

MURDER SQUAD DETECTIVES
JOSEPH LIND AND
SHELLEY ANNE SHIELDS

DUST TO DUST

A CRIME NOVELLA BY
PETER C BYRNES

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SHELLEY ANNE SHIELDS

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This is the 52nd Instalment of the series on the life and times of Detective Grade Four Joseph Lind.

The eastern half of Australia is suffering its most severe drought ever recorded. The vast swathe of land in four eastern states has not experienced worthwhile rain in several years. The very land is parched and bone dry with stock being sold off as the cost of feed and water to keep them alive becomes unsustainable during this very bleak period.

Many Farmers have walked away from their properties; many have committed suicide.

This story describes the desperate needs of our Farmers while showing the bravery and resilience of the man and woman on the land. The story interweaves into the next Novella 'The Last Step' as the events out west is a concurrent investigation for our pair of Detectives.

Synopsis:

The suicide rate out west peaks during a severe drought with this most severe drought breaking all records...even in suicides.

A popular farmer dies in a back paddock of his property with the initial prognosis being that he had a heart attack. Upon completion of the autopsy, that belief is altered to one of suicide.

The country town folk and other neighbouring Cockies do not believe this much loved and respected farmer capable of taking his own life.

Detective Joseph Lind and his partner Detective Shelley Shields are allocated the Case of the sudden death of the farmer by his own hands. Their investigations soon becomes mired in the complications of outback living with Detective Lind working solo due to the sudden hospitalisation of Detective Shields.

Lind is convinced there is more to this case than first thought. He must tread light-footedly though the growing animosity of the townsfolk and neighbouring Cockies.

If it wasn't a heart attack, an accidental death or suicide...then there are few alternatives left, leaving only a death by others as the workable solution.

Close friends and townsfolk are further enraged by this probable conclusion...

CHAPTER ONE

He sat in the farm Ute to allow the cocky comb of dust to overtake him. He then turned off the motor and the air-conditioner to next open the vehicle's door. He was assaulted by the searing heat and dry northerly wind that blew every day. He reckoned that it had to be close to fifty degrees Celsius. It was a long, scorching summer with no relief in sight. The very parched ground emitted a glare all its own. There was no ground cover to lessen the effect. He stamped his feet on the bluestone steps up onto the veranda, once again stamping his feet on the large flagstones of the wide, covered veranda to rid his boots of the covering of dust. He ran each boot sole across the 'boot scrapper', wondering as he did, why he should. '*Out of habit*', he suggested softly to himself for as sure as shitting, there wasn't a skerrick of mud on the soles of his boots, just more bloody dust! And not a trace of bull shit as he had sold most of his cattle...unable to keep up the costs of trucking in water and fodder to keep them alive.

With an effort and a grunt signifying his attempt, he heel-toed both boots off and placed them neatly side by side to one side of the front door. He padded in his woollen socks into the dimness of the homestead taking a key from on top of a door opening architrave. Walking purposefully into the neat Study, he opened a small Gun Cabinet with the key. He was a careful man. He took out the barrel and stock of a large-bore rifle. Closing and again locking the Gun Cabinet, he double-checked that the door was locked. He walked out into the Stock Room where Gumboots lined a wall, sitting neatly in line hard against the wall and floor junction. Above the gumboots were six 'Dry-as-a-Bone' full length coats and a couple of waist-length ones. He always preferred the full-length coat especially when sitting on his favourite horse, his Akubra pulled well down and the collar of the coat sitting up tight against his neck. The pelting rain a singsong to his ears...something he hadn't enjoyed for too many years to remember.

He ran his hands down his 'Dry-as-a-Bone' wondering when the last time was that he wore the wet-weather gear.

He had forgotten it was so long ago. He gave a sniffle as he picked out his broad-brimmed hat that hung with a row of hats hanging neatly along the length of the wall. There were few 'hangers' left even with the kids in Boarding School...

The 'Dry as a Bone' ensembles had not been used for several years. No need as no useful rain had fallen for that long. Things were grim, getting past the catastrophic stage...and by what all the Weather Forecasts were predicting, the wet weather oilskins wouldn't be needed until at least mid-summer next year...if they were right for once...

In one corner, he bent down to unlock another Gun Cabinet, taking out the Breach Block, and an empty magazine and half a dozen bullets. He again closed and locked the door of the steel cabinet that was anchored securely to the wall, replacing the key for this cabinet back above the door frame before retracing his steps back into the Study.

He took a gun cloth and cleaning kit from one of the desk drawers and broke down the Breach Block to clean and oil it. He re-assembled the rifle expertly and loaded the magazine with the six bullets, placing the magazine into his pants pocket.

He was a careful man...and if the truth be told, he was not a gun lover even though he had around a dozen different types of long guns.

He walked out of the house, closing the front door behind him. The front door of the farmhouse was never locked. The house dog barked its annoyance at being left inside, too stupid to flip out through the 'doggy-door' on the back door and trot around the veranda to sit beside its mate. He would figure it out by the time its master was driving away. That being the case, the small dog would either sit where it was at the edge of the veranda or make its way back inside where it was a lot cooler. To lay under the Study Desk waiting patiently for its master to return. The dog would never venture past that point out onto the vastness of the dirt. Once upon a time it would jump from the veranda edge to frolic gleefully in the depth of the green grass that was the Home Paddock...now it was just inches of dust and dirt and not to his liking as a frolic in the dust meant a soapy wash almost immediately. She would never understand that with a coat stained red with dirt she was banished to the veranda until she had that wash...hating it as much as the banishment...she was the ruler of the house so she thought!

The farmer carefully leaned the rifle against the outside wall and sat on an old sofa that everyone sat on to have their early morning coffee. He wrestled into his elastic sided boots and plopped his broad-brimmed hat back on. He picked up the rifle, whistled to his two farm dogs who jumped into the cabin of the 4WD Ute as the man placed the rifle in a lockable cradle behind his head but well below the sill height of the rear window.

He eased slowly away from the beautiful old farmhouse. This and his fifty-thousand-acre farm and two other adjacent properties that trebled the holdings had been in the family by marriage for over one hundred years. The surname of Cowdrey an institution around these parts. The Prendergast family line was less known but still he was a prominent citizen in these parts. The Prendergast Holdings north of town were sold during the Millennium Drought around eighteen years ago. The sale still left the man a very sizable amount as an only child on the death of his mother and father not long after the sale had been finalised. Some say that old man Prendergast had deliberately steered into an oncoming Roadtrain...others poo-pooing the suggestion, but the rumours continued even to this day.

Archie had digitised the weather records that had been recorded from the early days. This was the worst drought that had been listed in those pages. Not a blade of grass. Water tanked in. His herd drastically reduced to minimise hay and grain trucked in that involved ever increasing prices. They were trading in dust. They had a million tonnes of it at least!

Those costs of keeping his diminishing herd in grain, feed, and water were becoming unmanageable.

He was running on empty himself.

His four kids in Boarding School in Sydney as the nearest School to the inland property was some one hundred and fifty kays away...a little too far for the School Bus to negotiate. They would soon have to decide whether to take the kids out of School as money was that tight. His wife worked and lived in that 'nearby' town. He may see her if she came to visit on a weekend...if she or he wasn't working. She worked in the local Hospital getting reasonable money just to pay for the normal outgoings of a family on the land.

He was here at the Farm by himself. His closest neighbour occasionally dropped in for a cuppa...a natter...to complain about the lack of rain. There was nothing else to talk about as he hadn't planted a crop for the third year in a row; and he had drastically reduced his herd to less than a hundred head. All his best breeding stock which he didn't want to get rid of. He had organised agistment for his two prize bulls down Victoria way...and he was shooting two heifers a week because they were too weak to stand or walk. At this rate he will have destroyed his entire mob inside a year.

Not a good thought.

It made him near cry.

He crawled along the back-paddock track not wanting to create a cockie's comb of dust up behind him. The constant westerly winds were enough to rob him of his precious topsoil...and he was not looking forward to this task ahead of him. He slowed even further as he approached the small herd, all looking skinny and depleted. He stopped some distance from the cow lying in the dust bowl, having little energy to even lift its head to look at the man as he alighted from the vehicle.

He leant back into the cabin of the vehicle to take the gun from its cradle, telling his dogs to 'stay'. They obeyed the mumbled command, whimpering as they knew what was about to occur. It was becoming a daily chore. The man walked slowly to the animal as he took the six-bullet magazine from his pocket and clipped it into the rifle, sliding the bolt back to load a bullet. He slid the bolt ready to fire. He had tears in his eyes as he placed the muzzle of the

rifle to the beast's forehead and pulled the trigger. He walked on killing two others too weak to offer any opposition. They knew their fate.

The bloke walked wearily back to the Ute knowing he would need to bring the Tractor out to dig a hole to bury the three carcasses. He squatted, then sat back against the rear wheel of the Ute. Called his two dogs in who came to rest their heads on his calves, on either side of his body.

They could feel their master's pain.

CHAPTER TWO

We still had two days to go before the official end of Summer. While it had been warm as we had waited for our flight at Sydney Airport at some ungodly time in the morning, out here it was just past eleven in the morning and the Sun had a bite to it. The heat oppressive. We had spent several hours at the local Police Station familiarising ourselves with the local coppers who had visited the 'crime scene' and obtaining an understanding of the weight of the drought and how it affected people...we then left for the farm in question some one fifty kilometres out of town.

"So where did they find the body, Sergeant?" I asked as I stood beside the large 4WD that was front on at a boundary fence gateway. Its nose almost touching the gate.

"See up that rise where the top paddock fence is? Where it bisects the slope of ground and comes down to meet the road fence here?" He mimicked with his arms as though he was a maestro waving his baton at an Orchestra. "From here in this corner to up there? It is called the Back Paddock not because it is but because the boundary fence here where we are standing runs along beside the Back Road..."

"I thought I saw a sign calling it Bungarra Creek Road..." Shelley commented as she stood beside the gateway, swatting a cloud of flies away from her head. "As we turned off the Town Road".

"Yeah, that's right...but the locals know it as the Back Road...the same as Town Road. Everyone knows it as the 'Town Road', but in fact the correct name for it is Sir George McKinnon Road. Over two hundred years ago he was the founding Pastoralist taking up digs in these parts south of town".

I nodded my head not too sure with what I was agreeing.

“Back Road to where?” I asked as I turned to him.

“Bungarra Creek of course...” He looked at me as though I was dense. What else would it be called? “About two...three Properties further out. The paddock here is called the Back Paddock because it fronts onto the Back Road...” He repeating the obvious to us two clowns from the City, so his tone seemed to imply.

“Clear as mud!” Shelley countered, laughter in her voice. “So where was Archie Prendergast’s body found? He was sitting propped up leaning against the rear wheel of his farm Ute, wasn’t he?”

She had read the File on the Case while we flew up. Me? I slept for the entire flight. It had been an early start to get to the Airport a couple of hours before ETD. I found it hard to crawl out from under the doona as I’d had a late night entertaining a tribe of friends! I was never known as a morning person unless, when I was younger, the early morning surf beckoned...then I was always up before sunrise. Those days long gone with me occasionally getting up before dawn in the middle of Summer only...and then when the wind, tide and swell were in conjunction!

I wasn’t too concerned about our need to toss over too many stones as it was a simple suicide Case. All our involvement meant we would interview all persons close to the Deceased and then write up our findings for the Coroner’s information. I often wondered why we were involved in such a case at all. As far as I was concerned, the local lads could do just as well, saving us hours of easy detective work out here in the boondocks.

At least it occasionally got us out into the Bush, I suppose. An easy sojourn for really, little work. Besides, it was a pleasant sojourn to get out of the City and into the heartland of Australia. Clear the head and clean out the sinuses and just view the Bush which was something I always enjoyed.

The Sergeant broke into my musings.

“See that fence-line?” The Station Sergeant pointed to the same boundary fence he had before. He thought he was dealing with two drongos from the City who didn’t know chaff from hay or shit from clay! “Halfway up the rise. About halfway along there is an earth mound...fresh earth...see it?”

We both nodded our heads.

“They dug a trench to bury the three head of cattle there...or what was left of them. It was on the third day before Rowena Prendergast came back to the Farm to discover Archie’s body. Every Eagle, Kite, and Crow for quite a distance was waiting their chance to feed on Archie’s body. We are in the middle of the worst drought ever recorded. Something to eat is at a premium...for everyone”.

“Why did she take so long? You know, three days before she came home?”

“Rowena works in town. At the Hospital. Has for a couple of years now to get extra money to keep things going. You know...the normal outgoings that every family experiences. There is no money coming in from the farm...in fact the exact opposite. Been like that for a couple of years now...five or six years. These Charity Drives to keep the Farmers going...and yes, a helping hand-out from the Government as well means so much to these people. Their very existence. She stays in town. Almost two hundred kays away. She’d come out on a weekend to be with Archie if her Roster permitted it. They would talk on the phone most nights. She missed the usual nightly call on the Monday but when she rang the following night, it rang out. She was not particularly worried about it, but when she rang the following afternoon, then Wednesday night after that with still no answer, she began to worry. She drove out the following morning. Thursday two weeks...no, three weeks ago. Early morning, silly girl”.

“Two hundred kays...a two...three-hour drive. How come she went straight to this...er...back paddock?”

“Apparently Archie had mentioned that he was going to herd the mob closer to the farmhouse as it was easier for him to get water and hay to them in a paddock closer to the Home Run. The last time they spoke on the phone, he mentioned that the mob were in the Back Paddock as he had thought of organising a truck run for half of them to the Sale Yards for the coming monthly Sale Day...didn’t you see the cattle yard and stock loading ramp further up the road as we passed it? He would have been so disappointed that his prize herd was being seriously decimated. A sad day for a lot of folks around here who were doing the same thing. The cost of food and water to keep the herds going was becoming too much of a burden...sell the entire mob...so many empty paddocks out around these parts...most of New South Wales and Western Queensland. It’s a bugger!”

“Can we drive up there?” Shelley asked.

“Sure...but there’s bugger all to see”. He nodded to the young Constable standing beside him to open the gate.

“It’s not locked!?” I commented, surprised that a boundary gate on a distant paddock out of sight was not locked.

The Sergeant looked at me before climbing into the cabin of the 4WD and driving through. He propped so that the gate could be shut behind us and Shells, me and the young Constable could climb aboard. He half-turned to me as we bounced up the slight incline.

“What are they going to steal, Detective?” He asked glumly as though he now knew he had a couple of city-slicker dumb bells on his hands. “A mob of undernourished cattle that wouldn’t even make the pay-back minimum price at sale. I don’t think so”.

“From what I understand, part of the tragedy of this terrible situation is that Archie Prendergast’s herd is a prize producing herd. He and his father-in-law before him, old man George Cowdrey have carefully bred a very successful bloodline over many years. They have won major Awards for their Bulls and their breeding herd...I would have thought that would need protecting by locked gates”.

The Sergeant sat still listening to what I had to say, nodding his head as a reaction to my comments.

“Yeah, that’s right. Old George was a well-known figure in cattle genetics and blood line. A real pioneer in that side of things; known throughout the country and Archie continued with the legacy but...the boundary fences that follow the Back Road can be punched through easily in any case if yer want to do that, so why worry about locking a bloody gate? At least yer fences would remain intact! And yer gotta cattle ramp and loading yard further along this road that anyone could use to load the herd if they wanted to. It really means bugger all, at present. They lived through the ’67 drought okay though it was tough; the Millennium drought much better...but this one...it has brought them to their knees”.

He stopped in a cloud of dust halfway up a slope which had a boundary fence-line traversing it. We waited until the cockie-comb of dust overtook us before opening the doors to alight. We gathered about as though this was a farm education session, and we were here to learn something.

“That mound there? Holds the three carcasses that Archie shot that morning. His Ute was about here...” The Sergeant walked some metres away to a spot, stamping his foot to send up an eruption of dust particles. “He was leaning against the rear wheel of his Ute facing up the hill...it would have been in shade at that time of morning”. The big man rotated as he hauled his pants up. He nodded to a tree line on the other side of the boundary fence-line. “That’s the McKinnon place from that tree line. Tim Cowdrey’s place which is a part of this farm is that Spread across the road. The Bungarra Creek Property you can just make out on the horizon. It shares a common boundary with Tim Cowdrey’s place but is a lot larger sharing a joint boundary-line with the McKinnon spread on the east-west axis”.

I nodded my head, not really taking in this spiel. I couldn't see what it had to do with Archie Prendergast's demise.

"Who buried the animals?" I asked as I spun around to face him. Me shielding my eyes from the sun's glare even though I had my Force issued sunglasses on. They were decent quality, yet the glare out here was too much for even them.

"Archie, we suspect, before he sat down for a rest...maybe he had chest pains or something then. According to Tim Cowdrey, Archie didn't complain of chest pains at that time although he thought Archie was quickly out of breath which according to Tim and Rowena his wife, was not like Archie at all. Wouldn't blame him for feeling off after shooting a couple of head...and burying them".

"How did he bury them?"

"His Tractor we suspect. It's fitted with a Back-end Digger and a Push-blade. It's up in the Machinery Shed".

"So there has been enough activity around the death scene to cover any thought of Trace evidence being found, huh?"

"Yeah, what with that...and us...and Rowena...the Chopper and the Ambulance...and a couple of Paramedics, there'd be Buckley's chance of snaring anything...like tracks of the Perp or any DNA that could be used? Is that what you mean? It would be considered too contaminated and not permissible in Court for that reason".

I nodded my head, looking around. Not one blade of grass anywhere. It was a sorry sight. Just dirt and fine silty dirt inches thick that buried my shoes as I walked about. I reckon I'd have a tonne of fine talc in them by the end of the day. Every night I will need to wash my socks as I had only packed two pair.

The Sergeant coughed, hoisted up his pants again before taking off his broad-brimmed hat to scratch his head. Only a fine filament of hair coverage that was mostly grey was discernible. I guess that is why he may keep it that short. A certain amount of vanity shown by the Bush Cop.

"You gotta realise, Detective...we never assumed or considered it as a crime scene...a death scene. We thought he had a heart attack. It wasn't until almost three weeks later...last week, in fact that we got the call from Dubbo that Archie had a poison in his system. We rang you guys straight away".

“Self-inflicted, eh?”

“That’s what we thought, yeah. Somehow, yer can’t blame the bloke, can you. It would be heart-breaking enough to survive through this drought, seeing everything turn to dust. Fine bloody dust that got into everything...but to gradually shoot yer breeding herd would be the last straw...the last step...for a lot of folks out this way”.

CHAPTER THREE

The all-encompassing three-hundred and sixty-degree scene was depressing. As far as you could see, nothing but a parched landscape. Even the trees were dying. Large Eucalypt that had stood for over a century or more. Trees that had always got their moisture from nearby or adjacent running creeks now hanging limp, many falling, others shedding branches unable to support themselves. As we had driven the two hundred kilometres from the Town out to the Property, all you saw was empty paddocks of dirt...and the number of Roadkill was extraordinary...every couple of metres so it seemed, a dead Roo, Emu, or bird on the side of the road. Most too weak to get out of the way of the speeding vehicle...it was heart-breaking.

The Station Sergeant told us of one incident where a local Cockie was even shooting his farm dogs because he couldn’t afford the feed for them...that is level with shooting a member of the family to Outback Farmers...that struck me as a bit of theatre as there were plenty of Roos about. One Roo carcass could keep a couple of farm dogs going for two bloody weeks...and no-one would object to shooting a couple of Roos each month. Country folk have a bit of the ‘Blarney’ in them, just read some of Henry Lawson’s Short Stories.

We climbed back into the 4WD and bumped our way over the farm tracks towards the Homestead, a giant cockie’s comb of dust pluming out behind us.

“Were there any photographs taken of the death scene?” I asked gingerly. Almost afraid to ask the question in case it was taken as bad taste.

“No...there was no reason to...as I said before, we had no indication but to suspect it was purely a heart attack that took Archie...it would seem rather...you know...in bad taste to start clicking a camera about”.

It may be, but any unexplained or sudden death required certain protocols to be adhere to. One was that the death scene be recorded regardless.

“Arrh...so, there is no way of telling how the poison was administered? You know, via a cup of coffee? In a bottle of water? Maybe in something he was eating...no...that doesn’t seem right”.

I glanced at Shelley who was hanging on tightly to one of the panic handles. I frowned as something went click in my brain. I stumbled a couple of times to put these sudden thoughts into words.

“To me, if he was so depressed, and after just finishing shooting three prize cattle, why wouldn’t he just turn the gun on himself rather than taking a poison?” Shelley asked as she and I hung on to the panic handles in the back seat as the vehicle bounced along the farm track. She had put into words what I was thinking.

There was silence in response. Eventually, the Station Sergeant sitting in the passenger front seat turned to me.

“You suspect foul play?”

“We don’t suspect anything but are looking at all possibilities at this stage...but if he was found to have poison in his system from his autopsy, then you have to be a little suspicious”.

“There is no-one in the District who would want Archie dead...” The Sergeant responded a touch snappishly. “He was a well-loved and respected local in the District. He had a successful marriage with four kids. His wife is gutted over his sudden death” He sounded short. Annoyed.

“His wife? Would she benefit from his death?”

“Detective? What the fuck are you on? I think you should shut your fucking mouth and sit and listen instead of voicing such wild accusations. These people out here have enough to contend with without you going off half-cocked with crazy suspicions and unsubstantiated stories that you are making up on the spur of the moment”.

I tightened my jaw and breathed deeply a couple of times. Counted to ten then made thirty before I relaxed my body. It was obvious we would have to tread very gently if the Sergeant’s attitude were anything to go on.

“Did you notice whether the victim had a Thermos of coffee...or a bottle of water with him? In the cabin of the Ute?”

“Umm...no, Detective. It was not noted...that I know of”. The tone of his voice indicated he did not wish to elaborate further.

“Then we have no way of knowing how the poison was delivered...was there any indication of that in the Autopsy Report?”

“No...we received a verbal ‘heads up’ that he had a poison in his system late last week. We rang you people straight away. That is protocol. They are still doing tests and Blood Workups...um...we never treated the Scene as anything else but an accidental death. A health problem. A very tragic incident...we now believe it is a self-inflicted death, Detective. Plain and simply! As in every other drought out around these parts, there is a spike in suicides. Sad but true. This drought being the worst ever experienced, we have expected that way of dying to increase...unfortunately it has”. The Sergeant sweeping the affair under the carpet. He had expressed his opinion and there was no correspondence to be entered into in opposing that opinion. None what-so-ever!

I was not so willing to let the matter be dismissed so easily in such a forthright manner. I had thoughts whirring around in my head that I could not put into words yet. They would come to me at odd times that I knew would fuel the Bush Copper’s dislike of me.

Too bad, I was here to do a job.

CHAPTER FOUR

He slowed the large vehicle to a stop at the gate into the Farmhouse Yard.

The entire quadrangle that was the Home Yard was surrounded by large trees and bushes that at most times of the day provided some shade over portions of the farmhouse roofline. The whiteness of the Gum tree trunks blindingly stark especially when the sun’s rays hit them. The house a low, sprawling affair with a very wide veranda to the eastern and western sides. The sloped roof to the north was covered in some twenty solar panels and two solar hot-water services.

I walked through an arbour of some type of vine...Wisteria I later learnt from Shelley, that provided a tunnel effect at the gateway. I stood in the ‘home yard’ picturing it in better times when the rains came regularly. Formed flowerbeds and a gurgling fountain would have attracted birds from miles around. Now the fountain was empty and red dirt stained. The flower beds in fallow waiting for the next rains...not until mid-summer in twelve-month’s

time. The yard area was nothing but bare earth where I could imagine an emerald green carpet of lawn in better times.

I walked slowly around the end of the house. A large Veggie Patch enclosed in chicken wire and mesh sat sadly depleted and unloved...nary a plant in sight.

"I don't know how they do it...every ten or fifteen years or so. Go through the heartache watching everything die around them. I couldn't do it!" Shelley quietly commented as she came to stand beside me. The irony of the statement lost on her. As part of our job, we watched and dealt with death every other week...without a second thought...usually!

"I guess it's all about love...and hope". That kind of felt hollow to me but I had nothing better to offer.

"I often sit out here in the shade and look at what once was a very viable, rich veggie garden. It supported at times between six to twelve adults for a fair few months of the year. Now...I have trouble recalling what it looked like especially when all you see now is turned dry sods! You are the City Police, I take it...investigating Archie's death".

I turned to see a woman sitting deep in the shade of the side veranda. She was in her middle forties, I reckon. Fair skin dappled in freckles. A wide, friendly smile. A casual air about her. I couldn't see her eyes behind dark sunglasses.

"Missus Prendergast? Rowena Prendergast?" I asked pleasantly.

The woman nodded.

"Come in under the shade. It is several degrees cooler". She patted the long, low couch on which she was sitting.

"Sorry missus, for your loss..." I stepped up onto the higher level of the veranda. Shook the woman's hand. More a man's shake with a firmness and strength that belied her narrow frame. Shelley stepped forward and introduced herself.

"Hello, Brian. Caleb". She addressed the Sergeant and the young Senior Constable off-sider as they walked around the veranda corner.

"Hello, Missus P. How you bearing up? Okay?" The Sergeant asked as though he was a member of the family.

“I have my moments...sometimes it’s good, mostly it is bad. I will miss the old man...he was my mate and soul-patch...that was his saying”. Her breath caught in her throat. She coughed a couple of times to clear it. “I still do not know what to do...sell up or struggle through. I can get good people to help me run this place. If I sold up, you could bet your house that as soon as the Final Steps of the Sale go through, it will piss down raining...we will have knee deep mud for a couple of months before it settles down again into the normal pattern of weather...so I’d like to think...bugger thinking about Climate Change, but you have all the evidence you need right here. More heart-breaking droughts with the good times in between getting shorter and less intense...it’s been happening for as long as I can remember”.

“You reckon, Row!? With what they are talking about Climate Change, who is to know?”

“Know what you mean, Brian. Come up and sit a while. I’ll get my sis to make us a coffee each. White one sugar. That’s all she knows so don’t blame me if it isn’t to your liking”. A soft giggle went with the remark.

We all sat around an outdoor setting. The woman lifted her sunglasses onto her head. Her eyes were red from crying. She saw me looking closely at her.

“Some would say I’m a masochist sitting out here trying to recall what the veggie patch once looked like...only to make me cry...everything makes me cry at the moment”.

We nodded our heads in unison. I squinted as I looked out over the House yard and onto the bare paddocks that disappeared into the distance in a shimmering heat wave.

“It’s funny you know...I still have a problem getting my head around Archie killing himself...I just can’t see it Brian, really! You say he took a poison? That is just not his style. Blast his head apart with his favourite rifle I can half imagine...if we want to agree him capable of taking his own life...and wanting to...which I vehemently disagree with...but poison!? That’s got me beat. That is not Archie!”

“Was there any note left...anything at all to indicate his mental state?”

“No...nothing. He kept a Diary on his Laptop. Every day, religiously. There is nothing on it to indicate that he was even close to just thinking of suicide. It was full of his optimism and humour. You’ve read it, Brian. What do you think?”

“Arrh...yes, Row. I have read through it. Nothing but positive thoughts and a plan. He was even thinking of hiring Tim and his bulldozer to carve out a couple more paddock dams while it was still dry...there was no mention of him being down enough to want to commit suicide. No.”

“You have transcribed the Diary?”

“Yes, going back several months...”

“I would like to have a copy, if we may?” I quietly requested, a little put out that we had not received that copy first thing.

“That doesn’t mean much as less than one in five leave any sort of farewell note giving reasons for their ultimate action...” Shelley stated gently. “You know, when they are preparing to take their own life, any thoughts of loved ones is far from their mind. If they thought in that manner, thinking of the effect such an action would make on loved ones and associates, they are not ready for suicide”. She looked across at the woman who had begun to cry. “Sorry...” Shelley murmured, annoyed at herself for saying what she said.

“A farewell note...what a quaint way of putting it”. Rowena Prendergast replied quietly.

“You don’t believe your husband poisoned himself?” I asked.

“I would believe it more if he had shot himself as I said before. He just wasn’t that type of person. We were only talking about the opportunity of trucking all our remaining cattle down to some Property in Victoria so they can fatten up. The arrangement offered was that they will fatten the stock up sufficiently for it to be safe for all the young heifers to be in calf. The people down there will keep the new calves as the over-all cost of agistment and by then hopefully, things will have turned, and we can have our herd and two bulls trucked back here...it was going to be a lifesaver for us. The herd is like children to us...and it would give us breathing space and save us on fodder and water fees...Archie was thrilled with the offer as he did not know how long he could have hung on slowly killing off the mob...there was always a silver lining as far as Archie was concerned...but...we dragged out the arrangements where, in the end, none of the cattle would or could survive such a journey...we dilly-dallied which is not our usual style”. She stopped talking as something had caught in her throat. She excused herself to blow her nose. She couldn’t hide the tears that welled in her eyes. “Sorry. He wasn’t the type of bloke to just give up like that...I spoke to him every night. At no stage did he sound so down that I would worry about his safety. Sure, he was down...but tell me who isn’t out around these parts...we are all feeling it”.

CHAPTER FIVE

“You don’t realise, do you?”

“What?” I asked curtly as I munched on a mouthful of food.

It may be the worst drought ever recorded now effecting the entire State of NSW and half of Queensland and Victoria, but the local Club still put on a superb meal...maybe it was the last supper, so to speak.

“Three hours in, three hours out. To do the shopping. Too bad if you forgot the butter, eh?”

I nodded my head.

“Worse, the smokes or alcohol...yer’d have to make the return journey back into town for those, I suspect. Can you imagine how much stuff yer’d have to cram into the car if it was a once-a-month shopping expedition to feed up to twelve people...isn’t that what she said was there during the good times? No such thing as fresh vegetables...bulk frozen foods, I reckon. Would they survive the three-hour drive back to the homestead?”

“Maybe they have one of those small Freezer units on the back of the Ute. Everything goes into it. What doesn’t fit, sits on the back tray with the dogs...”

“Yeah...we don’t realise how lucky we are living in the City...a quick trip to the Supermarket every couple of days, just down the road. Know what I mean. Everything at your fingertips. The Doctor within walking distance with the Chemist on the way. Even a Hospital not far away...here? Nothing is bloody close! Not even your closest neighbours!”

“Mmm...she’s had three offers for the Farm...the guy hasn’t even been buried and they are putting out offers...that’s a bit rich, don’t you think?”

“Bad taste is all...the early bird and all that...the offers would be ‘fire sale’ prices I would imagine, considering the state of the land and the grip of the drought...”

“Mmm...opportunity knocks. She reckons that she would get enough to pay back what she owes the Banks...and the Government loans and have maybe a couple of Mil besides...a handy nest egg...”

“Do you reckon she’d sell?”

“Don’t know...she had that steely look when you asked the question...and there is something tying up any sale unless all the other family members agree to such an arrangement with the three parcels of land sold under the one allotment. The Property has been in five generations of her family. That by itself seems to be enough for her to think carefully over the offers. A local Solicitor’s Firm in Dubbo...they’re holding the offers”.

“Yeah, from what she knows, one of the offers is local...another Cockie wanting to expand his allotment while he has the chance...and two in Sydney. Macquarie Street Farmers I reckon...can’t resist a bargain...I wonder who the local bloke is. Would that be enough reason to kill Archie?”

“Again, another Cockie always thinking that the rains will come and then return back to the same cyclic patterns...forever optimists who obviously do not believe in all this talk of Climate Change...either that or they have a different skew on the subject. They think, regardless of what Climate Change will chuck at them in the future, they will always manage to survive...”

“They all are Climate Change advocates...well...the ones I have spoken to are...but they all are born optimists believing things will work out. Who would want to be a bloody farmer out around these parts? You’re continually flogging yourself to my way of thinking...every ten years or so”.

CHAPTER SIX

“Mister Carlos DeSilva? I’m Detective Joe Lind of the Murder Squad in Sydney. We are investigating the suspicious death of Archibald Francis Prendergast on the first Monday of last month. You did an autopsy on the guy, aged forty-three last Thursday, I think it was?”

“Yes, that’s correct. A careful visual would have indicated the Deceased did not die from a heart attack. I was surprised that the Paramedics came to such a conclusion...perhaps their knowledge of poisons and poisonings is not that acute, yes?”

“You are sure of it being a poison?”

“Most definitely. Once I opened the victim up and examined his arteries and vital organs, it was obvious. I am confident our victim was poisoned with Thallium, but I will not put that in writing until I have confirmation from Sydney. I sent tissue and blood samples to them last Friday. I expect something back within ten days...”

“Thallium...”

“Yes. Used extensively during the first quarter of last century as an excellent rat and mouse poison. It was taken off the market because of a peak in suspicious deaths...of humans...quite a few in fact. At that stage of proceedings, it was a little difficult to isolate and identify the poison and even harder to detect it in a solution. A couple of famous serial poisonings that made the Newspapers back then kind of killed off the appetite for it...and safer rat poisons came onto the market”.

“Does it kill swiftly?”

“Depends on the dose. It is a colourless, odourless, and tasteless substance that easily dissolves in a liquid. In Mister Prendergast’s case, it wasn’t that large a dose, I think. It could have taken a day...two for him to die. A slow death...but he could have become unconscious within thirty minutes. The act of dying considerably longer”.

“There was no mention of any...he was found leaning against the rear wheel of his Farm Ute. No mention of him squirming about...as though in pain. Nothing in the dirt around him that would signify him being in pain”. That was sheer fiction, but I wanted to push the guy.

“Depends on the dose, as I said. It can cause unconsciousness quickly, as though the person is asleep. This is caused by the blood clotting...no...congealing in the veins and arteries, unable to carry oxygen around the system...depending on where the major clotting occurs can have a bearing on how long the victim hangs on”.

I nodded my head, trying to connect discussions and titbits together that did not want to be connected.

“I will wait for the return Report from Sydney before I dispatch my final Report...will you still be in the area?”

“I doubt it, sir...send a copy up here to the local Station with the drop-copy e-mailed to the Murder Squad in Sydney for my attention”.

“Very well, Detective. If there is nothing else...”

“Um...yes. Stomach content? Could you ascertain when he last ate? What refreshments he may have had?”

“Breakfast around six in the morning, maybe a little earlier. For breakfast that morning he had Bacon and eggs, mushrooms, and tomatoes with toast. A cup of coffee. Later that morning

he drank a fair bit of water but his last drink I can comfortably say was a coffee...which may have carried the poison”.

“That doesn’t sound like a man contemplating suicide...”

“When you put it like that, Detective, no it doesn’t”.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Okay. Yeah, I got what you were talking about on the phone. What now?” Shelley asked after I had relayed the conversation to her.

“Um...how about a walk downtown to have a talk to the Paramedics who attended the scene?”

“Sounds like a plan. A coffee first. Check with the Counter Sergeant for the best coffee joint in town”.

“Mmm...good call”. I responded, hanging out for a decent coffee as the Instant stuff handed to us by a pert young Constable at the local Police Station first thing this morning was about the cheapest one on the market. It tasted like dirt, which it was! There’s enough of it out here!

The Ambulance Station was wide open, and a herd of Elephants could have wandered through...except they too would be suffering through this drought. Known for their common sense, they would have meandered over to the grasslands of the Serengeti a long time ago to rid themselves of this drought hereabouts!

“Hello!” I yelled out as I stepped into the cooler interior of the building. Three standard NSW Ambulances sat gleaming as though they’d just been washed...though I doubted that as water was not permitted to wash down any vehicles, so I wondered how in hell they did it! A large 4WD Ambulance Unit and a larger First Response Emergency vehicle filled the available floor space.

“Yeah...G’day. How can I help?” A head popped around from the tail of one of the smaller Ambulance Units.

“I think I am looking for Norm Garret. He and his partner were first Respondents out at the Archie Prendergast farm the other week...um...Detective Joe Lind and my partner, Shelley Shields. From Sydney”.

He smiled pleasantly as he walked towards us.

“You the guys from the City thinking there may be more to poor Archie’s death than a simple suicide...seems that is about all we are getting at the moment...maybe one every two weeks or so. Sad, eh? Yer got some form of identification?”

We both showed our ID Cards. He nodded his head.

“No worries...follow me, they’re in the Staff Room upstairs. They are on the early shift this week”.

We introduced ourselves to a middle-aged paramedic, Carlton ‘Carl’ Spitz, and his much younger partner Natasha Singh. We settled in opposite the two and accepted a lukewarm Instant Coffee that tasted right off when compared to the reasonable Java that we had not long finished at a small Café in the middle of town.

“I understand that Norm Garrett was the first Paramedic Respondent out at the Archie Prendergast farm the other week”.

The two shook their heads.

“No, that’s not correct. We headed out there first. Norm was on the road on another ‘call-out’ which turned out to be not as serious as first thought. He arrived later as we were lifting the Deceased onto the Chopper gurney. We transferred the body across to Norm’s Ambulance as he would transport him through to Dubbo. The Chopper didn’t have the range so we would have had to return to town to refuel before heading to Dubbo. It was easier for Norm to do the honours...and cheaper. The guy was dead so a road trip would mean little to him instead of an extended chopper ride”.

I nodded my head understanding the mistake that the Dubbo Morgue had made.

“Um...who called it in?”

“Archie’s missus. Rowena Prendergast. Because of the drought she is working at the Base Hospital to keep a bit of cash-flow happening. She is a trained Nurse...Double Certificate and a good one. She and Archie normally spoke to one another every night. She couldn’t raise him on the first night and tried again the following morning. Still no luck but she wasn’t overly concerned. She tried again the following afternoon and again that night. That started to worry her. She got up around four the following morning...silly really as we have a lot of Roos about at that time of morning when the sun has only just peeped over the horizon. Driving that time of early morning is not a great idea. She knew that Archie was transferring

the herd from the Back Paddock closer to the Homestead Run...she kind of went straight out to the Back Paddock and found him...sitting, slouched against the rear wheel of the farm Ute...his two dogs had kept the carrion and a couple of wild dogs away, but they didn't know about the ants..."

There was silence as we conjured up a picture of two loyal dogs sitting beside their dead master slowly being pulled apart by bloody ants...and not realising or being capable of stopping the feast. Suffering dehydration themselves but still not leaving their master's side.

"The dogs were pretty dehydrated, but Row gave them a drink. They'll be okay..."

As though the lives of the dogs were of more interest and importance.

"Rowena called it in...around seven. We arrived by Chopper just before eight..." He repeated as though our expressions displayed disbelief in his words.

"Anyone else there...apart from Archie's missus?"

"Arrh...no. We landed about halfway down the slope between Archie's Ute and the Back Road gate so's not to stir up too much dust...which is nigh on impossible anywhere out around here".

"The cattle he shot?"

"They'd been buried by that stage..."

"With the farm Ute?"

"No...um..." He looked to his younger colleague a little lost. "I guess he must have driven back to the Machinery Shed and driven the Tractor out. It must have been fitted up with a Back-end Digger and a Grader Blade on the front...that's the usual arrangement out around these parts...the all-purpose Tractor that is a must out around these parts. Every Cockie in the District has his own".

"So, he gears himself up with his favourite rifle and a couple of bullets slipped into the magazine and then drives his Ute out to the...arrh...the back paddock. He shoots the three head of cattle...drives back to the Machinery Shed, drives the Tractor out, digs a ditch, pulls the cattle into the ditch, covers up the ditch, drives the Tractor back to the shed and then drives the Ute back out...to commit suicide by taking a poison slouched against the rear wheel of his Ute...why would he do that? To me it doesn't show a man about to commit suicide...and quite frankly, it doesn't make sense...and how long would that take? Wouldn't it make more

sense to just take the poison while he was in The Machinery Shed. That is where he would have kept the poison, surely?" I spread my hands wide, palms up in our questioning manner.

"Mmm...I don't know where he kept the poison and yes, what he did would have taken all morning...most of the day, perhaps. He may have gone back to the Back Paddock to lead the rest of the herd into the Homestead Run...I believe Rowena may have mentioned that was his intention..."

"If he left the gates open, wouldn't the herd find their own way?"

"If they could smell the water, maybe..."

"Mmm...you diagnosed a heart attack, Mister Spitz. On what grounds?"

"I understand he was poisoned...self-inflicted..."

"I guesstimate much the same as your initial diagnosis?"

"You never think of a suicide unless it is obvious...poison? Not the normal method out around these parts...usually it is by hanging or a gun muzzle in the mouth..."

"Was there a cup? A Thermos? A bottle of water beside the body? One of those small Coolers that you keep a couple of beers in...maybe some water and a couple of sandwiches, perhaps...though I guess ants would have made short thrift of the sandwiches, huh".

"No...I don't rightly recall..." He again turned to his young partner.

"Um...I don't think so. No, I am pretty sure there was nothing like that around his body..."

"Could the Missus have removed any such objects?"

Both Paramedics looked stunned.

"You accusing Missus Prendergast of killing her husband? That is just not on! And frankly, why would she tidy up the scene? She was in no fit state to even tidy herself up when we got there..."

"I am not accusing anyone of any such thing. Me and my partner are here investigating the death of Archie Prendergast. We must look at all possibilities before drawing any firm conclusions for the Coroner if it turns out to be a self-inflicted death. Understand? We are

just doing our job which with this incident, provides more questions than answers at this stage”.

CHAPTER EIGHT

We left the Ambulance Station and walked back into the centre of town. It was time for lunch, and we planned on heading to the Club we had been at the night before with the Sergeant and the young Constable. Our shout. I got the impression this was to apologise for our contentious thoughts earlier that day.

We sat on a Council seat at what was the one major intersection of the town. Under the shade of a huge spreading Elm...or Oak...a Pepper Tree. I didn't rightly know! There was very little traffic and what there was crawled around at just past walking speed.

I had my eyes closed trying to think the Case through logically in my brain.

“What are you thinking, Joe?”

“As I said, there appears to be more questions than answers. The missus had what? An hour to tidy up the scene...how was the poison administered? It must be dissolved in a liquid I think...and what is some-one doing with Thallium today. I thought it was unavailable and one could not purchase it...”

“Everything you want is available on the Internet...and you know these Farmers, they never throw anything out. If it was of some use say, twenty years ago, it may be of some use to-day. I dread what some of these Farmers are harbouring in dark corners in their Sheds”.

“If the stuff had been obtained through the Internet, then that leaves a trail...this business about disposing of the bodies of the cattle before taking your life. To me that is not on. The last thing, if you were in that mindset of wanting to do away with yourself would be to worry about the bloody carcasses of several cattle. I mean, who cares if every known carnivore attacks the carcasses out around these parts. Shooting them I guess could toss you over the edge, but if that were the case, I can't see someone going to all that trouble of getting the Tractor, digging a bloody great ditch to push the carcasses into, covering it up and driving all the way back to the Machinery Shed...then come back out to drink a concoction containing a bloody poison to kill yourself”.

“I see what you mean...but what is the alternative?”

“He did all that work sure, but in sitting down to take a well-earned break, he was given the concoction by a second person. Identity unknown. Colourless, tasteless, odourless...dissolved in a thermos of coffee. The Autopsy revealed he had a coffee as the last thing to go down his throat. I mean, it makes sense that another person went and retrieved the Tractor and returned it to the Shed while Archie stayed where he was...the person then drives his vehicle back and sits down to enjoy a cuppa with Archie...”

“Okay...yeah, I get that, but why kill the guy?”

“Method? Tick. We know that with some certainty. He was poisoned. How? We are still trying to figure that one out but Thallium mixes easily with say coffee...tea in a thermos flask. Opportunity? Tick. Plenty of time to be able to carry out the deed. Reason? One would assume the weight of the Drought...everyone in the District is depressed. The constant killing of his herd was getting the man down...arrh...the why? It allowed that scenario of suicide to sit comfortably in the scheme of things in that moment of time...the drought, I mean causing a spike in suicides...a guess...with no questions asked as everyone is down at present. The drought hiding the actual murder with everyone accepting it as a suicide. I really don’t know and am just talking up ideas. Maybe he wanted to buy out Rowena Prendergast’s share of the farm at a Fire Sale price which would be the case now...if he divorced her, he’d get bugger-all, so it seems by the way the three Cowdrey siblings have the three separate Properties tied up. Either way, Rowena Prendergast didn’t like his rants on who deserved the property...he or she...”

I wiggled my fingers as that didn’t sit well. I could not see Rowena Prendergast nee Cowdrey being involved in her husband’s death. That didn’t leave much wriggle space though.

Either that or Rowena is a genius actress who has been pulling the wool over everyone’s eyes.

“Rowena told us she had received three offers through her Solicitors...I wonder who they are? Frankly, I cannot see her selling up...at least not now. There was a real steely look in her eyes when the subject was brought up yesterday”.

“Then who-ever our culprit is, has misjudged the situation badly, huh? If the reason for Archie’s death was to be able to get his hands on the farm”.

“If it has to do with the selling of the Property, then yes. That begs the question on whether any one of those Firms who made the offer being involved in the death. No, that doesn’t make sense as it isn’t Archie who has final control of selling the property. All the three siblings must have consensus with all three portions of the land being sold as the one allotment. Those Offers put forward? They weren’t aware of that arrangement so we can dismiss their involvement, don’t you think?”

Shelley followed my logic, agreeing with my assertions.

“Yeah, but yet again we have talked ourselves out of a reason for the killing of the poor man”.

“Mmm...back to square one, so it seems”.

CHAPTER NINE

We finished another superb Club meal. I leaned back in my chair and let out a sigh of satisfaction.

“I think we should go for a run to-night to get rid of some of this excess food. You with me Shells?”

“As soon as I decide on what Dessert I want...”

“You’re not a Dessert person. Well, so I thought”.

“Yeah well...away from home, another lonely night with no hungry man moaning his satisfaction beside me...it’s a good compromise...him in a complete euphoric state...depleted...or more of a male style...*‘completely buggered’*. It doesn’t sit well, does it? It blows away the romance of the moment...*‘I’m completely buggered, mate!’* It just doesn’t make it, does it? And I just feel like something sweet, is all”. She giggled which made me smile.

“Seems like a completely normal thing to say, I reckon. Explains the feeling of complete depletion very well I thought”. A smile on my face. “You seem a little itchy?”

For that I got a cold look from across the table.

“Bloody hell...what have I said wrong again? Christ, if I thought along those lines wanting some Dessert whenever I felt itchy, I’d weigh at least a tonne...we’re spending too many nights away from home. Um...I think Tellie maybe pregnant again”.

“Yer what!? Fair dinkum! That’d be great!”

“Maybe from your point of view it might be. Here I am over fifty, Tellie is over forty and the two girls should be enough for us...I just think she is that little bit too old to have a successful pregnancy. I am scared she may have a rough time with it. You know, the birth and all”.

“It’s a chance you should gladly take. Thinking those negative thoughts in the beginning could be the precursor for disaster! Think bloody tonnes of positive thoughts otherwise you could end up with a little bugger just like yourself...now that would be another disaster!” She giggled at her own joke before adding, “Don’t you take precautions?”

“I thought we were over the need for that...”

“You men! You’re all the same. Let the woman take precautions...the responsibility, as you don’t seem to like wearing raincoats as it doesn’t give you that...feel? Is that the right word?”

“Arrh...you and Brin have had words, huh?”

“No, not really, but I know by the way he talks he wants a couple of kids in the not-too-distant future...but...but...” She bowed her head. I heard her snifle.

“Yeah...you okay about that?”

“It seems a little long in the tooth to ask that question now, partner...men again...nary a thought...”

“Hold on, hold on, Shells. What are we really talking about here?”

She sighed deeply, looking down at her hands. A look of sadness seemed to roll over her as she glanced in my direction. I thought I saw a tear well in her eyes.

“I’m late with my periods and am worried sick about whether I am pregnant again as I don’t want to be but am worried about losing it...again...and I don’t want to be in the situation where I have to make a conscious decision about my career versus motherhood...I am scared that I might blame the bubs for me having to give up work...you men don’t know the agony some women can go through at moments like this...you guys haven’t a clue how hard and deep it bites!”

“Congratulations is the wrong word at the moment, huh...for both me and you, huh?”

She gave me an angry glare before throwing her serviette onto the table and getting up and walking out of the Club.

I wondered what in hell I had said wrong.

CHAPTER TEN

I stared myopically at the small clock face wishing the fucking thing would stop. Someone had a bizarre sense of humour, I thought. Some sick bastard who had this room before me...then logic kicked in past the foggy thoughts. I had been in this room for the past three nights without the bloody alarm going off.

It was my Mobile, sitting illuminated and buzzing, jittering over the desk near the TV. The only spot where I could put it near a power point to charge each night.

I partially fell out of bed in a panic. It was Tellie. One of the girls was sick...rushed to Hospital...other negative and worrying thoughts fought to gain acceptance as I made it across the cold floorboards of the old Hotel to grab at my phone.

“Hello?” I answered softly, emitting a sense of dread in my voice.

“Christ, Joe, where were you? Sleep-walking out on the veranda or something...”

“I was in a deep sleep...Shells? It’s just gone three in the morning, what the...” Sensibilities cut in. “Are you okay?”

“No...I’m bleeding...I think I may be having a miscarriage. I’ve called an Ambulance”.

“Stay there, Shells. I’ll come straight across...”

“Remember to get dressed first, dude...”

A silly thought crossed my mind. If God objects to abortions, why does he allow miscarriages? And if it is said that miscarriages are caused by His hand, isn’t that also murder as the anti-abortionists constantly claim? A silly thought as I stumbled about trying to locate my clothes in the dark. “*Turn on the friggin’ light, you bloody drongo*” I chastised myself. Several precious seconds were lost before I located the light switch!

Shelley’s Unit was directly opposite mine with the connecting hallway in between. The wide covered veranda ran outside my Unit for the length of the wing, around the end and down the other side. I dressed hurriedly and walked quickly around the veranda, knowing Shelley would

sleep with the door out onto the veranda unlocked and open. She always stated she needed plenty of fresh air when she slept...bugger the security and safety aspect of the habit.

I arrived as the Ambos knocked on the inside door.

I crossed the room quickly, turning on the lights and opening the door to permit their entry.

I went with her in the Ambulance to the local Hospital even though she objected to my presence.

“Don’t ring Brin about this until we know what is going on, Joe...”

I nodded my head.

“Joe? Promise, huh?”

“Okay Shells. I won’t. I promise, just you relax and lie back and close your eyes”.

Sitting around in a cold draughty corridor of a small country Hospital is not the way I would normally want to spend my time so early in the morning, especially when it extends out to five hours. I glanced at my watch convincing myself that the Boss would be on deck well before normal start up time.

He answered his phone slowly as though he had been deep in thought.

“Joe? Good morning to you”.

“Did I wake you from a slumber at your desk?”

“Hah! No, I was adding my thoughts to a Report that Callivan and Drury submitted late yesterday afternoon. I cannot believe there still are adults who cannot construct a sentence in the correct manner even with the help of Grammar and Spellcheck. Christ, it pisses me off! Yer feel like chucking the ten-page murder summary back in their faces and telling them to fix it. I am not supposed to be sitting here spending all my time correcting grammar and spelling mistakes. Now! G’day and why are you ringing at this time of morning?”

“What are you doing there at this time of morning?” I parried. “Shells? It looks as though she may have just had a miscarriage...”

“I didn’t even know she was pregnant”.

“Neither did she...or I. She has asked that we hold off informing Brin...or her mother until there is a concrete prognosis”.

“When is that expected?”

“I’d have thought they would have known by now...we were transported in at around three thirty this morning”.

“Jeez, keep me in the loop, Joe. Have you seen her?”

“No...”

“That sounds a bit ‘iffy’...let me know how things are as soon as you know, okay. Do you need to spend any more time out there?”

“A couple more days, Boss. I am not convinced it is a suicide...”

“You and your suspicious mind...okay...keep me in the loop will you...and when you get to see her, give her a hug and kiss for me, huh?”

“Yes Boss”.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Detective Lind, is it? You are not a relative or close family member of Shelley Anne Shields, so she says?”

The Doctor had changed from her old ‘scrubs’ though there was blood on her booties. She was a wisp of a woman, standing less than five-foot tall, although she knew how to sound authoritarian throwing her several stone weight around.

“Um, no. I am her partner in crime, Doctor”. I gave her a silly grin, hoping she would see the humour in it. She didn’t. “We are Murder Squad Detectives from Sydney who were flown in to investigate the death of Archie Prendergast several weeks ago...”

“Yes...a sad set of circumstances as though we haven’t enough to weigh heavily on our shoulders at the moment what with this terrible drought. I know his wife, Rowena. She works here in the Hospital. She hasn’t worked since the terrible event...she is shattered...your

partner? She has suffered a miscarriage with a massive amount of blood loss. We are arranging for her to be transported by Air Ambulance down to Sydney...as quickly as possible...to-night. We have stabilised her and stopped the bleeding, but I think...no, I know, there is more serious underlying complications that we cannot deal with here...she is distraught that this will halt any chance of her ever falling pregnant again...it may...it very well could. Um, next of kin? Husband?"

"Live-in partner...a Police Constable working out of the Liverpool Station...and her mother. I can get our Boss to contact them...or you can do the honours if you prefer".

"That is normal protocol. Do you have the necessary information? You may contact your Boss. I cannot see her well enough to be on deck for a week or two at least". All very businesslike without a pleasant bone in her body, so it seemed. She really lacked any bedside manner.

She took Brin and Shells' mother's details and left me standing in the middle of the corridor. I suddenly felt terribly alone...and powerless.

"Good morning, Detective". Her parting comment as she quickly walked down the empty corridor. I rang Tellie...and cried. She uttered soothing words allowing me to cry myself out.

"Why are you so upset, Joe?"

I couldn't answer her as I wasn't sure myself.

"You know, I heard them talking of a total Hysterectomy that would totally shatter her. She has so wanted a baby for a long time. To me thinking selfishly, I couldn't think of anything worse. At my age I do not know whether I could break in another partner...some-one as good as Hendricks or Shells. I have been so lucky with both...selfish thoughts I know..."

"Possibly such thoughts have been telegraphed to Shelley. That is why she has hung on for so long. You only have to look at she and Brin to know they are so right for kids. That bloody zoo of theirs shows you how strong both are in that department. Joe? You have no idea how some women agonise over that question. Work or motherhood. You men have no idea at all the depth of anguish some women go through. To some, it is no big deal. To others, as I have said, it is sheer torture. Are you sure that she will be having a Hysterectomy?"

"I don't know...I just heard the Doctor speaking about it...are you pregnant?"

“Me!? Goodness gracious, Joe. Where in hell did you get that notion? You may think you have the best swimmers known to mankind, but they aren’t that good...and I’m still taking the Pill. Hopefully in a couple of years, I can give that process away...”

“Won’t you be too old then?”

“Gord, Joe! You can be dense sometimes. The Murder Detective known throughout the World. I will be going through menopause, you twit. How can I love such a bloody dense drongo has me beat!”

“You’re not that old, my love...and this drongo has you pinned to a board like a beautiful butterfly” A smile to go with the stir.

“A butterfly pinned to a backboard? Nice try but it loses something in translation...I’m still young enough to enjoy...when are you coming home?”

“Stop right there...I’ll book a flight straight away...”

“Gord you can be a twit at times...but I will wait for you with open arms...”

“It’s not the open arms I am salivating over...”

“Joe! Stop that cheap talk. When will you be home?”

“Um...I have the Panel Hearing on Frederica Stonefield at the end of this week...no, the following week...and I have a preliminary Hearing on the Sellwick Assisted Suicide Case at the end of the following week...something like that in any case. Shells normally keeps an eye on such things...next week, okay?”

“Yep. See you then. Tra-lah. The girls send their love. Give them a ring to-night so they don’t forget who their father is. Speak to you then”.

For several hours I sat beside Shelley reading aloud our Case Diary on the Archie Prendergast suspected homicide stroke suicide Case. She was heavily sedated and offered bugger all to the conversation. No matter, as I was quite capable of answering the many questions I asked of her and myself. Talking to myself, answering the many questions I did ask, obtaining a positive response from my murmurings.

I rang Clive Butler on the latest before I quit to walk down into the centre of town for something to eat, though I was not that peckish or wanting to eat anything.

When I returned to the small ICU at the Hospital, they were preparing Shelley for the plane trip to Sydney. She would then go by Ambulance from Kingsford Smith Airport to the Royal Prince Alfred at Newtown. They had the necessary Specialist Surgeons ‘on-call’ to carry out the necessary repair works. So said the Head Nurse with a smile on her face.

There was no point in me accompanying her, but I rang Brin and Shelley’s mother to give them an approximate time she would arrive at the Sydney Hospital later in the evening.

I kissed her on the cheek not too sure whether I would see her again. There was that empty feeling in the pit of my stomach that said worse was to come. I wish I could be more positive at times!

I stood at the large window of the small public combined Arrival and Departure Lounge of the Airport building. My hands deep in my pockets as the small plane taxied out to the runway and took off, to be swallowed quickly by the low cloud cover that unfortunately, was not rain bearing.

I drove back towards town wondering why so many of these small-town Airstrips were so many kilometres from the town they serviced. My mood a reflection of the grey mass above me.

CHAPTER TWELVE

It was way too early for the Hotel Dining Room to be opened for Dinner, so I sat out in the cavernous Lounge area of the local RSL Club nursing a beer and watching the wall-sized TV on which the local News was being televised. The more important National and International News would be screened thirty minutes later. There was a fifteen second sound-bite on the *‘Visiting Murder Squad Detective being airlifted to Sydney for urgent attention. She and her partner Detective Joseph Lind (a long-distant shot of me exiting the local Hospital looking a little ragged earlier this morning) are in the area investigating the alleged suicide of the popular Archie Prendergast. The township is still in shock at the much-loved local figure’s demise’*.

“Mind if we join you, Detective?”

I jerked my head towards the Station Sergeant and his ever-present shadow, the Senior Constable of this township, Caleb Collins.

“No...please...sit. I was miles away, not even taking in the News...”

“Nothing but bloody politics in any case...but not a bad shot of you. Your partner? Is she okay?”

“She’s lost a lot of blood...she miscarried...she wasn’t in good health and the people here felt it best she be airlifted down to Sydney for a possible hysterectomy...that will gut her”.

Barry Bancroft nodded as he sat opposite, placing his beer on a coaster on the small circular table that separated us. Senior Constable Caleb Collins sat beside his boss.

“The silly buggers in Canberra...they want to continue with these silly little point scoring games instead of governing the country to my way of thinking. That stupid business of getting rid of the Prime Minister? A small band of Conservative Right-wingers wanting to flex their muscles...and losing the contest in the process...losing badly, I reckon! It’s turned me off voting for the Coalition unless they pick up their game. Abbot was shown a lesson in the numbers game by Turnbull which I don’t think he will ever recover from...that guy should be booted out of the game as he is so out of touch with his Sydney Electorate. I hope he loses his seat in the next Election...I reckon he will...sorry to hear about your partner, Joe. Bit of a bugger for you”.

“Don’t know, Sergeant. We won’t know until they do some tests on her down in Sydney...it’s not looking that promising, I’m afraid”.

“You’ll stay here in town?”

“Yes, until I can be certain about Archie Prendergast’s death although I must go down to Sydney later this week. I have a preliminary Hearing into an Assisted Suicide Case and during the following week, I have to front a Standards and Ethics Interview...”

“Ouch, they’re unwelcome news those S and E hearings...been to one or two meself. They pin yer to the wall real quick like and they’re not interested in your side of the story...they’ve already firmed a conclusion in their minds which yer can’t break”.

“Yeah. Your right Um... I wanted to stay up here until we could wrap up Archie’s death”.

“Mmm...you don’t think it is suicide, so it seems...you’re leaning towards a homicide killing...”

“I think you have been aware of my attitude of not calling it suicide from the get-go. I’d say I’ve spoken to half of the population of this town and most, if not all, voiced surprise at Archie

taking his own life...and from what I saw of the crime scene a couple of days ago only reinforces that resolve...”

“Crime Scene, you say...in which case we...here at the coal face, have stuffed up big time with the way we treated that scene in the initial stages of the investigation...in your opinion...”

I ignored the obvious ploy. They still didn’t like anyone who may voice a theory in opposition to their conclusions.

“I’m still having problems with the whole thing. Like the Deceased having intimate knowledge of guns and possessing quite a collection of rifles, yet he chooses to end his life with a little-known poison which would be hard to come by. In your several searches over the Property since his death, have you found any trace of the poison? No? And we have no indication of how the poison was administered. Tell me Sergeant, who would benefit the most by Archie Prendergast’s death?”

I wanted his help, not his hostility.

“No-one would benefit. In fact, just the opposite. Rowena is devastated...and Tim Cowdrey as they were best mates. He feels so guilty about not seeing Archie’s quick descent into a black depression. Most of the town are also upset by his passing. He was a well-liked and respected man right across the District”.

“But now she has a chance of selling the Property...” I knew this statement was incorrect but all I wanted to do was involve the guy. Up until now, he had stood at arm’s length from the investigation especially after learning of my reticence in labelling it a sad suicide.

“Detective? You are so far outside the Homestead paddock; it is almost funny! Are you suggesting that Rowena Prendergast nee Cowdrey killed her husband so she can sell up? That is ludicrous, sir. For a start, the three separate Spreads under the umbrella of the Cowdrey Holding Company cannot be sold individually. Rosedale Station with Tim Cowdrey. Bungarra Hills Station which was the original Cowdrey Station now run by Rowena and the adjacent Wheeribah Creek Station run by John Cowdrey. The total land mass of around two hundred thousand hectares. The largest allotment between here and Warialda. There must be consensus by the three Shareholders. Rowena, Tim and John to sell up...and Row loved Archie to death...she could never do such a thing...and she did not need, as a Cowdrey sibling and one-third of the voting trio, Archie’s approval to sell up”.

I took a sip of my beer taking my time to permit the atmosphere to chill. Where was Shelley when I needed her?

“It required the agreement of all three Cowdrey siblings to sell up the land. Maybe Tim and John Cowdrey wanted to sell”. I suggested, offering another take on the tragedy. “Rowena was almost there what with the drought and all. Archie is poisoned to push Rowena over the edge...how many acres are we talking about here? How much land? Almost two hundred thousand hectares! That’s one hell of a bank note...if there was any one in Australia that could afford the price. The Chinese I guess...maybe British or Yank investors...”

I was doing what Shells and I always did...just dribbling scenarios. Discarding most of them as they sprouted from our mouths but there was always that one line of guessing that got our hearts and minds racing...always.

The Station Sergeant glared at me.

“You for effin’ real? First you accuse Rowena of the crime! Now you’re into John and Tim Cowdrey!” He glanced at his watch, downed the last of his drink and offering his apologies, he gave a short wave as he hurriedly left.

“Seems I may have gotten your boss’s nose out of joint a mite...”

“That is one effin’ tricky thing to do, let me tell you!” The Senior Constable conceded as he nodded his head at a couple of guys holding up the Bar. “Poisoning some-one? That leans more to a female kind of murder, doesn’t it...if you’re talking murder here. If poor Archie were indeed killed, a shot to the forehead would be more in the realms of plausibility for a man to ...you know...for a bloke to commit the murder...”

“Or suicide for that matter”.

He looked over at me nodding his head.

“You’re unsure either way, aren’t you? Suicide versus murder?”

“Yep...it pays to keep an open mind in situations like this. Sure, it could turn out to be suicide, but it will need us to investigate the situation fully before that assumption sets solidly as fact”.

The man nodded slowly. I was sure he got the gist that he and his Boss had jumped to a lot of conclusions well before all the facts were known.

He stood to get the next shout. I waved him to sit saying I had enough, and the Dining Area had just opened for business. A wine would go better with my meal.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

For the third time in as many days, I endured the three hour drive out to the Bungarra Hills Station. As we turned off the Town Road at the Station entrance, I placed my hand onto Senior Constable Caleb Collins arm as a request to stop.

“How about we visit Tim Cowdrey. It isn’t far, is it?”

“From here? About another twenty minutes...half an hour, I suppose”. Cal replied.

The Station Sergeant had apologised, excusing himself from the day’s intended itinerary saying that he had other matters to attend to. It would appear I had ruffled his feathers a little too much the night before at the Club. Caleb Collins would be my official shadow and chauffeur for the day.

I had to smile at his reply as there appeared to be no sense of distance out here, instead everything was measured in time, even how far the nearest town was! Oh...around the three-hour mark but if you push it, can do it in two and half hours...

Even though we were in the middle of the worst drought experienced in human memory, there was something majestic, something ethereal of the countryside. I really could sit and watch the trees grow, some gnarled and twisted suffering in their way from the lack of water, while others continued to grow straight and tall as though thumbing their noses at what Mother Nature had pushed their way.

My poetic musing interrupted by a cough from Constable Cal as we negotiated a wash-away way too fast, the suspension bottoming out as we hit the ‘crease’ in the landscape, almost becoming air-borne as we exited the other side.

“Whoops...they come at ya really quick, huh? When you are not expecting them”. He glanced over at me. Me now hanging on tightly to the panic handle.

“Arrh, Constable? Can you slow it down a bit? I’d like to get to our destination in one piece, okay?”

“Sorry Detective...umm...did the Sarge inform you that Dianne Cowdrey, Tim’s wife...and Archie Prendergast had history? They were an item for quite a while, even living together down in Sydney before they broke up. Both coming back home like dogs with their tails between their legs. It wasn’t long after their arrival back home that Dianne hooked up with Tim and Archie with Rowena. In fact, Archie and Row were sweethearts in a way right

through School...you know, that first love that you will always remember...I don't know why they drifted apart at that time. Young love can be so fickle...and I guess at times, cruel. Maybe because Archie showed some interest in Dianne which Row couldn't handle...don't know...umm...thought you should know”.

I nodded my head, noticing that he had slowed to a more comfortable one-twenty. Still too fast if an Emu or Roo suddenly came out in front of us.

“It looks as though Rowena may have a jealous streak in her from what you say. Enough of a streak to want to kill her husband?”

“Um, Detective? Archie and Dianne may have been an item when they fled to Sydney, but I cannot see Rowena holding a grudge against the two for that long. It was over thirty years ago, now”.

“Mmm...they're all around the same age. The three Cowdrey siblings and Dianne...did her family have land around these parts?”

“The Hadleys. Yeah, an old name like the Cowdreys, but the Hadleys sold their lot during the Millennium Drought...though they kept Holdings nearer the coast. To tell you the truth, the Cowdreys, Hadleys and another historic family, the McKinnons who have Holdings abutting onto the northern fence-line of the Bungarra Hills Station down to the banks of the Bogan River represented over three-quarters of the little Primary School here in town back in the day. About forty years ago. The kids used to billet at people's homes in town so's they could attend School. Those original families were breeding like bloody rabbits! Their Station, Bungarra Creek Station was even older than the Cowdreys by a generation, at least. But I reckon all the kids as they were growing up had the hots for all and none if you get my drift...”

“Old heartaches being repaid, you reckon?”

“Hah, now you want to throw Dianne Cowdrey into the mix as well...jeez, I'd hate to be a kid of yours!” He laughed at his gentle jib, but somehow it hit a bit of a nerve with me.

“Wasn't it you who thought poisoning was more a woman's way of killing last night?” I countered.

“No sir. I believe it may have been you”. He smiled as he glanced over at me. Both of us knowing it had been a comment he had uttered last night.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

We slowed to a stop so that the cocky comb of dust wasn't that great. To me, we failed dismally as the woman seemed to disappear into the dirty cloud.

"Sorry, Missus C. I thought I was going slow enough to not stir up any dust". Cal offered as he opened the driver's door.

She waved away the apology with a slight raising of her hand.

"There's nothing but dust, Cal so you could never keep it on the ground". She dismounted from the small four-wheeled ATV and strode purposefully towards us.

"What's up Cal? Archie's death? You are the copper from down Sydney. Please to meet you. Dianne Cowdrey". She held out her hand which I took as I alighted from the 4WD.

"Detective Joseph Lind. Murder Squad..."

"Ooh! A murder copper! What, you don't think Archie killed himself?"

No mucking about with this woman. She called a spade a spade and bugger the consequences.

"With all sudden and unforeseen deaths, we are called in to investigate the death and to write up a Report for the Coroner...have you a problem in accepting Archie Prendergast's death as a suicide?"

She looked passed me towards the horizon with a frown. The wide brimmed hat and dark sunglasses made it hard to read her expressions.

"Archie would be the last person around these parts who I would think would take his own life...I still can't believe it. It's just not the man, if you know what I mean...and I've known the man for most of my life...we started Kindy together back awhile now..."

I nodded my head as I eyed her. There was a quiet beauty there. A lust for life and bugger the consequences. I thought I was gauging the woman a little prematurely, taking a mental step backwards so as not to crucify the woman too early. I could get to know this woman if you know what I mean. She was my type of woman. She noticed my examination of her, giving me a flashing smile as she brushed down her shirt sleeves as though the threadbare appearance rattled her.

“You’ve known Archie all your life. Is that correct?”

“Every person of my generation who was raised within a two-hundred-kilometre radius of the town knew one another from Primary School days onwards. A lot of us were billeted out to the same family in town for several years...and yes, it could be assumed you have done a bit of homework as Archie and I were an item for several years...down in Sydney...not several years...about eighteen months before we called it quits with both of us coming back up here. The Bush life has a real pull on any person who grew up on a farm...you can take the bush out of the girl, but you can’t take the woman out of the bush”.

“Why did the relationship end?”

“What!? I’m a suspect because Arch and I were an item at one stage? Jeez, I have four kids to Tim, seven if you count the miscarriages, am very happy which gets difficult at times because of the drought, bin married to the most wonderful guy around these parts for nigh on twenty years, both of us good...no...very good friends with Row and Archie where nary a week would pass when we weren’t at each other’s house...and I am a suspect in the *alleged* murder of the man because he and I were an item some twenty-five, closer to thirty years ago now...yer got a bloody hide, Detective”. She glared at me not taking a backward step.

“Where were you on the Monday when it is thought that Archie died?” Ignoring the show of anger.

“On a plane coming from Sydney. It landed at about three that afternoon. Even though we had no intention of staying in town that night, we did as Tim was late in coming into town to pick me up. He was held up helping out Arch bury some stock...in the Back Paddock...so he tells me”.

“You don’t believe the story?”

“I would never disbelieve anything that Tim tells me. I can pick a lie coming out of him at ten paces! It was no lie!”

“So, your husband may have been the last person to see Archie Prendergast alive before he died?”

“That is your assumption, Detective. I do not rightly know. I wasn’t there”.

“Where is your husband at the moment?”

“Down the bottom paddock putting in a couple of connected paddock dams and helping to construct a causeway weir across the creek. Bungarra Creek which eventually runs into the Bogan River. We have a small tributary creek...Little Bungarra Creek which runs diagonally across our land. Tim has constructed several dams of fallen trees and boulders which should extend our water supply by a fair bit...when the rain comes. Best time to do such chores before the rains come...the causeway will benefit several landowners as far as access is concerned...and the causeway is on public land so there should be semi-permanent water backed up from the weir. The Council and several of us landholders are footing the bill...it will benefit ‘The Long Paddock’ for people who want to drive their cattle onto the area...should be good...when the rains come...”

I cocked my head. A look of disbelief that Missus Cowdrey picked up.

“Detective, to-day we are one day closer to it raining. Yer gotta keep yer chin up out around here otherwise yer can go bonkers. I was in the process of taking Tim something to eat and drink for lunch. If you need to talk to him, which I think yer are, follow me, okay?”

“Missus Cowdrey? Why were you in Sydney?”

She turned to face me, the colour of her face reddening. She placed her hands on her hips and was on the verge of telling me to bugger off, I felt sure. She stepped back to face me at arm’s length, taking a deep breath to cool down before speaking. She looked away then back again having calmed her temper down to manageable levels. It was there though, just below the surface...I wondered what would get it to emerge as a cop from the city stirred it up a bit!

“This is the Bush, Detective. We’re a long way from everything. We each rely on one another to survive. To get through periods like this. The worst drought in these parts since records were being kept...and a long time before that!” She crossed her arms over her small breasts and squared up to face me. A look of...not hatred or loathing, more like an itch that wouldn’t go away no matter how hard you scratched. “Um...my family, the Hadleys, were one of the original settlers hereabouts, way back. They sold up Bungarra Creek Station during the Millennium drought. They still have Holdings closer to the Coast...there is a Manager in on that Property out Nundle way. Mum and Dad built a block of Apartments at Turramurra, an eastern suburbs beach of Sydney. They’ve got the top Penthouse Apartment. Four bedrooms. Good views of the beach. Mum died a couple of years back and Dad is showing the signs of old age...I suppose he should as he won’t see eighty again. Two of my kids board with him and are attending UNSW which is not that far away from Turramurra. I was in Sydney to see dad and my kids. Stayed for a week. Eight days. Nothing much to do here. All our stock has either been sold off or transferred by road onto the Nundle Property even though they are very dry themselves. Suffering just as much as we are but at least that Property has a good water supply. We offered to take Arch and Rowena’s herd at the same time...the more the merrier.

They buggered about like old women, so we just transferred our stock. We couldn't wait too long otherwise the cattle would have lost the ability and stamina to survive such a trip. As it was, we lost five head on the way". She stepped back away from me, that flush of anger still noticeable. "As far as me going to Sydney? It was good to see them all...I was supposed to come home on the Monday night, but Tim was late picking me up from the Airport. He was helping Archie to bury a couple of head...we stayed in town overnight...that was the day that Archie died...though we didn't know that until...a coupla days ago. You want that confirmed? Ask at the Airport and the local Town and Country Motel as that is where we stayed overnight". She gave me a smile. "Follow me. Tim is expanding the size and number of paddock dams as all are bone dry. Best time to do the work waiting for the rains...he's just finished a couple 'stepping' weirs on Little Bungarra Creek on our land...as I said before".

She was starting to repeat herself...I wondered why. It wasn't nerves...but there was a guilty streak which she was trying to hide...failing dismally.

She looked sideways at me half expecting me to say something.

As that did not eventuate, she turned on her heel and over her shoulder, requested Cal to follow her. She hopped onto the four-wheeled bike with two dogs sitting on a platform over the front handlebars. They yelped in excitement as though they knew where they were heading. She let out at a frightening speed as though she'd be late for supper. Cal hung back so's not to get caught up in the cockie comb of dust that ballooned out behind the four-wheeled bike. It would be hard to lose her.

"Jeez...she sure is going rickety split...buggered if I would ride one of those at such a rate".

"Or want to over these farm tracks!" I added comically, hanging on for dear life to the panic handle above the window line.

We followed her through several paddocks where the connecting gates were all open. We left them that way, eventually coming down a slight incline that was the bottom paddock. I could see the Back Road as a straight cut between this property and the neighbouring Prendergast spread. The tree line on either side of the Back Road looked exhausted and dust covered. A strip of trees about twenty-thirty metres wide on either side of the road. The only decent coverage of trees noticeable.

I reckon if I stopped and looked hard enough, I would be able to spot the slight mound of dirt where the three head of cattle were buried up near the top fence line in Prendergast's back paddock. Cal slowed to a crawl as he came up to where the couple were standing so as not to cover them in dust. Tim Cowdrey was standing looking in our direction, a large grease-gun

in one hand, the other arm around his wife's shoulders as a protecting gesture. He was tall, well over 180 centimetres, his shoulders as wide.

A large Bulldozer sat silently under the shade of a huge gum. The base of the tree strewn with fallen dead limbs. It was slowly dying as seemed was everything else around here. I wondered on the sensibility of the man to carry out running repairs on the 'dozer under the tree...he didn't show any nervousness about his position when I questioned him.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"Detective". Tim Cowdrey held his hand out. "I expected to see you sooner or later. You're the talk of town and the airwaves, let me tell yer. You the cop from Sydney, huh? Nice to meet ya. Cal? Good to see you. You the nominated driver for this outa town Dee, heh?"

He wiped his hand on a rag that was stuck in the back pocket of his jeans, but still his hand seemed greasy.

"By the looks of the dam you are digging, you're hoping for good rains soon".

"When it comes, Detective, it more than likely will come in a flood. That is the norm. We would much prefer good steady soaking rain but to break this drought, we'll need a bloody good fall spread over several months so we can still get out into the paddocks to put in seed...cuppa?"

"You have yours, sir. We brought our own supplies".

"You'll have to use the tracks of the dozer to sit down. If we'd knowed you were coming, we would have supplied a picnic table and chairs". Dianne joked, a smile to break the ice. She looked so different when the anger and impatience was gone.

After we settled with a cup, introduced to the dogs, and given an abbreviated lesson on dam building, siting, and forming, Tim broached the subject.

"I was here...doing what I've been doing this morning. Making sure the old dozer was greased right up. Two of me dogs for company. I heard the first shot. Recognised the gun and where it was coming from. Archie was shooting more of his stock. He should have moved them to the Home Paddock a while ago. Better chance to keep an eye on them. Feed and water them. He said he was gunna leave the gates open so's they'd relocate on their own. Personally, I

reckon he has left it too late...I heard the second shot and then the third. I reckon he would need a hand, so's I drives over in the farm Ute..."

I looked down at the bottom fence-line that ran parallel with the tree line that hugged and denoted the dirt road. Spotted a fence-gate down in one corner. Open.

"Yeah, went out through the bottom gate which is almost opposite Archie's bottom gate. Drove up the incline to where he was. He was sitting half out of his Ute. Tears in his eyes. He was still resting the rifle between his legs. The stock on the ground. He had ejected the magazine, so I presumed there was none up the spout. I offered to go back to his Machinery Shed to get the Back-hoe tractor. I couldn't figure why he hadn't driven it out as he knew he would be needing it to bury the carcasses. I let it go as no-one is thinking straight at the moment. Went and got the Tractor out of the Machinery Shed and drove it down to the back paddock. A fair distance sitting in a bloody tractor, let me tell you. We dug the hole, dragged the cattle into the trench and covered it up. We stopped for a cuppa, and it was then that I noticed the time. I would be late picking Dianne up from the Airport...and I was covered in dust and sweat. We had a laugh about that. He told me to take the Tractor back to the shed and have a shower there...I then went into town from there...no use coming back this way as it would add another hour on the trip about".

"How did he seem to you?"

"You know...he was really upset about having to put down stock...we all have been through it this time around...but he seemed alright when I left him...under the circumstances..."

"Wouldn't it have been quicker and easier for you to go back and get your Dozer...it was here, right?"

Cowdrey nodded his head, looking over at me.

"Yeah...it would have been...if I had thought about it..." A smile on his face, a shake of his head denoting he himself thought he was stupid in not thinking of that alternative.

"Why didn't you take his Ute back to the Machinery Shed...I presume there is a shower in that shed?"

"Yeah...um...why didn't I take his Ute?" He looked around him, his eyes open wide in a questioning manner. He shrugged his shoulders. "I really don't know...I guess I would have saved maybe fifteen minutes in driving his Ute instead of the Tractor...maybe closer to half an hour...huh...I can't tell you why...no...the shower is hooked up to an artesian bore that is getting a little low..."

“What did Archie have to drink when you stopped. You said it was after you had finished, didn’t you?”

“Yeah...I...Archie had his normal green tea out of a thermos...we both shared his supply of chilled water that he had in his little frig...you know, those small camping fridges. We drank it dry while we were burying the carcasses. It was hot work”.

“If you knew time was getting away, why did you stop for a cuppa?”

“Why!?” Again, he looked about, a slightly astonished look on his face. “Huh...I don’t know...yer gotta stop for a cuppa...” Even to him it seemed a bit off as though the etiquette of the Bush was set in stone. You had your cuppa together if you’d been working together, no matter what.

“A thermos of tea was not with his things listed by the Sergeant on site”.

“Perhaps Rowena tidied up a bit. She was with him for around three hours until the local guys got here...”

“The local chopper and Paramedics arrived within half an hour of Rowena calling the Police Station and Ambulance service...”

Again, he looked at me and shrugged his shoulders. He wasn’t aware of those facts.

“Do you have Thallium on your property?”

“What’s that?” Tim Cowdrey replied, a little bewildered.

“The poison that killed Archie...”

“He poisoned himself!!!??? Archie poisoned himself!? Narh...not on! No way. He didn’t seem like a bloke on the edge when I was with him...but...but if he *were* going to kill himself, he more than likely would be the type to shoot himself...poison? Not on. Narh. Not Archie. I thought he had died of a heart attack. That was the rumour going around. The Sarge thought as much as well, didn’t he Cal?”

“Why are you so adamant on that? That he didn’t kill himself?”

“It’s...it’s not Archie’s style...and I don’t believe he was anywhere near wanting to kill himself that morning. I was a good mate of his...we been mates for years. We played on the same team Summer and Winter for a lot of years. We still occasionally play in a seniors’ game

as a charity fund-raiser. I reckon I know him pretty well. We're close mates...have been for a lot of years. Enough to say that Archie would never take his own life. Yer can take that to the Bank!"

"In which case, the only alternative to that was he was murdered. By whom, Mister Cowdrey? Would you have any idea?"

"Whoarrh! You trying to put the handcuffs on me, Officer? Supposedly because I may have been the last person to see him alive...he was a good mate, Officer. That accounts for something out here in the Bush". The man was getting a little tight. Dianne gave him a hug and whispered for him to chill out.

"Is there anything that you know that may draw a conclusion on who would want Archie Prendergast dead?" There was silence for some time. Tim Cowdrey slowly shook his head.

"Nothing Detective. Nothing at all".

"Was Archie's family land holders?" I asked, changing the direction of the conversation, hoping to keep the man off-balance. All it did was to calm the man down.

"Back away, yes. His father and his father before him had a large Property north of town and about an hour out. They sold it about three years ago, just as the Drought was beginning to bite. Admittedly, with Archie here with Rowena on Bungarra Hills, there was no-one to take over running the Property. Old man Prendergast was getting old, and he had a few accidents during his life. Left him with a permanent limp and constant pain. He got a decent price as his property had reasonable water...back then...it has also run dry. Archie was torn between his love for Rowena and the family property. In the end, it didn't matter much I suppose. The sale gave him a good windfall, let me tell you. Old man Prendergast and...Lily..." He turned to his wife for confirmation. "Yeah, Lily. Both killed in a car accident heading to Sydney after the place was sold for a fair price. Ran straight into the front of a Roadtrain. Some say he fell asleep...others say it was deliberate. Don't rightly know, but it shook up Archie for a while..."

"Enough to cause him to take his own life?"

"Nah...his parents died what? Three years ago..." He nodded his head as confirmation. "And I'll say it again, Detective. I do not think that Archie was the kind to kill himself. I know that leaves a terrible quandary for you, Detective. So be it. I *will not permit* these rumours of self-harm on Archie's behalf to linger".

"Was he close to his parents?"

“Um...yeah. He was their only child. Lily had a lot of problems that way. You know?”

That was a natural affliction out here in the Bush, I thought to myself.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Dianne Cowdrey followed us down to the rear gate that gave us access onto Back Road. She opened the gate and closed it behind us. Cal went to turn right onto the dirt road heading back to the Town Road.

“Hang on, Cal. If we turn left...?”

“Takes us down to the Hadley’s old property, Bungarra Creek Station. As Dianne said, Jim Hadley sold the run during the millennium drought. He was getting too old for it in any case and his two sons didn’t have their hearts in farming...they still have the farm out Nundle way which keeps him busy, so I am told...though Dianne hinted that he’s getting a little too old for that. I think they have a Manager living on site now at the Nundle Property with the old man living at Turramurra Beach. Too bad as he was one excellent farmer ahead of his time”.

“Who owns Bungarra Creek Station now?”

“A partnership of three brothers from Sydney. Pitt Street farmers they’re called. They provide money, rake it in during the good times. They seldom come out here and when they do, they fly straight onto the Property in a small plane. Loaded. One brother resides at Hunters Hill in an award-winning house. The other two up the northern peninsular somewhere from memory...”

“Let’s pay the Station a visit, eh?”

“Okay. The manager on site? A bloody good bloke and a hard worker. Six kids and a very popular wife who is into about every cause that’s available out around here...but it’s the best way to get knowed and to learn what’s going on under the table if you get my drift. As new folks, they’s are still getting to be knowed by the locals. Only been on the Spread for five...six years. Good folks. The Cavanaghs. Real friendly-like”.

We drove down the Back Road for some kilometres, past a fancy entrance onto the rear Property that backed onto Bungarra Hills Station, Rowena, and Archie Prendergast’s spread.

“That’s the McKinnons Property...”

“Fancy entrance huh? Says something about the people, maybe”.

“Jeez you like to jump at shadows, Detective. The McKinnons are the founding family around here...along with the Hadleys. They’re good people too, Detective...”

“Nice people...good people can also commit homicide, Cal...or indulge in Domestic Violence...” I had no idea why I had added Domestic Violence into the mix as well, but Cal glanced at me, a frown that had me thinking of something that someone had said about the McKinnons. I couldn’t bring it to the top of the mix, so I forgot about it. It would eventually come to me.

He shook his head slowly without another word being spoken until we pulled up out the front of the sprawling homestead that oozed history. The style and construction bespoke the late Eighteen Hundreds: a beautiful example of that period Architecture.

Two people rose from an old couch located in shadow on the wide veranda as we crawled to a stop.

A nuggety bloke walked to open Cal’s driver’s door, cheerily addressing the Senior Constable as he alighted from the 4WD. The woman stood on the edge of the veranda shading her eyes, a frown on her face. A worried expression that concerned me for no logical reason.

“Come up and sit in the shade, guys. My wife Evie, Detective. She’ll make you a cuppa if you want...”

“Coffee would be fine. White one sugar”. We lowered ourselves into the old couch that sagged under our combined weight.

“Archie’s death, Detective. You want to know what we know, eh? Not much...” Straight into it, no ‘how’s your father’. “A nasty business. There’s talk about that it may not be suicide but something more sinister. Is that right, Detective?”

“We are looking at several lines of enquiry, Mister Cavanagh. As we normally do on every case of a sudden and unexplained death of a person. Could you tell us about your movements on Monday three weeks ago?”

“Are we suspects, sir?”

“Everyone around here has to answer the same line of questioning...”

“Even the McKinnons...” He gruffly said. He moved aside what was on a small side table so that his wife could place a platter with coffee mugs, milk, and sugar and half a Sponge cake.

“Help yourselves to whatever, gentlemen...Eddy? Don’t go accusing people of something that you have no proof of and are just the subject of idle people making up stories. Hear me?” His missus quipped.

“What about the McKinnons?” I asked as I added a small heap of sugar into my coffee.

“Eddy!” Evie Cavanagh admonished. “Don’t pass on scurrilous chatter when you have no way of knowing whether it is the truth or not. Hear me? Just because they are upset about you damming up a couple of watercourses that drain onto their land”.

I looked across at the man as he cut himself a slice of cake, offering the knife to me when he caught me looking at him. I shook my head as I was full of cake...and coffee. At this rate, I’ll be peeing all bloody night. Cavanagh had a smirk on his face. He winked at me as a message that he had got the ‘old girl’ going.

“I’d be interested to know, sir”.

Evie shook her head as she sat on the other side of her husband, almost blocked out of my eyeline. I could, however, see her shaking her head.

“Archie Prendergast and Victoria McKinnon were having an affair...that’s the reason why he kept what heads of cattle he still had in the back paddock...in abuts the back fence-line of Bungarra Hills Station...and the McKinnon property line”.

“You know this for certain, Mister Cavanagh?”

“Well...”

“Just stupid rumours that could wreck two sets of marriages...the Prendergasts and the McKinnons!” Missus Cavanagh spat out without moving from behind her husband. I missed the anger on her face, but the tone of her voice was unmistakeable. “The McKinnons? You don’t want to upset Gus McKinnon. He’s a big boy and he don’t ever take a backward step. He’s got one hell of a temper, so you don’t want to rile the man too much. Apart from that, we don’t know too much that could help youze”.

“So, who’s trying to spread spurious comments now, eh?” Ed Cavanagh sniggered at his wife. They both shared a moment of laughter.

“It has been said that both Tim and John Cowdrey wanted to sell up their sections of the Cowdrey Holdings. Rowena and Archie were adamant about seeing the drought through. Now that would be a good reason to kill Archie, wouldn’t it? Rowena by herself could not...would not be capable of managing the farm on her own”.

“Eddy, stop broadcasting these village rumours you pick up at the Pub in town. You’ll be the death of me, one day...”

“Until then, you’ll still love me, right?”

They both laughed, both convinced that rumours were mischievous lies. Cal looked at me with raised eyebrows. I slotted the information into that part of my brain that I used for this Case. I knew how close rumours came to be the truth, however way out, senseless, or cruel...given time.

It also agreed with what I had stated as an idea a couple of days ago, so I felt it close to a possibility.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The McKinnons weren’t home; we assumed either in town or out in the paddocks somewhere. The front door unlocked, and a mixture of dog types guarded the veranda though there were more wagging tails than aggressive barks. I was not going to stretch my luck by advancing to the veranda edge...I reckon I could end up with half a dozen dogs clamped to my legs!

“Um...how about we call into Bungarra Hills Station on the way back into town?” I suggested as I settled back into the front passenger seat.

“Yeah...OK. I’ll just leave a message to let them know it was us who caused the uproar with the dogs. If they are out in the paddock somewhere, I reckon they would have heard the barking and would wonder who had called in...hang on a minute”.

This was quintessential “Bush” conduct that I found difficult to grasp. I don’t know why except to say unlike the City where you would knock on a door to find no-one at home, you could cycle back to that door when next in the area. I guess it is a little more difficult when ‘near’ neighbours are counted in the kilometres and near Towns are in the hundreds of kilometres out here in the ‘Outback’...a little difficult to pay a visit later!

The Bungarra Creek Road begins at the entrance gateway and cattle grid of the Bungarra Creek Station, the road twice fording the creek before heading straight as a dyke for some fourteen kilometres before intersecting with the Town Road. I figured we made the intersection in record time.

“Um...has there ever been a case out here where you, say...or one of your co-workers has ever been pulled over for speeding?”

Cal glanced at me, a smile on his face.

“Not when we can prove we are on official Police business...”

“Like now, huh?”

“Yeah, I guess...”

“Could you just tone it down to say, around one hundred...and let’s pay Rowena Prendergast another visit”.

“What for...I doubt she could give us any more than she already has...I doubt the veracity of that rumour about Archie and Victoria McKinnon...or the Cowdrey conspiracy. That is just too way out to be the truth”.

“That is one of several questions I mean to ask her”. I answered, thankful that he had mentioned it as it had left me. It may be a good question to ask straight up to rattle her.

He slowed to a crawl as he turned into the Bungarra Hills Station entrance and crossed a very wide cattle grid made of old railway line. I noticed the name, a date of 1883 and Cowdrey Holdings Pty. Ltd etched into the stone of the more subdued entrance way as that of the McKinnons farm.

Another kilometre on and we turned into the Homestead yard, slowing to a crawl as we stopped in front of the homestead gate. We sat for a moment letting the dirt cocky comb dissipate before opening our doors to alight.

“Hello, Cal. You here to tell me when I can claim Archie’s body?”

“Uh, no. I am amazed that it has not been released as yet”.

“In cases like this where there is uncertainty into the cause of death, they sometimes like to keep the body until all avenues are explored”. I gave her my best smile.

“Load of bullshit, Detective. We know what killed Archie...”

“But there are questions as to delivery, Missus Cee...until we can categorically say it was suicide or death by other means, the Forensic Pathologist likes to hang on to the body...I think we can expect your husband to be handed over to the local Funeral people within a day or two”.

“Do you know something that we don’t?” Alarm in her voice.

“Um...can we sit somewhere, please?”

She scratched the back of her neck, gave out a heavy sigh and apologised for her rudeness.

“Sorry Detective. Come around the corner. I’ll get Lizbeth to bring out something to eat...and drink, yes?”

“That would be fine, missus”. Though I was not hanging out for any sustenance...but how can you refuse the hospitality of the Bush, especially in times like this!

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

We talked in general terms on the drought, how hard it was biting and the likelihood of rain until Lizbeth carried out a large coffee percolator, three mugs, milk, and sugar with a jam cake roll.

“Please...arrh...Lizbeth? Is that right? Please join us”.

We sat in silence until the woman sat with us, close to Rowena. I noticed that Rowena Prendergast smiled slightly knowing her friend was nearby. Patted her on the hand in a reassuring way.

I dived straight in.

“There are rumours abounding that your husband and Victoria McKinnon were having an affair. Would you know anything about that, missus?”

She shook her head slowly.

“Rumours...silly bloody rumours that can hurt...Archie didn’t need...no...wouldn’t want to stray. Don’t believe half the stuff that Cavanagh spews forth. If he said that within his wife’s presence, I’d be surprised she didn’t clip him over the back of the head”. She gave a cut-off laugh. I noticed though that she did not refute the allegation out of hand. I nodded my head.

“Umm...what, you think there may be some truth in that rumour?”

“What? That Vickie McKinnon and my Archie were having an affair. No...he would never cheat on me as I would know of it straight away...and besides, Arch was an old-fashion romantic who took his vows seriously. I have complete confidence in him never straying, Detective”.

She gave me a smile though it could have been a grimace.

“Lizbeth?”

I bent over to look at the other woman sitting on the other side of Rowena.

“You are? I seem to remember that Missus Cee said you were her sister the last time we visited. But that can’t be right as there are only the three Cowdreys, John, Tim, and Rowena here who have voting rights on the running of Cowdrey Holdings. Is that right, Missus Prendergast?”

“Yes, it is. You men can refer to your mates as ‘bro’, so why can’t us women call our VBFs ‘sisters’ or ‘sis’ occasionally?”

“Okay...yes...you are right...sure”. I turned to her. “Your details, missus?”

“Mz, if you don’t mind. Lizbeth Fellows. I have a Unit at Turramurra close to John Cowdrey Senior. Row and I have been close friends since our Boarding School days...” She spoke softly, a shaky voice which made me think she wasn’t telling the truth...or all of it!

“Where were you when Archie Prendergast died?”

“Am I a suspect, Detective?”

“Not in the least, but everyone remotely connected in this Case are all asked the same questions”.

“Very well...I was here...in town...”

Rowena Prendergast suddenly sat upright in surprise. Her friend noticed the reaction as I did, suspicion immediately surfacing. We needed to do a complete search on this lady.

“No...that can't be right. I flew up here as soon as Row called me to tell me the terrible news. Yes”. As though she was leaving it out there to be corrected or to be corroborated.

“Um...so what day did you fly in?”

“Oh...I can't remember exactly...on the Sunday?” She turned to Rowena Prendergast for support. “No, perhaps it was the day after Row found Archie's body...how terrible. The Thursday, I think. Is that right, Row? You rang me the morning you discovered Archie's body. You were really upset, and I knew you needed me. I immediately booked a seat for the afternoon flight up here...the Thursday. I stayed in town on the Thursday night and came here on the Friday morning...early”.

“You came straight out to the farm?”

“Yes...no...I stayed in town overnight...I came out here after that...”

“Let me ask you again, Mz. Fellows. Where were you when Archie was found in the back paddock on the Thursday morning, three weeks ago?”

“Detective, you are getting me so confused...I'm not too sure now”. She looked to Rowena for support. “I was home at Turramurra, overlooking the beach”. As though this was of some importance. “Thursday morning when Row called...yes...that's right”. She stated nervously.

“You stayed at a Motel in town? You hired a vehicle to get around perhaps? Why didn't you stay with Rowena here while you stayed in town? She has permanent digs in town. We can easily check your whereabouts, ma'am”.

There was silence. I noticed Rowena Prendergast looking quizzically at her very best friend. They had been holding hands, now they weren't.

“I didn't stay in town that night, Detective. I have been out here since I found Archie's body on the Thursday morning. Lizbeth came out on the Friday morning. We followed each other back into town so Lisbeth could return the Hire car”.

I nodded my head.

“Lizbeth, you would have got the same flight as Dianne Cowdrey, Rowena's sister-in-law?”

“No. I believe Di flew up here on the Monday night. Tim told me he was late picking her up from the Airport as he had helped Archie bury those three heifers. They stayed in town overnight”. Rowena stated, frowning as she looked across at me.

Again, total silence. I could even hear the ticking of an old grandfather clock somewhere inside the house. I was angry with myself for forgetting the movements, comings, and goings of people. That normally didn’t happen.

“What stupid questions, Detective. Lizzie will get fretful with questions like that. Her anxiety levels will escalate alarmingly. She wasn’t in town when Archie died. I picked her up from the Airport on the Thursday evening. Last flight in from Sydney”. Rowena stated strongly.

I kept my counsel. Those facts will be easily confirmed when I get back into town.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

It was close on seven when we hit town.

“I’m bloody starved!” I complained. “Is there anything in town that would be still open and serving food, decent food...and forget about the favourite fast-food outlets”.

“The local Chinese will cook us something regardless of whether he was closed or not”.

We settled at a table towards the back of the Restaurant. We were the only clientele on that mid-week evening. We ordered and sat back with a reasonable Dry White.

“Why give Row’s friend a tough time? She appears to me to be just a real nervy woman...maybe something in her past...” Cal asked quietly.

“As you said a couple of days ago, a homicide by poisoning is usually a woman’s handiwork, but all the women we have interviewed didn’t fit the profile. You always look for opportunity, method, and the reason why in any murder investigation. Fellows body language had me worried, along with the fact she couldn’t remember what she had told Rowena about the days and where she was on those days...and when she eventually did recall, it was not the same information as she had told Rowena previously...that put her on very shaky ground as far as I was concerned”.

The young Senior Constable nodded his head slowly.

“Do you think she killed Archie?”

“I’m not too sure...I’m inclined to believe her when she says that she didn’t know anything and by the body language and their comments to one another, I’d say no...she is just a very anxious, flighty woman who goes into meltdown at the slightest form of pressure. I’d say she has suffered some form of break-down during her life that has left her as she is. Can happen to anyone, I guess”.

“Are they sexually involved? That would really put the cat among the pigeons in this town at least. Calmly right-wing conservative with such nonsense barely tolerated”.

“Are they lesbians and are they in a long-term relationship? They may have been lovers way back in Boarding School...you know, teenage experimentation, but I do not think that Rowena is gay...with Lizbeth having the stronger feelings based on that episode at school all those years ago...I’d say at a guess”.

“Detective, how do you think up these scenarios? You think the worse of people all the time...”

“You’ve been in the Cop Force for what? Five years counting the Academy time as well. I have been in the Force for around thirty-five years, the Murder Squad for close to thirty now. You get to see the real cruelty, savagery and manipulation that normal people are capable of committing against their fellow man”.

I took a long sip of my wine, giving my career a quick once-over as I did so. Not a good look!

CHAPTER TWENTY

We spent all morning walking around town obtaining information that would corroborate Lizbeth’s details. I needed a coffee. A decent coffee so we sat in the local Cafe in the centre of town that we had visited before.

“Where to from here?” Caleb asked quietly, looking around nervously to see whether there were any customers within earshot. He need not have bothered. We were the only customers in the joint. It was a quiet day.

I went to reply but was interrupted by the Waitress...or the only other person in this little Café. The Owner, I thought.

“You’re the Detective from Sydney...up here investigating Archie Prendergast’s death. How is it going?” The woman asked as she placed steaming coffee mugs in front of us. A middle-aged woman who really needed to get the next size up in clothes, I surmised as I looked up at her. I nodded my head, gave her my best smile.

“We are following several avenues of investigation”. I answered, giving her the normal reply to such a question.

“You know Archie and Dianne Cowdrey were an item, don’t you?” She stated, bending down conspiratorially towards me.

“Yes, before they both married. Dianne to Tim Cowdrey and Archie Prendergast to Rowena”. I replied quietly. That smile never leaving my dial. “The two shared digs down in Sydney. There is no indication that the two were anything more than just friends since their respective marriages...they were sharing a joint to halve the rent back in their late teens and early twenties...for eighteen months before they both came home. No proof exists that would indicate anything else”. Caleb Collins asserted, a little peeved at the way rumours abounded in his hometown. Particularly those that asserted various nefarious things which our deceased person could not oppose.

Let her spread that about, I thought to myself though I was not impressed with how the Constable conducted himself.

“And it has been said that Victoria McKinnon and Tim Cowdrey have been having an affair for some time now”. This said with an air of superiority and a nose stuck firmly in the air as she straightened. Having recorded our choice of eats for the day she walked off, satisfied that she had done some good that morning.

“Isn’t it amazing that if you want to know the latest gossip in a town, all you have to do is listen to the old biddies who go to Church every Sunday”. Cal exclaimed as he looked up at the woman as she disappeared behind a high section of the small counter unit.

“You shouldn’t have done that, Cal. She may be a mine ready to unearth that one big nugget we are looking for. You never know with these old biddies; they hear and see a lot that is not meant for general consumption...then they make sure they spread it”.

“Yeah, well...she is renowned for her busybody ways”. Cal replied caustically/

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

My mobile rang as I went to take the first bite of a beautiful, large sandwich. My mouth no contest for the thickness of the sandwich.

“Yes Boss”. I answered impatiently as I placed the sandwich back onto the plate. A fill up of coffee by the old dear. I nodded my thanks.

“How you going up there, Joe? The alleged suicide has turned into a Homicide investigation, so it seems...you do it every time”.

“Appears that way, eh? I think I can roll up the Case in a couple of days but there are a fair few trailing lines that need to be investigated”.

“Can the local chaps proceed with that?”

“Yeah, I guess...as long as I brief them. What’s this all about, Boss?”

“You’ve got a Preliminary Hearing on the Assisted Suicide Case the day after tomorrow...arrh...Friday, and you have that S and E Committee Hearing on Frederica Stonefield’s Appeal on Monday and Tuesday of next week...”

“Bugger, I forgot all about those dates. Shells used to do the reminding, Boss...can I come back up here to roll things up later next week?”

“Let’s see how the local guys go over the next week, huh? If it is an uncomplicated Case of homicide, then they may very well try to make you look sub-standard in solving the Case and arresting the culprit...let’s see. Make arrangements to fly out to Sydney on the evening flight to-morrow...okay?”

I felt there was more to the situation than I knew. Under a normal position like this, your partner would stay on the Case while the Lead Detective attended to those other matters as though they have precedence over a Homicide Case. This is how Cases slip through the holes and become a badly investigated Case or a Cold Case mainly because there is a movement of different staff investigating the matter coming through the ranks continuously! Some may say that a different point of view was beneficial to a Case gathering moss, but it also has that negative effect at times.

Shelley and I had left our other Case hanging to come out ‘Bush’. As the Prendergast Case appeared to be a straightforward Suicide, we felt we could bundle up the Case easily, thus

getting us back onto the Suicide case in Sydney in no more than a week. That of a young sixteen-year Jason Joshua Foster hanging himself in the family garage. There were tentacles in that Case that had both Shells and I biting at the bit!

Both Cases proving there is no simple Suicide Case and the amount of investigation in such cases can be more than in a genuine murder case. Both of us however, preferred such cases over suicides, especially when it involves young teenagers. They were the worst! Really cutting Shelley to the bone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

After our Lunch and a dirty water coffee, we sat for close on two hours back at the Police Station. There was an official ‘handing over’ of the Case to Senior Constable Cal Collins with a young and enthusiastic Constable Danielle Page being his junior partner. The Station Sergeant would oversee proceedings. We filled a large white board with things that needed to be searched out to progress the case.

All the various questions and scribbles noted all over the white board transmitted by the young Constable onto her laptop. Both Cal and I sat in stunned silence as this marvellous process occurred. I may have known how to do it once, but I wasn’t about to let on my shortcomings and loss of memory of doing such things. I consoled myself by saying that the method needed to be undertaken on a regular basis to permit it becoming a second nature thing.

“Easy as, gentlemen. I see both of you hadn’t a clue on what I just did...the two of you are Dinosaurs. Cal, as my partner in this case, you will need to get up to date in these matters”. Said as though she had already taken over the reins as Leader of the Case I thanked my stars that I was gaining a reprieve and a break from the Case by being in Sydney even for those couple of days.

“Arrh...while I’m gone, can you interview all other Cockies in the same age group with possible knowledge and early friendship or acquaintanceship with the Cowdreys, the Prendergasts, McKinnons, and Hegartys in the quarter from east of the township round the clock to the west of town. I want all those people to be placed up here on the Digital Noticeboard and coloured lines going from name to name with say...a familial attachment, romantic attachment, an attachment that is purely rumour...and any other attachment that you can think of...”

“Business?” The young Danielle Page murmured.

“Yes, very good Danni. Yes, Business attachment. Maybe sporting teams back in the day or they still play. Mid-forties blokes. It is not outside the realms of possibility. You may require a few quiet words with Bank Managers here in town to assess financial associations. I do not expect to be too long in Sydney...say two weeks...three with a stretch before I am back here so you should have completed all these works by then...okay? No questions? One thing do not leave this white board where others may see it. Turn it over and yes, keep it here in this Interview Room...still turned over. Okay, I am out of here on the last plane flight out of town tonight. Can one of you give us a lift, please?”

The enthusiastic young female Constable offered. She was a real goer!

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I returned to Sydney to appear at the Preliminary Hearing for the Assisted Suicide Case with the elderly Katie Sellwick charged with the assisted suicide of her husband who was dying in any case. Her actions as she said was to lessen the amount of pain the old guy was experiencing. They had made a pact many years ago that who-ever maybe in this terrible situation, the other would help death come quicker. While I was totally in agreement with the question of Assisted Suicide...or euthanasia...as a Murder Cop I was still expected to uphold the Law as it now stood. That is why I had to arrest and charge the dear, brave old woman.

All she wanted was her husband to die with a bit of dignity.

Here, here I say!

She did not appear in Court, spending her last months on earth in a palliative Care Unit at the Mater Hospital in North Sydney. She in no condition to oppose the Hospital Staff efforts spent trying to keep her alive. Each day one of pain and drug taking.

On the following Monday I was requested to appear before the Standards and Ethics Committee Hearing into the way Frederica Stonefield conducted herself when we were called out to the Joshua Foster suicide Case. As it was, I sat patiently for two hours awaiting my turn to testify. I was solemnly told at twelve noon that my testimony would not be required. The Panel had conducted a two-hour Video Hearing with Shelley as she sat in front of her computer convalescing at home. Bloody Hell! A bloody electronic digital thing was superseding me!

Bloody hell!

I spent the rest of the week preparing a full Report on the death of Archibald Prendergast out west. Every day there was something further required from the small task group that I had set up headed nominally by Caleb Collins. I was usually on the phone for at least half an hour each morning urging the two to step outside their comfort zone and look for connections, reasons, and methods. I wanted them to try and emulate me which was a lost cause that I gradually realised. They needed to construct their own methods of deduction. I really had to make allowances as neither of them had any training in detective work or deductive reasoning.

“When is the Preliminary Hearing?”

“Um...next week. Thursday. You think you’ll be up here for that?”

“I...and my partner will have to be as the Lead Detectives called in once it was deduced as an unexplained death...and then as murder, so we may fly in on Tuesday, the early flight so my partner can get a feel of the situation as it now stands”.

“Okay. We’ve read your Report...um...Danielle Page? She has added some additional notations...hope you don’t mind. I’ve read over her addendums and agree with them. I was in the throes of e-mailing off the revised Work when you rang”.

“Good on the girl...she’s a go-getter, yes...arrh yes, send it down”.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“There’s something missing”. Shelley stated as she turned in her chair to face me. It was her first day back. I was glad to see her sitting in her old spot. It was good. She had spent most of the morning reading everything on the Prendergast Homicide Case.

“Yeah, I agree”. I remarked. “The identity of the killer”.

“Oh, how I have missed these in-depth conversations...”

“Me too”.

“Give me strength”. Shelley replied before she started chuckling away to herself. Her hand over her mouth trying to keep the glee in. That I thought, was a lost cause!

“Um, I reckon there’s a hidden connection between Archie Prendergast and who-ever killed him which we have not had a lead on, yet. I think we need to have a more penetrating talk with Rowena Prendergast...”

“And her friend”. Shelley added.

“Mmm...and we haven’t approached the McKinnons yet. They are the founding family along with the Hadleys and the Cowdreys...and this generation of those families all grew up together and even now, intermingle...socialise regularly with one another...there could be something in that going back years that has festered and has rubbed raw...and there is something in the McKinnon family going back years. I can’t remember who told me or what it was about, but...”

“That is helpful, Tonto. Take that bloody feather off him, some one! I hope you were not a scout for Geronimo during the Battle of Little Big Horn. It could have ended up so differently if The Chief were relying on your intelligence from the field”.

“Kemosabe? There was a lot of years between that decisive battle and me being born. I wasn’t even a thought in Black Eagle’s mind...my father’s name...and Geronimo? He was an Apache Warrior, not Sioux!”

“Black Eagle? There isn’t such a bird in the American west...”

“It was a dull day when my father was born...Black Eagle is a better name than Clouded Sky don’t you think?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

It was close to two weeks before we could head out west again. The Jason Foster Suicide Case kept us in Sydney for longer than I had wished. To tell the truth, I did not rate the local guys’ experience in tippy toeing through the Prendergast Homicide Case with any degree of panache or being able to second-guess any information that may come in. On the contrary, I could see nothing, but clumsiness involved.

After a brutal early morning start to get the first plane out, I especially sat bleary-eyed with only a reasonable coffee to make me feel better. These early morning flights will be the death of me!

Senior Constable Caleb Collins and Constable Danielle Page picked us up from the draughty Arrival/Departure Hall as we waited for our luggage. The Boss had given us two weeks max to roll the Case up and we had packed accordingly.

We sat in silence as Caleb and Danielle described what avenues they had explored while steering the investigation in our absence.

“Good. That’s good”. I encouraged their endeavours. “I notice here that you have obtained the Mobile Phone records of Archie, Rowena Prendergast, Lizbeth Fellows and Tim and Dianne Cowdrey. Is there anything useful that you may have wriggled out of those records?”

Both Cal and Danielle shook their heads.

“Um...Tim Cowdrey?” Shelley interjected. “The Records show that he made regular calls to a number that you have not identified. Have you any idea who that may be? And why he would be calling the number regular-like over the past six months. Possibly for longer. If that number gives us a lead, we should ask for the records going back two years”.

Again, both shook their heads in concert.

“There’s one way to check who owns that number...dial it!”

Shelley picked up her Mobile and dialled in the number.

“Yes...Missus McKinnon, is it?” She looked over at me, a surprised look on her face. Both Cal and Danielle almost fell off their chairs. “Yes. Victoria McKinnon...” She looked up at Caleb Collins as she spoke quietly. “My name is Debbie Keenan. I represent a firm that will be coming into your area in the coming months. Do you have Solar Panels on your roof?”

A moment of silence with Shelley nodding her head numerous times.

“You do! Would you want more, keeping in mind the Government subsidy will be decreased by the end of the year...” She was silent for some time. “Perhaps you require storage batteries...oh! You have them also. Sorry, I cannot help you. Thank you for your time”.

I looked at Tim Cowdrey’s call register. Scratched at my chin, a deep frown crevicing my brow.

“Who stated that Tim Cowdrey and Victoria McKinnon were having an affair? His missus was down in Sydney wasn’t she, for that period that Archie sat against the rear tyre of his Ute”.

“Missus Kragos. Alice Kragos. She runs that Café with half decent coffee in the middle of town. Superb sandwiches. She whispered that information to us as though she was being very clever...and helpful”. Cal informed me. “But what has that relationship got to do with Archie’s death?”

I didn’t know and was not sure myself on the relevance of the information. I shrugged, lowered my head to place that titbit into my iPad in the Archie Prendergast folio. Apart from that little pearl, there appeared to be little else of relevance that had been discovered by the two while I was absent from the investigation.

That angered me to a degree, but I was not willing to say too much that could have a detrimental effect on our working relationship. I figured they got the message just by my physical reactions. I was not that diplomatic.

I saw Shelley out of the corner of my eye shake her head, lowering it to hide a smile...or a grimace, I wasn’t too sure.

I wondered when she would chastise me on my rigid approach, not accepting that these two had never had any experience in homicide cases...still, they should have stepped forward to my way of thinking.

I looked at the column of names they had prepared of people in the District who had been in the Pre-School and Primary School days with the Cowdreys, Prendergasts and McKinnons.

“What do you think?” Constable Danni Page asked as I stood before the digital white board.

“That it looks like a spaghetti mess that that Artist who lived in Broken Hill would compile”. I smiled to show I was cracking a funny. “Anything stick out to you two? You’re the locals”. I added.

“Um...nothing earth shattering”. Page offered. It was obvious that she had become the leading light of the duo.

“It’s amazing that we have what, now about a dozen, maybe a few more families in the District who still keep in regular contact with one another...your saying at least once a month the lot get together. The ones on the north side of town would have regular fortnightly Bicky and Cheese nights...and ditto the same for those on the south side of town. Then again, those monthly get-togethers would involve plenty of miles...you have most of the ‘players’, those living around the Cowdreys, as having about a connection to every field you have suggested...and all the guys ...played together in weekly games of Rugby League in the Winter and Cricket in the Summer when they were younger, so I have noticed. That would

mean a bevy of the local girls would also attend...so there very well could have been clandestine affairs with one and all..."

"Jeezuz, Joe. What part of the Universe did you drop from? It is every red-blooded Aussie's dream to have that bevy of Belles following them. Just go to any Beach and the Beach Bunnies will be there eyeing off their favourite surfer..."

"No Shells. Those days are gone. Those Beach Bunnies are now conquering their own waves and the ones out here? They have their own Football and Cricket Teams...back then though, it makes your nose twitch, doesn't it? I think we have just enlarged the number of suspects exponentially! That's all we need!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Not for the first time we headed out in the large 4WD. Senior Constable Cal Collins drove with me sitting shotgun. Constable Danielle Page and Shelley sat in the back holding onto the panic handles expecting Cal to drive as he normally did out on these Bush dirt roads. He surprised me by cutting his speed in half and sticking to the left-hand side of the dirt road as much as possible...

"Why are we going to the McKinnons, Detective?"

"Because that was the one family south of town we didn't get to when we were last here. And I would like to know why Tim Cowdrey regularly phoned Victoria McKinnon...with that regularity only occurring so it seemed to me when Diane Cowdrey was away, usually down in Sydney visiting her kids and father. Is that right or is it an assumption that you have not confirmed yet? You have cornered them since, haven't you?"

"No...no reason to..." Cal offered, knowing both he and Constable Danielle Page had slipped up. "We haven't obtained any information either on Dianne Cowdrey's trips to Sydney".

"All loose ends are important in a homicide case, Cal. A loose end may divulge facts that alters the entire understanding of the crime. That information is something that needs to be chased out, okay?"

We had not long rocked over the cattle-grate and through the impressive entryway onto the McKinnon property when we met Gus McKinnon coming the other way. We slowed to a halt,

drivers' window to window. Both waited until the dust plume had drifted past us before both drivers wound their windows down.

"Cal, 'owyergoin'? Got a full load, I see. This is not a friendly visit, huh? 'Bout poor Arch, huh? We were wondering why we had not been interviewed yet, seeing how's everyone in the District has. Look, I'm just going over to Bertie's for a bit. Won't be long...I'll not hang around but come straight back..."

"It's more your missus we want a word with, Gus. No worries?"

The man's head slumped onto his chest. He took off his hat to scratch his bare scalp.

"We bin wondering when the rumour mill would catch up with yers. Mindless little people with nothing better to do. They sure do shit me".

He nodded his farewell as he slowly drove away. Cal took off slowly, waiting for the big man to drive out onto the Back Road.

"Who's Bertie?" I asked.

"John Cowdrey...he's known as a bit of an old woman".

I nodded my head, peering out of the dirt smeared windscreen at the beautiful old farmstead as we drew closer after a kilometre or two down the Property's entry road. It was one beautiful two-storey stone and brick relief building built in the old Victoriana style with a deep covered veranda on both levels. Steep roof line with bay windows. Tall chimneys hung off the ridgeline of the homestead. I vaguely remembered seeing a film...or a TV production where the building took pride of place. I mentioned my thoughts, to be told it had been in many Australian film and television productions.

"What a cow of a place to get to for the entire Production Crew, especially in the middle of a hot, dry summer". Shelley retorted.

"They flew in...the lot!" Cal said over his shoulder as he carefully opened the driver's door to alight.

It was obvious that Gus McKinnon had telephoned through to his missus as she stood at the edge of the ground floor veranda. I was surprised that she wasn't in period costume.

"Come into the house out of that sun and dust. I'm Victoria McKinnon..."

How else would she be named, I thought to myself as we followed her into the high-ceiling, stone, and brick building.

“Scuse the mess. The housework seems a waste of time what with this bloody dust that seems to get in everywhere”. She wiped her hands down her hips as a sign of exasperation. We followed her into the coolness of the Ground Floor, into what would be known as a Drawing Room in another age. She gestured to seats spread around a beautiful old Red Cedar table that had to be worth a fortune. I wanted it straight away and I could almost hear Shelley salivating over every piece of furniture in the room.

We settled into straight-back chairs that matched the table; ten in all.

I had a chance to take a good look at the woman as she worried about her guests, asking us all did we need some form of sustenance. Coffee perhaps? No? Tea, chilled water? We waved away the offers.

She was tall, only an inch or so shorter than I. Statuesque some may have described her. She belonged to another time was my estimate of her except her nervousness didn't seem to fit my assessment of her. She sat with some tension at the head of the table. Shelley and I on one side, Caleb and his partner Danielle Page facing us. I noticed that Shelley opened her iPad and zoomed it in on Victoria McKinnon who sat stiffly toying with her hair. Grooming her fingers through it as though it was untidy. It was a short 'bob cut' that bounced back into shape after every finger comb.

“Missus McKinnon...um...may we call you Victoria?”

“Vickie is fine. Everyone knows me as Vickie...”

“You from this area originally?”

“Um...no. Um...I went to a Private Girls School down in Sydney...um...I was good friends with Gus's sister who was in my year at School. That is how I met Gus. We married some twenty-seven years ago. Six kids, two still-born sadly. All the children are in Boarding School. Two in Sydney at my old school with the other two at a School in Melbourne...the one Prince Charles went to all those years ago”. Even while talking she played with her hair or wrung her hands continuously. It was becoming a bloody nuisance. A thought raced across my mind. That being she was sent to a prominent Girls School in Sydney to marry into class. She seemed to have achieved this, marrying into a very wealthy family with a long history in the district. She had achieved her dreams...or it was her parents dream for her.

“What part of Sydney did you know as home as a child?” This line of questioning to relax her.

“Canterbury...”

Bingo! Marrying well out of her parents’ circle that was for sure I cynically thought.

“Are you friends with say, Rowena Prendergast?”

She nodded her head, looking down at the table surface.

“And her sisters-in-law also. Dianne and Sally, Bertie’s long-suffering wife”. She smiled as she made the comment. “We would perhaps socialise...you know, get together at some-one’s place once a fortnight...or more frequently on occasions. For birthdays and such. For a BBQ or a dress-up party. They were always a hoot...” She smiled at the warm memories.

She was thawing. I nudged Shelley’s ankle under the table for her to take over.

“So, you regarded Archie as a member of your circle of friends?”

“Oh, yes. It was a complete surprise...and a shock to know he had committed suicide. That was not the Archie I knew”.

“What do you mean?”

“You know...he would be the last person I would ever think as suicidal...”

“We think he was murdered...”

She already knew this piece of information as the fact did not render a reaction in her at all. She commented as though she was telling a close friend that her slip was showing...she was devoid of any reaction.

“Oh, dear”. She finally said. “Do you know who may have committed such an awful thing?” She asked awkwardly, blushing slightly as she asked the question. I also noticed that she didn’t know what to do with her hands at such a pivotal moment.

“Not yet, no. We are still conducting interviews with all those who knew him...”

“Some say he was having an affair with Dianne Cowdrey, Tim’s wife...”

“Oh!? You know that for sure?” Shelley looked up quickly as though the information was fresh, and she had not heard of it before. This just a ploy to allow Vickie to connect with her and treat her as a confidante. The woman sat back and began again to wring her hands. There was silence so Shelley filled it in, wanting the woman to react to her obvious curtness.

“They lived together for a while in Sydney. Came back here with Dianne hooking up with Tim and Archie marrying Rowena...a genuine little Peyton Place, eh? Who would have thought...the rumour mill also has you having an affair with Tim Cowdrey? Have you heard that rumour?” Shelley smiled as though thinking little of the rumour.

Vickie twisted in her seat, ran her fingers one more time through her hair. This time she blushed slightly.

“If I was, my husband would kill me...” She stated a shocked look on her face.

“Yes, You have been in the local Hospital several times...quite a few times, in fact. Your injuries enough for the medical staff to call in the local police”. Shelley turned to Constable Collins who nodded his head gravely. “You have resisted all attempts to have the local Police intervene. Why?”

“You know, the gossipmongers...the rumour mill...they were just injuries that everyone receives while working on the farm. Falling off fences, tractors, horses and ATV’s...I also bruise easily”. She again ran her fingers through her hair. Gave a tight smile.

“You seem accident prone...no injury caused by your husband? We understand he has a bit of a temper. He was banned from playing League in his youth. Too violent in tackles so I heard”.

“Most men have their moments. Gus has his”.

“Most rumours continue to roll around with a certain degree of truth regardless. I think you would be aware that people are concerned about your safety...”

The woman lowered her head, shaking it several times.

“Is there any reason why your husband would belt into you?”

She looked up at Shelley, tears in her eyes.

“He accuses me of cheating on him...”

“Have you ever?”

“No...well...no...but he isn’t aware...he only thinks he knows”.

“I see...who are you having a secret affair with?”

She began crying, sobbing from her very soul.

“Do I have to divulge that information...there is just more than my family involved, there is his as well...and...and...and it doesn’t have anything to do with Archie’s death. Can’t we just drop it?”

“If you say there is no connection to Archie’s killing, then I guess it has nothing to do with us. Yes, we do not require any additional information into that subject”.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

We were hopping into the 4WD as Gus McKinnon drove up. Vickie had not come out to farewell us. I walked briskly over to Gus who was about to alight. I closed his door stopping him from doing so. I placed my head through the window close to his ear. He had tried to move away but his safety-belt held him.

“If I hear of you touching your wife one more time, I will personally charge you with Domestic Violence and assault and ensure you spend the maximum time in jail that such an act warrants...and deserves. Hear me? Your standing in this District will be lower than a cow pat!”

The man seemed to collapse several sizes.

“There are some who say she is playing up behind my back...” He whined as though innuendo and rumour allowed him to act as he had.

“Which does not warrant or allow you laying a bloody hand in anger on her...get some help and learn to control your anger...and your insecurities”.

I walked away and swung up onto the front seat of the Cop 4WD. Let out a huge sigh, buckled up and wiped my face with both hands.

“What did you say to him, Joe?”

“Nothing much. You guys should keep an eye on the two...the signs are there that he will eventually kill her if it keeps on going without some intervention from you local guys”.

“We can’t act on a suspicion...on something that he may do in the future...”

“And that is why wife bashing and murder is at horrendous levels in this country. Half the time, if the cops intervened well before the act knowing there is violence in the home, there is a decrease in such actions. Whether the wife has the gumption or not to leave the bastard, that is another question. I reckon the reason she hasn’t left Gus McKinnon is because her parents think he walks on water...a golden catch for the daughter...”

“Just a ‘call-in’ occasionally to ask how Vickie is and to show that you are watching him...” Shelley added, hoping to instil a sense of duty in the two country cops. They were not just there as a proactive form that acts only when the law is broken.

Whether it will work we won’t know until sometime in the future.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

We were stopped beside a dry creek bed where the trees looked dirty and thirsty. We had broken out the coffee and sandwiches to eat before we continued the long haul back into town. I could envisage what the small meadow looked like when regular rains hit. A slow water creek with the greenest of grasses where Roos and Wallabies grazed and myriad bird calls would near deafen you...now, nary a bird call...lonely Crows ‘arrking’ their presence is all we heard.

“One thing with this bloody drought. There is no cattle so there are less flies. Have you noticed that?”

“What part of Australia are you from. If anything, the fly population has continued to rise as each year passes in full drought. A true city girl, eh?” Danielle Page responded, giggling into her sandwich.

“We didn’t give Gus McKinnon a going-over, Joe. Why not?” Cal asked as he tried to balance his coffee on the dashboard. The cup holders provided were okay for the cardboard coffee

containers you got from coffee shops but would not accommodate the mugs off the top of our thermos flasks.

“I think it was you, Cal who mentioned that poisoning a person was more a woman’s way of getting rid of some-one...”

“What a bloody sexist statement!” Shelley interjected.

“Well, it may sound as such, but statistics will tell you that the statement is true, no matter how many times you want to jump up and down about it...and Gus McKinnon is not our Perp.”

“Oh? Why is that?” Constable Danielle Page asked.

“For him to want to kill Archie firstly he would need proof that his wife and Archie were in fact, having an affair. He would never even contemplate using a poison to do away with Archie. He would use fists and a cricket bat...and lastly, there is no evidence that Vickie and Archie were having it off under the Wisteria vine in any case. As much as Gus is an unfriendly guy, he is not a murderer...yet!”.

“So, we are running out of possible culprits...” He completely missing my last comment on Gus.

“Mmm...no, it was Vickie McKinnon who poisoned Archie...”

“What! You just said that Vickie was not having an affair with Archie, didn’t you? Why would she kill him, Joe?”

I could tell that Shelley was getting frustrated with my line of thinking while the two locals thought me slightly insane, going around in circles rocketing up any idea then shooting it down in flames.

“Why did Vickie poison Archie, you asked? I do not have a clue yet. We need to interview Vickie again in at the Police Station in town. Out of her comfort zone as she showed several nervous jitters while she was in her home...in her territory. We need to squeeze her a bit more. She should be more jittery outside her comfort zone”.

“On what grounds?” Cal asked.

“On suspicion of administering a lethal dose of Thallium to Archibald Francis Prendergast on or about Monday the twelfth of last Month by mixing the poison with coffee...arrh...who was it who mentioned that Tim Cowdrey was having an affair with...who? I can’t remember”.

“Alice Kragos...she runs the Café in the middle of town. A busybody and a rumourmonger. She mentioned it when we stopped in there for a coffee the other week before you flew back to Sydney. That Vickie and Tim were having it off”.

I rocked backwards and forwards nodding my head.

“But she was right, I think...all good rumours must have a modicum of truth in them”. I offered smugly.

“Okay, okay...but what is the connection between their affair and Archie Prendergast’s death?” Danielle asked, sounding a little angry.

“Think about it. Can you come up with a scenario that connects all the dots? Think outside that box that concerns the three people...the juxtaposition of the three properties; Dianne Cowdrey’s regular stays in Sydney; Gus McKinnon’s penchant for violence at the drop of a hat; the common habit of all the families getting together fortnightly, if not more frequently and the personalities of Tim Cowdrey, Archie Prendergast, and Gus McKinnon. Sleep on it and let me know what you think to-morrow”.

I glanced across at Shelley who had that tight smile...that patronising grin on her face. I felt for my Glock before changing my mind. Picking up my mug, I drained it of coffee. I went to pick up my Thermos Flask for a re-fill.

“Not that one, Joe. That’s mine. Yours is the other one”.

“How can you tell? They look the same...” I opened my eyes wide before clicking my fingers. “That’s what happened, I’m sure. We just need her to fill us in on a couple of things”.

They all looked at me as though I had grown another head. Shelley broke the silence.

“Now you know what I put up with on every Case we share. Every working day! Why I am not stark, raving mad is an indication of my mental resolve. Be sympathetic towards me, people”.

We all chuckled, throwing out smart-arse comments to lighten the mood.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

“Thank you for coming into town this morning, Missus McKinnon...”

“I didn’t think I had a choice. It was either me being seen in handcuffs hopping out of one of your cars out the front there with everyone in town looking on, or I come in of my own volition without any hoo-ha or carry-ons. I have been told that I do not have to answer any of your questions...”

“In which case you will be charged straight away with the poisoning death of Archibald Francis Prendergast on Monday the twelfth of last month at or near what is known as the Back Paddock adjacent to Bungarra Creek Road also known as the Back Road that forms the western boundary of the Prendergast Property known as Bungarra Hills. You have a choice”.

“It appears that I have not much of a choice at all. If I do not speak up, I will be charge and if I do speak up, I will be still charged, so it seems to me”.

For some reason I felt this ploy of getting her away from the comfort of her own home into the starkness of the small Interview Room of the Police Station was going to back-fire. Her nervousness and jitteriness of two days ago was gone to be replaced with an air of confidence and self-assurance. I wondered why and immediately thought that Gus McKinnon leaving the property may have indicated a morning spat that got ugly...it fitted. She was still a ball of nerves when we arrived. Here was the real Victoria McKinnon. A person full of confidence beaming with self-assurance and bonhomie.

We spoke in general terms to get her settled. That was how we had planned it, but we needn’t have bothered so after a couple of niceties, I jumped straight in.

“It was Tim Cowdrey you meant to poison, wasn’t it?” Both Cal and Danielle recoiled at the question, a look of disbelief in both. Shelley smiled that tight smile of hers.

Victoria looked me in the eye.

“You seem to have this matter resolved without my help, isn’t that so?”

I ignored her question to plough on.

“Where were you that morning?”

She looked over at me, a certain steeliness in her eyes. A coldness too that had rarely been seen.

“Um, with Tim. Down in his bottom paddock...Tim wanted to end the relationship. He said it was bothering him too much and he did not like cheating on poor Dianne. If the truth of the matter be known, she more than likely had a lover in Sydney as she went down there every month...regular like. Those times seemed to correspond with one of our get-togethers with poor Tim alone...half the time”.

“That’s when you and Tim would get together? When Dianne was in Sydney?”

“Yes...but he was becoming more uncertain about the relationship as though he had a lot to lose if it became common knowledge. Me!? I was dead meat if my husband found out...what did he have to worry about? Nothing really, just a small amount of money to park out as Dianne would divorce him if she knew...nothing less. He didn’t own the property he managed. It was locked up in Solicitor-speak with his, Rowena’s and John’s properties all tied up in some type of Trust...and he was worried? You have to be joking...what a puss!”

“How long was this arrangement going on for?”

“The two of us? Several years...two, I guess”.

That coincided with the rumour mill estimation.

“Where were you that Monday morning when Archie Prendergast died?”

“With Tim, as I said before...I was begging him not to end the relationship. I needed some form of warmth as God knows, I wasn’t getting it at home”.

“So, you were in the bottom paddock where Tim was enlarging an existing paddock dam?”

“Yes, he had been working down there nearly all week...and we spent the mornings down there...but then he says he’s had enough. Just like that which really shocked me. There was no...you know...no pointers that I recognised that he wanted to end our affair. He said that he couldn’t keep cheating on his *lovely* Dianne”. The words dripping with sarcasm. “I took a flask of coffee laced with some type of poison...I was going to end it, not him”.

“Where did you find the poison?”

“In the farm shed. There is a stack of poisons in a locked...kinda like a room within the shed itself. I just picked that one because it had on the label that it was colourless, tasteless and would dilute easily in a liquid”.

“How much did you put in the coffee flask?”

“A spoonful, I think. I don’t remember”.

“So, that morning you had full intentions of poisoning Tim Cowdrey, yes?”

She nodded her head. For the first time she had tears in her eyes which she swiped angrily away. It did no good as the waterworks began. She seemed to slump and for the first time realise what she intended to do on that day. Remorse? I doubted it judging on the way she had conducted herself up until this point. She was one cold fish, always getting what she wanted, always expecting more. This show of tears of remorse and regret not impressing me at all.

“What happened that thwarted your plans that morning?”

“We’d just...you know. We heard a shot. Tim knew straight away it was Archie killing more of his stock. Tim stood up saying that Archie would need a hand! Just like that! I might as well have been an ant on the ground. He ordered...yes, he ordered me to pick up all the picnic stuff, the picnic rug and make sure there was nothing left there to indicate what we had been doing...or that I had been there...he then hopped in his truck and pissed off down through the bottom gate onto the Back Road. There was a back gate onto Archie’s property opposite that of Tim’s. I was livid...I’d never been so angry. I tossed everything in the back of my 4WD and drove home...did some housework...stuff like that. I had a shower still seething...”

“What then?”

“I went to see whether Tim and Archie had finished. I was going to have it out with him even if it was in front of Archie. How dare he try to end it! I was determined to end it my way!” She gave half a smile.

“And...”

“Tim had left. I had missed him by minutes. You could see the cocky comb of dust that the Tractor made as he sped towards Archie’s Machinery Shed. He would be late in picking up *his* Dianne from the Airport. They had buried three head of cattle. Archie was really upset...what a whooze. We’ve all had to do it this time. Shoot cattle. All of us! He asked whether I had anything to drink as he had used up all the chilled water that he had in his

Ute...sharing it with Tim as they toiled to bury those three carcasses. He had one of those twelve-volt fridges...you know, the ones that you take camping? On the floor of his Ute...”

I nodded my head to indicate I knew the type of fridge. I had one for the caravan. That made me think that we had not been camping for quite a few years. I must have a talk to Tellie as it had been a while since we had taken the girls camping. I jumped back to the present realising I had interrupted the flow, the timing of the Interview.

“So, you offered him some coffee...the same coffee you spiked in order to poison Tim?”

“Yes...no...I had a similar Thermos Flask with some Buttermilk Tea in it for me. I didn’t know which flask was which. I opened one of the flasks and poured a little bit into the dust. Thank God I picked the right flask...it was full of coffee...”

“So, you intended then and there to poison Archie? Why? What had Archie done to you?”

She looked about the small room trying to put into words what she had felt that day.

“Um...I wanted Tim to suffer with the death of his mate the way I was suffering with Tim wanting out on our relationship...Archie’s death would really knock Tim’s world out of kilter”.

“So, you poisoned Archibald Prendergast as a spiteful gesture?”

She nodded her head. She was bent over with her head almost lowered onto her chest. Her tears dropped onto the table. With a throaty, quiet voice she answered ‘yes’ several times.

“Yes? You murdered Archie Prendergast to spite his best mate. Is that right?” My voice an octave higher. I thumped the table which made her sit up in fright. I repeated the question, almost bellowing it out straight into her face I was that mad!

Un-bloody-believable.

The act so childish but cold and calculating. We may have charged her with manslaughter with her getting the flasks mixed up, but as soon as she admitted intent, we would book her on a First-Degree Murder charge. Double the sentencing time. Also laying attempted murder charges for planning and admitting to wanting to kill Tim Cowdrey. That one we may have to bargain with at the time of the Trial. I must admit to smiling quietly to myself. Shelley too, showed pleasure with the outcome. She patted me gently on the shoulder.

We silently watched her being led out of the small room. The next time we would see her may be at the Preliminary Hearing, then the Court Case in approximately two-years' time.

The only thing that worried me was the ripple effect of this event. I could see Dianne and Tim Cowdrey marriage going to hell on a horse-back. A consensus being reached of the three Cowdreys to sell up and God knows what Gus McKinnon would do. He would be one loose cannon.

"We'll have to hold her here in the cells as her life will be worth nought if she is released. Gus will kill her for sure". Shelley offered.

"That would unfortunately, create a precedence in Law and you know how the Law feels about precedents". I murmured, gravely answering Shelley.

"Then she is dead meat as she stated".

I nodded, looking across at Collins and Page. They still appeared to be in shock.

"How can you guys cope with this all the time? You know, this type of thing?"

"How? We get to put the bad guys away. It could take another two to three years before we get to the Sentencing Hearing, but the joy in knowing we had the right guy, watched as he wriggled through the Court Process that would determine his fate for the next umpteen years is enough for us...then you have the Sentencing Hearing...bingo!" I smiled as I nodded. I'm sure all they saw was a slightly deranged fellow with an evil smile and chuckle!

"I don't know about you Cal, but I couldn't handle that week in week out". Constable Page opined.

"Nah, to me it takes a bit of a masochist to even want to become a Murder Cop. I couldn't do it. It would send me around the twist quick smart". Constable Collins replied.

Yep, it takes a special type of person to be a Murder Cop. Yes indeed!

Pcb 20/11/2018

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