotel rather than wait for Ted tomorrow when he heard a bumping noise on the front veranda. His body tensed - couldn't be Dan - how could he have found him - Terry's Dad was the only one who knew. Three sharp knocks at the door catapulted Terry from his chair. He went to the door and slowly turned the handle - slowly pulled - and peered through the pencil-thin opening.

"Ted... what are you doing here?" Terry said smiling with obvious relief.

"Thought you might be wanting this tonight," Ted said holding a brown paper bottle sized bag in front of him.

"Ted, you're a lifesaver - come in."

"I wasn't going to stay," Ted said.

"You have to have one with me now, c'mon'" Terry insisted opening the door wide.

"Well... ok, maybe one... thanks," Ted went inside.

Terry poured Ted a scotch and ice at his request and one for himself. He gave Ted cash for the scotch. They sat opposite each other, Ted on the sofa and Terry in the recliner.

"I got the impression that you enjoy a drink. You don't want to overdo it though - not good for you." Ted said with a concerned tone.

Terry could see his Dad saying the same thing. "Yeah, I know, I'm doing some medicating."

"You ok?" Ted asked, "You looked a bit tense earlier."

"Sure, I'm ok," Terry said, thinking the old man was perceptive. "Had some drama with friends - upset some people."

"You can't please everyone," Ted said as he took a timid sip from his glass.

Terry had finished his drink and was up refilling. "You're right, sometimes things get out of control."

"You have to do your own controlling Terry. There's no reason that things happen - no divine plan."

Terry returned to his recliner with a full glass wondering if he was about to hear Ted's philosophy on life.

"Five years ago this month, my wife Dana, had a severe stroke. She was still alive - but she wasn't Dana. That woman was the most gentle, considerate woman you could find." Ted's previous cheery disposition had disappeared completely. "Do you think there was a reason for that - course there wasn't - or for all the horrible events in the world. We can only control the things we are able to. My poor Dana got worse and I decided that we should let her go - you know - turn of the life support." Ted looked up with glistening eyes. "That was a difficult decision - but the right one."

"Geez Ted, I'm really sorry," Terry said softly.

"I came to terms with what happened... and I'm ok." Ted paused and took another sip. "What about you - sure you're alright?"

"No, I'm not sure," The way Ted had revealed his private life and feelings prompted Terry talk. "I was involved in an accident. I was driving a girl home from the pub when we went off the road and hit a tree. She was killed."

"Was she your girlfriend?" Ted asked.

"No, only knew her for a couple of weeks," he replied.

"I can see why you're feeling down. The trauma of accidents can cause a lot of problems," Ted said.

"Yeah well, the girl - name's Ali - has an older brother who reckons it was my fault. He said he wants to kill me." Terry lifted his glass and took a gulp.

"He's probably just saying that Terry - emotional, just lost his sister - doesn't really mean it," Ted said

"He means it alright. He solves his problems with violence."

"Why does he say it's your fault? Were you drunk? Ted asked.

"I wasn't charged with anything. Dan made up his own mind because he saw me drinking at the pub," Terry said.

"Ok, so you were drinking, but not enough to be over the limit when police got there?"

"Yes, but there's more to it," Terry said. "After we hit the tree and I was dazed, had a few cuts and bruises, Ali was beside me all smashed up. The tree hit her side. I got out of the car and sat there. It was around 2 am - I sat there, and I waited until daylight before I called emergency."

"What! Why did you do that?" Ted asked sharply.

"So the booze would wear off. Figured it didn't matter - Ali was dead."

"How do you know she was dead?" Ted asked tersely.

"There was blood everywhere in the car, she must have been. I couldn't even look." Terry said looking at Ted to gauge the response.

Ted had a look of distaste. "You haven't told anyone about this."

"Only you,"

"This is weighing on your mind?" Ted asked.

"Mainly worried that Ali's brother is coming after me - he's a nut case."

"Why did you tell me?" Ted asked.

"Not sure Ted, needed to unload some baggage I guess," he replied.

"I'm glad you told me," Ted said as he sat motionless, without expression.

The loud knock startled them. "Who the hell..." Terry mumbled as he strode over to the door and teased the window curtain aside. "Oh shit, it's him. How'd he find me?" Terry whispered.

"Ted its Ali's brother. Can you help?"

"Go into the bedroom, I'll look after it,"

Terry hustled into the adjoining bedroom and Ted stepped to the door and waited until Terry had disappeared. Ted opened the door to see a tall wiry looking young man with a severe haircut standing in the doorway. He was holding a short metal bar in his right hand.

"Hello Uncle Ted is he here?" he said.

"He's in the bedroom, Dan. I believe Kelley's lookout is the best option."

## Dogs Life

Michael didn't like dogs and dogs didn't like Michael. He thought they were a waste of money and a health hazard. He didn't really like any animals. His father had bought him a puppy when he was seven years old and it turned out to be a traumatic experience for everyone concerned. The dog chased Michael at every opportunity and bit him on a number of occasions in the short period of their tumultuous relationship. The memory of the dog running behind, jumping with fangs bared and attaching itself to his little backside still haunted him. Who would have thought that this common animosity between him and canines would become such a pivotal factor in Michael's life?

He sat quietly at his father's bedside leaning forward with hands clasped and an elbow on each knee. "Is the chemo working at all Dad?" Michael asked.

"No, not doing much good, just making me feel crook."

Michael's Dad had been unwell for over a year and he needed home nursing for most of that period. With no wife to help him, he was now in hospital with a prognosis that gave little hope.

"You need to hang in there Dad, you'll come good," Michael said.

"Sure, I'll be right."

He pushed himself up in the bed so he could look squarely at Michael. "I had a visit from your Uncle Tommy yesterday," he said. "He told me some interesting things."

"Yeah, what?"

"Well, as you know, Tommy is a little on the eccentric side and lives alone with just that dog of his. His visit wasn't

just to see how I was going. I thought it was a bit strange, but the first thing he asked me was how you and Jillian were going financially."

"Why did he want to know that?" Michael asked.

"I told him that you were good. You know, both with good jobs, you in accounting and Jillian doing jewellery. Then he told me that in the current circumstances, it was sensible for him to change his will to take me out of being his sole beneficiary... what with me being unlikely to be around much longer and him being in reasonable health, even though he's nine years older than me."

"Hang on a minute, let me get this straight. As it stands now you're the only one in his will. So what happens if you go before Uncle Tommy?" Michael asked.

"The estate would go to you because you are my sole beneficiary. But now, because I told him you and Jillian are pretty well off, he is making other plans."

Michael's Dad had a quizzical look, "You are well off, aren't you?" he asked.

"I know I said I was in accounting Dad, but it is probably more accurate to say, just counting. I do stocktaking at the company warehouse. And yes, Jillian is in jewellery. She makes earrings from clay and sells them at the craft markets every second weekend," Michael explained.

"So you are not well off," he said with a pained expression on his pale face.

"We are doing ok Dad, but I wish you hadn't said that to Uncle Tommy. So what is he going to do with his money now then?" Michael asked.

"He said he was planning to leave his housekeeper a small amount to look after his dog and the rest to charity," he replied.

"Don't worry about it Dad. Uncle Tommy probably doesn't have much other than that little unit he lives in at the coast. So it's no big deal," Michael said.

Michael's Dad swallowed hard, "Um, before he left, Tommy told me that cancer research would be his charity of choice considering my situation. He reckoned the four million dollars he had made with his investments would make a difference."

Michael's head lolled back, and his eyes rolled.

Michael drove out of the hospital car park and cursed the cost of parking. He didn't remember anything of the drive home. The thought of missing out on Uncle Tommy's money was consuming him. When Michael arrived home he relayed the information from his Dad. Jillian became quite agitated.

"What, he told him we were well off. You're kidding," she seethed.

"We're not poor though," Michael said.

"And we're not bloody rich, that's for sure. You have to find a way to let your Uncle know we need that money. We deserve it."

"He's old, what if he died before he had time to change the will?" she asked expectantly.

"That's not going to happen, he's not sick."

"Maybe you could somehow facilitate his passing away," she said quietly.



"What! Facilitate passing away. How the hell would I do that? That's bloody murder you're suggesting Jillian," he said through clenched teeth.

"Ok, Ok, I didn't really mean it... Well, you'll have to go and visit him and persuade him that we need the money. We are his family and you don't give money to charity when you have a needy family," she said.

"I think you're right. But I can't just go and beg for money. I'll have to be more subtle and get him to change his mind to leave the will as is. You know I have never even been to his place. He lives at the coast and that's a couple of hours away. Firstly we have to work out a reason for me going."

They both sat silently, pondering why Michael would make a first time ever visit to his Uncle Tommy at the coast.

The not unexpected death of his father was distressing for Michael but it did provide an opportunity. Michael's Dad was not a religious man. In fact, anti-religious was a more accurate label. He was convinced that religion caused most of the problems in the world and he wanted no part of it.

Accordingly, the funeral was a very small affair at the Albany Creek Crematorium. Michael made sure he connected with his Uncle Tommy at the ceremony and they agreed that they should each other more often. They were, after all, the last of their family line.

The drive to the coast was pleasant enough. It gave Michael time to think. Jillian had decided that it was better if she did not go. It would be more awkward for them to discuss family money issues with her in the room.

Michael found the street address without any trouble. The building was only two streets from the beach and he liked the look of it. It seemed to be about eight levels and was not one

of the typical high rises in the area. There was a lush garden at the entrance that gave a cool tropical feel. He made his way to the elevator and to level three, unit thirty-two. He stood at the door and knocked twice. Instantly he heard a yapping bark erupting inside. He heard a voice shout. "Hung, get here, Hung." The door opened and Tommy was standing there with a small growling white scraggy looking dog in his arms.

"Hi Uncle Tommy," he said.

"Michael, come in, good to see you. Glad you could come," Tommy was not a big man. Slightly stooped, tanned weathered skin and with only the back and sides remaining of his snow-white hair, he was looking his age.

"Your dog's name is Hung?" Michael asked.

"Yes, it's a Chinese name, means courageous. He's a Shih-tzu."

Michael raised his hand to pat the head of the dog in Tommy's arms. But thought better of it when he heard a low growl and saw it curl its' little black lips exposing pointy little Shih Tzu teeth.

He wandered into the lounge room and had a quick gaze around the unit. The cane furniture suited the tropical feel of the place. Looking out the double sliding door you could see ocean between the other buildings. "Wow! I really like your place."

"Thanks, it's not big but it's modern, comfortable and it suits me."

"Looks like you have plenty of interesting mementos from your travels," Michael said as walked towards the shelving covering one wall. The various artifacts in Tommy's collection were displayed on the shelves. Michael peered closely at a small clear glass jar with a screw top silver lid. What appeared to be two peeled lychees were in the jar in a clear liquid.

"What's this one," he asked.

"Oh, that's Hung's balls," he said.

"What?" Michael turned toward him with a stunned look.

"Hung's testicles - the vet gave them to me when I got him fixed and I haven't had the heart to throw them out," Tommy said with a smile.

*He certainly is Eccentric,* Michael thought.

"Would you like a coffee or tea," Tommy asked.

"Water would be great thanks."

Tommy filled two glasses of water, put them on the coffee table and sat opposite Michael. The dog immediately jumped onto Tommy's lap, looked at Michael and gave a low growl. "Don't mind Hung, he just needs to get to know you better."

Michael smiled. He thought it was ironic that such a small dog without testicles would be called Hung. He knew as soon as he saw Hung that they would never be getting to know each other better.

"You like dogs?" Tommy asked.

"Yes, I love dogs. We haven't got one because of the unit we live in. They don't allow animals," he lied.

Tommy scratched under Hung's ear "Good - you can't trust a man who doesn't like dogs, I always say."

"If we ever get enough money to buy a house I will be getting one straight away," he lied again.

"You can't afford a house? Your Dad told me that you and Jillian were doing really well," Tommy said.

"We didn't want him to worry about us. He felt ashamed that he had nothing left after all his health expenses. So we couldn't tell him the truth about our situation. Now it even looks like I will be losing my job due to company downsizing," he said lowering his gaze. "We wanted to start a family. But that's not possible now," he found lying easy now.

"I didn't realise that Michael. I thought you were well set financially. I can lend you some cash if you need it."

"Thanks Uncle Tommy but short term cash is not really the problem. We just can't see anything for us in the future," he said with a sullen look on his face. Hung growled again. Michael looked at the dog staring at him with those beady black Shih-tzu eyes and thought *Bastard dog*.

"Michael I can help you. I am so very glad you came today and explained things. It changes some important decisions for me regarding my estate. You know I am getting on a bit now. I am not as sharp as I used to be and I'm getting a bit tired of it all. I have had a pretty good life for a bloke who couldn't catch a woman. Maybe that's why it's been good," he added. "I probably don't have that much time left so it's important that I get my affairs in order now."

"I don't have to change anything because of me, Uncle Tommy," Michael said hoping he wasn't convincing.

"Oh yes, I do Michael. Family is important. Now let's talk about some other things. Is your mother still married to that retired dentist?"

The drive home was even more pleasant than the one down. The smile on Michael's face seemed to be permanent. He was so very pleased with himself. It was late afternoon and Jillian was sitting at the table reading a magazine when Michael arrived home.

He closed the front door behind him and walked in. Jillian turned towards him, "Well - how did you go?"

"Oh Babe, we are in like Flynn, just a matter of time."

Jillian knew it must have gone very well. He never called her Babe.

Michael was stunned at how quickly events overtook his life. It had been barely a month since he had been to his Uncle's unit when he received the phone call. Uncle Tommy had slipped on some dog feces in his bathroom. Hit his head on the bathroom floor and died of a heart attack. It was unbelievable that this had happened. Michael thought about the cause of death, "Slipped on Shih Tzu shit," he giggled to himself.

He felt sorry for poor Uncle Tommy but he was also so pleased he went to see him when he did. Michael got the advice that the reading of the will was to be next Monday morning.

They arrived early and sat in the Lawyers waiting room. They had chatted excitedly all the way in the car and were feeling relaxed.

"Peter is ready to see you now," the assistant said. She opened his office door and they went in. Peter Mason, who was Tommy's lawyer, smiled.

"Hi Jillian - Michael," he shook their hands. "Please have a seat," he motioned towards the two chairs in front of his desk.

"We are here for your Uncle Tommy's will, Michael, and he has left a letter for me to read to you. So I am going to do that first up."

He picked up an unsealed letter from his desk and opened it.

"It is addressed to you Michael and reads as follows. -

'Michael, if my Lawyer is reading this letter to you now it

means I am dead. I wrote this letter directly after you came to see me in October. Your visit had a great impact on me as you probably noticed at the time. Before you came to see me you might be surprised to know I had decided against changing my will. This would have meant that you would have been sole beneficiary and received all of my estate apart from some money to look after Hung.

After your visit, you must have thought I was silly enough to believe all that bullshit that you spun me that day. Like I have said Michael "You can't trust a man that doesn't like dogs". You didn't like Hung and he knew it.

Well, Michael, you wanted me to change my will so I did. My Estate will now be split two ways, one half to my housekeeper Beverly, who loves Hung, and a half to Cancer Research.

However Michael, you are family and I have left you something to remind you how bloody obvious it was to me and Hung, that you were trying to con me.'"

The Lawyer reached into the top desk-draw and removed the glass jar. He placed the dog's balls on the desk in front of Michael.

## Grey Days

Kelly heard the creaking and groaning of the garage door going up. She hurried over to the front window and squinted as she peered through the glass and drizzling rain outside. *He's back already*, she thought. *He must have forgotten something.* She went back to her ironing board and stretched out the sleeve of the business shirt. The closing car door made a dull thud. The inside door opened and Neil walked in.

"What did you forget?" she asked.

"Can you ring Hogan for me and tell him I'm sick?"

"Are you sick?" she asked.

"I don't feel like going today. Can you ring?"

"Can't you do it? What will I tell him?" she asked.

"You know, stomach upset or something," he said over his shoulder as he walked away from her to the bedroom. He listened as Kelly shuffled around getting the phone number and dialing. He couldn't hear exactly what she said but the conversation was short.

Kelly appeared at the bedroom door. He was lying stretched out on top of the bedcovers, hands clasped across his chest.

"What did he say?" he asked, not looking at her.

"He just said OK, hope he's in tomorrow... thanks for calling," she paused and then stood at the end of the bed.

"What's wrong? You were going to work, then came back home."

"I'm not up for it," he said.

"It's Hogan isn't it?"

"I don't know. I'm not happy there anymore," he said.

"Why don't you look for another job?" she asked.

"Yeah, think I'll sleep for a bit." He rolled onto his side.

"Ok, let's talk later," She stood and looked down at him for a moment and walked out.

Between the hisses and gurgles of Kelly ironing Neil could hear the light sprinkle of rain on the iron awning outside the window. He swung his legs over the edge of the bed, stood up and looked out. There were no clouds to see, just a flat greyness. He thought it was like a grey ceiling pressing down. The timber fence a few meters away blocked most of the view of the next door lowset house. This neighbourhood was full of this style house but with no mature trees, the area seemed barren. He lay back down and closed his eyes. He dozed restlessly for about an hour. When he woke and came out of the bedroom, Kelly was still at the ironing board. "Aren't you finished yet?" he asked.

"Oh you're up," she said. "I've got two loads to do and it's being picked up at three."

"I've decided to make a complaint about Hogan."

Kelly put the iron in its rack and walked over to face him. "I think you should Neil. She put her hands on his shoulders and kissed him softly on the lips. "You haven't been the same since he showed up."

He moved the basket of clothing on the couch and sat down.

"Yeah, you know I've been leading hand there for two years and he's only been there six months. I can't work it out. He gets on fine with the other leading hands. He just has favourites."

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"I'm going to talk to Tony Magnussen."

"And say what?"



"Not really sure yet, it's pretty risky," he said. "I can guess what will happen. It will be one of two things, nothing, because bosses look after each other, or he will call us both in to sort out our differences. If he calls us in, I'm really stuffed."

"Magnussen must know what he's like," Kelly said.

"He probably does. You remember Phil Howard who used to be the admin clerk in the office with Hogan?" he asked.

"Yeah, I remember him from the Christmas party."

"He is a really nice quiet guy, not all that old. He was good at his job and Hogan just put shit on him all the time. He's been on sick leave for over a month now and the word is he's not coming back. He does the same thing to me, probably not as bad. But you never know when he's going to snap. I'm walking on eggshells whenever he's around."

"You can always look for another job. You'd get one pretty easy," she said.

"Not so sure about that, used to think so. But why should I? I don't want to have to leave just because of that prick."

Kelly sat quietly next to him and looked out the lounge room window at the continuing drizzle. *What a miserable, grey day,* she thought.

"I know what I'll do," Neil said. "I'll ask Magnussen to transfer me to a different job, not under Hogan. Then I'll tell him how Hogan is a bully and killing morale."

"Are there other jobs there that you would like?" she asked.

"Maybe in the office, there's a bunch of buyers and admin people. Be good there, wouldn't get dirty," he said and stood up from the couch. "Yep, that's what I'll do. I'll see Tony

Magnussen tomorrow." Neil went to the side table and picked up his car keys "I'm just going to slip down the bottle shop Kel. I might have a couple tonight," he said.

Kelly was back ironing and looked up. "What if someone sees you? You're supposed to sick," she said.

"Don't care if they see me," he replied.

Neil returned with two six packs of beer. One went into the fridge and the other with him to the lounge room. He was not a routine heavy drinker but the day had made him sullen and tense. Alcohol was his medication of choice. It usually provided a reaction of friendly sociability - not tonight. Neil declined Kelly's invitation to eat dinner and continued to drink. She ate alone in the kitchen. She could sense him slipping into melancholy. Kelly walked into the lounge room. Neil was sitting on the sofa - both feet were on the coffee table surrounded by empty beer bottles.

"You're not going to drink all the beer tonight, are you?" she asked.

"Yeah - I might," he replied with a sullen tone. He didn't look up.

"C'mon, don't be a dick. I know you're worried but you don't need to drink."

"I'm not fuckin' worried!" he shouted, looking at her with an angry gaze.

"Alright!" Kelly replied tersely as she turned away.

"I'm going to bed and you should too," she said as she walked out of the room.

The next morning was grey, a replica of the previous day, but not raining. It was still quite dark when Neil woke. Kelly was

asleep - lying on her side. He quietly slid out of bed, stood and stretched his arms up. He looked over at Kelly. He looked at the curve of her hip under the covers and wondered why that shape attracted him so much. He wanted to touch her. He resisted the urge.

He quickly showered, shaved and dressed in his work clothes. He sat on the edge of the bed, bent down and grabbed his work boots.

Kelly woke and blinked a few times to get the sleep from her eyes. She looked at Neil hunched over doing up his boots. "Call me later Neil," she said softly. "Let me know how it went."

"OK." He got up, went around to her side, bent and kissed her. "Sorry about last night," he said. He knew he was lucky to have her to talk to and to care about how he felt.

The forty-minute drive to the plant seemed to not exist. Neil pulled into the staff car park and into in his usual place. He had a knot in his stomach. He walked briskly to the main front office, not to the side workshop door as he normally would. He scanned his I.D. card to enter and walked past the unattended reception desk. A few employees were sitting at their desks. The rest of the office was empty. He knew Magnussen would be in his office in the corner. He usually came in early. Neil walked through and stood in Magnussen's open doorway.

Magnussen looked up from his desk over the top of his laptop. "Morning Neil, you want to see me?" he asked.

"Yeah, you got time Tony?"

"Sure, come in." He stood up, moved around the desk and sat at the round table in his office.

Neil entered and sat opposite him. He was sure the tension in his face must have been obvious. He decided to ask about changing jobs first and then tell him about the problems with Hogan.

Magnussen explained that Neil was unlikely to get a white-collar job anywhere near his current pay level. "If you don't have experience Neil, you start at the very bottom," He paused and leaned forward. "You're a leading hand Neil, why do you want to change?"

This was the opportunity - now - to do something about Hogan. Neil swallowed, looked down, then directly up at Magnussen. "Just thought doing something different might be a good move," he said.

Magnussen said he would let Neil know if anything came up that may suit him. He left the office with a painful thought. "Jesus, I'm a wuss. What am I going to say to Kel?" He made his way from the main office back to the workshop area. He was despondent and apprehensive now about how Hogan would react about his day off. He was thinking about what to say when the forklift hit him.

The investigation into the accident went on for about three months. It concluded that the forklift driver was not at fault. Neil was held totally responsible. He had been walking outside the designated walk zone and was not paying due attention to the surrounding work activity.

The unexpected outcome of the investigation and associated statement gathering from workers was that Supervisor Hogan was unsuited for people management. Many of the staff interviewed used the opportunity to complain about bullying from Hogan. He was shifted to a specialist role without subordinates. Neil recovered from the broken leg he sustained in the accident but was left with a permanent limp. He was unable to carry out the

usual heavy work of the leading hand. He resolved that never again would he allow himself to be a target for intimidation. Neil was promoted to the vacant Supervisor position on his return from sick leave.

## High Road

Jeff drove his utility as fast as the curving road would allow. He enjoyed this time of day. The sun was over the horizon and the light fading quickly to a gentle red. The tiredness in his muscles and the heat in his skin accompanied the end of a working day. The country in the foothills heading up the range was bushland, with some pockets of lush rainforest. The road curves became tighter and the grade steeper as he drove on. The bush was close to the road on his right and fell away steeply on his left. With an occasional glance out the side window, he looked across the valley towards the mill - too dark to see it. His headlights were on now. It was Friday. He was eager to be home and relax with a few drinks.

The heavy muffled thud on the left front of his vehicle jolted him. Something flashed past his view on the downhill side. He hit the brakes - not too hard on this road. He pulled over. He did not want to end up down the ravine. His immediate thoughts were confused. He had caught a glimpse of a light coloured shape

in the headlights with the impact.

*No, couldn't have been a person, could it? It must have been a roo,* he thought.

He sat stunned for a few seconds, grabbed his flashlight from the glove box and got out of the vehicle and left it running with the headlights on. He walked back to the sharp bend, where he'd felt the impact. Standing at the road's edge, he peered down into the darkness following the meagre beam of his flashlight. The incline was not vertical, but too steep to walk down. The thick undergrowth started in earnest about ten metres down from the road edge. He directed the light one side to the other. Something may have crashed through the

vegetation. He wasn't sure. The night had fully arrived and nothing moved that he could see. He listened. Only the sound the cicadas reverberated around him. Down on his haunches, he examined dirt area at the road edge. Blood! He thought about calling the police - he didn't.

Jeff pulled into the open driveway. The weatherboard house was small, needed painting, and was only a short distance from the village centre. The rent was low. It was the perfect spot for him and Joanne. They had been living together now for eight months. Joanne worked at the village tourist centre and Jeff at the sawmill. It suited them. They both loved this area up on the range and the plan was to save some money for a place of their own.

He walked around to the left front of the vehicle. The dent under the headlight was obvious as he ran his hand across it and looked at the red dampness on his fingers. He wiped his hand urgently on his khaki work trousers, went quickly up the timber steps and through the open front door into the lounge.

"Jo?"

"Yeah" she called from the kitchen.

Jeff walked through. Joanne still had her neat pants and shirt work uniform on, with an apron. She was standing at the bench in the middle of the kitchen slicing a chicken breast.

She looked up with a smile. "Hey... have a good day?"

Jeff moved to stand opposite her across the bench, "I think I'm in trouble."

"Why, what's happened?" she asked.

Jeff explained what had happened and his concern that he had hit a person, "I should have called Rodney straight away," he

said." "I should do it now." He thought about reaching for his mobile phone.

"Wait on Jeff" she snapped. "You don't know if you hit anyone. It would be unlikely someone would be walking down there. It's probably a roo. They're always around at dusk."

"If it's a person, that's hit and run, leaving the scene of an accident. Not only that, some poor bastard could be lying down the side of that mountain," he said.

"Oh come on, you're just getting yourself worked up." She put down the knife and wiped her hands on her apron. "Is there any damage on the car?" she asked as she left the kitchen.

They went out to the vehicle, got the flashlight and examined the damage. Joanne stood motionless with arms folded as Jeff inspected for further marks.

"Jeff..." she said. "Cars hit kangaroos all the time around here. Come inside and have a drink."

They went in. Jeff grabbed a beer from the fridge and flopped down on the lounge in front of the TV. Joanne finished cooking a chicken stir-fry for dinner. They ate watching their usual Friday night shows without discussing the incident any further. The issue was left simmering under the surface.

Jeff was restless all night and awoke still feeling tired. Joanne had already been up, had breakfast, dressed, and left for work in the village centre. He had decided that Joanne was right about last night. He would put it out of his mind and get on with the normal routine.

Jeff looked at himself in the bathroom mirror. He leaned forward turning his head to one side and gently touched his fingers to his temple. Apart from the slightly receding



hairline, he thought he looked pretty good. He would let the facial stubble grow a bit more.

His bowl of muesli was tasteless but satisfied him. He dressed in jeans and tee-shirt and headed to the village to pick up some supplies. He walked along Main Street footpath towards the supermarket.

"Hey, Jeff!"

He turned around to see Kylie Jenks, hurrying towards him.

"Hi Kylie, how's things," he said.

Kylie was a friend of Joanne. She liked to keep informed on the events of the village. She also enjoyed keeping everyone she knew informed.

"Great! Hey, you heard about the McPherson boy?" she blurted.

"What?" he asked.

"He's missing."

"Which one?" he asked.

"The youngest, the thirteen-year-old, Billy," she said. "He hasn't been seen since yesterday morning."

Jeff's mind raced. The McPhersons had an avocado farm a couple of kilometres from the village. Could that boy have been on the High Road when he was on his way home from the mill yesterday?

"OK, I'm sure he'll show up," he said "Look I've got to go. Sorry, I need to see Joanne."

"Sure, say 'hi' from me," she said and hurried off.

Jeff crossed Main Road and headed to the tourist centre. He went into the building central area where Joanne was talking

to an elderly woman. She was holding a brochure open while they examined it and chatted. The woman left and Joanne went over to Jeff standing near the entrance.

"What are you doing," she asked.

"There's a boy missing," he said quietly.

Before he could continue, "Yes, I know, I heard about it earlier, Billy McPherson."

"Why didn't you call me?" He snapped.

"Because it doesn't mean you had anything to do with it," she said with a pained expression on her face. "For God's sake, stop worrying. They'll find him," she said. "Look, I know you. You're not the type to be confessing to something if you're not caught doing it. Go home." A middle-aged couple came through the doorway. "I have to go," she said glancing around at them. "See you later." She walked towards the couple smiling.

Jeff had forgotten about doing any shopping. There was a bench seat with a sunshade outside the tourist centre. He sat there staring at nothing for a good five minutes. He stood and headed off with purposeful strides directly back in the direction of home, towards the local police station. It was a small timber building painted cream as they all were. Rodney had been the resident police officer for a couple of years and Jeff knew him reasonably well. He stepped up the front steps to the door of the office. It was closed with a white card notice attached at eye level. Rodney would not be back at the office until late in the day. Jeff guessed that he was with the McPhersons looking for Billy.

Jeff determined there was only one course of action now. He must go back down the High Road and find out if Billy was there.

He got himself home quickly. He went around the back of the house to his tool shed and selected one of the ropes. It was late morning and there were a few cars on the road for a Saturday drive. It was a nice drive from the city up the range and the day was perfect for it, cool breeze and blue skies with a few meandering clouds. Jeff drove feeling an increasing tenseness across his forehead. He pulled up and swung his vehicle around to almost the same spot as the night before. Feeling nauseous, he opened the car door and walked along the road edge looking down. He could see in the daylight that the bush had been broken. There was a shape in the deeper undergrowth. A tree stump a short distance over the roadway edge served as an anchor point to secure his rope. He slowly started down the slope backwards letting the rope slide through his gloved hands. This part of the hill was dry and the grass and sticks crackled under his feet as he moved towards the line of the thicker growth. It was mainly native bushes with some woody lantana. The shape he had seen was to his right, behind a thick patch. Did he really want to see this? He gave himself some slack with the rope and pushed himself along towards it. He reached through the prickling, scratching bush branches as far as he could and pushed them aside to get a clearer view. He saw the bloody body and dead eyes staring through him. His legs started to shake. He couldn't control it and screamed out... to no one "A bloody cow!" The wave of relief spread from his gut through his body.

Jeff made his way back up the slope, scratches, and blood covering his arms. Later that day he learned from Kylie, that Billy McPherson had been found hiding in one of the sheds at his property. He'd had a disagreement with his parents and decided that causing some distress was fair revenge. The unfortunate cow had wandered from a property up the hill.

Later that week Jeff advised Joanne that he wanted to move out and maybe she could get a friend to move in with her. He said he had things he wanted to do before he settled down. This was quite unexpected for Joanne. She thought she knew him better.

## Lucky Day

*This could be the day*, Rachel thought as they walked hand in hand towards the river bank. With no recent substantial rain in the north, this part of the river looked more like a creek. It meandered leisurely through patches of stone and reeds.

The Landrover was parked nearby under a huge ghost gum. It was a short walk through the gently waving long grass to a clearing by the river. If this was to be the day, Ben could not have picked one better - light breeze, cloudless sky and the enjoyable river scent for them alone. Rachel had decided to wear her yellow summer dress when Ben suggested they go for a drive to the river. She felt attractive in this dress - important for a woman approaching middle age. Rachel couldn't help but smile at the thought that Ben actually owned this part of the country only twenty minutes from his homestead. It had taken some time but she was feeling confident it would all fall into place quite soon.

Rachel and Ben had connected through an online dating app - the process often used by those with failed marriages and with the radiance of their youthful complexion fading. Rachel certainly fit the mould - Ben, however, didn't. He owned a sheep property in central Queensland. He inherited it after his father succumbed to cancer. The cause, Ben was convinced, was the myriad of chemicals used to manage the animals and crops. Ben's mum was in a nursing home so he lived alone, only seeing workers he hired from time to time. He was a big man in his early fifties hardened by constant work and the unforgiving conditions. He had a couple of almost serious relationships with local women in his early days. The young people didn't stay for too long out here unless they were working a property. Ben was well liked in the local town and by neighbours, always ready for a chat and to help out anyone in need. That was the way of the country community. Ben was

tired of the solitude and felt the need for a partner and friend.

Rachel had been married for eighteen years when her marriage ended. The usual catalyst for breakups after this amount of time is an affair by one or the other in the relationship. Not so in this case. Rachel and her husband grew apart and in the end, they just did not like each other. Their teenage son was a casualty of the bitterness and lived with his Dad.

Unfortunately for Rachel, the marriage failed to accumulate much in the way of assets, no house, property or cash to speak of. Since the split, she worked in a ladies fashion store in the central Brisbane city area, easy commute from her one bedroom apartment. With a petite build, short blond hair and elfin features she had her share of attention from men. Most were either married or separated with kids, and Rachel steered clear. She was looking for an uncomplicated relationship that would provide the security she craved.

Ben's profile on the dating app didn't really impress Rachel until she noticed the homestead and the sixty-five thousand acre property. His looks were a little on the weathered side but she knew that quite a few ladies would be interested. Living out in the sticks of South West Queensland would scare some off.

Rachel gave it a lot of thought before starting up a chat with Ben. She was a city girl. The lifestyle out there was so different. They may not even connect. The potential benefit may be worth it - so why not.

It was about a month of engaging chat before Ben suggested they meet up in Brisbane. From that point, the relationship blossomed and it wasn't long before Rachel was having extended visits with Ben at the homestead. She liked to potter around

the homestead not fussed on going out with Ben around the property.

They had only walked a few meters towards the river. Rachel screamed. "Ahh! Snake! I've been bitten - Ben!"

The snake slithered off and disappeared through the long grass. "Rachel, stay still. Show me." Ben crouched down to hold Rachel's ankle. Blood was flowing from two distinct puncture wounds on her instep. "Just stay calm, we need to get you to hospital." Ben picked Rachel up in his arms and quickly walked back towards the Landrover.

"Ben, did you see it? What was it?" Rachel was understandably agitated. "It hurts!"

Ben was hesitant. "I don't want you to panic, but it looked like a taipan."

"Oh my God!" Rachel was shrill. "They're deadly!"

They reached the Landrover. Ben opened the passenger door and placed Rachel in the front seat. He ran to the driver's side and pulled a first aid kit from the glove box.

"Rachel, you need to be as calm as you can and stay very still. I'll bandage your leg and ring the hospital." Ben arranged with the hospital for the ambulance to meet them halfway. He cleaned the wound, finished the bandage then drove as fast as the road conditions would allow out towards the highway.

Rachel was pale. "Ben, do people survive a taipan bite?"

"Yes, of course, they do. There's antivenom and it's on the way," Ben replied.

"How long until we meet them?" Rachel asked.

"Not long, about thirty minutes," Ben said. "Just stay quiet."

Ben knew it would be touch and go. He knew if left untreated a taipan could kill in thirty to forty-five minutes. He glanced at Rachel and thought that she knew it too. Her face was gaunt and very pale. Her lips pressed together and her eyes moist.

"It's not fair. I just wanted security and a decent life." She said weakly.

"You'll be ok, don't worry," Ben said.

"I don't fit in out here in the bush. I should have realised it was too much of an upheaval."

"Please Rachel, just stay quiet and still," Ben said as he drove, exceeding the highway speed limit.

Rachel was still pale but lucid when they spotted the ambulance with lights flashing and sirens howling. The pulled into a gravel side area. The paramedics acted quickly. She was injected with antivenom and on her way to the hospital within minutes. Ben followed in his vehicle.

Rachel was monitored closely overnight. The bite wound was a little swollen but apart from that, she appeared to be well. Ben was there at her bedside when the attending Doctor came into the ward.

"Hello, Rachel I'm Doctor Henson," he said to Rachel, ignoring Ben.

"Hi!" she replied.

"How are you feeling this morning?" he asked.

"Well, pretty good. That antivenom must be great stuff," she replied.

"It's good, but not that good. I would say that you are a very lucky lady. It appears that you had what is known as a dry bite from the snake," he explained.



"Dry bite?"

"Yes, the snake didn't actually inject its venom into you. The experts think it happens when the snake is not attacking to kill prey. Perhaps it thinks you are too big to eat. In any case, it is not common, and very unusual for taipans. So a lucky day for you," the Doctor said.

"Thank you doctor. That is such a relief," Rachel said.

"No problem! As long as you are over the stress of the experience and look after the bite wound on your foot you should be fine."

"Thank you so much," she said. The doctor left them alone.

Rachel sat up in bed and looked directly at Ben. "That is such a relief. Wow! What a story I've got to tell now," she said.

"I'm so glad you're ok. I was really worried," Ben said.

"You were great Ben. I knew how serious this could have been. Thank you for looking after me. It's a shame that snake spoiled our day. I had a feeling it was going to be special,"

"Well there was something I wanted to say to you yesterday," Ben said lowering his voice.

"Yes?" she replied expectantly.

"I wanted to tell you that I didn't think that we were really suited to each other for a long term relationship. Sorry Rachel, but I think you feel it as well."

Rachel could not stop her face showing the disappointment she felt. "Is it what I said in the car on the way here Ben?"

"No! That just confirmed it for me," he said.

"My lucky day," Rachel replied.

## Apparition

Mitchell had a close relationship with his Grandma. He didn't remember much about his Granddad Jed, who died when Mitchell was only nine. He would look forward to his visits to the big Queenslander house as a young boy. It was a trip to the country even though it was only thirty minutes from his suburban home. You could play cricket on the wide verandas and go for bush walks. Grandma Molly was always a fun lady but firm in her views on right and wrong, and serious about her religion. She was described by many who knew her as eccentric. She often told a story that she had seen an apparition of the Virgin Mary at the house. Now that Grandma was gone and Mitchell had inherited the old house, he was considering whether he and his partner Jody would live there and renovate the place. They were both in their mid-twenties and worked in the city, but they were happy to try commuting. Sitting on the veranda sipping a glass of wine was a vision they both shared. Quiet weekends away from the city and suburbia were appealing. Mitchell and Jody were hardly prepared for what lay ahead.

They pulled into the front boundary driveway full of expectations for relaxed country style living. Jody jumped out of their small car, opened the double gate and Mitchell drove in. They continued along the gravel road entry - just five minutes and they were parked adjacent to the front steps. The excitement of moving into the old house was sparkling in their eyes. They grabbed bags, jackets and an esky from the boot and went up the wide front stairs to the veranda. Mitchell hesitated, turned and looked out over the undulating grassy hills. A significant part of the thirty-hectare property had been cleared, but areas of thick bush persisted around the creek snaking through the property. Mitchell pulled a set of keys from his pocket, opened the heavy timber door and they went inside. All of Grandma Molly's furniture was conveniently still in the house. The main bedroom was first on the right of

the hallway and had access out to the veranda. They felt a little odd about moving into Grandma Molly's room but knew she would have wanted it. Mitchell felt close to his grandparents in this house. Grandma's old jewellery box was on the bedroom dresser and what must have been Jed's pipe was on the bedside table. Mitchell opened the windows and doors to replace the musty odour with the aromatic eucalyptus bushland scent. He spent the afternoon turning on appliances, unpacking clothes and food, dusting, cleaning and looking in cupboards. Jody was more interested in examining the kitchen and bathroom. The possible renovations were popping up invitingly in her vivid imagination. The afternoon disappeared as they moved from room to room on their separate assignments. They had planned to go back to the village cafe for dinner but when the evening came a couple of microwave dinners were too convenient to resist. After eating they sat in the lounge room and talked. Jody loved decorating, was excited about the potential renovations and was keen to discuss it.

"I'm going to start doing some rough plans on renos. There is so much potential in this place. I can imagine how fantastic the kitchen will look," Jody said.

"We can't do anything until we're sure about staying here though. We haven't been here one night yet," he replied.

"I know, but it looks good don't you think?"

"Yes, it does. No doubt we could make it look great - if we can afford it. Tomorrow we'll get serious about working out what we can do," Mitchell said.

"Yeah, kitchen first."

Mitchell stood and looked at Jody. "It's so bloody quiet here. Listen - can you hear anything?" he asked.

Jody cocked her head. "Only cicadas...and some bird - owl I think."

"Exactly, I hope the quietness doesn't keep us awake," he smiled and moved towards the bedroom. "Coming?"

It had been an interesting and tiring day. They were both asleep not long after they were in bed.

Jody woke with a start. "Mitch! Wake up! Someone's on the veranda!"

Mitchell woke, dazed, blinked a few times, and turned quickly towards the veranda door. A shadowy figure was standing motionless outside. It had some type of white veil over its head and pale grey clothing head to foot. Mitchell sat up, eyes straining to see into the darkness. It disappeared.

"What is that?" Jody squeaked.

"Bloody Hell! It's Grandma's Virgin Mary," he shouted as he bounded out of bed to the veranda door. He turned the key and opened the door in one quick movement. He caught sight of a figure with one leg over the veranda rail. In a few steps, he was there. "You're not going anywhere Mary," he yelled grabbing the leg stranded on his side of the rail. With a leg on each side, Mary let out an unworldly howl.

"Ok, you win. I'm coming back over," she said with a pained guttural tone sounding very un-virgin Mary-like. She flopped down onto the veranda floorboards, sat up and removed her veil.

"Joe! It's you. What the hell are you doing?" Mitchell said, clearly agitated. Joe was the property handyman who helped Molly around the property. Mitchell knew him from the times he had visited. He stood over him peering at his grey overalls

outfit and the white material clutched in his hands. "What's with the veil?"

"Hell, I should have known this wouldn't work," Joe said as he put his head down in his hands. "It's a bee keeper's hat - not a veil," he added.

"C'mon Joe, what's this all about?" Mitchell asked. Jody had tentatively tiptoed out and stood behind him.

"This is my partner Jody,"

"Hi Jody," Joe looked at her apologetically, then at Mitchell. "I'm sorry Mitchell. I was just trying to scare you off. Make you go back home - for a while at least."

"Why would you do that?" Mitchell said tersely.

"I needed time to tidy up around here before anyone came," Joe said.

"The place looks fine to me. What needs tidying up?"

"It's a long story," Joe said sullenly. "I need to show you something that will explain it all. It's very late, and dark now, how about I come here tomorrow early and I'll explain everything?" he pleaded.

"I told the wife, I was going out to check the bee hives. She thinks I've lost it," he added.

Jody and Mitchell looked at each other. "Ok, if you're not here by eight I'll be over to see you," Mitchell said firmly.

"Sure no problem - one thing though - you called me Mary when you grabbed my leg?" Joe asked.

"Yeah, I know you were trying to be Grandma's apparition - go home Joe," he replied.

Joe nodded and wandered off down the gravel road to his car parked outside the front fence.

After a brief discussion on what had just transpired, Jody and Mitchell thought that Joe may indeed have 'lost it'. A conversation with his wife may be in order to check on his state of mind. They went back to bed and eventually got to sleep.

They felt they had no rest at all when they were woken by the early morning arrival of a vehicle at the front of the house. Joe trotted up the steps and knocked. Mitchell and Jody jumped out of bed and dressed at top speed. Mitchell opened the door. "Joe, good to see you're on time," he said as he tried to flatten his unruly hair.

"Said I'd be here, C'mon put your boots on. I want to show you something."

Jody and Mitchell finished dressing and went out onto the veranda. Joe was standing beside his dual cab four-wheel drive. "It's only a few minutes away, hop in."

They got into the vehicle, Mitchell in front with Joe, Jody in the back. "Ok, where are we going?" Mitchell asked.

"You'll see, just wait a bit," Joe replied.

They turned off the gravel entry road before reaching the front fence and headed along a rough track towards a bushland area. The undergrowth and forest thickened as they bumped along over a crest and down to an isolated flat grassed area. Joe stopped the vehicle and got out. Mitchell and Jody assumed they had arrived at wherever they were going and also got out. They looked around.

"What do you want to show us?" Jody asked.

Joe pointed to a gently rising slope with unusually thick undergrowth and a number of spindly gum trees.

"I don't see anything," Jody said. Mitchell was quiet, staring intently at the bush.

"Is that... what I think it is?" Mitchell asked hesitantly.

"It's our marijuana crop," Joe said still pointing. The cannabis plants were dispersed among the gums, at various stages of development, some nearly two metres tall.

"Molly and me were in partnership. She provided the land and cultivation gear and I did the work and distribution," he said. "It worked ok for us. She needed money after Jed passed away so it was sort of a hobby. I knew it was not really legal so I just needed time to clear it all out before anyone came to live here. Thought maybe I could scare you off and sort it all out."

"By dressing up and creeping around our veranda at night?" Mitchell snapped accusingly.

"Yes I know, seems a bit silly but everyone knew about Molly's apparitions. I just thought it might work," he said.

Mitchell's mind was buzzing. "Hang on - was Grandma Molly a user?" he asked.

"Oh yeah, loved it. She had her own special weed pipe," Joe said.

"So the Virgin Marys showed up because Grandma Molly was stoned?"

"Well, I can't guarantee that... but good chance," Joe said with a grin.

Jody and Mitchell stood silently trying to process what they had been told.

"Anyway," Joe said. "I'm really sorry about all this. I'd be grateful if you didn't turn me in to the police. I'll get rid of all the plants."

Jody and Mitchell looked at each other and smiled. "Would you be interested in a new partnership?" Mitchell asked.



## Options

Billy and Dave were good friends. They went to school together and had played in the same footy team. They had lived in the same rented house as teens. As time passed their work lives had taken them in different directions, with Billy moving to Melbourne and Dave remaining in Brisbane. A catch up was always on the cards when Billy visited. Dave was in his sixties and was comfortably retired with his wife Joan. Billy was divorced but had returned to Brisbane and lived in a city apartment block designed for seniors. They got together regularly for a chat and a beer or coffee, reminiscing about the old days and discussing issues about their past and present relationships. The next meeting was scheduled for the coming Wednesday. The friendship that spanned so many years was about to be tested.

"Hey mate," Dave said as pulled up a stool at the tavern bar beside Billy. The majority of people in the tavern had come in for lunch and sat at the tables. Dave and Billy were the only ones at the bar. They were both dressed for the tropical heat in shorts and t-shirts. Dave had put on a little weight since they last met. He was a tall man and carried it without concern. Billy was of much slighter build and could not gain weight, though he had often tried. The middle-class retiree's aura surrounding them was unmistakable.

"What'll you have," Billy asked looking up.

"Same," Dave replied, looking at the pint on the bar.

"Another pint thanks," Billy said looking at the barman.

"What's new?" Billy asked.

"I have something serious to discuss with you today mate," Dave said.

Billy raised his eyebrows and smiled. "Really," he said thinking that Dave wasn't serious about too many things. "Don't tell me - you and Joan are splitting up - again."

"No!" Dave said abruptly.

"Ok, what?"

Dave took a sip from his pint. "I want to know how to kill someone," he said looking straight ahead.

Billy laughed out loud - then saw that Dave wasn't smiling. "Joke right?" he asked, looking at Dave's right ear.

"I'm serious," he replied.

"What! Who do you want to kill - why?" Billy stammered. He knew Dave wasn't averse to a bit of drama, but this was unprecedented.

"You don't need to know. I just want your advice. Don't want to implicate you," he said quietly.

"Implicate me - Implicate me," Billy's voice became shrill. "C'mon you gotta be kidding mate," he said, pushing his face forward.

"I am deadly serious - and I need your help. I want to know how I can do it so it looks like an accident, and it needs to be... not too painful. I want to get rid of someone but I'm not a sadist," Dave said.

"Right, the best way to kill someone - make it look like an accident that doesn't hurt," Billy said with a sardonic smile.

"I can understand how this seems weird to you, but it is important... I'm not going to rush out on a murderous spree," Dave said.

"Good, but you'll have to explain what this is about... or I'm not discussing it any further. You can't expect me to help you if I don't know what you're on about," Billy replied.

Dave took a deep breath of resignation. "Yeah alright, but we discuss the options first, and then I will explain... I'll tell you what I've come up with and you tell me what you think."

Billy nodded his reluctant agreement.

"I have already abandoned some options straight off - like shooting - stabbing and bashing. These would definitely hurt and would be hard to make look like an accident as well," Dave said.

Billy could hardly believe what he was hearing. Dave was actually contemplating a murder.

Dave continued. "I'm thinking poison would be good, or gas. You know... carbon monoxide from car exhaust. It'd be painless?"

Billy put his elbow on the bar and rubbed his forehead, looked at Dave and said, "Billy, some poisons just make you go to sleep but the autopsy would show there was poison, not an accident. Carbon Monoxide... well I'm pretty sure that it's a nasty way to go. And how does someone put a hose from their exhaust into their car by accident?"

"Yeah... I suppose. Another option I thought of was drowning. There are lots of drowning accidents. People fall off boats, drown in the bath" he said.

"Shit! Drowning would be a horrible way to die... and drowning in the bath would be very bloody unusual," Billy said.

"What about suffocation? Pillow over the face or plastic bag on the head - seen that on TV a few times. Looks like a heart attack. I think I'd be happy with a pillow if it were me."

"I guess so. There's no good way. That's enough now mate! Tell me - why are we talking about this?"

Dave hesitated. "Yeah, ok, I suppose I should tell you who I want to get rid of,"

"That would be a good start. Who is it?" he asked.

Dave took some time to answer. "Joan's mother Agnes,"

"Agnes," Billy was surprised. "She lives with you and Joan?"

"Yes, she's an evil woman - makes our lives a misery. She refuses to move to a home - hates me with a vengeance."

"C'mon Dave it can't be that bad. She must be ninety?" Billy asked.

"Eighty-seven, and it is very, very bad. She just takes over the whole house. We have to watch her TV shows eat what she likes. I've just had enough," Dave said.

"But you can't kill her," Billy said.

Dave took a long sip of beer... "I already did."

As Billy's jaw was dropping, two uniformed police appeared in the tavern doorway. They were obviously looking around to find someone. They spotted Dave and Billy and walked purposefully towards them.

"Guess I picked the wrong option," Billy said, watching as they approached.

## Toby

Toby Jensen's birth was difficult. He was without oxygen for some time. The medical staff was concerned that he may have had brain damage. As it turned out in the following years Toby had learning difficulties, but in all other ways appeared to be a normal healthy boy. Now twelve years old Toby still struggles to keep up with his peers at school. As an only child, losing his mother and upheaval in his family situation was an additional burden. His habit in social situations was to stay on the fringes and avoid the interactions. He was, however, interested in observing people acting and reacting with each other - their voices - their expressions - movements. Toby and those who knew him were unaware that he was developing a remarkable talent.

"We have to find a way to take advantage of this situation," Dan said with a determined look. He felt it was his responsibility as the older one to take the lead. Dan and his sister sat at the kitchen table. The breakfast dishes and cutlery were still scattered around together with the milk, butter and jam. The black and tan toast crusts on the plates and table were the remnants of a casual breakfast.

"Look Mil, now that Mum's shackled up with Harry, we might finally get some money. If he didn't have that Toby kid we would do a lot better. We know Mum will give us what we want but Harry won't - not while the kid's around here. He's so special," he said in a squeaky voice as he pulled a face and wobbled his head from side to side.

"Yeah, I know," Millie replied.

"Look, we both want to move out on our own. We need money. You're eighteen now, and we're missing out on a good time," Dan said.

"Ok, let's buy him a plane ticket and send him to Siberia," Millie said with a cheeky grin.

"This is serious," Dan growled.

He hesitated, put his elbows on the table and clasped his hands together under his chin. "Maybe little Toby can help us," he said with a sly grin.

It had only been a month since Harry and Joan had combined the two families and they had all moved in together. Harry thought his son Toby needed a mother figure but was worried about how Toby would get on with Joan's children. He had hoped Dan and Millie would not live with them for long. Apart from having to rent a bigger house, they were much older than Toby, and Harry was concerned they would be a bad influence on the boy. Both had previous run-ins with the law, Dan with drugs and Millie with shoplifting. Dan said he was looking for work. Millie had sporadic part-time work at the local fruit shop.

"I'm worried about this. You'll get in trouble for sure," Millie said with her forehead tensing.

"It's ok. I'm just going to discuss finances with him. I know that he's got money," Dan hesitated and looked at Millie. "I happened to be passing through his bedroom the other day, while he was at school, and guess what I saw on his desk... a credit card. I just want to know how much he's got and find out if he's willing to part with it. He's not real bright. C'mon you won't have to do anything. He'll be here in a minute."

Millie sat with a look of resignation.

Toby was lucky the school bus stop was close. It only took a couple of minutes to walk home. He opened the front door with his key, walked in and called out. "Hello, anyone home," he

slipped his arm through the strap on his backpack and dropped the bag on the lounge room floor.

"Toby, in here," Dan called from the kitchen.

Toby walked through to see Dan and Millie sitting at the kitchen table "What're you doing?"

"We were talking about how difficult things are for me and Mil. You know Toby...we've both been a bit unwell lately. Mum's finding it hard to pay for the special medicine that we need," Dan lowered his head in a submissive pose. "Would you have any money you could lend us?" he looked up at Toby with a pained expression.

"Yeah, I've got some," Toby said.

"How much?" Dan snapped.

"\$864" Toby replied.

"Well...that's not a huge amount. But it would help. Can you lend it to us?" Dan asked.

Millie sat silently, knowing that every time Dan said 'lend' he meant 'give'.

"Um, okay," Toby replied. "I'll get Dad to get it for you."

"No, you get it. Don't want to worry your Dad about it," Dan said.

"I can't, Dad has to do it," It was obvious to Toby, that Dan was up to no good. Even Millie, who had not said a word, had a demeanour about her that oozed deceit.

"You've got a credit card, Toby, use that," Dan snapped.

"It does deposits only - but I can ask Dad," Toby said, wondering how Dan knew about his card.

"No, no - look it's okay - I've changed my mind. We won't need your money. We'll work it out - thanks anyway," Dan stood abruptly and walked away with a stony face.

Millie, looking surprised at Dan's quick exit, also stood. "Yeah, thanks anyway," she said walking away.

When Toby had gone to his room to do homework, Millie went to Dan's room. The door was ajar and she pushed it forcefully. Dan was lying on his bed looking at his mobile phone. "I told you that it was a bad idea, you dumb arse. You reckon *the kid's* not bright. He'll tell his old man all about what you tried to pull," she said in a hushed, aggravated tone.

"Okay, settle down, I've thought about it a bit more. I think we should probably do something that's not so - you know.

"What - stupid?" Millie said, raising her voice.

"No - obvious," Dan said looking hurt. "I think we just need to talk to Mum."

"Well good, talk to Mum... about what, exactly?" Millie said as she sat at the end of the bed.

Dan sat up with a sneaky grin. "Okay...we know that Harry has quite a lot of money, from property and investments and stuff. Mum has sweet F. A. The kid gets anything he wants because Harry pulls all the strings. Now - you listening?"

Dan looked up at Millie who nodded. "Mum has to convince Harry that she desperately needs financial help. She will then, of course, relay these finances on to her beloved deserving children. Now...you may be thinking, how will Mum convince Harry to give her cash? This is the clever bit," he paused for dramatic effect. "Mum will tell Harry that we, you and me, have a bipolar mental disorder. We've already told the kid we're not well, so it all fits. This disorder was inherited



from our father, who is in the loony bin. Now...you still listening?" Dan asked. Millie nodded vigorously.

"Mum will convince Harry that we, you and me, need to move out to be close to some medical place and also, more importantly, for the sake of poor little Toby, because we might hurt or upset the little shit. Mum will need the money to set us up in our own place for the family's benefit. Harry will not even hesitate - anything for the golden child. What do you think?" Dan asked with a confident smile.

"Yeah, not bad...but Dad's not in the loony bin...he's in jail," Millie said.

"We know that but Harry doesn't. Mum never told him," Dan replied. "We should have thought of this before. We both know Mum will look after us," he said with a supercilious smile.

"Right, okay, tonight then, talk with Mum," she said, as she stood and walked out.

Harry and Joan arrived home at about six p.m. Harry had a company car and he and Joan both worked for the same multinational. They drove home together. They had met at work and struck up a relationship after Harry's wife had unexpectedly died from a heart attack. It had been a difficult time for Harry and Toby. Joan had been divorced for two years and was eager for a new companion and she thought she was fortunate to connect with Harry, having two grown children living with her.

The nighttime activities had quickly become a routine with Harry, Joan and Toby eating dinner at the kitchen table and Dan and Millie in front of the TV. After eating, Dan and Millie would normally go to their respective rooms to leave the cleaning up to those more inclined. Tonight was different.

"Hey Mum," Millie said as she walked into the kitchen with her plate and almost finished meal, held out in front of her.

"I'll give you a hand to stack the dishwasher," Joan, Harry and Toby all looked up at her with raised eyebrows. "Then can I have a talk with you in my room, you know, girl stuff," she added.

"Sure, Mil," Joan smiled at her, wondering what trouble she was in.

With everyone now finished dinner and clean up complete, Millie beckoned Joan towards her room. Millie entered with Joan close behind. Joan was surprised to find Dan was waiting inside. The discussion between the three went for about fifteen minutes and the wheels of the conspiracy were successfully put into motion.

Toby and Harry were sitting together on the lounge room couch watching 'A Current Affair' when Joan stepped into the room. Toby could see immediately how awkward she appeared like she didn't know whether to fold her arms, scratch her nose or put her hands in her pockets.

"Toby, can you go to your room for a few minutes? I just want to talk to your Dad."

Toby stood and went towards his room without comment. Joan sat down beside Harry on the sofa, grabbed the remote and hit mute. She looked directly at him, her face racked with concern. "We have a problem with the kids,"

Joan gave Harry the whole story precisely as she had agreed with Millie and Dan - the bipolar - Dad in the Asylum - need her kids to move out - best for Toby. It was a very convincing performance and Harry was visibly affected.

"Joan, of course I'll help. Wish you had told me earlier about this. We could have worked something out." Harry had the fleeting thought that if he'd known earlier he probably wouldn't have been here in the first place. "Don't worry -

tomorrow we will work it out. Find a nice place for them - poor kids. I'll look after it," he put his arm around Joan's shoulders.

"That's wonderful, the kids will be so grateful," she said standing and walking towards Millie's room to report the success of the operation.

"Dad, Dad," Toby was standing just inside the open kitchen doorway calling his father.

Harry stood up from the sofa and walked over to him. "What are you doing?" Harry asked in a hushed tone.

"Dad, come to my room," he said grabbing his father by the hand dragging him into his room and closing the door.

"Dad, it's all lies," he said with urgency, looking up at his father.

"What?"

"I was watching Joan talking with you - and none of what she said is true," Toby said.

"Now how would you know that?" Harry said with a condescending tone.

"Because I can tell when people are lying. I thought that I just guessed that people lied. But I know now that I get it right every time. I can see it in their face, their eyes - their skin - every time. I didn't say anything when I wasn't sure, but now I am sure," he said excitedly.

"What you're saying doesn't really seem possible, Toby. I know some people are good at reading others. It's called emotional intelligence, but to know consistently, when someone is lying is unlikely," Harry said.

"I can prove it," Toby snapped. "Tell me some things and I'll tell you if they're true or not."

"Okay Mr lie detector, I'll tell you different things I've done today and you tell me if I'm lying," Harry said.

Harry reeled off a number of actions to Toby, like - "had a ham sandwich for lunch" - "met a man named Peter" - "saw a fire engine on the way home". Toby watched his father as he spoke. He identified each statement as true or a lie - absolutely correctly. Harry was stunned and excited. Toby did indeed have a remarkable ability. It would be a wonderful asset in his future life. Harry looked at his son with love and pride and made an important decision.

"Dad, can you pass me the sunscreen," Toby asked as he lay on the pool sun lounger. The mid-morning sun began to tingle his skin. Toby had never been to a resort with such a massive pool. "Do you think they were angry when we left Dad," he asked.

"Oh yeah...they were angry, especially when I said we weren't coming back" Harry replied as he handed Toby the sunscreen bottle.

## The Ring

It was a clear crisp day in the Victorian country, not far from the historic Sovereign Hill gold mining town. Jamie Scott had permission from the local landowner to be there at the creek and he felt, as he did on every excursion, that this could be his day. The slurping, sloshing noise of water and gravel side to side in the pan was hypnotic. If it wasn't for the ache in Jamie's knees as he squatted it would have been a relaxing experience. He was alone at the creek and had been working for about an hour with not a lot to show for the effort. A few glittering specks were stored carefully away in his little bottle. Panning for gold was a hobby for Jamie rather than a serious pursuit. He used to take the kids panning when they were young. That's when he became hooked - the thrill of the discovery - the outdoors experience - the private time, all contributed to his enjoyment. Now every year he took a few days off work to head out alone with high expectations of returning with a bag of gold.

The flash of reflected light caught him by surprise. Jamie was still washing the larger gravel from the top of the slurry in the pan. He wasn't expecting any results until he got down to the finer sand where gold specks usually settled. Jamie stopped and peered into the pan as the water settled. He could hardly believe what he saw. It was a ring. He picked it out of the stones. It was an engagement ring with a sizable central diamond and other smaller ones surrounding it. Jamie examined it closely and noticed two letters LM engraved on the underside of the gold band. The thought of keeping the ring didn't enter his mind and he started to consider how he might find the owner. The engraved initials would definitely help.

After another hour or so of panning without luck, Jamie decided to pack up and drive to see the property owner, Harry Dennett, to see if they knew anything about a lost ring.

The homestead wasn't far from the creek where Jamie was panning. When he arrived, old man Dennett was sitting reading a book on the front veranda. Harry Dennett looked to be well into his eighties and was lucky enough to have two sons and a daughter working the property. Perhaps the ring was connected to one of them Jamie thought.

Jamie parked his Land Rover facing the veranda and got out.

"Hello, back so soon," Harry said as Jamie stepped onto the wooden veranda.

Jamie had only been here yesterday asking permission to pan on the property. "Found something yesterday - panning at the creek Jack - thought it might belong to you." Jamie reached into his inside jacket pocket and produced the ring glistening in the middle of his open hand.

The old man closed his book onto his lap and took the ring from Jamie's palm, between his thumb and forefinger. "It looks expensive," he said as stared at it and pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose to their proper position. "Someone will be missing this...You say you found this in the creek?"

"Yep, in my pan," he replied.

"Maybe someone swimming lost it...No one here been engaged or married except me and it's not my wife's," He twisted it around as he examined it. "I see initials LM on it. As you know our name's Dennett - but I'll tell you something. The folks that I bought this property from, 40 years ago - their name's Madden," The old man paused and looked up at Jamie. "The bloke, Henry and his wife - can't remember her name - had two daughters. One daughter, Elizabeth, died before we came. The other daughter, Lena, married a local man, Dean Wicks, and still lives in town. There's your LM - I'd check with her."

Jamie was sure he'd found the owner. He wondered if he should accept a reward if offered. He found the address of Lena Wicks and headed in to town to return the ring.

The local newsagent was up for a chat and gave Jamie some background when he dropped in to get directions. Lena Wick, previously Lena Madden was in her sixties and lived alone in a modest one-bedroom apartment near town. Husband Dean had been a bank teller - became obesely overweight in his later years and died recently from pancreatic cancer.

"It's definitely *not* mine, Mr Scott" Lena said sharply, standing in the doorway. She was obviously not going to invite Jamie inside.

"It's got your initials engraved on it," Jamie said.

"They're not my initials. How many times do I need to say it?" She was clearly getting angry.

Jamie was puzzled by Lena's reaction. She appeared to recognise the ring when he showed it to her and then backed off and denied any knowledge.

"Okay, I just thought it must be yours. No problem, I'll hand it in to police. Sorry to be a bother." Jamie said backing away. He thought there had to be more to this than Lena was letting on - maybe she had a failed romance. Jamie couldn't imagine why she wouldn't want the money - she didn't appear to be well off.

The police sergeant was a heavy set older man, totally bald, with black-rimmed glasses perched on an imposing Romanesque nose. He leant across the desk examining the ring that Jamie had just handed to him.

"Nice ring - in the creek?" he asked with head down.

"Yes, I checked with Jack Dennett - you know - the property owner, and then I went to see Lena Wick. She used to live on the property when her name was Madden. She said the ring wasn't hers even though the initials on it are hers...LM," Jamie explained.

"Think I remember something about the Maddens. There was a suicide many years back. Just hang on a minute. I'll go and check our records." The sergeant put the ring on the desk, pushed his chair back with a spine-shivering scrape and strode off into the back room.

Jamie wasn't all that interested in looking at the Madden family history. He just wanted to hand over the ring. He sat at the sergeant's desk and gazed around the office.

"Here it is." The sergeant walked back in and sat down with a folder open in his hands. He started to read out loud.

"Investigation of the apparent suicide of Lizzy Madden - jumped from the top of Wilson's falls at the Madden property and was pronounced dead at the scene. At the time she was engaged to be married to a bloke named Dean Wicks." The sergeant looked up at Jamie. "He later married the younger sister Lena."

Jamie looked baffled. "Lizzy Madden - her name was Elizabeth."

"Yes, Elizabeth - she was known as Lizzy."

"Thank you Sergeant, I think I got the wrong LM," Jamie said as he picked up the ring. "I'm going back to see Lena - let you know how I get on." Jamie left the station with an air of determination.

Jamie's interest was now severely piqued. He needed to know. This time Lena didn't open the screen door. She stood on the inside as Jamie spoke. "Mrs Wicks, you didn't tell me about



your sister, Lizzy. If this ring is not yours I'm thinking it must be hers."

With a look of resignation, Lena opened the screen door and stepped aside for Jamie to enter. "You're digging up some painful memories," she said showing him into the small lounge room where they both sat.

"I'm trying to do the right thing," Jamie said. "I know now that your sister committed suicide and I'm really sorry about that, but I can't understand how the ring got into the creek for me to find."

"Alright, Mr Scott...I'll tell you the story. I've had to tell it quite a few times so one more time won't hurt...I guess." Lena settled back in her chair. "Lizzy was two years older than me. We both lived and worked on the property with Dad until our twenties. Well before I married Dean, he and Lizzy had been engaged. Dean was a local town man - worked in the bank. He would often come out to the property to visit. This one day - middle of summer - stinking hot - he came out to see Lizzy. She and Dad were out checking fencing in the south paddock. Dean and I decided to walk down to the creek. The water looked so cool and inviting, we decided to strip down to our undies and have a swim - completely innocent. It's what you do out there. We were in there splashing about when Lizzy showed up. She just exploded, went off, accused Dean of being unfaithful and called me a slut. She pulled the engagement ring from her finger and hurled it into the creek and stormed off. Dean and I jumped out, got dressed and went to find her." Lena paused and put her head in her hands.

"That was the last time we saw her until they found her body at the bottom of Wilsons Falls. She had committed suicide. Of course, Dean and I were distraught - seemed like it was our

fault. Eventually, the trauma was like a bond that drew us together."

"That's a sad story," Jamie said. "The ring has been lost for a long time and I can understand the painful memories." Jamie put the ring down on the coffee table in front of Lena. "You should keep it." Jamie stood up. "I'll let myself out Mrs Wicks, goodbye." He left the apartment, leaving Lena sitting sadly and went to his car. He sat there for a few minutes contemplating his emotions, satisfied to have returned the ring and sorry for reopening old wounds for Lena. He started the car and headed home with a story to tell.

Lena sat motionless staring at the ring on the table. *Most of what I told him was true, she thought. Lizzy did come to the creek when we were swimming. She probably wouldn't have reacted so badly if we hadn't been naked. If she hadn't been screeching and wailing like that - grabbing my hair - I wouldn't have hit her with the rock. Lucky Wilsons Falls wasn't far for us to carry her.* Lena picked up Lizzy's ring and put it on the wall shelf behind the photo of her dog. *I wish Dean had been worth it, she thought.*

## A Dog's life

Michael didn't like dogs and dogs didn't like Michael. He thought that as a pet, they were a waste of money and a health hazard. He didn't like any sort of animal much. His father had bought him a puppy when he was seven which turned out to be a traumatic experience for everyone concerned. The dog chased Michael at every opportunity and bit him numerous times in the short period of their tumultuous relationship. The vision of that dog running behind him and jumping with fangs bared and attaching itself to his little backside was etched into his memory. Who would have thought that this common animosity between him and canines would become such a pivotal issue in Michael's life?

He sat quietly at his father's bedside leaning forward with hands clasped and an elbow on each knee. "Is the chemo working at all Dad?" Michael asked.

"No, not doing much good, just making me feel crook."

Michael's Dad had been unwell for over a year and he needed in-home nursing for most of that period. With no wife to help him, he was now in hospital with a prognosis that gave little hope.

"You need to hang in there Dad you'll come good," Michael said.

"Sure, I'll be right."

He pushed himself up in the bed so he could look squarely at Michael. "I had a visit from your Uncle Tommy yesterday," he said. "He told me some interesting things."

"Yeah, what?"

"Well, as you know, Tommy is a little on the eccentric side and lives alone with just that dog of his. His visit wasn't

just to see how I was going. I thought it was a bit strange, but the first thing he asked me was how you and Jillian were going financially."

"Why did he want to know that?" Michael interrupted.

"I told him that you were good. You know, both with good jobs, you in accounting and Jillian doing jewellery. Then he told me that in the current circumstances, it was sensible for him to change his will to take me out of being his sole beneficiary, what with me being unlikely to be around much longer and him being in reasonable health, even though he's nine years older than me."

"Hang on a minute, let me get this straight. As it stands now you're the only one in his will. So what happens if you go before Uncle Tommy?" Michael asked.

"The estate would go to you because you are my sole beneficiary. But now, because I told him you and Jillian are pretty well off, he is making other plans."

Michael's Dad had a quizzical look, "You are well off, aren't you?" he asked.

"I know I said I was in accounting Dad, but it is probably more accurate to say, just counting. I do stocktaking at the company warehouse. And yes, Jillian is in jewellery. She makes earrings from clay and sells them at the craft markets every second weekend," Michael explained.

"So you are not well off," he said with a pained expression on his pale face.

"We are doing okay Dad, but I wish you hadn't said that to Uncle Tommy. So what is he going to do with his money now then?" Michael asked.

"He said he was planning to leave his housekeeper a small amount to look after his dog and the rest to charity," he replied.

"Don't worry about it Dad. Uncle Tommy probably doesn't have much other than that little unit he lives in at the coast. So it's no big deal," Michael said.

Michael's Dad swallowed hard, "Um, before he left, Tommy told me that cancer research would be his charity of choice considering my situation. He reckoned the four million dollars he had made with his investments would make a difference."

Michael's head lolled back, and his eyes rolled.

Michael drove out of the hospital car park and cursed the cost of parking. He didn't remember anything of the drive home. The thought of missing out on Uncle Tommy's money was all consuming. When Michael arrived home he relayed the information from his Dad. Jillian became quite agitated.

"What, he told him we were well off. You're kidding," she seethed.

"We're not poor though," Michael said.

"And we're not bloody rich, that's for sure. You have to find a way to let your Uncle know we need that money. We deserve it."

"He's old, what if he died before he had time to change the will?" she asked expectantly.

"That's not going to happen, he's not sick."

"Maybe you could somehow facilitate his passing away," she said quietly.

"*What!* Facilitate passing away. How the hell would I do that? That's bloody murder you're talking about Jillian," he said through clenched teeth.

"Okay, Okay, I didn't really mean it... Well, you'll have to go and visit him and persuade him that we need the money. We are his family and you don't give money to charity when you have a needy family." she said.

"I think you're right. But I can't just go and beg for money. I'll have to be more subtle and get him to change his mind to leave the will as is. You know I have never even been to his place. He lives at the coast and that's a couple of hours away. Firstly we have to work out a reason for me going."

They both sat silently, pondering why Michael would make a first time ever visit to his Uncle Tommy at the coast.

The not unexpected death of his father was distressing for Michael but it did provide that opportunity. Michael's Dad was not a religious man. In fact, anti-religious was a more accurate label. He was convinced that religion caused most of the problems in the world and he wanted no part of it.

Accordingly, the funeral was a very small affair at the Albany Creek Crematorium. Michael made sure he connected with his Uncle Tommy at the ceremony and they agreed that they should each other more often. They were, after all, the last of their family line.

The drive to the coast was pleasant enough. It gave Michael time to think. Jillian had decided that it was better if she did not go. It would be more awkward for them to discuss family money issues with her in the room.

Michael found the street address without any trouble. The building was only two streets from the beach and he liked the look of it. It seemed to be about eight levels and was not one

of the typical high rises in the area. There was a lush garden at the entrance that gave a cool tropical feel. He made his way to the elevator and to level three unit Thirty-two. He stood at the door and knocked twice. Instantly he heard a yapping bark erupting inside. He heard a voice shout. "Hung, get here, Hung." The door opened and Tommy was standing there with a small growling white scraggy looking dog in his arms.

"Hi Uncle Tommy," he said.

"Michael, come in, good to see you. Glad you could come," Tommy was not a big man. Slightly stooped, tanned weathered skin and with only the back and sides remaining of his snow-white hair, he was looking his age.

"Your dog's name is Hung?" Michael asked.

"Yes, it's a Chinese name, means courageous. He's a Shih-tzu."

Michael raised his hand to pat the head of the dog in Tommy's arms. But thought better of it when he heard a low growl and saw it curl its' little black lips exposing pointy little Shih Tzu teeth.

He wandered into the lounge room and had a quick gaze around the unit. The cane furniture suited the tropical feel of the place. Looking out the double sliding door you could see ocean between the other buildings. "Wow! I really like your place."

"Thanks, it's not big but it's modern, comfortable and it suits me."

"Looks like you have plenty of interesting mementoes from your travels," Michael said as walked towards the shelving covering one wall. The various artefacts in Tommy's collection were displayed on the shelves. Michael peered closely at a small clear glass jar with a screw top silver lid. What appeared to be two peeled lychees were in the jar in a clear liquid.

"What's this one," he asked.

"Oh, that's Hung's balls," he said.

"*What?*" Michael turned toward him with a stunned look.

"Hung's testicles - the vet gave them to me when I got him fixed and I haven't had the heart to throw them out," Tommy said with a smile.

"Eccentric, he certainly is," Michael thought.

"Would you like a coffee or tea," Tommy asked.

"Water would be great thanks."

Tommy filled two glasses of water, put them on the coffee table and sat opposite Michael. The dog immediately jumped onto Tommy's lap, looked at Michael and gave a low growl. "Don't mind Hung, he just needs to get to know you better."

Michael smiled. He thought it was ironic that such a small dog without testicles would be called Hung. He knew as soon as he saw Hung that they would never be getting to know each other better.

"You like dogs?" Tommy asked.

"Yes, I love dogs. We haven't got one because of the unit we live in. They don't allow animals," he lied.

Tommy scratched under Hung's ear "Good - you can't trust a man who doesn't like dogs, I always say."

"If we ever get enough money to buy a house I will be getting one straight away," he lied again.

"You can't afford a house? Your Dad told me that you and Jillian were doing really well," Tommy said.



"We didn't want him to worry about us. He felt ashamed that he had nothing left after all his health expenses. So we couldn't tell him the truth about our situation. Now it even looks like I will be losing my job due to company downsizing," he said lowering his gaze. "We wanted to start a family. But that's not possible now," he was finding lying easy now.

"I didn't realise that Michael. I thought you were well set financially. I can lend you some cash if you need it."

"Thanks Uncle Tommy but short term cash is not really the problem. We just can't see anything for us in the future," he said with a sullen look on his face. Hung growled again. Michael looked at the dog staring at him with those beady black Shih Tzu eyes and thought. "Bastard dog."

"Michael I can help you. I am so very glad you came today and explained things. It changes some important decisions for me regarding my estate. You know I am getting on a bit now. I am not as sharp as I used to be and I'm getting a bit tired of it all. I have had a pretty good life for a bloke who couldn't catch a woman. Maybe that's why it's been good," he added. "I probably don't have that much time left so it's important that I get my affairs in order now."

"I don't have to change anything because of me, Uncle Tommy," Michael said hoping he wasn't convincing.

"Oh yes, I do Michael. Family is important. Now let's talk about some other things. Is your mother still married to that retired dentist?"

The drive home was even more pleasant than the one down. The smile on Michael's face seemed to be permanent. He was so very pleased with himself. It was late afternoon and Jillian was sitting at the table reading a magazine when Michael arrived home.

He closed the front door behind him and walked in. Jillian turned towards him, "Well - how did you go?"

"Oh Babe, we are in like Flynn, just a matter of time."

Jillian knew it must have gone very well. He never called her Babe.

Michael was stunned at how quickly events overtook his life. It had been barely a month since he had been to his Uncle's unit when he received the phone call. Uncle Tommy had slipped on some dog faeces in his bathroom. Hit his head on the bathroom floor and died of a heart attack. It was unbelievable that this had happened. Michael thought about the cause of death, "Slipped on Shih Tzu shit," he giggled to himself.

He felt sorry for poor Uncle Tommy but he was also so pleased he went to see him when he did. Michael got the advice that the reading of the will was to be next Monday morning.

They arrived early and sat in the Lawyers waiting room. They had chatted excitedly all the way in the car and were feeling relaxed.

"Peter is ready to see you now," the assistant said. She opened his office door and they went in. Peter Mason, who was Tommy's lawyer, smiled.

"Hi Jillian - Michael," he shook their hands. "Please have a seat," he motioned towards the two chairs in front of his desk.

"We are here for your Uncle Tommy's will, Michael, and he has left a letter for me to read to you. So I am going to do that first up."

He picked up an unsealed letter from his desk and opened it.

"It is addressed to you Michael and reads as follows. -

Michael, if my Lawyer is reading this letter to you now it means I am dead. I wrote this letter directly after you came to see me in October. Your visit had a great impact on me as you probably noticed at the time. Before you came to see me you might be surprised to know I had decided against changing my will. This would have meant that you would have been sole beneficiary and received all of my estate apart from some money to look after Hung.

After your visit, you must have thought I was silly enough to believe all that bullshit that you spun me that day. Like I have said Michael "You can't trust a man that doesn't like dogs". You didn't like Hung and he knew it.

Well Michael, you wanted me to change my will so I did. My Estate will now be split two ways, one half to my housekeeper Beverly, who loves Hung, and a half to Cancer Research.

However Michael, you are family and I have left you something to remind you how bloody obvious it was to me and Hung, that you were trying to con me."

The Lawyer reached into his top desk drawer and removed the glass jar. He placed the dog's balls on the desk in front of Michael.

### City Lights

This wasn't a marriage made in heaven. The wedding was an upmarket affair in Singapore - not large but exclusive. John and Tania's reasons for marrying were varied. Neither love nor children were high on the list for either. Financial security was not an issue for John. He worked in Brisbane with his father growing a property empire throughout the country. He was attracted to Tania because she fitted his specifications. She was pretty - she was intelligent - she dressed well - she looked good sitting in the passenger seat of his Lamborghini Centenario V12. Tania's requirements were quite different. There was only one - wealth. She had come from a middle-class family that aspired to more. The family managed to send Tania to an exclusive private school where she acquired her expensive taste. She had met John at an upmarket going away party for an old school friend who was moving to Sweden. They had both recognised the benefits of a partnership and were married within six months. They lived in the penthouse of an inner Brisbane city high rise, socialised with the jet set and travelled extensively. To family and friends, Tania and John were the perfect couple who had it all. Within five years they got to know each other much better and neither of them could hide their disappointment. The relationship became difficult but separating was an option that would cause more problems than it solved.

Ainslie had been a friend to Tania since high school. She appeared to take the religious content there a little more seriously than most. She became a nurse, working at Mater Hospital Brisbane and living in a one-bedroom apartment nearby. Nursing was her profession and her passion and it didn't seem to give her much time for a social life. Today was a catch-up coffee with Tania at Espresso Garage in South Brisbane.

"I don't think I can take anymore Ainslie. It's wearing me down," Tania said with a despondent look. "He either ignores me completely or questions everything I do."

The waiter, dressed in typical black jeans and tee-shirt, placed the two coffees on the old wooden table. It was one of six tables on the wide concrete footpath. With a few well placed spreading Leopard trees, the area had a cosmopolitan feel. The large canvas umbrella anchored next to the table shaded them both from the biting mid-morning Queensland sun. The two well-dressed women looked up at the olive-skinned waiter and smiled.

"He's cute," Ainslie said, watching the young man walk away. Then she looked at Tania. "He always seems nice when you two are out together."

"It's just for show," Tania paused. "I don't really like him - and I'm sure he doesn't like me. I'm good as a partner with him at parties and I'm a favourite with his family. That's all he wants from me. We don't do sex anymore and I reckon he's having it off with other women - I can smell it on him."

"Tania, that's terrible. What about counselling?" Ainslie asked with a compassionate frown.

"No, I want to be rid of him. I could have a great life without him, but I can't leave. I'd have nothing." Tania replied.

"Tania, are you serious?" Ainslie asked in a louder voice than she realised.

"Yes, I'm very serious," Tania hissed gazing piercingly at her friend.

"Well, there are ways for clever women to handle this sort of problem," Ainslie said with a cheeky grin.

The two women continued their discussion in an animated fashion for almost an hour before leaving the cafe.

It was a Friday night and John was home from work at around the usual time of nine pm. He was always late on Friday nights. He dropped his briefcase in his office and went to the lounge. Tania was sitting out on the balcony with a glass of wine. The light breeze and the familiar city vista surrounded her. She heard him arrive but continued to stare at the city lights. Tania would never grow tired of looking at the jagged array of buildings with dazzling white patterns of light - like a myriad of diamonds set in black and grey tombstones. The extended stretched out letter M of the Story Bridge outlined with dots of yellow light hovered over the polished sheen of the Brisbane River.

John came out to the balcony. "Hey Tania, have you eaten? I've already had a bite."

"Yeah, I'm fine," she replied. "You're staying in tonight?" she asked. He quite often would go down to one of the ubiquitous city bars to meet up with work colleagues and would not return until the early hours.

"I'm going to watch some telly and have an early night. I'm worn out - been a big week," John replied and headed back inside to the lounge room.

Tania clutched her wine glass - slowly lifted it to her lips and took a long sip. "Tonight's the night," she thought.

John settled himself into his favourite lounge chair. He felt relaxed in this room. The rich aroma of the black leather lounge suite added to the visual appeal of the solid walnut timber furniture pieces. He grabbed the remote and turned on the 75-inch television.

"John, would you like a drink? I'm having one," Tania asked as she walked in through the wide opening from the balcony and turned towards the kitchen.

He turned and looked. "That would be nice. What do you want - more money?" he asked with a sly grin.

"Don't be an asshole. You want a drink or not?"

"Yeah, scotch and soda would be great, thanks." He turned back to the television.

Tania went to the kitchen cupboard and retrieved the bottle of Glenlivet single malt scotch whiskey and a crystal glass. She poured a shot of whisky straight from the bottle and added the ice and soda from the fridge. Finally, she pulled a small plastic satchel of white powder from her jeans front pocket. Her hand was trembling. She emptied the powder into the drink and stirred it. She went to the lounge and placed the glass on the walnut side table beside John's chair.

Tania went back to the kitchen and stood at the white marble bench. She poured herself another glass of white wine. She had crushed five of his sleeping pills into a fine powder. The normal dose was one pill. Surely that would be enough.

Tania took her wine back out to the balcony and positioned her chair to enable her to see him sitting in his chair. Her heart was thumping and the city lights were no longer comforting. She could see him raising the glass to his lips. "Was it working?" She waited - the glass was empty. She waited longer. John's head was resting on the back of the chair. He appeared to be asleep. She walked timidly through the open balcony door to the lounge and stood in front of him.

"John," she whispered. "John," she spoke louder.

He didn't respond. Tania bent forward and could see his chest rhythmically rising and falling and hear the faint exhale of his breath. She turned and walked purposefully to the kitchen and picked up her phone. She dialled "It's done, come now," she said and put the phone down. Tania was feeling ill. Her mind was racing. She started to worry that they wouldn't be able to lift him. Though he wasn't a big man - with the two of them they should manage. They would need to be careful not to be seen dragging him out to the balcony. It wasn't uncommon for drunken people to accidentally fall from balconies. At least he would not feel anything when he hit the ground.

There was a soft knock at the door. Tania jumped with fright and hurried to open it. "Come in, he's in the lounge," she whispered leading Ainslie into the lounge.

John was standing in the middle of the room, stony-faced with hands clenched.

Tania stood there wide-eyed with mouth open, unable to speak.

"It would have been a good plan Tania. The problem was that I knew what you were up to. I switched my sleeping pills to harmless vitamins." He paused. "You're wondering how I found out. Well, Ainslie and I are friends - close friends, if you know what I mean."

Tania was about to turn to face her when Ainslie's hand with the chloroformed pad flashed up from behind and clamped over Tania's nose and mouth. As consciousness faded away she thought about Ainslie's betrayal - bitch - obviously after John's money. Tania was disappointed. At least she wouldn't feel it when she hit the ground.



## Orchard Lane

Tim had promised himself he would visit his mother every month. It had been six months since his Dad died and he'd only been home twice. His mother lived alone now in the old house. She was fiercely independent and although in her seventies refused to move to a smaller place. Tim had made feeble excuses about his busy life, his work and his partner keeping him tied to his city life. He was feeling guilty that she had called to ask for him to visit. This particular call had him concerned. His mother seemed to be genuinely upset about some unusual events at the house.

The drive to Tim's old home took around two hours. He enjoyed getting away from the city and he enjoyed the drive up the range to the Granite Belt. His partner Jackie stayed home this time. She had exams coming up and needed to study. Spending weekend with his Mum, just the two of them, was a consoling thought and it eased Tim's conscience.

Tim pulled into the driveway and the memories swamped him. Almost everything he cast his eyes over had some poignant childhood or teenage memory attached. It was comforting to reminisce and it made him smile. The line of apple trees on his right was feeling the autumn bite and starting to drop their golden leaves. This property had been in Tim's family for three generations and he knew that there was disappointment that he wouldn't continue the dynasty. Some of his school friends had stayed on to be fruit farmers, most didn't. Tim's Dad had sold off most of the 95 acres under orchard when he retired. He kept the house and a small parcel of land. It was a large timber house with the usual veranda around three sides. The morning sun made the white timber railings and posts stand out from the shaded area behind. The tall charcoal coloured brick chimney sprouting from the grey roof reminded him of warm family evenings in front of a

crackling fire. He saw his Mum standing, waiting on the veranda at the top of the front steps. She wore a floral dress and long sleeved pink pullover jumper. She looked smaller than the last time he saw her.

Tim was sitting with his arms folded on the kitchen table. His Mum was standing up at the bench pouring hot water into two cups.

"Do you want any cold water in this?" she asked.

"No thanks... when are you going to get a real coffee machine Mum? This stuff is not much good."

"I like it. Those machines are too expensive," she said, as she placed the cups on the table and sat opposite Tim.

"How have you been? Is your health okay?" Tim asked with a concerned look.

"Yes, I'm fine. Bit lonely since Dad's gone. But I've got the ladies club," she said.

So what's this you say about hearing noises?" Tim asked, cocking his head to one side.

"Well I thought I was imagining things at first, but it kept happening," she said clutching her cup with both hands.

"What kept happening?"

"I've been hearing noises after I go to bed. A door closes - doesn't slam, just closes, sort of loudly - then opens and closes again. I know where it's coming from. It's Dad's office door. I'm sure."

"How do you know it's Dad's office?" Tim asked.

"When I'm in my room at night it sounds like the noise is coming from down the hall, from the office. After the first

time it happened, I locked the office door the next morning. Then I heard it again that night. Next morning the door was open and unlocked again."

"Mum... are you sure? That seems pretty weird," Tim said.

"I'm glad you're here with me - that's all... I think it may be Dad's spirit" she said sheepishly.

"Well, that would be surprising Mum," he said with a smile.

"I'm going to have a look at the office. I'm sure there's a reasonable explanation." Tim stood, looked across the room towards the office. "Is it locked?" he asked.

"Yes, I'll get you the key," she jumped up and hurried down the hallway. She returned with the key in hand and gave it to Tim. She also had her bag over her shoulder "You have a look around Tim. I'm going to the markets to get some things for dinner." Tim's Mum still drove the old Toyota and she headed off back down the hallway and out the front door.

The office was on the other side of the kitchen and was originally part of the veranda. Tim's Dad had closed it off for use as a room for doing his accounts and office work. Tim tried the round brass door-knob to confirm it was locked. He then unlocked the door with the brass skeleton key and opened the door. Tim wasn't sure what he was looking for but decided to give the room a close examination. He was confident that the reason for his mother's experience was one of two things. The door was closing due to the breeze through the hallway - this would need some windows open or, his Mum imagined it. She was anxious, or perhaps depressed since Dad's death. This was the most likely explanation.

The office was neat and well ordered. Tim's Mum had tidied up and put most books and papers away. Tim could almost see his father sitting at the old teak desk - telling him to "Piss off

Tim I'm busy," when he opened the office door. He gazed around the shelves. There was no evidence of any disturbance that he could see. He opened the top right-hand drawer of the desk without knowing why and immediately noticed a heavy bound leather book. It was one of those books with a leather flap and metal catch. He had not seen it before and he undid the latch and opened the book. It was filled with his father's handwriting. It was a diary. Tim knew how important it was to have records of family history and was excited by the find. He flicked through the pages. The entries were succinct, just brief sentences. There was not an entry for every day and some long periods of silence but he was chuffed to see his name mentioned a number of times. He flicked to the first entries of the book to see how far back in time he might see a glimpse of his Dad's past. One particular entry struck him.

Dated the 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1965 it read - "I know Janine loves him. I can't bear to watch them together now. The time has come. I'm going to kill him tomorrow. Orchard lane RGA9"

The entry was sinister, to say the least. Could his father have killed someone? Did his mother, Janine, have an affair? She had been an attractive young woman. He would ask about it later. Tim left the office, locked the door and took the diary to his bedroom.

Tim had skilfully avoided discussing the nightly disturbances during dinner and promised his Mum they would have a chat and a drink later. He had the fire going nicely and the two of them settled into separate lounge chairs with a glass of port. Janine was clearly enjoying this personal time with her son. They sat seemingly mesmerised by the crackling fire when Tim spoke.

"Did you know Dad kept a diary?" he asked

Janine was surprised by the question and looked at Tim. "Yes, he's had a diary since I first met him, a big old book. Why do you ask that?"

"I found it in his office. There's an entry in it from before I was born that has me worried," Tim said.

"Really, what's it say?"

"I'll show you." Tim stood and went to his room and returned with the diary in his hand. He sat and opened it to the entry for 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1965 and read it out loud for his mother.

"Does it mean anything to you. Could Dad have killed someone?" he asked.

"Oh my God, no, your father had a temper but he would never do anything like that.

"Do you remember around that time, 1965? Did you have other men friends?"

"In 1965 we were not long married. We would go to parties with other friends. I got on well with the men. I can remember Dad did get jealous at times. This one chap, Tony, always wanted to dance with me. One time Dad got really angry abused him and they went outside. They both came back all scuffed up, dirty with blood on their faces. I never saw Tony again after that night." Janine paused and stared at Tim. "You don't think he would have done anything to him do you?"

"I don't know," Tim replied.

Janine looked back at the fire. "Oh goodness, the noises, I think Dad's troubled spirit may be looking for redemption."

"C'mon now, you're getting carried away." Tim didn't want to patronise his mother but he wasn't going along with her supernatural view of events. "What about this Orchard Lane RGA9 in the diary. Is that an address?" he asked.

"Sort of... You remember how Dad knew exactly where his fruit came from. Orchard Lane was a pathway dividing our orchard trees, lines of apples off to one side and pear trees on the other. Each tree location had a row letter and position number. RGA9 was Royal Gala variety row A, tree location 9." Janine explained.

"I'll have a look there tomorrow morning," Tim said, feeling uneasy about why his father would note that specific spot. "We should call it a night Mum. Don't worry, there won't be any noises tonight." He added.

Janine nodded - they had finished their port and they took the glasses back to the kitchen. They exchanged goodnights before Tim checked that all the windows and doors were locked. The office was locked and he had the key. His bedroom was directly across the hallway from his Mum and he lay there thinking about the day's events. When he arrived this morning he could not have believed that he would be investigating a murder and chasing a ghost.

"Tim wake up!" A voice shouted.

Tim sat bolt upright, his eyes trying focus in the gloom and his brain trying to register what he heard. He jumped out of bed and bounded into the hallway.

"Tim look, I heard a noise" Tim's mother was standing in the hallway outside her room in her nightdress pointing down towards the office. Even in the darkness, it was clear the office door was wide open.

He switched the hall light on and walked carefully down to the office. Tim's mind was a jumble - not a ghost - no, couldn't be that. I've got the key. What's going on? The hairs on his arms and back of his neck were trying to jump out of his skin. He could see some way into the office from the hall light but

it was pitch black further in. He strained his eyes into the darkness as he reached inside the door for the light switch. He thought there was a tall dark shape. He flicked the switch and his heart jumped. There was nothing in the room. His head was swivelling from side to side as he confirmed the emptiness.

"Nothing here Mum," he called to his mother who was still standing in the hallway.

There were no further disturbances that night. Tim was puzzled about the door being open when he had the key. He knew he'd locked it. It took some time for him to get back to sleep. His mother seemed less troubled. He heard her snoring soon after they returned to bed.

Tim was bleary-eyed when he awoke and he went straight for the coffee. Janine was already up and finished breakfast. He didn't know what to do or say about last night so he decided to avoid it.

"I'm going out to the orchard to check that location," Tim said as he drank the last of his black coffee and grimaced.

"You know that the land is not ours anymore. It belongs to the Davies now," she said.

"Yeah, I know. They won't mind me looking around," Tim said. He had worked out that RGA9 was not that far from the house and was an easy walk into the neighbour's property.

The walk reminded Tim of working with his Dad in the harvest season, picking and grading fruit. Within ten minutes he had reached the location RGA9. The Royal Gala apple tree looked like all the others. Tim noticed a granite stone near the base. He squatted down for a closer look. Something was scratched on the stone, a cross - no a 'T'. "Shit, 'T' for Tony," he thought. Tim stood with hands on hips and looked

down. There was a patch of dirt in front of the stone where the grass was lush - greener than the surrounds. Tim felt ill. He was sure this was a burial plot.

"Tim, what are you doing?" Janine asked as her son grabbed a long handle shovel and garden fork from the tool shed.

"I think Dad has buried your friend Tony in the Orchard. I'm going back to check," Tim said, looking over his shoulder at his mother.

"I'm coming with you," she said.

Tim started to dig as his mother watched from a few paces behind him. It was only a couple shovels full when he hit something - bones.

"Oh God, Oh God," Janine blurted as she peered at the white fragments coming out of the dirt.

Tim was speechless and continued to dig. He unearthed a skull and placed it next to the excavated hole.

"Mum, it's not a person. It's an animal, a dog I think," he said looking down at the remains.

Janine stood with a puzzled expression. "A dog - yes

Of course," she said with a smile. "It's poor old Toffy," Tim stood transfixed by his mother's words. "I loved that dog. He got sick and Dad had to take him away," she added.

"Would this have been in 1965," Tim asked, knowing the answer.

"Um, yes I think so," she replied.

"Well that's one mystery solved," Tim said as he started to fill the hole. "Just the office door that opens itself now," he added.

"Actually...that was me," Janine said with a guilty look.



"What?" Tim shouted, stopping his shovelling, turning and looking squarely at his Mum.

"I made the story up and I opened the door last night with my spare key. I wanted to you to spend some time with me. Sons should spend time with their mothers. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing Mum," Tim replied, slowly returning to the reburial of poor old Toffy. From that day Tim visited his mother regularly every month, sometimes more often.

## The Leo Budge Files - The Finance Manager

Leo Budge wasn't your average Private Investigator. He was well below average at this stage of his career. He had gained his online Certificate 3 in Investigative Services at the Australian Security Academy last month and was eagerly looking forward to his first case. Leo had thought that experience in police work or security would have been mandatory, but no, anyone could do it. Leo at 45 years of age had embarked on a career change that filled him with anticipation. The previous job as Sales Manager at upmarket city men's wear store, Antonios, became untenable when a much younger man was appointed as his boss. There was no career progression for him at the store so he made the bold decision to start his own detective business. The only issue that concerned him slightly was his one eye. Leo had lost his left eye to fungal infection as a boy. He now had, what was commonly known as a glass eye. It was actually an acrylic prosthetic eye that was practically undetectable to others. He had learned to manage his difficulty with distance and depth perception over the years. It wasn't an impediment and he was confident he could be a successful detective. He chuckled at the thought that he could legitimately call himself a private eye. Leo was divorced, had no children and lived with his Burmese cat Andre in a two bedroom inner city apartment. Andre came with him as part of the distribution of assets when his marriage failed and had settled nicely into apartment living. The purring affection he got from the little chocolate brown feline always lifted his spirits. The office was set up in the second bedroom. The surveillance equipment had been purchased from China. He had advertised his services as best he could with a website and social media and he was ready to start work. His marketing slogan was - Leo H Budge Private Investigator - Keeping an eye

out for you. Leo's second name was Harley and he included the initial to make him appear more professional.

It surprised Leo when he got the phone call within two days of getting the marketing started. A major mining company city office sent him an online request and wanted a quote for a one-week commitment of consulting time to investigate a sexual harassment complaint. Leo knew that private detective work wasn't all like Magnum P.I. but this was unexpected. He got to work on his submission emphasising that he was a trained, licensed Investigator with extensive people management skills. This was mostly true, though he had only managed one casual worker each Christmas for the last eight years at the menswear store. He reasoned that if you added all the eight casuals together they collectively could be regarded as people. He fired off the email quote and waited.

Leo took the lift up to the eighth floor and asked the first person he saw for directions to Ms Adele Finlay, the HR Manager. She was the contact given to discuss his submission for the job. He had dressed conservatively in dark blue chinos and purple skivvy and was feeling confident.

"Leo, have a seat," Adele said as she looked him up and down with a strange look that Leo interpreted as admiration for his dress sense. She was a young woman with shoulder-length blond hair wearing a smart charcoal grey pants suit. It seemed to Leo that most of the people on this floor were of a similar description.

"Thanks for your quote Leo. I'll give you some background on the issue we need to be investigated and you can ask any questions." She paused and Leo nodded. "We have received an

anonymous complaint by mail on a typed letter indicating that our Finance Manager, Danny O'Brien, has propositioned a staff member. The letter says that the advance was clearly of a sexual nature and as a young female, she is too scared to come forward. Here is a copy," she said handing Leo an envelope. "I asked Danny, who has been with us for about two months, what he knew about the allegation and he denied it vehemently. He is aware we are hiring someone to investigate. We take Sexual Harassment very seriously here and would like you to get to the bottom of it for us. You would report to me by email daily with progress and any issues, plus a final written report and recommendation at the end of the week.

"Yes, of course," Leo said. It was clear this lady wanted some action. "Is there any office space I can use for the week?" he asked.

"We have a spare office on this floor that you can use. You just need to complete the visitor sign in when you come," she replied.

Leo nodded, "Okay."

"Can you give me a brief rundown on how you plan to approach this investigation?" she asked.

Leo was hoping not to get this question. He didn't have a clue about how to do this sort of investigation. His training had mainly been about how to get good pictures showing people cheating on their partners.

"Um, firstly I'll do a preliminary reconnoitring assessment of the complete situation. This will enable me to make the appropriate decisions on the compatibility of the extensive array of surveillance equipment, and the response commitment" he replied.

Adele cocked her head to one side and gave a puzzled look.

"Right, can you start on Monday?" she asked.

"You bet," he replied.

Leo spent the weekend checking his equipment, making sure and listening devices received and recorded, and his cameras were in good order. The decision of what to wear on his tall gangly frame took the most effort. He settled on black tight pants, short enough to just see his white socks, black pointy shoes, a grey jacket with blue fine checked shirt buttoned at the neck. Leo eventually thought about devising a plan for the investigation. He then decided he'd just work it out when he arrived there in the morning.

After the visitor induction, he grabbed a coffee from the ground floor cafe and went to his office. It was a stretch calling it an office. Leo likened it more to a cupboard with a glass front. It was positioned against a solid wall and opened to the rest of the open plan office which had many desks and busy people. His office did, however, accommodate a small desk and had the necessary power, telephone and internet connections. He pulled out the complaint letter Adele had given him from his briefcase and opened it on the desk. The message in it was short and specific. It detailed how the writer had been beckoned into Danny O'Brien's office as she walked past. He had then asked her if she would like to come to his place after work for some fun. She said "no" and left. "I suppose it depends on the way you say it and the look in your eye'" Leo thought. "So, I just need to find out if he did it, and who he did it to." He put his elbows on the desk with hands clasped and stared at the door handle. Then, looking up he said out loud. "I'll ask him." Leo picked up the internal

handphone on the desk and made an appointment for that afternoon to meet with Danny O'Brien in his office.

"Leo pleased to meet you," Danny said as he stood and presented his hand to Leo for shaking. He looked Leo up and down with a strange look on his face. Danny was a small man in his thirties with fine features and thick brown hair. He wore the ubiquitous men's business attire that Leo despised, dark trousers, white shirt and tie.

"Hi," Leo said as he shook his hand. Danny's grip was anything but firm and Leo quickly let go fearing he might hurt him. Danny gestured towards the chair in front of his desk and Leo sat down, surreptitiously removing the small listening device from his pants pocket and placing it under the edge of the desk where it stuck fast. "You know I'm here about the complaint against you?" Leo asked with a casual air.

"Are you recording this conversation?" Danny asked.

Leo was stunned by the question and sat with eyes wide open unable to think what to say.

"You put a bug under my desk. I saw you do it in the reflection of the glass behind you," Danny said.

Leo turned in his chair and looked at himself. He turned back to Danny. "Yes, um I thought I should keep a record if that's okay with you?" Leo said sheepishly.

"Sure, make sure you take the bug when you go," Danny replied with a tone of aggravation.

Leo had made an initial impression with Danny and the meeting was short and terse. Danny had no explanation for the complaint and would not even provide a guess as to who may have made it. "Well, that went well," Leo thought as he left

his office. Before leaving he decided to have a chat with Danny's Personnel Assistant Tina before returning to his own office. She knew about the investigation and hadn't seen or heard anything that would support the complaint. No witnesses - no complainant - this investigation was going nowhere.

That night at home in his apartment, Leo discussed with Andre what the next steps should be. Andre was a good listener and Leo appreciated that he could talk and think without interruption. Following three glasses of red wine, the way ahead became obvious. He would check with Danny's previous employer. There may have been similar complaints. There is often a history with deviant sexual behaviour Leo had read somewhere.

Adele provided the details of Danny's previous employer and using the authority of the HR Manager, Leo sent them a few questions regarding Danny's employment. The response came back the same afternoon and Leo scanned the emailed document. He went straight to the main issues. Were any complaints made - no. What was the reason for leaving - health. Leo was thinking there was nothing unusual in the information. Then he looked at the personal details at top of the page. The name read - Danielle (Danny) Annette O'Brien.

Leo had invited Danny to meet at the ground floor coffee shop explaining it was urgent that they talk. Leo was sitting at the back booth admiring the crema on his long black when Danny slid in opposite him.

"What is it Leo? I thought we'd already discussed this."

"Not everything - Danielle," Leo said with slow deliberation.

Danny gazed at the ceiling and sighed deeply. He looked back at Leo. "What do you know?" he asked.

"I know that before you came to work here, you were Danielle - a woman. I know you have not had any previous complaints of any kind. Would you like to add anything?" Leo asked.

"I left my last employment to have a transgender operation. There is nothing wrong with that and I am not obliged to make it common knowledge." Danny replied.

"Yes, I agree," Leo said. "But someone has accused you of sexual harassment and it is obvious to me who it is?"

"I suppose you want to know why I did it?" Danny said with a look of resignation.

Leo resisted the choking sensation and tried to appear like he knew what was going on. "Yes Danny, why did you do it?" he said, feeling sure Danny would notice the shocked puzzled look in his good right eye.

Danny clasped his hands on the table and looked at Leo's bulging eye. "I wrote the complaint myself because I wanted to feel like a normal heterosexual man. Many in the office believe I'm a gay bloke. I thought this would help change their minds. I didn't imagine they would hire a detective."

Leo sat there speechless. He was about to say that it was most likely Tina who had sent the complaint. "Okay Danny, I can understand the issues you must be having. But I don't think you're on the money thinking that normal heterosexual blokes proposition girls at the office," he said without conviction. "I'm going to wrap this investigation up and say in my report that you have an unblemished record. No person has come forward to support the complaint and it should be dismissed."

"Thanks Leo, buy you another coffee?" Danny gave a cheeky girlish smile.



Leo arrived home early that evening. He was flushed with the success of his first investigative assignment and rushed to the cupboard. He pulled out a bottle of red and a tin of pilchards in aspic. "Andre" he called. "It's celebrations tonight."

### **The Leo Budge files - The Artist**

Leo Budge woke early with a thumping headache. He didn't want to be awake and stumbled with a sticky eye into his apartment bathroom. He grabbed a glass of water and swallowed three pain killer tablets. He looked at his pale face in the mirror thinking how odd he looked with his right eye bloodshot and his left, prosthetic eye, pristine. He went back to bed. There was no time for relief as his phone started its annoying buzz tone as soon as he hit the pillow. Leo reached out with a clumsy hand and grabbed the phone. He didn't recognise the number. He ignored it and the call went to message bank. He resumed his sleeping position. His slumbering momentum had been interrupted and he groaned in annoyance and sat up. Last night Leo and Andre had celebrated the start of a potentially rewarding career for Leo as a private investigator. He was making a career change late at 45 but he considered his life experience would be of great value in his new field. Andre was still asleep curled up on the couch. Leo dressed and made himself a double shot black coffee. He contemplated having some toast and thought better of it. Too much red wine always gave him a headache but he still kept doing it to himself. At least he didn't drink alone last night. Although Andre was a Burmese cat Leo counted him as a person. Leo picked up his phone and listened to his only message. A previous colleague, Kevin Wilke from the menswear business where he used to work requested an appointment. Leo smiled - a new client.

Leo responded to the knock on his apartment door and opened it. Kevin Wilke's substantial body filled the doorway. Kevin was on his way home from work and was in his work outfit of dark trousers pink business shirt and tie. The shirt gaped between the buttons across his middle showing his white

singlet. He had a big personality to match his body and a wide grin split his pudgy face.

"Budgy, how are you going mate?" Kevin asked.

Leo hated being called Budgy. It reminded him of unpleasant years at school. "Hi Kev, I'm well thanks. Come on through," he replied, showing him in towards the office, recently converted from the second bedroom.

"I could hardly believe it when I was googling Private Detectives and your name came up - Leo H Budge private investigator - very impressive. What's the H stand for Budgie?" Kev asked smiling profusely.

"Harley - my Dad was a motorbike enthusiast." Leo disliked Kevin's intrusive style and wanted to get to the point of his visit "What can I do for you today Kev?" Leo asked as he sat at his IKEA desk and Kevin sat opposite. Kevin's demeanour suddenly deteriorated from 'happy go lucky' to deadly serious. He explained that he was suspicious that his wife, Marion, was having an affair. She was in her thirties - younger than Kev and was working from home as an artist. They had been married for five years with the relationship growing cold in the last twelve months. Kevin had found that while at work he was unable to contact his wife at times during the week. The excuses for her whereabouts were varied and unconvincing. He'd recently discovered she'd purchased some new sexy lingerie but he only ever saw her in the floppy beige items. She had also begun going to the gym twice a week. Kev showed Leo a photo of Marion and requested Leo investigate to determine if she was, or was not, being unfaithful. Leo sat for a moment examining the photo of the young, attractive looking Marion. He could see why Kevin would be concerned. Leo looked at Kevin and felt a pang of guilt for thinking that Marion could be forgiven for looking elsewhere. He gave Kevin a rundown on his fees and

agreed to proceed with the case. Leo would start surveillance tomorrow at Kevin's suburban house.

It was 9 am and Leo had parked two houses down and across the street from Kevin's house. He sat slumped down in the driver's seat of his yellow Suzuki Swift trying to look inconspicuous. The Nikon D850 with telephoto lens nestled into Leo's groin was ready to be put into action at the sign of any movement. Three hours later he was starting to get cramps in the back of his legs from the inaction. Leo knew from his Certificate 3 online Investigative Services training course that surveillance work could be unexciting. He was considering leaving and trying again tomorrow when an Uber, silver grey late model Toyota sedan cruised by and pulled up at Kevin's house. Leo sat up and his camera fell onto the floor at his feet. He cursed, hurriedly retrieved it and had it up to his face taking multiple photos of Marion coming from the house and getting in the car. The Toyota drove away with Leo following. He tried to stay a sensible distance behind to ensure his yellow Suzuki wasn't noticeable. The twenty-minute drive ended at a Paddington cafe and Marion got out and went inside. It was a busy area and Leo had to park down a side street opposite the cafe. He climbed into the back seat of his Suzuki and focussed his Nikon through the back window. He could see Marion sitting in the cafe with a man who looked about her age, having a conversation. Leo took a number of pictures of them in the cafe and also caught them in an embrace on the footpath before they left in an Uber. Leo was convinced he had conclusive evidence.

Following the call from Leo, Kevin called at Leo's apartment after finishing work. Leo was reporting back on the day's

findings on Marion's movements. Leo had downloaded all his photos to his laptop and was flicking through them, showing Kevin as they sat in Leo's office.

"Then she got out of the Uber and went in to meet - this bloke," Leo said as he flicked onto the next picture showing a close up of a blond youngish man in a grey suit.

"Wait," Kev said. "Can you do a close-up?"

Leo magnified the image.

"That's her brother Gary," Kev said as he looked up at Leo. "She catches up with him sometimes. You'd better keep investigating mate. You've only been at it one day."

Leo thought it was too good to be true to get a result that quickly. Kevin headed off home and Leo resigned himself to doing more hours with surveillance.

Three days of watching Kev's house with nothing suspicious to report and Leo was glad it was Friday - he'd have the weekend off. He was planning to see his girlfriend Lucy. As an over forty-year-old woman, she liked being referred to as his girlfriend. Possible dinner venues were running through his mind when the Uber pulled up. "Here we go again." Leo thought. This time the trip took longer and finished at a city apartment block. There were both residential and office space in the building and Leo couldn't be sure where Marion was visiting. He decided to risk a ticket and park in a nearby loading zone. Marion was disappearing through the double glass front door as Leo hustled across the street in pursuit. He made it to the lifts in time to shove his hand between the doors and prevent them from closing. He stepped into the lift with Marion and one other older grey-haired man in a suit. Leo hoped his attire of pink polo shirt, checked shorts, purple

tint reflective sunglasses and also the Nikon hanging around his neck gave him the appearance of a tourist and not a private detective. Marion and Leo both exited the lift on level three. Marion walked briskly down the hallway and through double doors. There was a large sign beside the doors and Leo stood motionless in front of it.

Leo had left a phone message for Kevin to call into his apartment again that evening. He was in his office adding details to his investigation report when Kevin arrived.

"I'll explain my activity today and show the relevant photos as we go Kev."

"Sure," Kevin replied as he sat down and the chair disappeared.

"Marion took an Uber into the city at 1.10pm. I followed and she arrived at this building at 1.45pm." Leo pointed at the building showing on the laptop.

Kevin stared at the image. "The building's not familiar."

"I then shadowed her into the building and up in the lift to the third floor. She went through doors into a part of the building with this sign outside." Leo flicked onto the photo of the sign.

Kevin leaned forward. "School of fine art," he blurted. "She's at bloody art classes." He said with a tone of relief.

"There's more to come," Leo said. "I investigated further and went through those doors to see what class Marion was doing. Inside there were a number of people sitting with easels and paints, around a small raised platform. Marion was not among the artists. She was posing naked on the platform with a scrap of cloth around her waist and holding a clay pot."

Kevin's jaw dropped and his chins vibrated. "What, those bloody arty types. They think a naked body is nothing to be ashamed of. Were there men there?"

"Yeah, a few - I had to back out like I'd come in by mistake. I definitely couldn't take any pictures. I went back down to my car and sat there waiting for her to come back out. Thinking perhaps she would be accompanied by one of the men art students. But no - she was alone when she came down. She jumped in an Uber and left." Leo said.

"Okay, Budgy, you have found nothing except that Marion is an exhibitionist. She doesn't have a secret lover."

"Well Kev, I followed Marion when she drove away from the building and was not surprised when the Uber pulled into the Riverside Motel. I may only have one good eye but I don't miss much. I noticed that every time Marion goes somewhere it's in an Uber and it's the same driver. Marion's does have a lover - it's the Uber driver.

### **The Leo Budge Files - The Jewel Thief**

The pain rocketed through Leo's body. A scream choked in the back of his throat as he fell back. He had only taken two steps when the little toe on his left foot caught the leg of his queen sized bed. He desperately clutched his foot with both hands. Leo sat on the end of the bed moaning, with face contorted and his knee pressing against his left ear. Leo's Burmese cat Andre was curled up on the end of the bed trying to ignore the commotion. The throbbing was slowly subsiding. Leo gently removed his left hand to hoping to see all his toes still in alignment. Having a prosthetic eye had some disadvantages. Judging distance on his blind left side was one on them.

*Geez, is it going to be one of those days?* Leo thought.

He hobbled into the bathroom for the morning ritual and considered the middle aged reflection in the mirror.

*I look a bit like George Clooney,* Leo thought.

Unfortunately for Leo, the bit that looked like George wasn't his face. Though his hair was grey and wavy, his face had a pointed shape, perhaps more like Dustin Hoffman. Leo washed his face and trimmed his stubbly beard and thought about the investigative work that lay ahead for the day.

Leo H Budge private investigator wasn't well known around town and this opportunity with Sun Country Insurance was important for his reputation. The appointment with the company Insurance Officer was for 10 am. Leo dressed to show he was in touch with modern fashion in pale green chinos with multiple pockets, a short sleeve purple striped shirt buttoned at the neck and white sandshoes, no socks. Leo arrived at their city office 20 minutes early.



"Come in Leo." The young insurance man stood behind his desk and beckoned him into his small cubicle. They had spoken on the phone previously and established an initial rapport. The young man was lean with a Nordic appearance, short cropped blond hair and arctic blue eyes. It always annoyed Leo how the Scandinavians could get such great tans.

"G'day, Marty, nice to meet you." They shook hands and Leo sat at the front of Marty's desk.

"I've had a recommendation for your services from a mining company client of ours and we would like you to do some work for us, if you're interested."

Leo tried to keep his excitement concealed. The mining company job was his first case and he must've impressed them.

"Of course, what have you got in mind?" Leo asked.

"We have an insurance claim that has been highlighted as requiring investigation by my boss. It's most likely not fraudulent but it needs to be checked. If you could make it a quick job, it would be great."

"Sure." Leo said, wondering why it had to be quick.

"A middle aged retired couple, who appear to be well off financially, living in a large riverside house in Fig Tree Pocket, recently purchased a home contents policy from us for \$250,000. Less than a month later they were burgled and are making a claim." Marty paused and folded his arms. "The police are investigating and have not identified the culprit or culprits for the crime. We would like you to investigate this claim and report your findings to me."

"I can certainly do that Marty," Leo said with a broad smile.

For the next half hour Leo and Marty discussed and agreed the detail of the contractor arrangement for the investigative

work. Marty had the documents drawn up and emailed to Leo for signature that afternoon.

Leo checked the briefing notes he'd received from Marty. The break-in took place on a Saturday night when no one was at home. The burglar forced open the back door - went upstairs to the bedroom and cut the lock of a metal cash box containing the jewels and left without being seen - leaving no finger prints

Leo's first task was to interview the claimant. He hadn't previously worked on an insurance case but he was aware he needed to be careful not to accuse anyone of anything. Leo wanted to build his reputation as a professional.

The lounge room, open above to the second level, had a glass wall with stunning views across the Brisbane River. A sleek twin-outboard runabout boat was moored at a small jetty on the river bank. Everything Leo could see inside the house was polished timber, stainless steel, gleaming white or glass. The decor reeked of opulence. He sat with notebook in hand, in an ultra-white leather lounge chair wondering why anyone who owned this place would rip off an insurance company. Jerry and Megan Flegg sat together on the sofa. Leo thought the 8.30am interview appointment meant either they were early risers, or they wanted to get it over with quickly. Jerry looked like he'd just got out of bed - untamed grey wispy hair, narrow eyes and a pale complexion. He was casually dressed in cargo shorts and polo shirt. Megan, a solidly built blond woman was also dressed for relaxation in jeans and tee-shirt.

"I see from your claim that jewellery to the value of \$250,000 was stolen - tiara, necklace and bracelet."

"Yeah, the set was worth much more than that to us really. It was handed down to Megan through her family in Germany," Jerry said.

Leo scribbled furiously in his notebook. He loved the pen he'd bought recently. It wrote well and took great pictures. He looked up.

"The policy was effective a month ago from 23<sup>rd</sup> March this year. Can I ask what prompted you to insure at that time?" Leo asked, looking for any signs of tension in either of them.

"It was a simple change of insurers. We decided Sun Country was a better option," Jerry replied.

"Okay, and is it just you and Megan living here at present?"

"No, my daughter Leanne is here. She works in the city. The police have spoken to us and taken statements. None of us were here at the time of the break-in last Saturday night. We were with Leanne at the coast for the week-end."

Leo noticed that Megan had not said a word. She sat with hands clenched between her knees.

"You must be upset at losing your family's jewellery?" Leo asked looking at Megan.

"Oh, yes, it was very upsetting," she replied with a start and unclenching her hands.

Leo's eye for detail was going into overdrive. Megan had a slight Scandinavian accent. Her hands and fingernails were rough and un-manicured. Did this mean anything? Leo wasn't sure but something was out of place. He positioned his pen to get plenty of shots.

"Do police have any leads on anyone who knew you had expensive jewels?" Leo asked.

"Afraid not, and there're no clues or finger prints. - doesn't look promising," Jerry said.

Leo stood with notebook and pen in hand. "Thanks for your time. I may need to come back and talk to you again. I'll give Leanne a call. I'd like a quick chat with her too if possible."

Leo left the Fleggs and jumped into his yellow Suzuki Swift parked outside. Before leaving he looked up Leanne's number, phoned and made an appointment to meet her for coffee.

The café was busy and fortunately they found a quiet table at the back. Leanne's office worker appearance with light button up shirt and dark skirt resembled many of the other women in the café. Like her father she had high cheekbones and a pleasant smile.

"Were you aware there was an insurance policy covering the jewels?" Leo asked before taking a tentative sip of his long black. "I assumed there was one. I didn't know anything about it," she said.

"It must be upsetting losing a family treasure. Your Mum was very unhappy about it," Leo said.

"She's my Step-mother," Leanne said bluntly.

"Oh, yeah, of course, still it was disappointing - lucky your Step-mother took out the policy,"

"It was Dad who took out the policy, not her." Leanne was obviously not enjoying Leo's questions.

"Do you have a partner...boyfriend?" Leo asked.

"No, police already asked all this," she snapped.

"Anyone you can think of who knew there were jewels in the house, neighbour, cleaner?" he asked.

"Not really, Dad probably told you about the housekeeper, left a little while ago, before the robbery."

"Um, he might have said something. What was her name?" he asked.

"Ingrid... can't remember her surname" she said.

"Would she have known about the jewels?" Leo asked.

"No, I don't know," she snapped

Leo scribbled in his notebook and thought, judging by Leanne's aggravated demeanor, he should end the meeting

"Look, thanks Leanne for taking time out from your lunch break. I'll let you know if I need any further information."

Leo was about to ask her to contact him if she thought of any other relevant information, but she'd stood up and headed out of the café before he had the opportunity.

Leo stayed at the table and looked through his notes. He had underlined a few important points.

Megan had a German family but her accent was Scandinavian.

Megan was a retired wealthy woman but she had dishwasher hands.

Leanne lied about not knowing anything about the policy. She knew Jerry was the claimant.

Leanne was nervous about discussing previous housekeeper Ingrid

This case wasn't fitting together for Leo and he tried to remember what the Certificate 3 in Investigative Services manual would recommend in a situation like this one. He decided on two actions. First he would find out more from the Fleggs about Ingrid and second he would unleash his Nikon D850

with telephoto lens do some surveillance. Leo left the café with the look of a bloodhound on the scent.

It was late afternoon and the yellow Suzuki was as unobtrusive as Leo could manage, parked under a Poinciana tree, four houses down and across the street from the Fleggs. Leo's notebook and the Nikon were on the front passenger seat ready for action. He sat in the driver's seat and pulled his mobile phone from inside his blue checked jacket. Leo dialed the Flegg's home number and Jerry answered.

"Hi Jerry, it's Leo Budge, got a minute?"

"Sure, what's up?"

"I understand you had a housekeeper up until recently. Can you tell me about her?" Leo asked.

There was a longer than was socially accepted silence. Leo was about say the usual 'Hello, you there?' when Jerry responded.

"Yeah... Ingrid Larsen, she left us a while ago - before the robbery."

"Why did she leave? Did you have problems?" Leo asked.

"No, she was great. She just decided to go back to Europe. She couldn't have had anything to do with it." Jerry said firmly.

"Okay, thanks Jerry, that's all I need, I'll be in touch," Leo said and terminated the call.

*This is getting curioser and curioser, Leo thought. Everyone is keen to keep Ingrid Larsen in the clear. Leo's brow furrowed. Larsen... Larsen... that name rings a bell.* He grabbed his notebook and pulled the Sun Country Insurance briefing notes from the back of the book. Leo examined the name and signature at the bottom - Marty Larsen.

*Shit, can't be a coincidence, can it?* As Leo's mind went into overdrive, a vehicle pulled up outside the Flegg residence. Leo stopped thinking and looked. Marty Larsen, the Nordic insurance man, got out of the car and went to the front door. Leo had his Nikon up to his eye, focused the telephoto lens and was taking photos in a flash. Leanne opened the door and embraced Marty and gave him a girlfriend style kiss. Marty went inside.

*Oh my God, Marty is involved in a conspiracy to fraud the insurance company - his own company,* Leo thought.

He was stunned by this new development and tried to put the pieces together in his mind. *Leanne is Marty's girlfriend. Marty has the same surname and is probably related to the housekeeper, and it appears that Jerry, Megan and the insurance company are being conned by their daughter and her friend.*

The front door at the Fleggs suddenly opened and Leanne and Marty emerged. Megan was close behind and gave Marty a hug and a kiss on the cheek. They got in the car and drove away. Leo followed the progress through his Nikon.

*I need more information,* Leo thought staring blankly at the inside of the windscreen. *I should talk to someone who knows these people - neighbour.*

Leo pressed the door bell. An elderly lady with extremely white short cropped hair and large round lens glasses opened the door.

"Hello, my name is Leo Budge." He flashed his business card. "I'm investigating the robbery that occurred across the street last week. Could I ask you a couple of questions?"

"Oh yes, I heard about that. It's very frightening when that happens so close. Would you like to come in?"

"No thank you." This won't take long. "Do you know the Fleggs over there?" Leo pointed at the house.

"Just to say hello, not very well," she said.

"Do you know these three people?" Leo held up the Nikon digital screen for the old lady.

She peered intently at the screen. "Yes, that would be the Flegg's daughter, her boyfriend, who is often there, and the housekeeper."

Leo's eye opened so wide, his prosthetic couldn't match it.

"You mean Mrs Flegg...Megan?" he asked excitedly.

"No, that's the housekeeper. I don't know her name. I see her quite often."

"Thank you so much. You have been a great help." Leo said with a smile. He turned and headed back to his car.

*It's time to wrap this case up,* Leo thought.

Detective Sergeant Darcy O'Malley was running the police investigation for the robbery. When Leo explained what he'd uncovered, Darcy agreed to meet with him to confront the Fleggs. The two men were a discordant combination standing at the front door. Darcy, a big man dressed in dark suit, white shirt and tie, and Leo slim build in vibrant check blue jacket and ripped jeans. Darcy ignored the press button and rapped on the heavy timber door. After a few seconds Jerry Flegg opened it.

"Detective" The fear in Jerry's eyes betrayed him. "I thought you were finished here?" Jerry didn't seem to notice Leo standing there.



"I have a few more questions for you and Mrs Flegg... Can we come in?"

"Of course, Megan's in the lounge" Jerry opened the door and led them through.

Darcy wasn't one to procrastinate and as soon as he entered the room he turned to the blonde woman standing in front of him.

"Ingrid Larsen... can you explain why you have been masquerading as Megan Flegg?" Before she could answer he turned to Jerry. "And perhaps you could tell us where the real Mrs Flegg is?"

Ingrid looked pale when they'd walked in. What was left of the blood in her face drained out, and she crumpled to the floor in a dead faint.

The elaborate conspiracy had fallen apart and when Ingrid recovered she told Darcy the whole story. The plot was hatched by Jerry and his daughter Leanne, who was in a relationship with Ingrid's son Marty in Sun Country Insurance. Marty was to set up the policy and ensure the payout was made to Jerry. The insurance company's check highlighted a potential fraud and Marty picked Leo as the least likely investigator to uncover any problem.

Leo was still confused. He understood the plan to get a \$250,000 payout for a pretend robbery for jewels that didn't exist. But Megan Flegg was still unaccounted for. Jerry and Leanne were adamant that she had just packed up and left a couple of months ago. Ingrid had no idea, and appeared to have simply done as instructed.

*Why go to all this effort when you live in a luxurious house worth at least \$4 million,* Leo thought.

The police back-up team that waited for Leanne and Marty to arrive home, and took them all, Jerry, Leanne, Ingrid and Marty to the watch house to be charged. Leo was still at the house and found Darcy upstairs looking in the cupboard.

"Hey Darcy"

"Yep?" He didn't look around.

"We need to find Megan Flegg to find out what this pretense was all about."

"I'm way ahead of you Leo," Darcy said, turning to face him. "I've done some checking and Jerry didn't own anything of value. Megan was the wealthy one through family inheritance. If Megan disappears then Jerry gets the lot - an obvious motive for murder."

"Oh, shit, yeah I guess so," Leo said, thinking it was time to leave. "I'll see you Darcy, good luck."

Detective Sergeant Darcy O'Malley's thorough search of the property discovered the body of Megan Flegg. She was found in the freezer of the runabout moored in the river. She had died from suffocation and was drugged before she was placed in the freezer. Jerry and Leanne were charged with murder and Ingrid and her son Marty accessories. They were all charged with attempted fraud.

Leo returned home to his apartment around 8pm, feeling drained, satisfied and worried that Andre would be hungry. He grabbed a tin of cat food from the cupboard and read the label 'Gourmet Duck and Wild Rice with Gravy'.

*Bit hungry myself, he thought*

### **The Leo Budge Files - Missing Person**

Losing an eye at age five would be a problem for most people. Leo's cheery disposition allowed him to deal with it better than anyone would have expected. Kids are cruel at the best of times and he could have been damaged psychologically, as well as visually. Not Leo, he considered himself special. The patch became part of his persona. He made friends and didn't back away from bullies. His sharp tongue and straight left jab served him well. Leo was comfortable with his patch through his teens. Of course, it had to be black. With a tall frame and thick dark wavy hair girls found him more than interesting. A boy who'd lost an eye had to be a seriously excitingly bad.

Leo was almost disappointed when prosthetic technology became too hard to resist. His new left eye was indistinguishable from the real thing. It even moved at the appropriate times. Leo found the main drawback was when he drank alcohol to excess. One eye looked bleary and the other clear, or the next day one was bloodshot and one clear. Given this minor inconvenience, now 45 years old he was convinced that his growing years had prepared him well. His failed marriage had left no scars and no kids. His relationship with lady friend Lucy was loving and satisfying. His inner-city apartment living arrangement with his Burmese cat Andre gave him the independence that he needed. Most importantly, it has all led to Leo's new career as Leo H Budge, Private Investigator.

Maryanne York gazed around Leo's sparsely decorated home office. A slim mature woman in her sixties, she had an aura of wealth. Leo felt underdressed as he appreciated her meticulous makeup, short styled blonde hair and crisp dark pants suit. He had promised himself that he would present himself to clients

in a professional manner but the jeans and AC/DC tee-shirt were just more him.

"Mrs York, can I get you tea or coffee before we start?" Leo thought that using her first name would be a little presumptuous considering her imposing appearance.

"Call me Maryanne please Leo...no thanks I'm fine," she replied.

Leo couldn't help but wonder why she had picked him from all the private investigators in town.

"Can I ask how you found me Maryanne?" Leo sounded like he was checking the success of his marketing strategies but he really wanted to know how an apparently well to do private person would pick a little known inexperienced investigator.

"I had a recommendation from a friend of yours. Lucy... she's my personal trainer," she said.

Leo raised his eyebrows. "Really, Lucy, she didn't say anything."

"She doesn't know I made an appointment. She has spoken highly about you Leo as an investigator and it just so happens that I'm in need of one."

*That's my girl,* Leo thought with a flush of affection.

"Great...well what can I do for you?" Leo asked.

"I need you to find my husband Denis. He has been missing for almost two weeks."

The alarm bells in Leo's head were ringing. His Certificate 3 in Investigative Services course had specifically warned about the perils of taking on missing person cases. Often the persons who were missing did not want to be found. There had been a recent case of an investigator finding someone who was

subsequently killed by the client. How do you live with that on your conscience? Leo needed more details.

"Can you give me more information Maryanne?" Leo poised his pen over his notebook. "Firstly, have the police investigated?"

"Yes, of course, they are still investigating. He disappeared from our house while I was away one morning - just vanished. No one has heard anything since. It doesn't make any sense." Maryanne clasped her jewellery laden fingers together as if in prayer and pressed them to her lips.

Leo could see the pain glistening in her soft eyes. "I'm sorry to hear that," Leo said. "You don't think the police are doing enough?" he asked.

"No, they're not taking it seriously," Maryanne paused and looked up. "There's something else."

Leo looked at her in anticipation.

"I saw him two days ago at Maleny."

Leo straightened in his chair. He knew that he was a good judge of people - emotional intelligence was it? Maryanne appeared to be a stable sort of personality from his early assessment - not eccentric. She cared about her missing husband - better dig a bit more.

"You saw him?" Leo asked. "Are you sure it was him?"

"I saw him in the street in the village. I was about twenty metres away. It was him. He was wearing his bomber jacket - the one that he was wearing that day. He went into an arcade. I ran down and he was gone." The look of pain returned to her face.

"Have you reported this to authorities?"

"No, I want to be positive before I report anything."

Leo was sure that Maryanne was genuine. She was in distress and it was possible she had seen what she wanted to see. He decided that he'd help her.

"Ok, I'll get a few more details Maryanne and then I can see what I can do to find Denis."

In the following hour or so with Maryanne, Leo expanded his knowledge on the circumstances surrounding Denis's disappearance. Maryanne had left to go shopping on Saturday morning, leaving Denis alone - they had no children. She returned home in around two hours. Denis was not at home. He left no message and there were no signs of a crime. The Jenkins, neighbours across the road, recalled seeing a dark coloured vehicle parked near the house for a time. Jerry from next door said he saw nothing unusual. Maryanne confirmed that their relationship was cordial, if not all that affectionate, and he was in good spirits, though on medication for depression and anxiety. A check of phone and computer records did not show anything untoward. *Not much to work with*, Leo thought as he completed his notes.

Leo had decided the first task was to go to Maryanne's house. He thought that some piece of evidence may be hiding undetected. The police are professionals but with the pressure of work, and when a case seems clear cut, they can miss clues.

"This is Denis's work area," Maryanne said, as she showed Leo into the study. The room had a double glass window with a view across the mountains. Most of the rooms in the large Queensland style house had spectacular views across their own land and the surrounds. A large polished timber desk with

office chair sat in the middle of the room with a laptop computer.

Leo stood at the front of the desk and gazed around the room. There were photos on the low bookcase against the back wall. Two small framed prints were happy couple shots with Denis and Maryanne, one older couple - parents perhaps and one photo of a young man.

"Is that Denis when he was younger?" Leo asked.

"That's his son from a previous relationship," Maryanne said. "He connected with him for the first time only about a year ago. His name's Ken." Maryanne paused. "I've never met him. Apparently, his mother passed away a while ago. She had cancer or something."

"He looks a lot like Denis, doesn't he?" Leo asked as he peered at the photo.

"Yes, I suppose he does," Maryanne replied.

"Did the police talk to Ken?" Leo asked as he pulled out his notebook.

"I don't know. They didn't mention him to me. Do you think he could be involved?"

"I have no idea... but I'd like to have a chat with him," Leo said. "Have you got his surname and address?" Leo was hopeful that Ken was the critical lead in this case.

Ken, a student in his twenties, lived in a unit block in South Brisbane with two other young people. Leo rang Ken and explained he was an investigator. He could sense Ken's reluctance to meet when he mentioned his father. The local coffee shop near Ken's unit was Leo's choice of venue for what he hoped would be a relaxed conversation.

"I am trying to locate your dad. Have you heard from him recently?" Leo asked as the waiter placed the two coffees on the table. The shop looked more like a country museum than a café with old furniture and artefacts - the atmosphere was all important.

"I have seen him once in the last year. We don't have a close relationship." Ken replied with a stern look on his face. "Why are you looking for him?"

"He's been missing for over two weeks." Leo didn't get the look of surprise from Ken that he was expecting. "No one had heard from him and his wife is extremely concerned."

"Well, I haven't heard anything. To be honest, I wouldn't expect to. Like I said I'm not close to my father." Ken sipped his coffee.

"So you haven't been to Montville or Maleny recently?" Leo asked.

"No, and actually I've never been to my dad's house."

Leo could feel the tension. This was a touchy subject. What the hell... Leo needed to know.

"Is there any bad blood between you and your father?"

"Well if you mean am I angry about him abandoning me and Mum - not giving us money - probably being the cause of Mum's death - yes I am."

Leo had touched the nerve. He knew the meeting was going badly but pressed on.

"Do you own a vehicle Ken?" Leo asked.

"Yes, a Mazda two."

"What colour is it?"



"Brown, why do you want to know?" Ken replied with a scowl.

"A vehicle was seen near your dad's house at the time of his disappearance - Saturday morning two weeks ago," Leo replied.

"I've already told you I wasn't up there and I work Saturday mornings. Check if you like," Ken said with genuine anger in his voice. "Look I don't know anything and I don't want to know." He stood pushing his chair back, turned and walked out of the shop.

Leo pulled out his notebook and jotted the detail of the conversation before finishing his coffee. He would like to come back here. He was impressed by the ambience.

Ken definitely had the motive to harm his father but looked to have an alibi. Leo decided to check further with Maryanne's neighbours. Jerry Martin, who lived alone in a timber cabin style home next door to the York's, agreed to meet with Leo the following morning.

Jerry's décor was unusual, to say the least. A huge beaten copper sun hung imposingly over the fireplace. Small Aztec type artefacts sat on furniture and shelves around the room. The open timber ceiling gave the place a feeling of warmth. Jerry's personal attributes were as unique as his decorating style. Dressed in jeans and white tee-shirt, he had a bushy salt and pepper beard and a long grey ponytail. He looked to be in his fifties - it was hard to tell. His piercing grey eyes made Leo uncomfortable.

"Can I ask a few questions about the disappearance of Denis York, if you don't mind Jerry?" Leo asked as he sat down and gazed around the room with unbridled interest.

"No problem," Jerry replied.

Leo couldn't help but ask. "Are you into archaeology?"

"Not exactly, I believe the Mayans knew the secrets of life," he said smiling. "Did you know that **Kinich Ahau, the Mayan Sun God transformed into the Christian God.**"

*Okay... looks like Jerry's a weirdo,* Leo thought.

"No, that's interesting." Leo wanted to get back to reality.

"Did you see Denis the morning he disappeared?" Leo asked with his notebook out and pen poised.

"Police have already asked about this," Jerry said, still smiling.

"Yes I know but I need to confirm the details," Leo said.

"I was down the back of the property, doing some clearing. So no, I didn't see him."

"What about vehicles, did you notice any in the area?"

"No, I was down the back," Jerry said tersely.

Jerry leaned forward. "Denis had some strange views you know."

"Really," Leo replied. The irony didn't escape him.

"Yeah, he was an atheist. How bad is that? Even Satanists believe in something. I told the poor man he would pay in the next life."

"Yeah well everyone is entitled to their point of view Jerry," Leo said, thinking that wherever Jerry went he would have a lot of company.

"Anyway, thanks for your time. I'll be in touch if I need more information." Leo was keen to get out and headed for the door. Jerry's odd behaviour had convinced Leo that he should investigate the man thoroughly.

The daylight was fading, it was getting cold and Leo parked his yellow Suzuki well away from Jerry Martin's cabin. Concealed by the cover of darkness he walked to the property front boundary and down the side of the building. There was no fence that he could see and like the York's property next door, it was likely in excess of twenty acres. Leo positioned himself, with an infrared camera in hand, on a large rock obscured by bushes about ten metres to the side of the cabin back door. He could observe any comings or goings at the front or back from this spot. He waited. This was the boring part of investigative work that Leo hated. He could sit here for a night, or many nights, with no result. He had a feeling that something would happen tonight. It was the winter solstice.

The back door opened and light flooded out onto the grassy yard area. It was 11.30pm. Leo had been waiting for about four hours. Jerry stepped out in jeans and jacket and with a backpack slung over one shoulder. He had a flashlight in his hand and walked directly to an opening in the line of trees behind the yard. Leo darted over through the opening before Jerry got too far away. He could see the flashlight flickering and moving in the bush ahead. Having only one good eye was not going to make this any easier. Jerry was following a rough track through the long grass and scattered gum trees. Leo used his infrared camera to find his way and follow Jerry's heat signature. Jerry moved steadily along a path zigzagging its way down the bushy hillside with Leo following.

*Where the hell is he going?* Leo asked himself.

Leo was thinking it mustn't be much further to the bottom of the hill when the flashlight disappeared.

*Bloody hell, where's he gone?*

Leo tried to hurry without losing his footing. The track curved around an outcrop of large boulders. Leo stopped. Directly in front of him was a small solid looking timber cabin. It reminded Leo of a Canadian log cabin with a front porch and small glass windows. A light was on inside. Leo crept up to the side window and surreptitiously looked inside. He was not prepared for what he saw. Denis York was lying spread-eagled on a table in the middle of the room. He was dressed in shorts and a long sleeve shirt. His eyes were open but he wasn't moving. He looked drugged. Mayan symbols adorned the cabin. Jerry was standing at a bench built on to the wall. He was opening a small bottle. Leo's heart started thumping when he saw a long blade knife on the bench. He knew the Mayans practised human sacrifice. The door was bolted on the inside.

*I need to get in there now but I'm not up to breaking the door down, Leo thought. I have no weapon and if Jerry's a homicidal maniac I'm in trouble.*

Leo considered his options and decided that if he couldn't get in then he would get Jerry to come out - hopefully before he killed Denis. Leo stepped around to the front of the cabin and stood at the front of the porch wishing he had a taser.

"Jerry, it's Leo Budge, come out," Leo called loudly. Leo heard the door bolt sliding across. The wooden door opened. Jerry stood motionless with the light streaming from behind him.

"Leo, what the hell are you doing here?"

"I'm stopping you from killing Denis York," Leo said sternly.

"The police are on their way Jerry."

"Come inside, it's cold out here."

"What have you done to Denis?" As Leo tried to look intimidating Denis York stepped onto the porch.

"What's going on?" Denis asked.

"Leo, here thinks I'm going to kill you," Jerry said calmly.

"Well, what the hell are you doing, with the knife and him on the table?" Leo asked.

"Denis is being initiated into the Mayan Order of the Solar Temple. He has decided to be one of us and shun all his worldly possessions and previous relationships. This winter solstice ceremony involves a small amount of a calming drug and the sign of **Kinich Ahau cut onto the shoulder.**" **Jerry paused. "Like this," he opened the neck of his shirt to show the sun symbol scar.**

Leo looked at Denis with bewilderment.

"So why don't you just piss off," Denis said.

### **The Leo Budge Files - The Deli Purple Sapphire**

He was surprised at the redness, the intense colour of the fresh blood. It flowed quickly, spreading across the polished timber floor trying to escape from the rough-edged gash in Harry Morgan's head. Nick hadn't killed before. He was in over his head this time. Violence for his ilk was a part of existence. He was a petty criminal, and now a murderer. The skin on Nick's face tightened under the ski mask and his teeth clenched. The older man was no conquest. A punch to his soft face and his head cracked against the bottom step. It was over. Killing him was part of the instructions. It made no difference to Nick. He would be well paid and out of the country. The spreading blood was slowing its movement. He stepped around the dead man, pleased that his pleading eyes were closed.

He climbed the stairs two by two, the adrenalin driving him. Nick wanted to get the thing and get out. The house was in a private bushland location but he was not going to take unnecessary risks. The huge bedroom window view out to the mountains caught his eye. He pulled the curtain, swivelled and looked around the room. Rose was specific, go to the safe in the walk in robe. The safe door will be open. This was too easy - not even locked. The object was wrapped in a soft black velvet cloth. He removed it carefully. The gold sceptre was inlaid with precious stones with one dominating purple sapphire. It seemed to flicker as if alive. Nick rolled it back in the cloth, gripping it tightly. He darted out of the room and down the stairs. His car was parked nearby and he smiled as he got in. He placed the object with his ski mask and gloves in the back seat. This was his ticket to a new life. Lie low for a while then meet up with Rose as planned.

Leo was relieved to hear from Tony from Sun Country Insurance. He'd had no investigative work since the missing person case - and he was trying to forget that one. Tony had emailed through an information request for his services and Leo was going through the details in his home office. Much of the Insurance work he'd had was routine but this one was heavy duty and already had police involvement. Leo skimmed through the details. It appeared that a house robbery had gone badly and the property owner - a Mr Harry Morgan - had been murdered. His wife Meg was making a claim for the only stolen item, a golden sceptre known as 'The Deli Purple Sapphire'. The item belonged to the family from English ancestors. The claim was for - Leo's jaw dropped - \$535,000.00.

"Holy shit," Leo said out loud and looked at Andre, who was curled up in the top tier of Leo's inwards tray. "I can understand why someone might kill for that."

Leo liked to talk to Andre. It clarified his thoughts to speak them out loud. Andre rarely responded other than to give a look of disdain, or perhaps disinterest, with his clear golden Burmese eyes.

"This sapphire has a name. Let's see what we can find Andre."

Leo typed 'Deli Purple Sapphire' into his laptop internet search and hit enter. Leo leaned back and rolled his eyes.

"Oh, I should have known. The Sapphire is cursed."

All the first page headings were related to the curse of 'The Deli Purple Sapphire'. Leo wasn't into the supernatural and was always amazed at how often, apparently intelligent, educated people could believe, without a shred of verifiable evidence, in magic, curses, miracles, voodoo, and the like. For the next twenty minutes, Leo took notes from the some the web sites. The legend started in 1857 when the sceptre was

looted from the Indian Temple of Indra in Cawnpore by an English Bengal Calveryman Colonel Ferris. He took it back to England. The misfortune, sickness and financial ruin for him and his family struck soon after. The unfortunate events continued when the sceptre was given to a friend of Ferris who subsequently committed suicide. In 1890 the sapphire was in the possession of Edward Heron-Allen, a respected scholar and scientist. The curse should have ended with this supposedly rational man. However, Heron-Allen became convinced that the sceptre was the cause of misfortune and also the appearance of a Hindu Yogi apparition in his family home - searching for the sapphire he believed. The sceptre was stored away in the British Natural History Museum for some time until recently brought to Australia by the Morgan family.

*Well, Harry Morgan certainly had some bad luck,* Leo thought, as he flicked back to the email from Tony and scanned the details.

*Why, apart from the value of the cover, of course, was Sun Country Insurance concerned about this policy?* Leo wondered.

"The Morgans only purchased the policy a month ago," Leo whispered as he peered at the email. "I also need to confirm that there was a working security system and the sceptre was kept in a safe at the residence."

This claim had set off the alarm bells at Sun Country as a potential fraud case and hence the service request to Leo. He checked his diary and decided to contact Meg Morgan for an interview.

It had been two weeks since the job, and Nick was heading to the agreed meeting place. About two hours out of Brisbane city and Nick checked the car GPS - Old Coach Road at the bridge



Rose had said. Not far now, he pulled onto a long straight dirt road edged by gums and low bush. He picked up speed and could see the dust swirling away behind his Toyota Camry in the rearview mirror. The sceptre was in the back seat wrapped in the velvet cloth. A 9mm Glock G19 handgun was on the front passenger seat.

*No one is likely to see us out here,* Nick thought with a thin smile.

Nick could see the bridge ahead in the distance and a vehicle was parked nearby. Suddenly a figure appeared from nowhere. Standing in the middle of the road, wearing bright orange robes. Nick screamed as he hit the brakes and pulled the steering wheel violently. The image of the wild grey beard and hair and weathered face with a bright red dot between his eyebrows overwhelmed him as he slammed into the tree.

Friday afternoon and Leo parked his yellow Suzuki in the Morgan's driveway. The house was an average looking two level brick place situated on a large bushy block of land in the outer Brisbane western suburbs. He was expecting the house to be a little more ostentatious. For some reason, he thought the owners of such an exotic item as the sceptre would be well off. Meg Morgan opened the front door. She was an attractive woman, in her forties Leo estimated. She had a slim build, short styled blond hair, an elfin face and she spoke with an unusually low sultry tone that reminded Leo of Stevie Nicks.

"So Mr Budge, as you should understand, this has been very distressing for me. It's only been two weeks since Harry's murder. What exactly do you want to know that I haven't already put into the claim?" Meg asked as she made herself comfortable in the lounge chair.

Leo sat in the two-seater adjacent to Meg. "Please call me Leo," he said, wanting the conversation to be as relaxed as possible. "I certainly understand... and I am so sorry for your loss."

Leo wanted to ask if she believed the curse on 'The Deli Purple Sapphire', but decided, given the tragic circumstances, it would be insensitive to bring it up.

"There are just a few issues that I need to clarify with you. I also know that you have spoken with the police and I apologise in advance if I cover some of the same issues." Leo smiled, hoping he didn't look insincere.

"Firstly, you say that there is a security system here in the house, was it working at the time of the robbery?" Leo had his notebook and pen ready.

"Yes, the police have all the footage from our cameras. He wore a facemask you know - the man that killed poor Harry." Meg looked down and brought her hands up to her face.

"I know this is difficult for you Meg," Leo watched her intently.

"It's okay." She lifted her head and gave Leo a sad look.

"So security was all good... and the sceptre was kept in your home safe. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Who knows the combination for it?" Leo asked and looked directly at Meg.

Meg hesitated. "Only Harry and me," she replied. "Why are you asking that?" Meg straightened in her chair.

"I'm just assessing the possibility of the intruder knowing the combination. The police report said the safe was left

open. No apparent force used to crack it. Sometimes combinations can be known to other family members or left written down someplace."

"That couldn't have happened. He either forced Harry to open it or he worked it out himself," Meg said with a stern look.

"Yes, you're probably right," Leo said, deciding not to push the issue and thinking that Meg's demeanour had changed remarkably.

"One more thing... you have had the sapphire here for some years but decided to take out the insurance cover only about a month ago," Leo paused. "Was there something specific that prompted you to do it?" Leo asked.

"Yes, we had it appraised and realized it was more valuable than we thought. So we insured it." Meg said abruptly. "Look, Leo, I have other things to do. Can we wrap this up?"

Leo knew that sceptre was appraised at the request of Sun Country Insurance to enable the policy, not by the Morgans. "That's all I need. Thank you so much for your time, Meg." Leo stood up and headed for the door.

It was obvious to Leo that Meg had become defensive and was acting strangely. Certainly requiring further investigation and justifying Leo placing the listening device under the front of the two-seater lounge that he'd been sitting on. The item that Leo had found on AliExpress was perfect for his needs. Fitted with a sim card the small device was sensitive and relayed nearby sounds and recorded to his mobile phone whenever he activated it.

When Leo got back home he activated the listening device to give it a test. He could hear kitchen noises, water being

turned on at the sink, clinking cutlery, but no voices - Meg must have been alone. He could hear all this from the device in the lounge room. Leo was impressed. Then it happened. He couldn't believe his luck. Someone had arrived. Leo pressed his phone to his ear and listened intently.

"Meg... Meg... it's me." A muffled voice - *must be at the front door* Leo thought.

"Tommy, what are you doing here? Meg said.

"It's okay, there's no one around. I've been watching the place," Tommy replied.

Leo heard light footsteps and the click of a door opening and closing - then a soft sucking sound.

*Oh, they're kissing, Meg's having an affair,* Leo knew this was a critical revelation.

"Did you pay him? Have you got the sapphire?" Meg asked excitedly.

"Bit of a story with that." Tommy paused. "I was at the agreed meeting place this afternoon." His voice got louder on Leo's phone. They must have moved into the lounge.

"I was at the agreed meeting place at Old Coach Road, waiting for Nick when I saw his car coming down the road towards me. All of sudden, he veers off the road and into a bloody tree."

"What?"

"Yeah, when I got to the car, it was badly smashed up."

"What about Nick?" Meg asked.

"The poor bugger was dead. But get this, he was dead because the sceptre was stuck in the back of his head. It must have flown from the back seat into his head like a missile when he

hit the tree. It was not pleasant extracting it I can tell you."

"You're kidding... but why did he go off the road?"

"I've got no idea, but I'm starting to wonder about this bloody curse," Tommy said.

"No that's rubbish. It's just bad luck for Nick... and good luck for us. We keep the money *and* the sapphire." Meg paused. "Where is it by the way?" Meg asked.

"It's safe at my place," he replied.

"I think we should bring our travel plans forward. I had an insurance investigator here today asking some awkward questions." Meg said.

"Like what?"

"Why did we buy a policy only recently and how did the safe get opened so easily," Meg said.

"Well, nothing incriminating can be proved. There's nothing to indicate that we planned the whole thing or that you were the one who left the safe open for Nick. Just relax, I'm going back home to pack up and work out how we can leave without too much suspicion."

Leo heard more sucking noises and smiled, clutching his mobile to his ear. *You guys are so busted*, he thought.

Leo had been in touch with his contact in the Queensland Police, Detective Sergeant Darcy O'Malley, and given him the full details of what he had uncovered on Meg Morgan and Tommy. It was still unknown who Tommy actually was, but Leo was sure that Darcy would question Meg and quickly track him down. Leo knew that his recording from the listening device was illegal

and wouldn't be admissible in a court but when Tommy was apprehended with the sceptre it wouldn't matter.

Leo was binge watching his favourite show 'Midsomer Murders' when Darcy rang. Leo paused the show and answered the phone.

"Leo...Hi, you'll never guess," Darcy said.

"What?"

"There was a fire at an apartment block. Seems a ground floor restaurant had a gas leak that ignited. The apartment upstairs was damaged badly by smoke and fire and the occupant died from the fumes." Darcy hesitated for dramatic effect.

"It turns out that his name was Thomas Rose and he was Meg's accomplice... Tommy. We also found the 'The Deli Purple Sapphire' in his burnt-out apartment"

"Shit, really," Leo said

"And... the body of part-time criminal Nick Scallini was discovered in a car smashed into a tree at Old Coach Road. Ski-mask, gloves and a gun were in the car. We have confirmed that he was the murderer of Harry Morgan."

"Good work Darc, looks like you've got the case all tied up," Leo said, thinking that it was really himself who had done all the good work.

"You know, there might be something in this curse story Leo. There's been a lot of bad stuff happened to people."

"C'mon mate, thought you were smarter than that. Suppose you believe in Santa Claus too." Leo said with a tone of derision.

"Okay, okay, anyway thanks for your work on this one and we should catch up for a drink soon."

"Yeah, no problem, see you mate." Leo hung up and chuckled to himself. He was amazed at people getting sucked into this curse fantasy.

He was, however, a little surprised when he read in the paper that the location of the fire that caused Tommy's death was 'The Deli Temple' Indian restaurant.

### The Leo Budge Files - Bathtime

"You think Margo had something to do with the death of her mother?" Lucy asked, lounging back on Leo's leather couch with her legs resting on the ottoman. She tossed back her thick dark shoulder length hair and sipped leisurely on a glass of her favourite, Curly Flat Pinot Noir. This Friday night it was Leo's turn to cook and the pre-dinner cheese, crackers, and wine were an essential ingredient for a successful evening.

"Not just something to do with it," Leo said. "I reckon she killed her." He paused and looked at Lucy as he stood at the kitchen bench. She was dressed in tight jeans and plain white tee-shirt and Leo couldn't suppress a fleeting thought about the events of the night ahead.

"I don't usually rush to make judgments without all the facts of these cases, but this Margo is such a miserable, nasty bitch, I think she must have done it," Leo said with a smile.

"You're not serious?"

Leo filled his wine glass. "Not really, but I think she should be locked up because of her cranky disposition."

"She's certainly got under your skin," Lucy said.

Lucy Ying was Leo's sounding board. As much as he enjoyed discussing issues with his Burmese cat Andre, Lucy was much better with feedback. He and Lucy had been seeing each other for over a year and had developed a comfortable relationship. They were both in their forties, with careers and separate living arrangements to manage. They connected routinely for companionship, sex, affection, and fun, without needing to compromise on their individuality. Leo would rarely admit how important Lucy was to him. He loved her temperament, always calm and clear thinking. He thought it had something to do with her genes. Lucy's Chinese and Aboriginal ancestry was



unusual, if not unique. The history of persecution of both these groups in Australia could have had a negative influence on Lucy - it didn't. At any given time she was 100% Chinese, 100% Aboriginal or just 100% Australian, and she harboured no grudge against the early colonials. They were a product of their times and the environment, Lucy thought, same as her Chinese great grandfather who came to the Australian goldfields and married an Aboriginal woman. Lucy had deep empathy for her ancestors who had to deal with violent racism but she didn't think putting shit on Captain Cook or changing the national anthem would make much of a difference for today's problems. Leo's more recent Scottish ancestry - his parents emigrated in 1960 - made it difficult for him to take ownership of the colonial atrocities and he was pleased with her pragmatic view.

Leo sauntered from the kitchen with his wine glass in hand and sat beside Lucy. "I can't say the interview I had with Margo this morning went well. I thought she was defensive and arrogant. She didn't seem to be upset at all about the death of her Mum - in fact, I'd say she was pleased," Leo said and took a sip of wine.

"So why did they send you to interview her. Was the death suspicious?" Lucy asked.

"Suspicious... bloody oath, electrocuted in the bath with a hairdryer, no fingerprints on it, and with a life policy of half a million dollars - what do you reckon?"

"Accidents can happen, Leo," Lucy replied.

"Yeah, but this looks so dodgy," Leo said with a frown. "I mean who, in their right mind would sit in a bath of water and use an electric hair dryer. Of course, there was no Earth Leakage Device in the old house." Leo said holding his left-hand out palm upward.

"A what?"

"Earth Leakage Device... safety switch, to cut power if there's a short." Leo said, hoping he sounded like he knew what he was talking about.

"Okay, does seem odd, but the lady was old, wasn't she? Maybe she didn't know any better,"

"Yeah, 83, but old doesn't mean stupid," Leo said, pausing in contemplation.

"It's difficult to prove anything criminal in a case like this. Margo was living with her mother, Violet, as a sort of carer, and on the night of the ... accident, Margo's friend Leah was staying the night. The way they explained it, Violet was having a bath and they were watching TV when they heard a crackling noise in the bathroom. Margo went to investigate and there she was, sitting in the bath sizzling, with the hair dryer set on high. The police haven't come up with anything and I'm at a loss with what to do next."

"I know what I'd do," Lucy said.

Leo raised his eyebrows and looked at her. "Enlighten me," he said.

"I would go back for another talk with Margo and I would tell her that her fingerprints had been found on the dryer."

"Okay... and why would I do that?"

"To see her reaction, of course - is she surprised or not surprised? If she did it and wore gloves, or wiped the hairdryer clean, she would be shocked to hear that her prints were on it. She might even blurt out something incriminating." Lucy said casually.

Leo stared at her with unblinking admiration. "Not just a pretty face and gorgeous body," he said with a wicked smile.

Leo jumped up and headed towards the kitchen. "I'd better get on with dinner so we can get to dessert," he said giggling as he went.

The house was a lowset brick pre-war cottage at Newmarket in Brisbane's north. Leo didn't let Margo know he was coming. He wanted her to be off-guard if possible. He knocked on the solid timber front door.

"Shit, you again, I told you everything yesterday. It's Saturday for Chrissake," Margo spat, with the door half open.

"Yes, sorry Margo, I have a couple more quick questions and I'll be gone. Just need a couple of minutes of your time."

"Leah's here with me, Okay?" Margo asked, and opened the door.

Leo hesitated, he thought Margo would be alone. "Sure, no sweat, and I will need to use my recorder, if that alright with you."

"No bloody way, you're not recording anything. So you may as well piss off." Margo said angrily.

"It's only to save me having to write things down Margo, saves time. I'll have to stay longer if I have to write everything. It's not a big deal really," Leo said with a supercilious grin, pleased with his quick thinking.

Margo's frown softened a little. "Well, okay if it makes it quicker." She showed Leo through to the small lounge room and introduced him to Leah who was sitting on the sofa reading the paper.

Leo thought Leah was the exact opposite of Margo. Both women looked to be in their fifties, but where Leah was quietly spoken and mousy, brown long hair and no makeup, Margo was loud and brassy, short blond hair and painted. Leo wondered about their relationship.

Leo sat opposite the two women and turned on his small recorder. "Now Margo, you mentioned that you were unaware that your mother had a life policy with Sun Country Insurance until recently." Leo didn't want to go to the fingerprint question first-up.

"Yeah, she only told me about a month ago. She said it would be something for me for looking after her all these years. I said 'thanks', but told her she'd likely live to 100 just to be a pain. Guess I got lucky," Margo said with a wry smile.

Leo wanted to slap her but controlled himself. "The police have been involved to investigate Violet's death, I understand?" Leo asked.

"Yeah, they have questioned us both extensively."

*Okay here we go,* Leo thought, feeling tense.

"You know they checked fingerprints in the bathroom and on the hairdryer?"

"Yeah, so?" Margo replied.

"You know they found your prints on the hairdryer."

"No, they couldn't have," Leah said abruptly, her eyes wide.

Leo and Margo both turned and looked at her. Leah hadn't said a word until then.

"I mean... it's not Margo's hairdryer. It's Violet's. There wouldn't be any of Margo's prints on it, would there," she stammered. "How do you know it Margo's prints?"

Leo looked down and peered at his notebook. "Sorry, my mistake, Margo's prints were on the doorknob, not the hairdryer."

*That was unexpected,* Leo thought. *Leah has reacted, not Margo.*

After leaving the house, Leo decided to arrange a private meeting with Leah. She was hiding something and came across to Leo as a person who may crack under pressure. He rang her first thing on Monday morning. She worked at the local shopping centre florist and agreed to meet for coffee.

"I thought I would hear from you," Leah said and took a tentative sip from the cup. The café was directly across the aisle from her florist shop and perfect for her to keep an eye on it while she was away.

"Yeah, why is that?" Leo asked as he gazed around. The corner table where they sat was private enough for his liking.

"A feeling I got from our conversation at Margo's."

"You did react a little strangely at one stage Leah." Leo decided he would ease into the subject. Then follow up with a direct confrontation that might rattle her.

"I killed Violet," Leah said softly.

Leo had his coffee up to his mouth and appeared frozen as he stared over the lip of the cup. Time seemed to have stopped.

"What did you say?" Leo blurted, putting the cup down slowly.

"I killed her... I went to her room when she was in the bath, got her hairdryer, went to the bathroom, plugged it in, switched it on and dropped it in the bath. I wore gloves and that's why I reacted when you said Margo's prints were there."

Leo was stunned. His mind buzzed trying to process what he'd just heard.

"You said that you and Margo were watching TV?"

"Yes, after I killed Violet, I went back out and sat with Margo. She heard a noise and went to the bathroom."

"Why did you kill her?" Leo had to ask.

Leah took a deep breath and looked at Leo. "Because Margo deserves to have a life. She's been looking after Violet for so many years. When I found out about the life insurance I thought it was the best thing to do." Leah clasped her hands together on the table as if in prayer. "Violet wasn't a nice person you know."

*Must run in the family*, Leo thought. The shock was wearing off and he was getting his mind back on track.

"So you went to the bathroom, waltzed in - Violet didn't say anything - like 'what are you doing in here I'm naked'?"

Leah didn't respond immediately. "I knocked and said I needed to get my comb. Then I went in and did it."

"Did you plug the dryer into the wall socket or the one near the basin?" Leo asked.

Leah hesitated again. "I don't really remember, could have been either," she said sheepishly.

Leo knew then, that she wasn't the one who killed Violet. She was covering for Margo.

"Okay Leah, this is serious and I will need to let the police know. I'll do that later. You can finish work and they will contact you soon."

Leo wasn't planning to contact the police. He was heading over to see Margo.

Leo parked his yellow Suzuki outside and went to the door and knocked.

"Okay this is bloody harassment," Margo groaned through the half-open door.

"Margo, this is important. We need to talk. Leah's confessed." Leo said quickly before Margo could close the door.

Margo opened the door with a look on her face like a bewildered owl. "She what?"

Leo went through to the lounge and sat down in the same chair he used last time. Margo followed.

"She has confessed to killing Violet." Leo paused and stared at Margo. "I don't think she did it. I think you did."

"You think *I* did it?" Margo said loudly. Now her face was like an angry owl.

"Yeah, I spoke to Leah today and it was obvious that she was covering for you. She is not a good liar."

"Leo Budge the investigator, you are so bloody clever," Margo said with the sarcasm dripping from every word. "I have something to show you." She stood and went down the hallway.

Leo waited quietly, hoping she wasn't getting some kind of weapon. Margo returned with a folded piece of paper in her hand. She handed it to Leo.

Leo unfolded the paper and read out loud the hand-written message.

'Margo, I am truly sorry for being a burden. I know I have not been easy to live with. I don't want to be here any longer so at least you will get some money. Love Mum.'

Leo looked up. Margo had tears in her eyes. She wasn't as tough as she made out. "Where did you find this?" he asked.

"When I found her in the bath, it was on the wash basin."

"Why didn't you say anything about it?" he asked.

"Oh c'mon smarty, you've worked with insurance before."

Leo hesitated. " Yes, of course, they don't pay out on suicides," he said looking down at his shoes.

"Anyway, it's all out in the open now. So that's that. You've done your job, asshole." Margo said with a tone of resignation.

"Well, what the hell is Leah on about then?" Leo asked.

"She really thinks I've done it... silly tart. She was trying to protect me."

"She really cares about you, you know Margo. You'd better ring her and let her know what's going on," Leo said.

"Yeah, I like her too. She's going to move in with me now. So that's good, even though we won't have any money." Margo said softly, with her head bowed.

Leo stood and started towards the door. He stopped and turned back to face Margo. "How long has your mother had that life policy?" he asked.

"Five or six years I think. Why?" She looked up.

"Did you know that if a life policy is active for over two years the company will still pay out on suicide."



A smile split Margo's face. "Leo you really are an asshole."

## Dunedin

Jake didn't know what it was like to have a father. He had questioned his mother Fay on a number of occasions about his father's identity. The answers were consistently vague and unsatisfying - a one night stand - don't know who - don't remember. He had lived with his Mother Fay in a rented house in Brisbane until he left home at age nineteen. Jake realised with increasing clarity that his Mother was the reason for any success that he'd had in his life. Through his health problems as a child and emotional issues as a teen, she hadn't wavered. His career as an engineer was just beginning and he wanted her to be proud of him. Jake had started his first job and moved in with his partner Jody. His mother's sudden death was a devastating blow. The funeral was small, mainly friends Fay had made through her work at the library. The only family member at the funeral was Jake's Uncle Don from Dunedin. Fay had been born and raised in Dunedin and she had moved to Brisbane following Jake's birth. Don had visited them in Brisbane a few times previously. Fay had never been back. The reason, for anyone asking, was always a curt reply about family disputes. The truth was more specifically that Fay's parents, devout Presbyterians, had not reacted well when she became a single mother. Her only sibling, older brother Don, was the rare contact from her home in Dunedin. Jake was always excited when Don visited. He brought presents and made a fuss over the young Jake. The wake for Fay at the Normanby Hotel was a less pleasant reason for meeting.

Jake and Don sat at a small table out under the high roofed outdoor area of the pub. A huge ficus tree spread its grey gnarly arms and soft green foliage as a backdrop. The traffic going to and from the city gave an undulating buzz.

"There's no history of heart problems in the family that I know of. It was a shock when I heard. She was only fifty-nine. I'm two years older you know, I'd better get a checkup." Don said and raised the glass to his lips.

"Yeah, no one could believe it happened. There were no symptoms."

"Jake, there is something Fay gave me for you. I need to give it to you before I leave." Don placed an envelope on the table.

Jake pulled out a photo of the Dunedin Anderson's Bay Cemetery. He stared at the image of graves and grass and trees. He flipped the photo over and read out loud the handwritten words.

"I'm so sorry, your mother is waiting." He looked up at Don, puzzled. "What does this mean?"

Don didn't answer. "Your Grandparents are buried in that graveyard and I think Fay would like you to come to Dunedin and visit them. You can stay with me. My daughters have moved out now and it's just me and Millie at my place."

"That would be great, thanks Don. I have wanted to see where Mum lived for a long time." He had also wanted to visit Dunedin and try to track down the identity of his father. "I will need to organise a few things first."

"Of course, let me know when you can make it."

Jake was still at a loss as to what the photo was all about. Perhaps Dunedin would reveal the answer.

The flight to Dunedin was uneventful and took around three and a half hours. Don picked Jake up at the airport. It was a short thirty-minute drive on a single lane highway through rolling green farmlands and a few small villages. Jake could appreciate why Scottish settlers would have selected this area to live. It was late May; the sky was grey and the wind was biting. Don's house was across the bay from Dunedin city at Ocean Grove high on the headland with stunning views of the Southern Ocean. They arrived as the daylight was fading. Jake settled himself in the spare room of the unpretentious weatherboard house and then joined Don and his wife Millie in the front room for a drink. Millie had accompanied Don only once to Brisbane when Jake was a boy. When Jake saw her he didn't remember her face. Her high pitch cackling laugh, however, was unforgettable. The front room had wide glass windows to take in the beauty and power of the Southern Ocean.

"You have a great spot here," Jake said as he swirled the ice around in his scotch and soda.

"Yeah, we love it. We've been here since we married," Millie said.

"Been a bit quiet since the girls have gone. At least I get to watch what I want on TV now," Don said, and Millie cackled.

"They're both coming over with their partners for dinner tomorrow night - to meet you at last," Millie said with a smile.

"I am so pleased that you came over Jake. I just wish Fay had wanted to come back after our Mum and Dad passed away." Don said.

"I could never get a straight answer out of Mum about the problems with her parents. Maybe you can enlighten me?" Jake asked.

Don leaned forward and put his glass on the table. "Thinking about it now it seems hard to believe," he paused for a moment. "Fay and I were brought up with the fear of God. Our parents were strongly religious in the Scottish Presbyterian tradition and they expected us to follow their lead. Fay was nineteen when she met and started a relationship with a Doctor who practised in Dunedin. Doctor Houghton, who wasn't that much older than Fay and was just starting out. Fay had some medical issues and that's how they met."

Jake had a puzzled look on his face. "Mum told me she didn't know who my father was. Why didn't she tell me about that?"

"I think it was too painful for her to talk about. It was certainly painful for our parents, your grandparents. They were devastated. Fay had committed a terrible sin and they felt compelled to disown her. I had deserted religion as soon I was old enough to ask questions that no one could answer sensibly and I tried desperately to reason with them. They could not accept the situation. Their actions were guided by a book written by bronze age people from the middle east some two thousand years ago. Fay believed that she had no choice but to leave Dunedin."

"What about the Doctor?" Jake asked.

"The distress that Fay was going through at the time was compounded by the death of Doctor Houghton." Don's eyes were glistening and he was clearly feeling the emotion of the memories flooding through him. "The Doctor, as well as your grandparents, are buried at Anderson's Bay Cemetery - just a few minutes drive from here. I believe that's why your Mum gave you that photo. She wanted you to come here and find the truth." Don took a deep breath. "Tomorrow morning I am taking you to Anderson's Bay Cemetery."

Jake was speechless. He nodded in agreement. Millie hadn't spoken for some time, which was highly unusual.

Jake had a fitful night's sleep. The anticipation of the cemetery visit was weighing on him. He was up and dressed early and his eagerness to get going was obvious. A quick breakfast and he and Don were in the Toyota sedan cruising along Tomahawk Road. The trip was five minutes at most before they pulled up at the roadside with the cemetery on the left separating them from the Southern Ocean. The day was windy cold and grey, like yesterday, and Jake thought there were most likely many days like this. They walked a few metres along to the open double iron entry gate. A narrow bitumen roadway snaked from the entry down through the myriad of stone monuments and grave sites. Low growing shrubs, green and grey, were dotted among the sites. A few small trees by the roadway, battered by the wind, looked to be struggling to hold their positions. They turned off to the right, Jake behind Don, and followed a path beside a row of headstones. Don was peering at the inscriptions as he walked along. He stopped in front of an upright marble headstone.

"This is it,"

Jake moved closer and squatted down to read the inscription. He read out loud, "In loving memory of Doctor *Alice* Houghton. *Alice*? What's going on? This obviously isn't my father," he shouted spinning his head around to look up at Don.

"She is your mother, your biological mother," Don said

Jake's mouth hung open and his eyes were bulging. He didn't know what to say.

"I know this is a shock Jake. I'll explain as best I can. Your Mother, Fay, did have a relationship with Doctor Alice Houghton. It was a same-sex relationship. They had actually moved in together and wanted to settle down with a child. Fay was unable to have children so it was Alice who had to get pregnant. They found a suitable donor and when the time came, they both went to Sydney for the birth." Don paused and Jake stood to look at him face to face. "The tragedy was that Alice had serious complications and died in childbirth. I had kept in touch with Fay and she was shattered. She didn't return here after that. She moved with you to Brisbane and made a life there. You can imagine how our parents reacted to all this. Having a child out of wedlock would have been enough, but a lesbian relationship as well."

"I'm trying to take this all in Don. All these years Mum - Fay - kept this from me."

"She felt responsible for Alice's death and she was ashamed. Remember Jake, she was your Mother in every sense of the word except biologically. Everything she did was for you."

Jake's stomach was churning. "I feel like I've been cast adrift in a storm." He looked across the gravestones at the ocean with a dazed stare. A light drizzle had begun. "You know what this means Don. You are not my Uncle and it's not my Grandparents buried here."

"Well, you're right about one thing. I'm not your Uncle. Now come with me and we'll visit your grandparents." Don said with a wry smile and put his arm around Jake's shoulder.

### Are you Awake

The psychiatrist's office was larger than Matt had expected. Many of the office buildings in the old city area were renovated with smaller rooms. The walls were painted pink. 'An unusual colour choice for a doctor's office,' Matt thought. Doctor Erik Bergin's appearance was also a surprise. He was a thin man, average height, with grey-stubble beard wearing rimless glasses, a pink shirt, blue bow tie and dark trousers. Matt had a couple of days off work and was pleased he had got an appointment so quickly. There must have been a cancellation. He followed the doctor into the office.

"Matt, have a seat," the doctor said gesturing to the leather-covered armchair. Matt's mind wandered and he rapped his shin sharply on the edge of a low solid-polished timber coffee table as he sat. He felt nothing. The doctor sat in a similar armchair opposite.

"I see that you've been having disturbing dreams. Your local medical practitioner gave me a brief outline. He said it was urgent I see you," the doctor said as he perused the referral letter in his hand. He looked up at Matt. "If you don't mind, I'll run my recorder - I don't use a notebook," he said as he reached down and pressed a button on the small device on the table. "Let's start with you giving me a rundown on these dreams. When did they start and what can you remember of the content?"

Matt felt tense and settled himself into the chair. "They started only recently - about a week ago. I don't remember much of the first few. I thought nothing of them at the time. They were violent dreams," Matt said with a pained expression. "I was hurting my wife Julie."

"How were you hurting her?" the doctor asked.



"I can only remember being violent, until the dream last night. In this dream, I hit her with a golf club and killed her. This time the dream seemed real and it disturbed me a lot." Matt paused and rubbed his forehead. "That's when I knew I had to see someone - get some help. My local doctor was great and had me booked in with you this morning."

"Where were you, in this dream?" Doctor Bergin asked.

"We were at home - in the garage. We were having an argument - yelling at each other when I pulled the golf club out of the bag and hit her with it."

"Okay, was there anything unnatural about the setting? Generally, dreams are in strange surroundings. When you woke did you believe the events had actually taken place?"

"Oh yeah, I was in a panic. I rushed out of our bedroom expecting to see Julie lying in the garage with her head bashed in."

"You realise now that it was a dream?"

"Of course, Julie was in the kitchen when I came to my senses. She's in the waiting room now," Matt replied with a hint of aggravation.

"I'm just confirming you are not in any prolonged delusional state. It is possible to lose touch with reality when vivid, lifelike dreams are involved. Have you been having relationship problems with your wife?"

Matt hesitated before answering. "We've had problems - disagreements - nothing physical."

"Have you told Julie all the details of the dream?" the Doctor asked.

"Yeah, I wasn't going to, but thought I she should know everything."

"What about work, have you been under stress?"

"I'm in sales so we're always under pressure, part of the job," Matt replied.

"Anxiety can cause many unusual and unique physiological responses. I would like you to follow a regimen of relaxation activities that I have used with some success. I have a document for you that's quite easy to follow. You should start as soon as possible and we can see how you are doing in a couple of weeks."

Doctor Bergin provided a printed sheet of instructions, discussed the various relaxations techniques and concluded the consultation.

Matt gave Julie the details of Doctor Bergin's prognosis as they drove home. They agreed it made sense that stress from work played a part. Matt didn't mention he also thought Julie's nagging and spiteful personality was a factor.

The low-set brick house was a forty-five-minute drive from the city. They pulled into the driveway with Julie instructing Matt to start immediately on the relaxation exercises. He didn't argue and went directly to his favourite lounge chair and commenced number one - relaxed deep breathing.

Matt woke with a start. He had drifted off to sleep while doing the deep breathing. "*Well, that worked,*" he thought. He stood, blinked, rolled his shoulder blades and called.

"Julie... are you there?" The house was quiet. Maybe she'd gone out. She didn't work so she might be shopping. Matt decided to check the garage to see if the car was there. He walked through the kitchen and opened the door to the garage.

"Oh shit!" Matt jerked his hand up to his mouth. Julie lay on the concrete floor - her dead eyes staring at the ceiling. There was a large pool of drying blood under her head. Clumped strands of Julie's shoulder length grey-blond hair were splayed across it. A nine iron golf club with blood covered blade lay beside the body.

"No! No! This can't be real. This is my dream." Matt's heart thumped. "I wouldn't do this - would I?" Matt was confused. Julie was okay and now she isn't. Matt stepped over to the body, bent down and touched Julie's cold pale cheek.

"God! What do I do now?" He stood, mind racing, trying to think. He picked up the golf club, went through the house to the laundry and washed off the blood. "I need to get rid of her. I'll tell everyone she left me. They all know she was an erratic bitch," Matt went back to the garage, wrapped Julie's body in a tarpaulin that he had and loaded it into the car boot. He decided on a burial site as he put the shovel and pick into the car boot with the body. The hour's drive to the old quarry seemed to disappear in a blink. Matt parked and walked around to locate a suitable site out of the way - where the soil was not too hard to dig. He selected a spot at the base of a sheer cliff, behind a two metres high pile of granite rocks. "No one comes here anymore, this is perfect," he thought as he carried Julie's body to the selected gravesite. Matt dug, and dug, for over an hour without noticing the time. He wanted to make sure she was well down. Exhausted dirty and sweaty, he climbed out of the open grave and grimaced from the throbbing pain in his lower back. He rolled Julie over a few times and into the hole. The noise of the body's impact and crinkling tarpaulin startled the crows roosting in a nearby gum tree. Their raucous calls and flapping wings made Matt spin around with fright. He stood

watching them circle above before regaining his composure. He began refilling the hole.

The daylight was fading as he parked the car back in his garage. He went to the lounge and flopped down in his chair feeling mentally and physically drained. His back pain subsided and he closed his eyes.

"Matt, are you ok?" Julie said, standing with hands on hips.

Matt slowly opened his eyes. Julie stood in front of him.

Matt's body spasmed as he gripped the arms of the chair.

"Julie! What! You're here?"

"Of course I'm here. Where would I be? You've been sitting here asleep making all sorts of weird noises."

"Oh my God, I've just had another of those awful dreams. I feel sick," Matt said. "I can't keep doing this. I'm not able to close my eyes. Are you sure you're here?" He stood up and put his hand on Julie's shoulder to make sure she was real.

"We better ring that doctor. You probably need medication," Julie said.

"No good ringing now. He'll be finished for the day," Matt said.

Julie rang nevertheless. Doctor Bergin advised them to come in immediately.

Matt thought he was fortunate that the doctor was working late and able to see him again. He was feeling quite jittery and the thought of a calming drug was appealing. There was no one in the waiting room when they arrived. The receptionist had also gone home. The doctor's office door was wide open. He was expecting them.

"Matt, come in, and you're Julie," Doctor Bergin said holding out a hand for Julie to shake.

"Please sit down." They both sat at the coffee table opposite the doctor.

"Now Matt, you've had another dream episode already...today?" he said grabbing a notebook and pen.

"Yes, and I feel like I'm losing my mind."

"Can you tell me about it? Is it the same dream you had previously?" Doctor Bergin asked.

"It's not the same dream. It's a continuation of the dream-."

"The one where he killed me," Julie interrupted.

Matt knew that Julie shouldn't be here in the consultation, but this was not the usual situation.

"This time the dream continued with me driving Julie's body out to an old quarry and burying her," Matt said.

"Nice," Julie interrupted again.

Doctor Bergin gave Julie a glare and turned to Matt. "Did you feel you were in reality, like last time?" he asked.

"Yes, it was scary."

"You are clearly in a state where you are finding it difficult to differentiate conscious reality from the unconscious dream. The well-known psychoanalyst Stephen Le Berge has shown that it is possible to identify dream from reality through what he termed 'Dream Signs'. These are objects or experiences that do not fit into the real world. For example, when you're hurt you don't feel pain. There may be monsters, flying people, aliens and the like. If you can remember these unnatural things, when you wake then it is obvious that you've had a dream. Now I

want you to concentrate - think back to your dreams. Tell me if you can remember anything out of place."

Matt sat back in his chair and stared at the wall. "The only thing that sticks in my mind is the crows. There were crows at the quarry where I went to dig a grave," he said.

"Crows, did they talk or do something abnormal?" the doctor asked.

"Nothing specific, they were eerie I suppose." Matt paused.

"Um, you said that you don't feel pain in a dream?"

"Correct, very unlikely you'd feel pain," the doctor said.

"Matt gazed around the room at the yellow-painted walls. Then carefully reached over to the doctor's desk and grabbed a letter opener that was laying there. He stabbed it into the back of his hand. Julie and the doctor began to laugh.

## Diamondvale

Tommy O'Rourke was on a mission. He set letter out in front of him on the coffee table. This was the perfect place to start his search. Maric Cottages was a popular retreat for tourists and anyone looking for quiet country relaxation. The cottages were in the Diamondvale area, a little east of the township of Stanthorpe in the Queensland granite belt. Tommy arrived and settled himself in his cabin with the setting sun casting a red glow through the front windows. He had been planning this trip for some time. Julie and the kids were at their Grandparents in Melbourne for the April holidays and this was the perfect opportunity to investigate. Tommy picked up the letter and leaned back on the leather couch. It was a copy of the original letter from his Grandfather Patrick (Plover) O'Rourke to his wife Marie. The nickname "Plover" was given because Patrick had skinny legs similar to the grey bird. He had always been known by family and friends simply as Plover. The letter was posted in 1890 and was preserved in the family due to the disturbing fact that Plover was neither seen nor heard from again after sending it. He had worked in the tin mines around Stanthorpe to accumulate money while his wife and son in Brisbane. He stayed in an abandoned cabin on a property in the Diamondvale region and went home every month to see his family. Wife Marie reported him missing when he failed to arrive at the expected time and didn't contact her. A search was carried out without success. He was never seen again. Tommy sat and perused Plover's faded handwriting. The first paragraph stood out as a clue for Tommy.

'I am missing you and Michael as usual, but I now believe it has been worthwhile coming here. Through my own endeavour, I have discovered something that will put a sparkle in your beautiful eyes. I will keep it safe for you. There are thieves around this place but they will get a hot reception if they try anything. I will see you at home in two weeks.'

Plover was a larrikin but he would not leave his wife and child. Something unexpected had happened to Plover.

Tommy had heard about 'The Stanthorpe Diamond', a good sized gem found in the area a not long before Plover started work at the tin mine. He was sure that Plover had been fossicking for gems around Diamondvale as well as working in the mine. The letter from Plover hinted that he had found something valuable and was wary of being robbed. Tommy thought there were two likely scenarios for his disappearance. One was that he was done over and disposed of by some scoundrel with robbery as the motive. The other was that he had come to grief while fossicking in the hills - falling into a rocky cavern or gorge. Tommy's plan covered both possibilities. He would find the most likely places in Diamondvale for finding gems and investigate the area. It was a long shot but he thought it worth a try. He would also try to locate the old cabin where Plover stayed - maybe he would unearth some clues.

Tommy had a good night's sleep in a bed that seemed big enough for a family of four, ate a cereal breakfast and drove into town. He found a men's barbershop and went in for a haircut - the barber always knew everything going on in the local area. Following some conversation on the football and the impending election, Tommy got to the reason he'd come in for the haircut.

"Are there any old abandoned cabins around Diamondvale that you know about?" Tommy asked

"Are you looking to buy in the area?" the barber responded.

"No, my Grandfather used to work in the tin mines and he lived here in Diamondvale. I'm just interested," Tommy replied.



"Yeah, there's a few. Some are just ruins now, burnt out or fallen to pieces. I know of one in Marcus Lane. You need to drive around and you will see some remnants. Quite a few people just up and left when times were hard," the barber said as he looked at Tommy in the mirror.

"I'll do some scouting around tomorrow," Tommy paused. "What about gem fossicking - any good places for that?"

"Yeah, some are still trying their luck up on the ridge behind Reilly Road. Fossicking seems to be addictive for a lot of people."

"Reilly Road, I'm staying in a cottage right down the end for a few days. That will be convenient," Tommy said as he bent his head forward and the barber ran the number four blade up the back of his head.

"Oh, Maric Park, yeah, directly behind there and along the ridge. But you want to be careful if you go traipsing around up there. It's dangerous in among the boulders and crevices," the barber said flipping the little white-haired brush across Tommy's neck and shoulders and pulling away the black cape like a Spanish bullfighter.

The day was still young and Tommy headed back to the cottage to collect his backpack, fossicking shovel and put on his hiking boots. The day was clear and cool, with the sky such a sharp blue it was almost painful to look at. Tommy made his way up the track behind the cottages. The path had been hacked out for those wishing to find a vantage point on the granite outcrop to view the surrounding country - perhaps with a bottle of wine. Tommy had a different plan and turned off the main track when he reached the end, near the top of the ridge. It was rough going. Tommy wasn't naturally athletic and took

his time stepping around and over the ubiquitous grey speckled granite rocks and through the scrubby bush. The larger boulders, some single monolithic, and some in random stacks were an impenetrable barrier that forced Tommy to detour many times. He stopped on a number of occasions to inspect places where a person may have fallen or become trapped, not expecting to find anything. *Any poor soul meeting their end out here would be soon consumed by the wildlife,* Tommy thought. He was also being vigilant for unusual pieces of stone that may or may not have had any value. Tommy had started to tire after an hour with the pain in his shoulders increasing from the weight of his backpack and shovel. He looked for a spot to rest and noticed an open patch of grass through the low bushes. He took a step through the bushes and his foot slipped out from under him on the gravel and leaves.

"Shit!" Tommy yelled out loud.

He went down with a thud onto his tail bone. He skidded on his boots, arse, hands, and backpack down the gravelly incline about ten metres to the bottom of a gully. He sat there stunned, heart thumping looking at the bloody grazes on his palms.

Tommy sat stunned for a moment. "Jesus, think I'll call it a day," he muttered to himself.

He stood up and brushed himself off and looked around. He froze at the sight of an object protruding from the ground near his right foot. It was a bone - looked like a human leg bone - broken off at the end.

Tommy marked his way back to the track with yellow tape strategically wrapped around trees as he progressed. He contacted the local police on his mobile and they were sending someone out to investigate. Tommy thought he may have found a

crime scene and was as careful as possible not to disturb the area.

Tommy directed the police to the bone site and then left them to do their job. The detective in charge came to see Tommy at his cottage before they left with bone samples. It was late afternoon and Tommy sipped a glass of red wine as he sat on the deck contemplating the circumstances of Plover's demise.

"Mister O'Rourke, we have recovered some samples and have finished here for the moment," the young detective said as he stood on the cottage steps.

"How does it look?" Tommy asked with trepidation.

"It's not your Grandfather that's for sure'" he said with a smile. "It's a big animal of some sort. They're very old bones. We'll know more after they've been examined. Let you know when we have something," he said as he turned away towards the police vehicle. Tommy didn't know if he should be relieved.

Tommy planned to go back home the next day and decided he would find Plover's cabin before he left. He resigned himself to leaving without resolving the mystery. The morning was cool and clear, a replica of the day before. Tommy locked the cottage door and stood for a moment on the front deck looking out across grasslands with scattered patches of gums and a dark line of low hills in the distance marking the horizon. *I would have enjoyed being here a lot more if his mission wasn't so serious,* he thought.

He jumped in his dusty red Mazda3 and drove off down Reilly Road. Tommy had a general idea of the location of the cabin if it still existed. There were a few unsealed laneways running off Reilly Road and, as indicated on Plover's letters, the

cabin was on one of these. A short drive from the Maric Park Cottages and he was at Marcus Lane and turned off. The lane was narrow with a property fence and paddocks on the right and thick bush on the left. The bumping dirt road tested the Mazda's suspension as he drove. He continued on between two solid timber fence posts and knew that he was now on someone's property.

*Just a tourist who took a wrong turn if anyone asks,* Tommy thought. The lane was disappearing into the bush and he was about to stop and turn around when he saw it. A red brick chimney stood like a monument in the long grass on his left. Tommy stopped the car and got out. This had to be it. He stepped carefully through the grass over towards the chimney. Lying all around were the blackened remnants of the framework of a timber cabin. Bushfire or arson had destroyed the place. Tommy felt unsettled as he gazed around the ruin. He walked to the open hearth of the brick chimney and noticed a piece of dirty grey material hanging out from under the lintel. He pulled it down and staggered back in horror as bones, a human skull and bits of material cascaded onto the brick base.

"Oh my God!" Tommy blurted, he couldn't believe what happened. He stood motionless looking down at the remains, trying to make sense of what he was seeing. His mind raced - how could he be in the chimney? Tommy squatted down and retrieved a small tied leather pouch lying among the scattered bones. He prized it open with shaking hands and laid a white translucent stone in his palm. It was the size of a macadamia nut. Tommy's thought went back to Plover's last letter. What was it he said?

'I have discovered something that will put a sparkle in your beautiful eyes. There are thieves around this place but they will get a hot reception if they try anything.'

*Plover had got himself wedged in the chimney trying to hide his diamond and died from asphyxiation. Tommy squirmed at the thought. At least he will get a proper burial.*

The results of forensic tests on the bones in the chimney confirmed that it was Plover. Tommy also had a call regarding the bone pieces he had stumbled across on the ridge behind the cottages. They had been identified as around 450,000 years old and belonging to a huge wombat animal named Diprotodon. Tommy had the stone that he had recovered from the chimney appraised by a jeweller. He was advised it was chlorite quartz and worth nothing.

## Friends

"There is no way I can be nice about this Molly. You are a greedy woman. I believe that you were responsible for my Father's death. I'm not sure how you did it, but I will find out."

The tears welled in Molly's eyes as Jade stood glaring at her. She turned and walked away leaving Molly standing in the doorway. *Why would she say that?* Molly thought as she wiped the wetness from her cheek. Molly closed the door and went inside to the lounge room and sat with clenched hands to collect her thoughts.

Molly lived in a federation styled bungalow in a Brisbane inner west suburb. She loved the federation architecture, less formal than English Victorian with some influence from the Californian bungalow style. The earthy red brick, leadlight windows and tall chimney gave the lowset brick house a storybook aura. The street was quiet and appealing with the residents appearing to be competing for the neatest and leafiest property. Molly had been in the house for over twenty years and had outlived two husbands. Both had passed away from the effects of heart problems. The last one, Bernie, died a months ago leaving Molly alone for the second time.

Molly was surprised when Jade arrived at the door of the house that morning. She hadn't seen her stepdaughter since Bernie's funeral. The bitterness and accusation that spewed from her were unexpected. A sharp knock at the door interrupted Molly's thoughts and she went to the front window to check. She peered through the narrow opening between the curtain and the leadlight side window. It was Helen from across the street.

Helen had lived alone since her sister moved back to Scotland five years ago. She was retired from the Queensland Police but

still had the appearance of authority. Her hair was grey and short cropped and she preferred to wear long-sleeved shirts and pants. Molly and Helen had become close since the death of Molly's first husband.

"Come in Helen, I'm glad you're here," Molly showed her in and they went to the lounge area. The room was warmed by the sun streaming through the front full-length leadlight windows. The rich dark reds and browns of the large carpet on the polished timber floor added to the old English ambience.

"You had a visitor this morning?" Helen didn't miss anything going on in her street.

"Oh yes... I did," Molly said as they sat down in the soft cushioned sofa. "Jade was here, Bernie's daughter. You would've met her at the funeral." She paused and stared at the floor.

"I still can't believe it," Molly said looking up and clenching her hands. "She accused me of killing Bernie for his money."

Helen could see the distress in Molly's face. "Okay, just relax for a minute love. She can't prove anything."

"Well, why is she doing this?"

"Obvious...she is after money. She didn't get much from Bernie's estate did she?" Helen asked.

"No, only a small amount of cash - he left it all to me. When Bernie split from his first wife Jade disowned him. She never visited him... ever," Molly said.

"I didn't like her right from the minute we met - beady eyes - thin lips. I understand now why she was asking me where you lived - bitch," Helen said with venom.

"Maybe I should just offer her some money to leave me alone," Molly said.

"Don't be silly love. You will never be rid of her."

"Helen," Molly grabbed Helen's hand.

"Yes?"

"Should we get rid of all the flowers?"

"No need to do that," Helen replied. "It's okay."

"What are we going to do now?" Molly asked.

"I'm going to sort our friend Jade out," Helen replied with a grin.

Helen took advantage of her policing skills to track Jade's place of work in the city. She agreed to meet for coffee at Mario's café to discuss Bernie's will.

Helen was sitting at the corner table examining the pattern in the crema on her coffee when Jade walked in. Helen stood up to attract her attention.

"Where's Molly?" Jade asked tersely.

"She couldn't make it so it just me."

"Why should I talk to you? You're not involved with this."

"I am acting on behalf of Molly. She hired me."

"Hired you, hired you for what?" Jade asked as she sat down.

"I'm her legal advisor and she has given me instructions on this matter."

"Are you a lawyer?"



"I have been fully briefed on the details of your nasty defamatory remarks to my client Saturday morning last week. I am advising you that if you continue to harass Molly you will be sued."

"What...you're kidding. Look I don't know what you're trying to pull but there is something fishy about my father's death. He was not that old and was fit as a fiddle when he died. I checked with his Doctor." Jade was getting agitated. "And why, tell me, would Molly refuse to allow an autopsy - unless, of course, she had something to hide."

"A court order for an autopsy would sort it out, don't you think?" she added.

"You know as well as I do, that Molly's refusal for the autopsy was because of her religious beliefs. So don't give me that shit." Helen snapped.

"C'mon now, what do you really want Jade?"

"I want my fair share of my father's estate," she spat. "Molly probably hasn't worked a day in her life. She's got that nice house and money. I need it more than she does."

"Yeah, thought that was it. Well, Jade, I can guarantee you that if you pursue this vindictive, unwarranted harassment, you will have less money than you've ever had. You deserted your father and don't deserve anything from him. You also know that Molly would not be capable of doing what you have suggested. So, if I were you, I would be thankful for what I have...and bugger off." Helen said with such emphasis that the surrounding café goers turned to look.

Jade reacted like she'd been slapped. She stood, turned and hurried out knocking chairs as she went.

It had been a month since the meeting with Jade. Molly crouched peering at the patch of vibrant purple flowers. She picked one with the stalk between thumb and forefinger and examined the delicate petals in the shape of a small crested helmet. She stood and turned towards Helen.

"It's ironic," she said.

"What is?" Helen asked as she pulled a weed from the garden edge.

They enjoyed gardening together and the colourful display of cottage garden plants was a testament to their combined green thumbs.

"It's ironic that this pretty, deadly 'Devil's Helmet' flower saved me, and also conjures the monster that haunts me."

"Your father?" Helen said quietly.

"It hurts to even mention him, but what he did to Mum, and to me as a child, was abhorrent. I tried so hard to deal with it - with religion - with relationships with men that might change my mind. I could never do it. My Mother saved me from an abusive father with tea made from this flower. I saved myself from Harold and Bernie. They were just men, and I couldn't bear being with them. I should feel remorse, not peace," she said as she looked into Helen's eyes.

## Black Mountain

*Where am I?* Ivan had a throbbing headache and his eyes felt glued shut. He forced them open. The bed had a white cover, tucked in tightly around him. His movement was restricted but he could feel tingling in his fingers and toes. A heavy cream coloured curtain hung on the right side of the bed in the small, dimly lit, bare, grey, windowless room.

*I'm in a hospital,* he thought, relieved that he was safe.

*I need to see Luka. Make sure he's got our notes and pictures.* Ivan desperately pushed his foggy brain to focus on the events that led to him being in this debilitated state.

It seemed just a few days ago that Luca phoned him from Cairns. Luca was doing post-graduate work in anthropology at James Cook University and was excited about a discovery he'd made at Black Mountain in the Cooktown area. Ivan had met Luca in Brisbane when they had started university together. Their common interest in Australian Aboriginal culture had provided a solid bond.

"You have to come up here now," Luca pleaded through the phone. "You need to see this in person."

"I can't just up and leave. I have lectures to give here in Brisbane. What is so important?" Ivan asked as he sat at his desk, phone pressed to his left ear.

"I was on a field trip yesterday at Black Mountain. Have you heard about Black Mountain?"

"Yeah, of course I have - missing people - planes instruments playing up and better known as the 'Mountain of Death'".

"That's it. It's like a mountainous pile of black boulders thrown down by some angry God, about thirty kilometres south

of Cooktown. The locals take the legends seriously and they can tell you about a number of people who have gone into that mountain, and never came out."

"Okay... what's that got to do with us? Ivan asked.

"I thought I would have a look around the base of the mountain, check for any aboriginal artefacts. I wasn't expecting to find evidence of activity, with the Black Mountain's reputation as a no go zone. Anyway, I was poking around among the boulders not far from our truck when I noticed a cave opening a little further up and went to investigate. No way was I going inside alone but what I saw absolutely stunned me."

"Okay, you've got my interest, what'd you see?"

"The cave opening was not simply an opening in a bunch of boulders, it had carved stone sides - rectangular blocks placed on top of each other, and get this - there were hieroglyphs carved into the rock," Luca said excitedly.

"What, that's crazy. The Aboriginal people painted on rocks but I've never heard of carved symbols,"

"Ivan, these symbols look like they're Egyptian," Luca said slowly and with conviction.

Ivan smiled. "You know that's not possible, Egypt is a long way from the tropics of North Queensland."

"I'm sending a couple of photos to you. After you've had a look, will you please get yourself organized and get your arse up here." Luca said.

"I'll do my best but I can't promise."

"Okay let me know soon," Luca responded and terminated the call.

As the plane approached Cooktown airport Ivan examined the photos again. He still couldn't believe what he was seeing. The carved symbols were Egyptian - 'Amenta - World of the Dead' looked like a flat jellyfish with one short tentacle and one long - 'Ka - the soul' two joined arms with hands reaching up, and 'Ankh - Eternal Life' the cross with a loop on top. *If this is a hoax, someone has gone to an extraordinary amount of effort to pull it off,* he thought.

Luca had a hire car and was at the airport to meet Ivan. They went directly to the hotel where they had both booked in. They agreed to meet in the lounge bar at seven p.m. for a drink.

The two men sat in cane lounge chairs, each with a pint of beer. If an observer was asked to identify the academics in the room, they would be the first picked. Both men in their thirties had trimmed beards uncombed hair and thick-rimmed glasses. They both wore long sleeve shirts with button down pockets. The noticeable difference between the two was Ivan had a pale complexion and dark beard while Luka had tanned skin and a light beard.

You've heard a bit about Black Mountain from the locals I take it," Ivan asked and took a sip of beer.

"Oh yeah, many myths and sinister legends, the Kuku Nyungkal people of the region have long shunned the mountain. For them, it's a haunted place. In more modern times there have been reports of disruption to navigational equipment in planes and air turbulence - possibly due to magnetic forces or radiation. The big mysteries have been the disappearances. When you consider the weird nature of this place with massive boulders, tunnels and huge caverns it's perhaps understandable. Apparently, the boulders were formed from solidifying magma around 250 million years ago, there's no soil and the black

colour is caused by a coating of oxides. Add a film of blue-green algae on exposed surfaces, the wind howling through crevices and you have one truly creepy place." Luca paused to take a swallow of beer.

"The scariest part though is the many disappearances. The indigenous people have many stories but the first European accounts were from the 1870s. One of these was a notorious criminal known as Sugarfoot Jack and a couple of his accomplices who fled to Black Mountain following a shootout. They were never seen again, and despite the police search that followed there was no evidence at all to where they had gone. They had simply vanished."

"What about your discovery? Are there any reports of similar type finds - carved stones or symbols?" Ivan asked.

"No, there's nothing that I've heard of. I suspect, judging by the way the boulders were strewn around in front of the cave, that a rock slide exposed this opening. It may well be the only one in the mountain," he said.

Ivan leaned forward - he'd been waiting to ask this question. "What's your hypothesis for the Egyptian symbols being here in this place?"

"Well, I'm not thinking aliens," Luca said with a smile. "The Egyptian civilization existed around 5000 years ago so the question is how could there have been a connection with this huge black pyramid, Black Mountain. Aboriginal culture is much older and dates back over 40000 years. Could the start of, what became the Egyptian dynasty, have actually originated here in Tropical Queensland and then found its way to Egypt.. not likely," he paused. "So... what's my hypothesis - I have no bloody idea."

"Right, let's see what we find tomorrow then," Ivan said with a chuckle. "Have we got all the gear we need?"

"Yep, waist belts, ropes, helmets, flashlights, the lot, I assume you brought your own personal clothing and boots?"

"Yeah of course, when do we head out?" Ivan asked.

"I want to go early, first light, about 6.30 a.m," Luca replied.

Black Mountain loomed like a huge dark monolith as they approached from the north along Mulligan Highway. The day was clear with a few meandering white clouds, as the tropical bush-land flashed by the Toyota Hilux. Luca pulled off the main road onto a dirt side track that circled around behind the mountain. He knew exactly where to park the vehicle to get access up to the cave opening. They organized their equipment, put backpacks on and headed up towards the first barrier of black rocks and boulders. This was Ivan's first contact with Black Mountain and his look of astonishment lingered for some time. Luca took the lead as they scrambled, rather than climbed, upwards. He had marked various boulders as guideposts to the cave. Within twenty minutes they'd reached the entrance and sat to rest and prepare. The cave entrance had carved grey stone block walls and ceiling, post and lintel style. The front surface of the block posts had a number of carved symbols. The entrance was wide enough for a man to enter and not touch the ceiling. The tunnel sloped downwards into the darkness and the bowels of the mountain. The two men stood at the entrance, helmets on and flashlights in hand.

"Let's go, stay close," Ivan said, leading the way into the tunnel.

The sloping floor was solid rock, flat with a light cover of sand and grit making it slippery enough to ensure slow progress. They moved with caution without speaking, surveying the surroundings as they went. The walls were bare grey stone with no further symbols or makings to be seen. The only sound to be heard was the breathing of the two men. Ivan stopped, the beam from his flashlight flickering across the walls.

"Oh God, spiders," Ivan spluttered.

A dozen or so large black spiders were grouped in a nest at the top of the wall on his left. Luca let out a grunt of disgust.

"Quick, move," he said pushing Ivan.

Luca's terrifying vision of a cascade of spiders forced the two men forward into the gloom. Their hearts were pumping. Ivan stumbled. Their flashlights showed a set of stone slab stairs descending then curving to the right. The stairway was long, about thirty metres, and covered the full width of the passage.

"A stairway, this is unbelievable," Ivan stammered, as he squinted and peered down the passage. "Luca, am I seeing things?"

"There's light down there," Luca said, as they both pointed their flashlights to the floor and looked down the stairway.

A faint yellow glow illuminated the wall at the bottom end of the stairway as it curved down. They continued on, neither man offering a possible explanation for the illumination. Their flashlights skipped from side to side as they carefully navigated down each large stone slab step. An increasingly unpleasant musty stench assailed them as they moved downward.

"That smell's disgusting," Luca said with a contorted face.



They navigated the curved part of the stairs and moved toward the dim glow. The stairs ended with the passage floor becoming flat and leading to an open stone doorway. The weak light was coming from within. Ivan stepped through the doorway and Luca eagerly followed.

"Oh my God," Ivan muttered, as he looked upward and scanned the cavernous room. Both men stood spellbound, wide eyes searching up, down, and side to side, trying to take in, and rationalize what they were seeing.

The room was twice the height of the passage and was around four metres high. The room seemed to be the same dimension wide as deep. It was like being inside a cube. Light streamed from above through a slot in the stone slabs, one of nine positioned in the ceiling. In a carved tapestry at eye level around the walls was a stunning display of carved hieroglyphics. Directly across from the entry, on the opposite wall, was another doorway opening.

"This is fantastic," Luca stammered. "There are light shafts to the surface for the sunlight at different times and seasons," he said looking up. "It really does look Egyptian."

They both moved to the wall display on their left to examine the carved symbols using their flashlights.

"Some of these symbols are Egyptian, like your photos, but there are some strange ones," Ivan said. "Here look at this." Ivan pointed to a stylized figure of a man holding a staff. "Same side on style but the head of a lizard and a tail - and here again." He moved his finger across to a silhouette face with pharaoh's headdress. "It's the head of a lizard or serpent. In fact... it appears there are no human faces," he said moving along the wall peering at the carvings.

Luca didn't respond and walked across the room and stood in the opening of the other doorway.

"Ivan... look here," Luca said as he walked into an adjoining room almost a replica of the one he'd come from. The obvious difference was the raised sarcophagus in the middle of the floor. Ivan followed Luca through then stood with him looking down at the carved and painted stone reptilian face on the lid.

"It's a burial chamber for someone... or something. That explains the Amenta symbol repeated many times in the wall carvings - 'world of the dead'," Ivan said.

"This is getting weird," Luca said. "I think we'd better go back and get a team out here."

"You know we can't leave without checking inside this sarcophagus," Ivan said, putting his flashlight on the floor. He stepped back to get leverage and with both hands pushed the heavy stone lid. "It's bloody stuck," he grunted.

"Okay, hang on, let's both try," Luca said positioning himself.

There was a scraping sound as they both put their backs into the task. The lid had slid across a couple of inches at the head end.

"Let's have a look," Ivan said, as they both picked up their flashlights.

"Holy shit, it's not human," Luca said as their lights illuminated an elongated reptilian skull resting in a pharaoh style headdress.

"I thought it was strange there were no humans in any of the wall carvings," Ivan said. "I would say this guy belongs to a race of theropods - bipedal dinosaurs."

"How is that possible?" Luca asked. "The dinosaurs went extinct with the K-T event asteroid."

Ivan stood motionless, staring down, his brain connecting the dots. "Well... just thinking out loud, it's possible that this species evolved with intelligence at the same time as the other dinosaurs, about 70 million years ago. Living underground they could have survived the asteroid extinction and created a civilization similar to the Egyptians, but predating them by millions of years. My guess is that this species existed in other parts of the world and somehow influenced the Egyptians." Ivan looked at Luca for a reaction.

"That's an interesting hypothesis Ivan, and as good as any I've heard," Luca said with a grin. "You know that there have been stories about underground lizard people before. Some whacko in the U.S., years ago, reckoned he'd found a lizard city under Los Angeles - all crap of course. My guess is that some enterprising human has put a dinosaur skull, which may or may not be authentic, in this sarcophagus. I can't wait to get some tests done," he said slipping off his backpack and grabbing his camera. "Let's get some photos and get out of here. This place gives me the creeps and that smell's awful."

The two men had been taking photos in the burial chamber and writing notes when Ivan stepped onto the flagstone at the head of the sarcophagus. They heard a sound, a mechanical hum.

"What the hell is that?" Luca growled.

Suddenly a deep rumbling noise - a stone slab door dropped with force from the ceiling. It completely filled the doorway.

"No! No!" Ivan screamed as they both ran to the door. "We're trapped, there's no way out."

"There has to be, a way," Luca had his hands on the stone door.

They both spun around at the new sound - hissing gas.

"That smell," Luca gasped and clutched his throat.

Ivan was already unconscious, lying on the floor.

*Had they both been saved? Is Luca here?* Ivan wondered. There were no sounds. *Usually, hospitals are noisy places. Where's the nurse?*

The curtain was pulled aside and startled him. He could now see Luca asleep or unconscious in the bed next to him.

He recognized the face on the figure standing at the end of his bed, looking at him with interest - Velociraptor.

### **Alien Saviour**

Alec always knew he was different, but discovering he was an alien came as a surprise. Alec lived all his young life in foster homes. He was an abandoned baby found in the carpark of the Brisbane Royal Hospital. He took the family name, Smart, from his first Foster parents. He thought Alec Smart was a great name even though he got a lot of teasing from other kids at school. The Smarts didn't adopt him unfortunately and he had to live with a number of carers. Being a foster child set him apart from most others but he was sharp as a tack and did well academically. He had a special aptitude for science and technology. Alec's difficulty was connecting socially. Wherever he went his peer group generally didn't appreciate his nerdy behaviour and tended to avoid him. Now eighteen years of age Alec worked at the local hardware store and he was making enough to pay the rent on a one bedroom unit in Arana Hills. The last Foster parents couldn't wait to be rid of him. They were nice people but he was costing them quite a bit through high school. He finished school with not many friends - only one really, Millie. She liked his quiet quirky ways and she liked the way he looked. Alec was tall, slim, with a sparkle in his brown eyes, and a cheeky smile. He had natural brown skin, unruly dark hair, and a happy temperament that defied his troublesome upbringing. He also had an unusual physical feature that Millie didn't know about. He didn't have a belly-button.

The knock on Alec's apartment door was loud.

*Okay don't break it,* Alec thought as he went and opened the door. The man standing there was tall, taller than Alec. He had short dark hair, a trimmed beard, wore a grey uniform buttoned up to the neck. There was a small oval shaped insignia with a black dot on his chest. It resembled an eye

with a black iris. Alec thought the man looked to be aged about 50.

"Hi... Alec, I'm your Uncle Fredrick. I have something important to tell you. Can I come in?"

Fredrick was in a hurry. He pushed past Alec and, after gazing from side to side, went directly to the lounge room and sat down.

Alec turned and followed, trying to work out what was going on. "Excuse me, what did you say?" He was beginning to think this was some sort of home invasion. "I don't have an uncle. You need to leave."

"I'm sorry to barge in like this. If you can allow me to explain. It's very important," Fredrick said, looking up pleadingly. "I am your biological mother's brother and you need to know who you are, for your sake and the sake of this planet."

Fredrick continued before Alec had time to respond.

"There is no easy way to tell you this, Alec, so I'm going to lay it all on you and then you can ask me whatever you like." He took a breath. "You are not a human you are Zypian. Your home planet is Krobar in the Alpha Centauri system, not Earth, and you were placed here as a baby by the Krobar Interplanetary Service with the blessing of your mother Krayolla." Fredrick looked at Alec's stunned face and decided to continue.

"You are a placement here on Earth who is to be trained as an agent and correspondent for the KIS. However, we have an emergency that requires your assistance immediately."

Alec stood there, in the middle of the lounge, staring at this strange man sitting on his sofa and he didn't know what to say.

"Alec... are you okay?" he asked.

"This is a joke, right... Krobar, seriously. Did Millie put you up to this?"

"It's no joke. As well as your uncle, I am your allocated mentor and I have been keeping track of you all your life. You have a microscopic implant behind your left ear that you can't even feel. It allows me to find you anywhere. The time has now come for you to do your duty."

"Oh C'mon, pull the other one. I'm not a bloody Zippy-whatever." Alec said, rubbing behind his ear.

"Zypian... yes you are," Fredrick said, unbuttoning his coat and pulling aside his shirt to display a bare midriff uncluttered by a navel. We Zypians have no navel as humans do. We procreate through the shelled egg process, similar to echidna on this planet. We are, however, humanoid, or humans are Zypianoid if you like. We have both evolved from mammals in an almost identical environment."

Alec sat down beside Fredrick and put his head in his hands.

"Okay, let's assume for a minute that what you have told me is true," he said, lifting his head. "How did I get here and where is my mother... Crayola?"

"Her name is Krayolla and she is the chieftain of the McKarno clan on Krobar. It is the custom of this clan for the Chieftain's selected offspring to be posted off-planet with the KIS. You were deposited here by our fusion drive Interstellar Space Transport Service."

"So, she abandoned me?" Alec asked.

"She gave you a great opportunity to serve your planet. You need to understand that Krayolla has had 36 children with many going to other worlds. The mother-child bond cannot be too strong for the sake of necessity."

"Why do you need me all of a sudden? You're here."

"Well... firstly I'll explain the problem," Fredrick said with a serious tone.

"There is a race of intelligent Saurians called Crokomorons from the Proxima Centauri system that has been in conflict with Krobar for millions of years. Currently, it is a standoff and I guess you would describe it as a cold war."

Fredrick took a deep breath. "Yesterday I received an intelligence update message from Krobar Interplanetary Service High Command. The Crokomorons are heading here to colonise and set up a military base. This is bad... very bad. They are intending to eradicate all humanoid life on the planet. They are expected to enter the earth's solar system within three days."

"C'mon Fred, humanity eradicated by lizard people. I think I saw this one on TV a while ago," Alec asked with a smile. "So how do I save the world?"

"The name's Fredrick," he said sternly and continued. "You and I must locate the Zypian back-up defence equipment left here millions of years ago for just such an emergency. Then you must assemble and activate it. We need you Alec, because you have a special ability that only the selected Zypians from the McKarno clan have. You are endowed with an inherent understanding and skill with Zypian mechanics and technology. It is built into your DNA through millennia of selective breeding. Do you understand?"



"Ahh, I think so ... and how would we find this equipment?" he asked.

"I have been advised that it has been well hidden in central Australia - under a big rock."

Alec insisted that Millie could keep a secret and he should confide in her. He thought that if she was convinced by Fredrick's yarn, then maybe he wasn't going insane. Amazingly, Millie was excited that her friend was an alien. She appeared to have no doubts that Fredrick was trustworthy and demanded that she accompany them both to Uluru. Alec made arrangements for leave from work and Millie hadn't started her first-semester university course, so Alec booked travel for the three of them.

The flight from Brisbane to Uluru took around four hours and this gave Millie the opportunity to interrogate Fredrick thoroughly. Millie was petite with mousy short hair, big grey eyes, and energy to burn. She looked like a pixie between giants in her seat on the plane between the two men. She had ensured that she was seated next to Fredrick and was itching to ask questions. As soon as the seatbelt sign was off she started.

"Hope you don't mind Fredrick, but can I ask you a couple of things about Krobar?"

"Yes, of course," he said with a smile.

"Do you have wars and strife, like we do here?" Millie was an ardent pacifist and this was an important issue for her.

"We're past all that. Our race has matured and we have eliminated the problems - no countries, no religion, no race issues, and free antidepressant drugs. The main worry for us

currently is the declining fertility of Zypian women - problem with thin eggshells."

"Sounds like they need calcium. Crushed oyster shells worked for our chickens," Millie said.

"Afraid it's more serious than that. But we'll work it out."

"Okay, next question, why does the Krobar Interplanetary Service put agents on other planets?" Millie asked.

"Our galaxy is an immense place and it is difficult to keep up with the important news and changes happening on civilized planets. The Agent-Correspondents job is to advise KIS of any political developments - like world wars or serious uprisings, planetary disasters - like comet strikes, and technology developments. Any of these events could have a future impact on Krobar." Fredrick looked across at Millie.

"Even though our Zypian technology is far in advance of yours, we have actually picked up a few useful things from you humans," Fredrick said condescendingly.

"Really, like what," she asked.

Well, the hills hoist was one... blu-tack, um... cement, now that was a good one."

"Wow! That's amazing. How long have you guys been coming here?"

"We've actually been visiting for millions of years but only leaving agents for the last couple of thousand. You've probably heard of Jesus who got a bit of a reputation. He was one of our first, but he went off the rails trying to impress the locals and had to be recalled. You also may also know about how dinosaurs disappeared around 66 million years ago - we did that."

"What, you sent a comet to earth?" she asked.

"No, no, that's just a human theory. We fumigated them. The Crocomorons put some of their lizard species here in the early days and they just took over the place. We wanted the mammals to have a chance so we got rid of the lizards. The Crocomorons were pretty pissed off I might add."

Millie sat staring wide-eyed at Fredrick, thinking that what he was saying must be true. No one could make that stuff up. Alec snoozed for most of the flight ignoring the other two while they chatted.

They landed at Yulara at 5 pm and checked into the hotel with a hire-car arranged for an early morning start the next day. Time was of the essence.

The pale dry grass rippled and undulated on each side as they sped along the single lane bitumen road to Uluru. Alec was driving with Fredrick in the front passenger seat and Millie in the back. Alec was still half expecting the whole thing to be exposed as an elaborate charade.

"We are getting close to Uluru, Fred. Can you explain more about this defence device that I am supposed to set up?" Alec asked.

"The name's *Fredrick*," he said through clenched teeth. "All I know is that it is called a Neurochromatic-crokotech-disrupter. It can emit a radiation pulse that interferes with Saurians detection technology. If the radiation reaches them before they get here, our solar system should become invisible to the Crocomorons, like an invisibility cloak, and they will not be able to find Earth.

"Hey, that's clever," Millie quipped from the back seat.

"Yeah, we have to find the equipment first," Alec said, as they pulled into the carpark with the massive furrowed, orange-ochre Uluru rock in front of them, a monolithic reminder of their insignificance.

"I have a plan for that," Fredrick said. "We ask one of the local Anangu people. They've been around here a long time and probably know a few things."

Alec asked a young aboriginal tourist guide who was with a tourist group if she could help. She directed the three of them to an older man nearby, dressed in long sleeve shirt, a wide-brimmed hat, jeans, and boots. Eddie was one of the elders and worked as a ranger at the rock. His skin was bronzed-black and he had a bushy grey beard. They approached with smiles and Fredrick did the talking.

"Hi, my name's Fredrick. We were wondering if you could give us some information about Uluru. The guide over there said you would be the one to ask," he said as he pointed back towards the tourist group.

Eddie looked at each of them in turn with his piercing dark eyes.

"Marlee the guide knows everything," he said.

"No this is apparently secret business. She said only an elder would know. We're looking for a hidden entrance that leads to a place under the rock. Do you know of such a thing?" Fredrick asked.

"It's a big rock mate. You know how hard it would be to dig a hole under there?" Eddie asked.

"Yes I know, but this was done by ancient star travellers millions of years ago with advanced technology." Fredrick thought he may as well tell it straight.

"Shit, you one of those UFO nuts?" he asked.

"No, we just need help. I guess you don't know anything. Sorry we bothered you." Fredrick said.

At that moment Eddie noticed the insignia on Fredrick's tunic.

"What's that on your shirt?" Eddie asked pointing at the oval shape with a black spot design.

"It's the insignia of Krobar Interplanetary Service from my home world," he said.

"Shit, are you a Zypian?" he asked with enthusiasm.

"Yes, I am," Fredrick replied with a big smile.

"Why didn't you say so. Our legend tells of the return of the Zypian to protect Uluru. That mark is on the rock in a sacred place at the most eastern point." Eddie's white teeth glinted in the sunlight as he grinned. "Come, I'll take you."

They headed off along a walking track around the rock's base with Eddie in the lead. Within a few minutes they reached Uluru's eastern point and Eddie walked to the rock face and put his hand on the carved insignia.

"This is it. I'll leave you to it. This is a forbidden place for our tribe," he said, turned and walked away back along the path.

"Thanks Eddie," Alec called to the receding figure and turned back to examine the carving with his two companions.

"Where's the doorknob?" Millie asked.

"No doorknob but there a suspicious looking slot in the rock here," Alec said as he poked his fingers into the letterbox size opening.

"*Ouch! A prick*" Alec yelled as he whipped his fingers out of the hole and looked down at the spot of blood.

"What?" Fredrick asked.

Alec was about to say how he thought he'd just had a blood sample taken when a rock section the size of a door in front of them suddenly moved inwards and began to slide upwards.

"We found it," Millie squealed, peering into the opening.

"Let's go in."

The three of them went through the door and down the wide, gently sloping set of steps carved from the rock. Fredrick led the way with Millie and Alec behind. There was plenty of light inside from glowing panels in the ceiling and walls.

Incredibly there was no sign of a join anywhere in the rock. It was all smooth and rounded like moulded clay. Once inside the door closed behind them.

"I hope there's a blood test to get out'" Millie said looking over her shoulder at the disappearing piece of blue sky.

The stairway ended at a large archway into a cavernous, well-illuminated room. On each side, there were long rows of three-level shelving. The shelves were filled with pieces of multicoloured, variously shaped metal components. Each piece was, more or less, the size of a Rubik's cube but with connections and weird markings. On the far wall, there was a large white screen attached at about eye-level and in the middle of the room was a black metal box the size of a filing cabinet with slots on every side.

"This must be the equipment to build the Neurochromatic-crokotech-disrupter, but where are the instructions?" Fredrick said gazing around the room.

Alec and Millie were standing at the shelving inspecting pieces of equipment.

"We don't need instructions, Fred. I know I can do this. I don't know how I know, but I do. All these components have a place on the main console and I can see in my mind where they fit. But I need you and Millie to help. I can fit the pieces if you guys find and bring each one to me when I need it. That would be the quickest way, okay?" Alec asked and looked around.

"Of course, whatever you say. You're the only one that can save us Alec... and it's okay if you call me Fred," he said with an insipid smile.

Millie was standing beside Alec nodding furiously. "Let's do it."

They worked tirelessly for over five hours with Alec connecting each component into place on the black central console with Fred and Millie bringing them as required. Luckily they had brought water and snacks in their backpacks to sustain them.

Finally, Alec had the last component. A rod about 500 mm long with radiating fine metal filaments on one end. Sort of like a metal toilet brush. He slotted the rod into the waiting slot in the top of the console.

"Okay, that's it. I just need to switch it on," Alec said as they gathered in front of the fully assembled machine which had doubled in size with the added components.

"Go on, do it," Millie said.

Alec looked at her then reached for the blue start button on the front panel... and pressed it.

A faint backlight lit up the start button. What happened next no one was expecting. It was nothing, nothing happened. The machine was supposed to be radiating some sort of powerful pulse. It was completely silent.

"What's wrong with it?" Fredrick asked.

Alec was walking around the console examining it up and down. "I don't know. I think I've connected every piece in its correct slot. Give me a minute I'll recheck," he said.

Two hours later the machine was still silent. Millie and Fredrick had curled up on the floor to get some rest while Alec inspected and prodded every component."

"Shit, I give up," Alec said with exasperation. "And we're running out of time. Those Croko-bastards could be here anytime now."

Millie and Fred sat up bleary-eyed.

"Hey, Alec... have you tried switching it off and on again?" Millie asked.

Alec and Fred both stared at her and then at each other. Alec reached for the blue button and pressed it off, then on. The machine started to hum with blue pulsing radiation emanating from the toilet brush looking rod on the top of the console. The screen on the wall also sprang to life showing what appeared to be an astronomical map.

"Yes... it's working," Alec yelled, raising his hands in the air. The other two jumped up for a group hug with beaming smiles. Alec and Millie continued to hug much longer than was appropriate for friends.



Fred began staring at the wall screen. "Have a look at this. It's showing the solar system, and here's earth," he said pointing at the screen. A blue halo was expanding from Earth out past the sun as they watched in amazement.

"We are now invisible to all Crokomorons who may invade our space, well done. The Device will now stay on auto mode and activate whenever it detects them," he added.

With the mission successfully completed and the human population of Earth unaware how close they came to annihilation, Alec and Millie returned to Brisbane. Fred headed off to Stonehenge in England to meet with the next Interstellar Space Transport from Krobar. Apparently, the Zypians had put some stones there to mark the landing area.

It was almost twelve months later that the side effects of the Neurochromatic-crokotech-disrupter radiation became obvious. Alec and Millie had moved in together and were having their Sunday morning bacon, eggs, and coffee on the apartment balcony.

"Alec, do you think the radiation from the machine we turned on has anything to do with this fertility problem?" Millie asked as she flicked the pages of the morning paper. The headlines for weeks had been postulating about why the male humans on earth had suddenly become infertile.

"It had crossed my mind," he replied.

"There's lots of doom and gloom in the news about the end of the human race."

The knock on the apartment door was loud. Alec jumped up startled. He went to the door and opened it.

"Fred, what the hell are you doing here? I thought you'd gone home. Come on in," Alec said as they both walked through to the balcony.

"Good to see you guys," Fred said smiling.

"Hi Fredrick," Millie responded.

"What's going on Fred, why are you here?" Alec asked.

"A courtesy call and I've got some good news and some bad news," Fred replied and sat down. Millie poured him a coffee from the jug on the table.

"Ok give us the bad news first," Millie said.

"The radiation from our device at Uluru has destroyed the ability of Earth's male humans to produce offspring. They have been made completely and irreversibly infertile."

"Shit Fred," Alec jumped up. "We were thinking that may be the case. The timing was too much of a coincidence. This is not just bad news, it's bloody devastating."

"Wait a minute, let me finish. I know that has made the human blokes a bit unhappy but to compensate, I have been delivered from Krobar the first batches of Zypian sperm. I have squillions of these little suckers ready to impregnate any Earth ladies who are willing. These batches will be made available to all medical fertility facilities. Do you know what this means?" Fred was as animated and excited as they had ever seen him.

"Both our races, Homosapiens, and Zypians will be saved, and a new hybrid race will emerge - Homozypians perhaps."

When Fred had left, Alec and Millie sat quietly contemplating the gravity of his words.

"Do you think Fredrick knew all along what the radiation would do here? I mean, was there really a threat from the Crokomorons. We didn't ever actually see any evidence, did we?" Millie asked.

"Don't think about it," Alec replied and they began to realise that they were witnessing the dawning of an evolutionary leap for their species.