

# **Torn Silk**

**by Mark Dryden,**

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„How small, of all that human hearts endure,  
That part which laws or kings can cause or cure.  
Still to ourselves in every place consign'd,  
Our own felicity we make or find.“  
—Samuel Johnson

## Chapter 1

Early Friday morning. I strolled into the room of Terry Riley, Senior Counsel, and found him taking lusty practice swings with a golf club. He belted an imaginary ball far into the distance.

I said: "I think that one went into the rough."

He turned and smiled. "Morning Ben. Play golf?"

"Only when forced at gun-point."

He thought I was joking. "Hah, hah. Can't stop slicing my tee-shots. Bloody annoying."

I sat in an armchair and watched him swing the golf club a few more times. His artificial and larger-than-life personality made him seem indestructible, like a Styrofoam cup. I certainly had no idea he would soon be murdered in a most grisly and violent fashion.

Terry and I both belonged to Thomas Erskine Chambers, a floor of thirty barristers who shared expenses, shared work, shared gossip and shared problems if anyone would listen. We were both personal injuries barristers. So we appeared in court for anyone suing or being sued over a motor vehicle accident, botched medical operation, shopping centre fall, food poisoning or the like. Most hearings focused on two basic questions: who caused the damage and how much was it worth? Fine points of law rarely intruded. In Court we wore the same garb that Charles Dickens observed when he was a court reporter. It was a golden life if you could make a buck.

The Bar Association had appointed Terry as a Senior Counsel, which allowed him to wear a silk robe and over-charge with impunity. He was sixty-one and looked hand-made for the role; he was tall and broad-shouldered with a helmet of grey hair, high forehead, firm lips and decisive chin. In court, he stood like a lord on his battlements and spoke like he was describing the first dawn. Gravitas and self-confidence should have been separate items on his bills.

However, the contents of his fine-looking head weren't much to write home about. When making submissions to a judge, he often seized upon an untenable argument and brandished it aloft like a burning torch as he charged into a forensic *cul-de-sac*. Judges often had to make him shut up so they could explain the real reason his client was going to win - and even then he sometimes didn't get it. When cross-examining, he was like a blindfolded man trying to hit a piñata.

Nor was he a great worker. There is a hoary adage that old barristers are like old boxers: it's not the fighting that gets too hard, it's the training. Terry was a case in point. He'd never prepared much for hearings. Now, he prepared even less.

Yet, despite his shortcomings, he'd had a very successful career. Clients usually assess barristers on the basis of their looks and confidence, and Terry had both in abundance. Further, when he lost, he was adept at blaming a witness, the judge or his opponent, while looking slightly embarrassed to be part of such a pathetic and unjust system. I'd seen clients who lost cases start feeling sorry for *him*.

In an hour or so, we would appear—as silk and junior—for a plaintiff in a hearing in the Supreme Court of New South Wales. Having Terry lead me was both good and bad. He was usually pleasant to deal with and amenable to advice. However, when listening to him in court, I often wanted to wrestle him to the ground and stuff his wig into his mouth. I also felt a little uncomfortable spending all day with him because I'd been sleeping with his wife for the last five years, without getting caught. I felt guilty about that and feared I might make a slip that betrayed me.

Terry took a final swipe with his driver, shoved it into a gargantuan golf bag and dropped into the chair behind his desk. "Have we been allocated a judge yet?"

"Yes. The registry called my secretary a few minutes ago: we've got a ten o'clock start before Dick Sloan."

Terry smiled. "Dick? That's good news."

His reaction surprised me. He was a good pal of Sloan and would be treated with courtesy. But Sloan rarely gave verdicts in favour of plaintiffs and, when he did, usually awarded measly damages.

I said: "You're kidding, right? That black-hearted bastard eats plaintiffs for breakfast."

Terry smiled. "He's not that bad; he'll give us a fair hearing."

"If he does, you can cut off my legs and call me Shorty."

Terry's phone rang. He picked up the receiver and listened briefly. "OK, send him in."

He put down the receiver. "Bob Meredith's here."

About ten seconds later our instructing solicitor, Bob Meredith, steamed into the room carrying a leather briefcase and trilby hat. Almost sixty, he was bald and stocky, and wore an expensive suit and chunky Rolex. Everything about him said that life was a transaction. He owned Meredith & Co, a firm that employed half-a-dozen solicitors to run personal injuries actions on a no-win/no-fee basis. That was the basis on which Terry and I had taken the present brief. Meredith was earning enough to own a mansion in Vaucluse and a big yacht called FEENOMENAL. The name said it all.

Meredith had briefed Terry for a long time, mainly because Terry did what Meredith told him to do: if Meredith wanted to fight hard, Terry slugged it out in court; if Meredith wanted to settle, Terry water-boarded the client to take the money on offer. Further, Terry never complained when Meredith's firm did its usual slack job of preparing a brief. Indeed, he hardly seemed to notice.

However, Meredith and I had never got on well. I didn't like his mercantile approach and disdain for clients, and he knew that. So he only briefed me when Terry demanded that I be his junior, as Terry had in this case.

We all exchanged greetings and Meredith said: "We got a start?"

I said: "Yes, the registry called: we're before Dick Sloan at ten o'clock."

To my surprise, Meredith also smiled. "Good".

"Really?"

"Yes."

"He's a miserable turd."

Meredith raised his eyebrows, scratched his broken nose - he liked to tell clients it was busted during a fist-fight with an opposing solicitor - and said: "Oh, he's not too bad. Bark's worse than his bite."

What pills were these guys taking?

Terry looked at Meredith. "Client here?"

"Yes, outside, with his parents."

"Good. Wheel him in."

Terry had met our client only once, several months ago. So, as Meredith strolled off, he glanced down at the coversheet of his brief to confirm his name.

The solicitor returned with our client, Mick Arnold, limping behind him. Mick was in his early twenties, with a ginger mullet, narrow freckly face and jug ears pierced with several gold earrings. He looked like an un-cunning fox. Meredith must have asked him to dress well, because he wore a clean and well-pressed Wallabies jersey. Peeking just above the collar was the tattooed head of a snake. He looked mildly pleased that the world was finally paying attention to him.

He had brought a claim for assault and battery. Eight months ago, on a Saturday night, in the Royal George Hotel in Bondi, he and his girlfriend sat in the upstairs bar and got seriously hammered. Their darker selves emerged and, after a fierce argument, she stormed off.

Mick should have gone too. But he kept drinking and propositioned a woman sitting next to him. She was not impressed. Nor was her boyfriend. The two men started pushing and shoving. Two hulking bouncers, Vincent Taggart and Desmond Fuolau, arrived and asked Mick to leave.

There were two versions of what followed.

According to Mick, the bouncers frogmarched him to the top of the stairs and tossed him down them. He landed near the bottom, hit his head and blacked out.

Later, at St Vincent's Hospital, x-rays revealed a couple of broken vertebrae. But the orthopaedic surgeon predicted that, in a few months, he'd be right as rain. However, according to Mick, a few months later he still had a lame left leg, three paralysed right fingers and almost insufferable back pain. He went on a disability pension and visited Bob Meredith, who promised to recover huge damages.

Meredith & Co filed a claim in the Supreme Court that alleged assault and battery against the two bouncers and the company that owned the pub. It sought more than a million dollars for Mick's pain-and-suffering, future economic loss and medical expenses.

The bouncers denied touching Mick. According to them, they persuaded him to leave the pub under his own steam but, at the top of the stairs, he tripped and fell. Their insurance company stepped in to defend the claim.

During my fifteen years as a personal injuries barrister, I'd represented plaintiffs who were the salt of the earth and bore their suffering with immense fortitude. I'd also represented liars and cheats trying to bilk the system.

Unfortunately, it was hard to distinguish between the two. Honest plaintiffs could seem shifty and crooks could lie with grace and charm. But as soon as I clapped my eyes on Mick, I smelt bullshit and suspected any sensible judge would do the same.

Mick sat tentatively in an armchair and Terry perched on a corner of his desk, looking avuncular. "How're you feeling?"

Mick's Adam's apple ducked and weaved. "A bit nervous, I guess. I'll be OK."

"Well, you'll be pleased to know the hearing will start at ten o'clock before Justice Richard Sloan."

"Good. What're me chances?"

Terry shrugged. "Hard to say. As you know, both sides have different versions of what happened. It all depends on who the judge believes."

"Any chance we can settle?"

Terry glanced at Bob Meredith. "So far they haven't offered anything, right?"

Meredith said: "Correct. They're playing hardball."

Mick looked annoyed. "I want a million, because I can't work no more. Those bastards have got to pay, big time."

"Fair enough. Just remember this: if we run this case and you lose, the judge will make a big costs order against you and the defendants will end up owning your living room."

"I don't own no living room; I've got nothing except a shitty car."

Terry shrugged. "I guess that's an advantage. Anyway, let's not get ahead of ourselves. I'll talk to the barrister for the defendants and see if they want to settle. If not, we'll obviously have to fight."

Mick said: "Who's their barrister? He any good?"

Terry glanced at me. "Who've they got?"

"Don't know. Until recently, it was Bert Truman. But he told me yesterday that he's jammed. Don't know who's replaced him."

Meredith interrupted. "I spoke to their solicitor this morning. They've briefed Bill Anderson."

Terry frowned. "My goodness, Wild Bill. This will be interesting."

Mick said: "Really? What's he like?"

For once, Terry looked flustered. "He's, umm, very aggressive. So when you give evidence, stay cool and keep your nerve."

Mick looked alarmed. "OK. Is that why they call him Wild Bill, because he's so aggro?"

"Yes. But don't worry, I can handle him."

I doubted that. I really did.

Terry put on his wig and gown. "Right, let's go." He made a sweeping gesture with his arm, like John Wayne starting a cattle drive, and headed for the door with the rest of us moseying along behind.

## Chapter 2

Phillip Street ran through the heart of Sydney's legal precinct. Barristers' chambers occupied ugly buildings on each side, and the Supreme Court was housed in a forbidding concrete tower at one end. Every morning, desperate litigants and their barristers trekked into that Fortress of Doom searching for justice. Instead, they encountered overworked judges who had to cut their way through thickets of lies to reach elusive truths. Usually, the only victors were the lawyers.

Thomas Erskine Chambers occupied the fifth floor of a drab office block opposite the Supreme Court tower. Just before ten o'clock, Terry led our small party across the road to join several gloomy souls trudging into it. Their clients looked even unhappier. The tower scowled down at everyone.

Inside, we passed through a metal detector and caught a lift up to the 13th floor, which had eight courtrooms. About thirty lawyers and their clients milled about in the hallway, anxiously waiting for the courtroom doors to open. There were also several litigants-in-person: bug-eyed crusaders with festering grievances whose court documents were stuffed into backpacks and shopping trolleys. They were assured of Victory because they marched under the banner of Truth.

Terry, Meredith and I stood outside Court 13A, exchanging legal gossip, while Mick and his parents, who shared his hard features and beady eyes, sat on a nearby foam bench.

Plaintiffs in personal injuries actions often attract hangers-on, hungrily eyeing the potential spoils. Maybe his parents hoped to gain a new house, car or boat; or maybe, as usual, I was being unfair.

Lift doors opened and Bill Anderson SC surged out, hands tucked inside his gown to make it billow dramatically. Trailing him, like feudal retainers, were his barrister son, Bill Anderson Jnr, and a gangly solicitor pushing a trolley bulging with lever-arch files. Strutting behind them were two heavily muscled young men with slick hair wearing shiny double-breasted suits: presumably Vincent Taggart and Desmond Fuolau.

Though in his mid-sixties, Wild Bill Anderson was still tall and robust, with a reddish square face and choleric eyes. In court, he bristled with menace, barking at judges, opponents, witnesses, his own solicitor and sometimes even his own client. I once saw him tear strips off a client for a poor performance in the witness box. In a way, I admired him, because he never short-changed clients on vigour and aggression. Indeed, he was so mercurial that he could easily win an unwinnable case, and lose an unlosable one.

His son was very different. "Mild Bill" was round-faced, round-waisted and quiet-spoken. He'd been at the Bar for ten years and, though quite bright, still lingered in his father's shadow.

Wild Bill shoved the door of Court 13A and realised it was locked. He looked ready to break it down, then grunted and looked around peevishly.

Terry smiled nervously and shows his palms. "Hi, Bill. We'll be crossing swords again."

Another grunt. "You're for the plaintiff?"

"Yes. Do you want to chat?"

Wild Bill frowned. "What about?"

"Well, is this hearing really necessary?"

Wild Bill raised bushy eyebrows. "What do you mean?"

"Maybe we can, umm, settle it?"

Terry's overture made us look weak. He should have let Wild Bill make the first move, if he was interested.

Another frown. "Depends."

"On what?"

"Whether your client's prepared to walk away with nothing."

"You're not going to offer anything?"

"Correct."

Terry looked annoyed. "Nothing at all?"

A nasty smile. "That's right: not a cent, not a zac, not a brass razoo. However, because I'm feeling unusually generous, he can walk away without paying our costs. I'm afraid that's the best I can do."

Wild Bill's position was entirely understandable. Even if the insurer was inclined to offer some money, why offer it now? Our client had to get into the witness box first. Why not kick him around for a while and see how he fared?

Terry frowned. "You must be kidding. My client's got a good claim."

"Rubbish, it's hopeless."

"Really? Why're you so confident?"

"Why? Because Dick Sloan hates plaintiffs and will hate your client."

"You're wrong there. He's not as anti-plaintiff as people say."

Wild Bill smirked. "We'll see, won't we?"

"My client won't walk away. He'll bat on."

A hollowed-out smile. "That's good news. See you in court."

On cue, a Court Officer opened the doors of Court 13A and Wild Bill strode between them, minions in tow.

Terry turned towards me. "Jesus, he seems bloody confident. Have we missed something?"

"Don't think so."

"Maybe they've got some film?"

Plaintiff barristers live in fear that a private eye has secretly filmed their client in rude good health. The film usually comes to light during cross-examination and hits like a torpedo below the waterline.

We both glanced at Meredith, who shrugged. "I told him he might be filmed. But he's dumb as dog shit; maybe he didn't listen."

I was alert but not alarmed—yet. Wild Bill always put on an act. Only time would tell if it was more than bluster.

Terry shrugged and sighed. "Oh, well, looks like we'll have to earn our money. Let's get this show on the road." He adjusted his wig and strolled into the courtroom.

On the stroke of ten o'clock, the Court Officer called for silence. A hidden hand rapped three times on the door behind the bench. As everybody rose, the door swung open and Justice Richard Sloan appeared. He was in his early sixties, tall and lean, with chiselled features, grey eyes and thin lips; he was bright and arrogant, and his heart was drained of pity. At the Bar, he always represented

defendant insurance companies. When he became a judge, nothing really changed. Battlers and underdogs got no special favours in his court.

His Tipstaff followed him into court. She was a young woman in her early twenties who probably topped her law school in looks. She would spend a year escorting him into court and helping around his chambers before fluttering off to a big law firm. Last to enter was his Associate, a matronly woman in her mid-forties, who always sat just below him, like a guard dog, mimicking his smiles and scowls. When he died, she'd probably throw herself into his grave.

The judge sat and gave Terry a gothic smile. "Mr Riley, good to see you."

Terry rose. His grin said he had no shame and would accept any form of defilement. "Thank you, your Honour."

"You're for the plaintiff?"

"Yes, I appear with my learned friend, Mr Kennedy."

"Good. I look forward to your assistance."

Terry's wig prevented him tugging his forelock. "Your Honour is too kind."

Wild Bill gruffly announced his appearance and that of his son. The judge's lips tightened into what could have been a smile, but probably wasn't. "Thank you, Mr Anderson."

He looked back at Terry. "Mr Riley, I haven't had a chance to read the pleadings. Perhaps you'll tell me what this case is about."

I'd drafted a five-page opening address for Terry to read out. It would, hopefully, educate both the judge and him, and stop him wandering off message. Certainly, he was always at his best when he only had to focus on delivery.

Sounding like he was describing the first moon landing, Terry outlined our client's version of events at the Royal George. Then he listed his injuries and explained why they rendered him unfit for work. Finally, he identified how much money was sought for economic loss and pain-and-suffering. When the judge realised this was just a garden-variety personal injuries claim—he wouldn't have to answer any tricky legal questions and his judgment would not grace a law report—his interest slackened. Maybe he had already decided against us.

Terry finished reading and the judge stifled a yawn. "Thank you, Mr Riley. Call your first witness."

Terry said: "I call the plaintiff, Michael Charles Arnold."

Our client hobbled slowly to the witness box, brow furrowed with pain. I hoped he wouldn't get too theatrical. Nobody likes a ham plaintiff.

The judge looked disdainfully at his football jersey, overlooking that it had been washed and ironed for the occasion.

The Court Officer handed Mick a bible and administered the oath.

Terry stood up, and put one hand on the lectern and the other on his hip. He looked every inch a barrister, from the highest tuft on his wig down to the cuffs of his pinstriped bar trousers. The entire body of Australian Law coursed through his veins and pulse in his forehead. For a few brief moments, he even fooled me.

Terry slowly questioned Mick about how he got injured. Mick was nervous at first, licking his lips, but loosened up as he described his argument with the defendants and being thrown down the stairs.

Terry said: "An ambulance came?"

"Yeah, and took me to a hospital. I was hurt real bad."



"Please describe your injuries."

"You mean, how I feel now?"

"Yes."

"Well, me back still hurts like buggery, so I can't sleep proper. Also, me left leg feels kinda numb all the time and so do the fingers of me right hand."

Mick held up the offending fingers and stared at them with disdain.

Terry said: "Does the numbness cause you any trouble?"

"I can't walk good and can't lift nothing."

Looking satisfied, Terry whispered to me. "Have I covered everything?"

Of course, Terry being Terry, he hadn't elicited a key piece of evidence. I whispered: "No, what about his eco loss?"

"Ah, yes, of course."

He turned back to Mick. "Now, Mr Arnold, I want to ask you a few questions about the economic loss you've suffered as a result of your injuries. What was your occupation before you fell down the stairs?"

"I was an electrician."

"Qualified?"

"Yeah, I'd just got me qualies."

"Right, and what was your salary?"

"About a thousand bucks a week."

"Before tax?"

"Yeah."

"Have you worked since you were injured at the pub?"

"Nah, course not. I'm too crook: can't work in me profession; can't do nothing—I'm useless." Mick peeked at the judge to see how he was reacting, and just saw indifference.

Terry glanced at me for confirmation he'd covered all the evidentiary bases. I nodded.

He turned to the judge. "No more questions."

"Good." The judge looked over at Wild Bill. "Mr Anderson, any questions?"

Wild Bill reared up and grinned wolfishly. "One or two, your Honour."

The judge glanced up at the wall-clock. "Alright. I see it's almost one o'clock. You can start after lunch."

On resumption, Wild Bill immediately glared at Mick in the witness box as if he wanted them to step outside and settle matters the old-fashioned way. Then he accused Mick of falling down the stairs because he was drunk.

When Mick denied that, Wild Bill accused him of being so drunk he couldn't remember what happened.

Mick said: "Nah. I mean, I know I had a lot to drink. But I remember getting thrown down the stairs. You don't forget something like that."

Wild Bill grabbed both sides of the lectern and leaned forward. "Mr Arnold, I'll put it to your straight: you're a liar and a malingerer, aren't you?"

Many barristers are willing to wound, but afraid to strike. Not Wild Bill. To his credit, when he had a serious accusation to make, he chased the witness with a machete.

Mick knitted his eyebrows. "A what?"

"A malingerer."

"What's that?"

Everybody—including the judge—giggled, except for Wild Bill, who scowled. "Someone who fakes an injury."

"I ain't faking nuthing."

A wolfish grin. "This isn't the first time you've been the plaintiff in a personal injuries action, is it?"

I felt a big jolt of anxiety. Mick hadn't mentioned a previous claim. But Wild Bill wouldn't have pushed out this boat unless it was seaworthy. This sounded bad—very bad.

I moved to tug Terry's gown, but for once he was on the ball. "I object".

The judge turned towards him. "On what basis?"

"If the plaintiff had a previous common law action, it's not relevant to this case."

The judge said: "That depends, doesn't it, on what happened in that case. I'll let Mr Anderson continue with this line of cross-examination, at least for now."

Wild Bill smiled malevolently and looked back at the witness. "You've had a previous personal injuries action, haven't you?"

Mick's self-satisfaction vanished and his Adam's apple took centre stage. "Ah, yes."

"What was that about?"

Mick licked his lips. "Oh, I, ah, slipped in a shopping centre."

"Really? Slipped on what?"

"Someone dropped some chips and I hurt me knee."

A surprisingly large slice of the population claim to have slipped on chips in shopping centres, which is why judges treat their claims with some suspicion.

"So you sued the shopping centre, didn't you?"

"Umm, yes."

"And what happened to that claim?"

Mick looked like a cornered rat. He'd just discovered the witness box can be a very lonely place. "Whaddaya mean?"

"Did you win it?"

Mick's croaked, "No, I, umm, lost it."

"You lost because the judge thought you were a liar, did he?"

Mick squirmed about. "Well, he didn't like me."

Almost without effort, Wild Bill's tone turned thunderous. "You lost because the judge found you faked the fall and faked your injuries, didn't he?"

"Umm, he said something like that—but he was wrong."

Mick looked at Terry and me, desperate for help. But we could only watch, with concealed horror as the case hurtled towards a cliff. I'd been worried Mick was secretly filmed looking healthy. Instead, Wild Bill had proof that previously he lied under oath. It wasn't a mortal blow to Mick's claim. Terry could still argue that one lie didn't prove another. But that submission was unlikely to tickle the judge's fancy.

Mick obviously didn't tell us about his previous chip-slip claim because he feared we'd refuse to represent him. He got that right. But now we were stuck with the little bastard. We'd done our dough in this case.

To twist the knife, Wild Bill started delving into the detail of the previous case. But Terry had had enough. He reared up and objected again on the basis of relevance.

Wild Bill's neck bulged and he roared at Terry: "Of course this is relevant. It goes to his credit."

Terry said: "Your Honour, my friend had already made his point. He should just hand you the judgment in the previous case and save us all a lot of time and trouble."

Wild Bill said: "This is an important line of questioning."

While Dick Sloan was always happy to see a witness get tortured, he didn't want this case to take a second longer than necessary. "Mr Anderson, you're wasting time. Just hand up the judgment."

Wild Bill saw the cold glint in the judge's eyes and handed the judgment to the Court Officer.

The judge took it and said: "Thank you, Mr Anderson. I'll read it when I get a chance."

While the judge sat like an eagle on his perch, Wild Bill went back to querying what happened at the pub, but Mick stuck to his story. Eventually, the judge glanced up at the wall clock. Almost four o'clock. "I note the time, Mr Anderson. Will you be much longer?"

"I'll be a while."

The judge stifled a sigh. "Then I'll adjourn now."

"As your Honour pleases."

The judge told Mick to return on Monday morning for further cross-examination. "Between now and then don't talk about this case to anyone, understand?"

"What about me lawyers, your Honour?"

"Not even them."

Mick shrugged. "OK."

"Good."

The judge adjourned the hearing and strode off the bench.

Wild Bill turned to Terry and said: "About the settlement offer I made this morning..."

Terry looked hopeful. "Yes?"

A big smirk. "It's no longer on the table, on the floor or anywhere in the room: it's gone. I gave your client a chance to escape without penalty and he said 'no'. Big mistake. Now, even if he abandons his claim, he's got to pay our costs, understand?"

Gloating is one of the worst sins a barrister can commit. But Wild Bill—the despicable bastard—was a chronic offender. I just prayed that one day I could repay him in kind.

Terry's mask of amiability cracked and peevishness shone through. "He's not abandoning anything."

"Good, because that means I can belt him around some more. See you on Monday morning."

Wild Bill strode from the courtroom, Mild Bill at his heels.

Terry rolled his eyes. "Absolutely no class."

Mick limped over to us, looking sheepish. "How'd I go?"

Terry showed his palms. "You heard the judge: until you've finished giving evidence, we can't talk to you about the case, OK?"

"Can't I ask a few questions?"

"No."

Mick looked annoyed. "That sucks. But you're the boss."

"Correct. We'll see you back here on Monday, just before ten."

"OK."

As Mick and his parents strolled from the courtroom, Terry whispered: "Little arsehole. Should have told us about his previous case."

"His claim's definitely heading for the main sewer."

To my surprise, Terry smiled. "Don't get too disheartened. I know a High Court decision that might tip this case in his favour."

"What decision?"

"*Portland v Egan*."

*Portland* concerned a property owner's liability to a trespasser who gets injured. It couldn't apply to the present case. But I wasn't surprised Terry thought it might because, like I said, he wasn't much of a lawyer.

Meredith approached us. "I can't hang about. Anything you want me to do between now and Monday morning?"

Terry glanced at me. "Anything Bob should do?"

"No."

Meredith looked relieved. "Good, then I'm off."

As he strolled off, I phoned my floor clerk, Philip Milliken, and asked him to send a junior clerk over to collect our trolley.

Terry and I ambled out to the lifts. As we entered one, he said: "You going to the Bench & Bar Dinner tonight?"

My secretary had bought me a ticket a couple of weeks ago, but I'd forgotten about it. "Yes, I'll be there."

"Good. We can get sloshed together. Let me know when you're leaving. I'll stroll over with you."

## Chapter 3

The Bench & Bar Dinner was the biggest night of the year for barristers in New South Wales. It was a great in-gathering of the tribe at which everyone ate, drank, listened to dull speeches, networked and gave themselves a huge collective hug. Self-satisfaction strolled around like an invited guest.

That year it was held in the Hilton Hotel ballroom. Senior judges and office-holders of the Bar Association sat a long table on the dais. Below them, at 40 round tables, almost a thousand barristers and a sprinkling of judges killed their brain cells and expanded their girths. Everyone discarded their solemn professional masks and revelled in their power and privilege.

Thomas Erskine Chambers had booked a table for its members. About twenty attended. I sat next to Terry, who played food hockey and drank hard. For most of the day, he'd been in a good mood. But, as usual, when he drank a darker, more despairing man peeked out.

He looked around and furrowed his brow. "You know, when I started at the Bar, 30 years ago, I knew almost everyone: we were a little community, a band of brothers. No more. I hardly know any of these people. Who are they? Where do they come from? What do they do? *Who let them in?*" He gulped some wine.

He'd gone from being a pompous ass to grimly human, which was out of character. Where was he heading?

I shrugged: "I don't know."

"You know, being a silk once really meant something. I was like a little god: junior barristers looked up to me, carried my brief to court and hung on my words. Not anymore. These days, they show no respect at all. Just the other day, one of the little shits called me 'mate'. Can you believe that?"

No, mate.

It was no wonder junior barristers showed him no respect if he subjected them to these sorts of tirades. He was, at least, maintaining one long-standing tradition of the Bar: pomposity.

"Time are changing."

"Not for the better. When I came to the Bar, being a barrister was a vocation. We were officers of the court. We cared about our clients. Nowadays, we're just another money-grubbing profession."

The Bar had always been money-hungry, but now made less effort to hide that fact. Still, why poke holes in his little fantasy? "You're right."

He stared poignantly into space and his tone darkened further. "I've enjoyed the last 30 years, I really have. They've been great years. God, I love this game—I really love it."

Terry had downed almost a bottle of red, but that didn't explain his lip-of-the-grave gloom. What was wrong? Was he ill? "You OK?"

He looked surprised. "Of course. Why do you ask?"

"You sound like you're about to retire." Or drop dead.

A forced smile and dismissive wave. "Do I? Don't worry, I'm OK. Got a few more good years left."

"You sure?"

"Yes, don't worry about me: I've drunk too much."

I fumbled around for another topic. "I haven't seen Doris for a while. How is she?"

Terry grimaced. "OK. She's a good woman - treats me well. But I sometimes wonder if she's too young for me."

"Why?"

"She always wants to go out and do things. Restaurants. Movies. Plays. Exhibitions. That sort of stuff. I just want to stay home and watch TV, or play golf. I think she finds me a bit boring."

I knew she did, because she'd told me herself, while laying in my bed. "Too bad she's not a golfer."

"Yeah." He fingered his now-empty wine glass. "You know, we were talking about you the other night."

A prick of concern. "Really?"

"Yeah. She wants to invite you over for dinner one night."

I wasn't keen to forming a love-triangle at their dinner table. Terry wasn't very observant. But one false move could be disastrous. "That'd be nice. But I've got no-one to bring."

"You're not seeing anyone at all?"

"Nope. Living at the end of Lonely Street."

A sharp laugh. "Well, don't worry: Doris said she's got a girlfriend you should meet."

A shiver of anxiety. Doris had a wicked sense of humour. But this time, she'd gone a bit far. "OK. When you've organised dinner, let me know."

"Good. I'll speak to Doris."

For once I was glad when the speeches started. At Bench & Bar Dinners, the first speaker is usually a silk referred to as "Mr Senior" who is supposed to welcome the guest speaker with a witty roast. Instead, Mr Senior delivered a fawning tribute to the Chief Justice of New South Wales.

The CJ's speech was even drearier. He pontificated for half-an-hour about the need for barristers to reduce their fees and help the poor, apparently forgetting that, at the Bar, he only worked for corporations and charged ginormous sums. Everyone present wanted to bask in their success, not question it. His remarks were way out of line.

While the Chief Justice droned on, most diners chatted quietly or stared off into space. Alcohol consumption spiked dramatically. I'd just vowed to never attend another Bench & Bar Dinner when the Chief Justice ended his sermon amid a smattering of polite applause.

The Bar, like the rest of the economy, was in the grip of a serious recession and had lots of under-employed barristers. So diners circulated around the ballroom, networking hard. Their strategies varied: some sucked up to everyone; others, like cold-eyed snipers, picked their targets. Many smiled at people they wouldn't have noticed if they had more work. Ancient friendships, forged on the muddy rugby fields of exclusive private schools, counted for naught when a potential source of work or preferment hove into view.

Sleazy judges and barristers also prowled around looking for women to accost. Though some got lucky, their prey usually scampered off to the toilets or huddled together for mutual protection.

All evening, I'd been eyeing Yvonne Lorade at a nearby table. She was in her early forties, with curly chestnut hair and handsome features. Hard to believe she was on the Supreme Court bench. Even harder to believe she was once my wife.

We met when we were baby barristers. She was good-looking, smart and ambitious. However, after seven years - and one child - she left me for a senior silk called Rex Marston. What went wrong? We were young and selfish, of course, and under a lot of pressure to establish our careers and bring up a child. There was a lot of friction. I found her bossy and she found me unsupportive.

Maybe, with time, we'd have sorted out our differences and calmed down. However, we didn't get a chance because Yvonne was briefed to be Marston's

junior in a long-running commercial case. They quickly started an affair and she left me soon afterward.

Until then, I'd always thought Marston an unpleasant egomaniac with few social skills. Afterward, he did nothing to change my mind. Certainly, I always suspected that, to Yvonne, a big part of his appeal was his ability to help her career. She was a talented commercial barrister. But he took her under his wing and pushed her career along much faster than it would have otherwise gone. She took silk after only twelve years at the Bar and, a few years later, became a judge.

The collapse of our marriage left me depressed for a while. Then I started enjoying my freedom and felt no desire to remarry. Indeed, my most stable relationship was with Doris Riley, the wife of another man. While my career didn't skyrocket like Yvonne's, I always had plenty of work which, for a barrister, is a significant achievement.

After our divorce, we kept in close touch because she had custody of our son, Robert. Then, six months ago, she announced she was divorcing Rex and got a lot friendlier. She even confided that she should never have left me.

What to make of that statement? Did she want me back? Or was I just a convenient bridge to her new life, because she could flirt with me without fearing the consequences? And did I really want to be her once-and-future husband? She was still an exciting and interesting woman. But our marriage crashed and burned for a reason. True, we'd both matured, somewhat, but surely not enough.

I dropped into the chair beside her. "Hello, your Honour. You look very sexy tonight."

She smiled. "Thank you. And you're definitely one of the handsomest barristers here."

"Is that a compliment?"

She glanced around and giggled. "I guess not."

"Thanks anyway. How's my favourite ex-wife? Enjoying yourself?"

"Hardly. I'm sitting here wondering what's on TV."

"That bored?"

"Yes. I want to get out of here before it turns into a zoo."

Though the night was still young, red-faced barristers were tottering around on unsteady legs.

I said: "Too late, I'm afraid. Don't worry. I'll protect you."

She smiled. "Thanks. I can fend for myself. You know, at my first Bench & Bar, a colleague tried to stick his tongue down my throat?"

"Uninvited?"

She frowned. "Of course. I had to dump wine in his lap."

"Who was he?"

"I'd rather not say. He's appeared before me a couple of times recently. Silly bastard's obviously forgotten what he tried. Can't work out why I give him such a hard time."

I laughed. "How's work?"

"Busy. Nine reserved judgments to write. On Saturday and Sunday afternoons, when you're out enjoying yourself, I'm grinding them out."

"That's why, if they ever offered me a judicial appointment, I'd refuse."

Don't blame you." She sighed. "It's also lonely on the bench. I miss the camaraderie of the Bar."

I scanned the room. "You mean the brown-nosing and backstabbing?"

A smile. "Yep, even that. What're you doing here? You claim to dislike Bench & Bar dinners."

"I do. But they're a good place to pick up judges."

She laughed. "Then you're out of luck tonight." She leaned forward. "Why are you *really* here?"

"Why? Because I'm trying to be sociable. I mean, this mob does give me the shits. But, at the end of the day, they are my tribe."

"I'm glad you've finally realise that. How's work?"

"Fairly busy. Appearing before Dick Sloan at the moment, with Terry as my leader."

"For a plaintiff?"

"Yes."

"Good luck. Dick's a tough draw." She sipped her wine. "How's your dad? Seen him recently?"

"Not for a few weeks. But he's fine."

"You know, I used to find him rather scary."

"I still do. How's young Roberto?"

"Good, good."

"I can take him out next weekend?"

"Sure." I started to rise and she touched my arm. "But I'd like to see you before then." She licked her lips. "Let's have dinner one night."

"With Robert?"

"No, just us."

We hadn't dined alone since she left me. My heart fluttered. "Why?"

She shrugged. "Why not? At least I can chat with you. There aren't many people—particularly men—I can say that about."

"Sure. When?"

"Wednesday?"

"OK."

We agreed on a time and restaurant in Milson's Point.

I said goodbye and headed back to my table where, to my surprise, Terry was talking quietly with Justice Sloan. There was nothing ethically wrong with them having a chat, if they didn't discuss the hearing. But many judges and barristers would have kept their distance while the hearing was going on.

As I got closer, Terry angrily jabbed a finger at Sloan and spat out a few words. Sloan recoiled slightly, glanced around nervously and muttered a reply.

My goodness. They were supposed to be buddies. Why the sudden rift? Surely, not because of the Arnold case.

Terry frowned and opened his mouth to riposte. Then he saw me and looked stunned.

The judge followed his gaze and shared his expression. He quickly turned back to Terry and muttered: "I'll talk to you later." He rose and strode away, avoiding my gaze.



I sat next to Terry, who still looked upset. "What was that about? Did you offer him a bribe?"

Terry produced a tight smile and strained laugh. "Of course not."

"Then what were you arguing about?"

Terry looked uncertain. "Arguing? We weren't arguing."

"Looked like it to me."

A shrug. "Oh, I suppose we were, a bit - just a small tiff between friends."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Don't worry. It was nothing."

"It won't affect the case?"

Terry had regained his composure, if not sobriety. "Of course not."

Their altercation looked serious. But if it turned the judge against our client, so what? Mick Arnold's claim had already gone over a cliff, taking our fees with it. I said: "You and Sloan have been mates for a long time, haven't you?"

"Yes, we were in the same class at Riverview, and even prefects together."

That figured. The Bar was infested with private school boys who spoke a private language their whole lives.

Terry reached for a bottle of wine and topped up both our glasses. "I'll tell you this: in life, your friends eventually let you down—that's guaranteed."

Because I was sleeping with his wife, I felt a tremor of fear. But I obviously wasn't the target. "You mean, Sloan let you down?"

He frowned. "Look, forget all this, OK? I'm pissed and talking crap. It doesn't matter. In fact, nothing matters." He held up his glass. "All that matters is your next drink."

Though Terry often made no sense, this was unnerving.

I raised my glass. "I'll drink to that."

He gulped some wine and looked around wistfully. "God I love this game—I love it."

I drank hard while a few more speakers mumbled away in the background. Then I slid between tables, dropping in and out of conversations, trying not to look friendless. For a few precious minutes, all of the bitchiness and envy at the Bar dissolved in a vat of booze, and we really were brothers.

The only conversation I can now remember was with Judge Paul Skidmore of the District Court. He was half-pissed and kept whining about the Court of Appeal. "You know, Ben, I accept it when they overturn my judgments—I really do. Shit happens, huh? But I object to their fucking rude and condescending tone. I mean, just last week, one of them wrote that it was hard to understand how a competent judge could have arrived at my decision, because it was so manifestly wrong. Prick. I've got feelings you know. I don't like being insulted. Yet, that's what they do. "

For once, I sided with the Court of Appeal, because he wasn't called "Skidmark" for nothing. On the bench, he was so rude that, during a recent hearing, both counsel accused him of bias. He also took forever to write judgments and usually got them wrong. It was if he needed time to truly stuff them up. Court of Appeal judges kept a mental list of dud judges and his name was near the top of every one, with an asterisk. They waited for his judgments with baseball bats. So it was not usually a blessing to have him find in favour of your client.

I was strongly tempted to grab the lapels of his cheap dinner suit and yell: "If you want them off your back, stop writing shit judgments." However, that would complicate my next appearance before him.

Skidmark leaned forward and I had to stop him falling off his chair. But the torrent of words continued. "They don't realise that it's a sausage factory down there. Nobody cares about justice anymore. It's all about statistics—cases heard. Those dickheads in the Court of Appeal get time to reflect on their judgments. I don't. I waste my weekends pumping them out, and they piss on them."

To escape his spittle, I pretended someone had beckoned me and slunk off.

Just before midnight, I staggered through the lobby, dense with inebriated lawyers. A very senior silk danced with a potted palm while Skidmark tried to drag a female barrister into a taxi. She pushed him away and tottered off.

At some stage during the evening, Terry disappeared into an alcohol-induced mental fog. I never saw him again.

## Chapter 4

Doris Riley was an attractive and boisterous fan of male company who, when she worked as a solicitor, often briefed counsel at Thomas Erskine Chambers, including Terry and me. For a while, after my divorce, we carried on a relationship. But she wanted to settle down and I didn't. Though I liked her and we had fun together, she was a bit too outgoing for my taste. I don't want many quiet moments in a relationship, but I like a few. So she bewitched Terry and dragged him off into captivity.

Though she obviously enjoyed sharing his status and wealth—which let her stop working—he was 20 years older and had no secret compartments worth unlocking. So after about six months we started an affair.

I felt guilty about cuckolding Terry. But at least I didn't want to steal her away. From his perspective, it was probably best if I was her lover. That's what I told myself, anyway.

My spacious art-deco apartment in Milson's Point had ten-foot ceilings, wonderful harbour views and no garden to vex me on weekends. On Sunday afternoon, I lay on the couch and read a novel while waiting for Doris. She arrived just after two o'clock. I opened the front door and she immediately glued her lips to mine.

Finally, I broke the clinch. "Missed me, have you?"

"Fucking-A."

I led her down the hallway towards the living room. "Terry got seriously plastered on Friday night - did he get home alright?"

She sighed. "Yes, at some godforsaken hour, stinking of booze. Threw his clothes all around the room and tried to grope me."

I looked indignant. "Your own husband wanted sex? How disgusting."

She giggled. "I know. Fortunately, he fell asleep and snored loudly enough to wake the dead."

"So you're sex-starved?"

She smiled. "Of course. Let's go to the bedroom."

"Don't you want a cup of tea first? I'm happy to have a chat."

She shook her head. "No way, not on my time."

I smiled. "Fair enough."

She led me into the main bedroom and rattled my bones for half an hour. She went to gym classes thrice a week, so her fitness was never in doubt, though mine was. Just before we finished, my left leg started to cramp. Afterward, we lay on our backs, perspiring.

I said: "If you hadn't stopped, I'd have called the police."

"I was a bit rough?"

"Ferocious. Next time we shag, I want an ambulance on standby. Where do you get your energy from?"

"Abstinence. I'm not getting at home. Getting drunk and having a grope is as far as Terry gets these days."

I never liked talking about her marriage, because there seemed so little there, but couldn't think of another topic. "He's lost interest in sex?"

"Yes, or he's rooting someone else."

She didn't sound concerned that Terry might be cheating on her: she had many faults, but hypocrisy was not one.

"If he is, he's a fool."

"Thanks. He's also been a bit stressed recently. Something's worrying him."

"What?"

"Don't know."

"Have you asked?"

"Yes, and he said I was just imagining things."

"If he did have a problem, would he tell you?"

"Probably not. Our marriage isn't built on good communication. In fact, we hardly talk at all."

"Maybe nothing's wrong—you are imagining things?"

She shook her head. "No, something's definitely out of place. I can tell."

I reflected on that. "You may be right. On Friday night he got very pissed and morose: talked like he'd soon be leaving the Bar."

"Did he? Yes, he's talked like that to me. Weird."

A tremor of apprehension. "Maybe he's upset because he's found out about our affair?"

She looked worried before smiling broadly. "Hah, I doubt it."

"Why?"

"Because Terry only focuses on two things: golf and his wine collection. Everything else just passes him by. In fact, if I told him I was having an affair, he probably wouldn't hear me. He'd say: 'Yes darling, as long as it doesn't cost too much'."

"Don't test that theory."

"I won't." She laughed and rolled on top of me. "Though I could be wrong. He may be standing across the road right now, looking up at the window. Want me to show him my tits?"

The bed turned chilly. I was tempted to slip across to the window and check. "Not funny."

"Oh, don't worry. I'm just kidding."

"I know. But be careful."

"Fear not, I'm very discreet. Terry drives me nuts, but he's been good to me: I don't want to hurt him." She sat up, boobs swinging about, fumbling for her bra. "Anyway, I'd better make him dinner. He's useless on his own."

As she scrambled around on the floor, looking for her shoes, I reflected that, though I was lucky to get sex without commitment, our affair wasn't good for my soul. I was hiding from responsibilities that would help me grow and develop. I needed to break out of my cocoon and have more to worry about than Terry catching me sleeping with his wife.

She left and I stopped taking stock of my life. Instead, I turned on the TV and watched a game of rugby league.

## Chapter 5

For dinner, I scooped a bacon and egg sandwich over the drying rack in the kitchen. I'd just finished when the telephone rang in the living-room. I scooped up the receiver. "Hello."

"Ben, that you?" a terrified woman screamed. Doris. Why so upset? I squeezed the receiver. "Yes, it's Ben. What's wrong?"

She sobbed loudly. "Ben, something terrible's happened—terrible. Oh, my God."

Dry mouth. "What?"

"It's Terry. He's ... he's ... dead."

My brain overloaded. "Dead?"

"Yes."

"Christ. You're kidding, right?"

A piercing wail. "No, he's dead, definitely dead." She resumed sobbing.

A bizarre joke? Doris had a spooky sense of humour. But her voice was too raw.

I said: "How? What happened?"

Doris gulped several times. "When I got home, I found him ... found him on the floor ... in the kitchen, blood everywhere."

"Blood?"

"Yes. Someone stabbed him."

My legs felt weak. "That's crazy."

"There was blood all over his back."

"You mean ... you mean ... he was murdered?"

"Yes, murdered."

"My God. Who did it? Why?"

Doris sobbed a few more times. "Don't know, don't know. Someone stabbed him."

"My God. Where are you right now?"

Her voice dropped, as if worried about being overhead. "At home, in the bedroom. The police are here: detectives from the Homicide Squad. They're everywhere, all over the house."

My legal instincts took over. "Have you talked to them?"

She gulped several more times and still sounded shaky. "Yeah, sort of. I mean, I spoke to the detective in charge, when he got here."

"What did you tell him?"

"Just that I got home and found Terry on the floor—that's all. He said he wants to talk to me later, to get a full statement. Should I? What should I do?"

Did Doris kill Terry? Maybe, when she got home, they argued and she grabbed a knife? Highly unlikely and it didn't sound like the police were about to arrest her. But, until I knew the full story, I didn't want her talking to the cops.

I made an immense effort to slow my throbbing heart. "Look Doris, it's best if you don't talk to the cops right now. Tell them you're tired and upset; you'll talk to them tomorrow."

"Alright."

"Good. Where are you going to stay tonight? Do you want to come over here?"

"No. Umm, I'll stay at my sister's house."

"How'll you get there?"

"I've already called Beth. She's coming here right now."

I considered going to Doris' house to help. But she'd probably be gone before I arrived and, because I spent the afternoon with her, I might become a key figure in the murder investigation. So I wanted to speak to her before I spoke to the police.

I said: "That sounds good. I'll drop over to Beth's place later tonight."

She sounded utterly exhausted. "OK, OK. You know where she lives?"

"No."

Doris recited an address in Wollstonecraft. I picked up a pen and scrawled it on the palm of my hand. "Got it."

"Good. Got to go. See you there."

"OK. Stay strong."

## Chapter 6

An hour later, I drove to Beth's house, still emotionally numb. Terry's sudden death was hard enough to digest. The manner of his demise compounded the shock. Who the hell would murder him? He was no saint and must have had enemies. Yet, he seemed the last guy to provoke murderous rage.

The last time I saw him, at the Bench & Bar Dinner, he hinted he'd soon be leaving the Bar and exchanged some harsh words with Justice Sloan. Surely though, the judge didn't kill him. I was quite happy to believe a judge was capable of murder. After all, they're monkeys in suits, like the rest of us. But Sloan seemed much too smart to solve a problem with homicide.

I gave up playing detective and felt the tug of sadness. My friendship with Terry mainly revolved around work and I found his defects far more amusing than I

should have. But I knew him for a long time, and always enjoy his company because he was so affable and positive about life, and himself.

Beth lived in a small Federation bungalow in Wollstonecraft. I hadn't met her before, though Doris once mentioned she was twice divorced and lived alone. Doris often used her as an alibi when she visited me, and claimed Beth didn't mind.

I pressed the door buzzer. Feet approached. My heart thudded. A tall, angular woman in her mid-forties, strikingly similar to Doris, opened the door. A heavy frown. Why? Concern for Doris? Anger at me?

A prim voice. "Ben Kennedy?"

"Yes. Beth?"

"That's right. Please come in."

"How's Doris?"

"Devastated, just devastated."

I nervously followed her down the hallway to a small living room with mahogany picture rails, an art deco fireplace, two plush sofas and an armchair in which Doris sat, eyes closed. I whispered her name.

Her eyes shot open. "Ben."

"Doris. How are you?"

She lurched to her feet and almost collapsed into my arms. "Oh, Ben, it's terrible. Just terrible."

I held her tight. "I know."

Terry's death suddenly hit me. Tears laced my cheeks.

She buried her face in my chest and sobbed hard. After about a minute, I stepped back, holding her shoulders. "You'd better sit down. You must be very tired."

She nodded dumbly and collapsed back into the armchair. I sat on the adjoining sofa, holding her hand. Beth leaned back against a wall.

Doris closed her eyes again; her voice slurred. "Oh God, I'm so tired, so tired. Beth gave me a couple of tranquillisers. They've helped. But I don't know how I'll sleep tonight. I just can't stop thinking about what I saw. I mean, when I left Terry, he was alive, and when I got home, he ... he ... he was laying on the floor in the kitchen, covered in blood." Her eyes sprang open, reliving the horror.

"It must have been terrible."

"Oh, it was. It was."

"I know you're in shock, but you've got to tell me what happened. How did Terry seem, when you left the house to see me?"

She shrugged, looking drowsy again. "Oh, he seemed fine. In fact, he seemed rather happy."

"Why?"

She shrugged slightly. "I don't know. He just seemed in a good mood."

"Did he say what he'd do while you were out?"

"No, and I didn't ask."

"Did he mention meeting anyone?"

"No. Like I said, we didn't talk about what he'd do. I guess I assumed he'd watch TV or potter around; I just said I'd be home between about four and five, and left."

"OK. And what happened when you got home?"

Doris went grey and held her stomach. Haltingly, she described how she wandered into the kitchen and found Terry laying on his belly, blood all over his back. She closed her eyes and sounded disembodied. "It was obvious he was dead; I mean, the blood had already started to dry." She sobbed again. "Oh, it was horrible, horrible."

I squeezed her hand and tried to stay calm and factual, as if she was a client at our first conference. "And there were stab wounds?"

"Yeah, looked like it."

"You didn't see a knife?"

"No."

"Then you called the police?"

"I called triple-0 and said my husband was murdered. About ten minutes later, police cars started arriving from everywhere."

"And you talked to the police?"

"Yes, of course, to the detective in charge. I think his name was Molloy or something like that."

"What did you tell him?"

"I was incredibly upset, of course. I told him I was out all afternoon and, when I got home, I found Terry dead."

My chest constricted and hands curled into fists. This was where I slotted into the murder investigation. Terry was murdered while Doris and I were bonking in my apartment. Did she reveal that? I had to know.

I said: "Umm, did he ask where you were this afternoon?"

Doris' lips trembled and voice quavered. "Yes."

My vocal cords tightened. "What did you say?"

"I, umm, said I was with Beth."

My brain processed relief, fear and guilt without really making a selection. "You what?"

"I said I was with Beth."

"You lied?"

"Umm, yes."

"Why?"

"I panicked. I didn't want to tell them that I spent the afternoon with another man. They might have suspected us. I tried to protect you."

She'd had a bunch of bad options and I couldn't really blame her for lying. But I had a terrible feeling her lie would come back to haunt us. We wouldn't escape the police net so easily.

Doris said: "Don't worry, Beth will back me up: she'll give me an alibi. We'll say we went shopping together."

We both looked across at Beth who nodded coolly. "Don't worry, that's fine with me."

I blurted out. "You sure?"

"Yes."

Christ. If the police ever found out that Doris lied to them, and I knew she lied and did nothing, I would get struck off the roll of barristers, permanently, and maybe go to gaol.

This topic was very unsettling. Time for another. I turned to Doris. "Have you got any idea who killed Terry?"

She shook her head. "No. But the police think he knew the killer."

"Why?"

"We've got an expensive alarm system, and big locks on all the doors and windows. There are no signs of a break-in. So they think Terry let the killer in through the front door."

"Maybe Terry invited the killer over to your house because he knew you'd be away for the afternoon, umm, seeing your sister; maybe he didn't want you to see this guy."

Doris' eyes widened. "I suppose that's possible."

"So, does that set off any bells?"

She looked exhausted. Heavy wrinkles blossomed on her forehead. "No. I still can't imagine why anyone would want to kill Terry. It's just crazy—crazy."

"You said he was worried about something recently?"

"Yes. But, like I said, I don't know what—I just don't."

Even if Doris knew something worthwhile—which I doubted—she was too tired to focus. So I asked if she'd contacted Terry's ex-wife, Maureen, or his son, David, to reveal what had happened. She hadn't and begged me to do it.

"Leave it to me."

I had to ring a few people to get Maureen's telephone number. Then I went into the next room and broke the news to her. She sounded quite upset and pressed me for information about who killed Terry. I said I had no idea, and would keep her informed. She promised to pass on the news to David.

When I got back to the living room, Beth went off to prepare a bed for Doris. I sat and took Doris' hand. She obviously didn't want to talk much, which suited me.

Terry's death would drastically alter the bond between us. I'd always made it clear I didn't want a full-on relationship. Now I didn't have Terry as a bulwark. A great attraction of my affair with Doris—its simplicity—was gone. Somehow, I had to provide her with real support without becoming an emotional crutch or partner. Beware of pity, I told myself—beware.

## Chapter 7

I woke the next morning, tired and crappy, and not sure why until the events of the previous night flooded my brain: Terry murdered; Doris widowed. Christ. My heart thumped as if I'd just plunged off a building.

The day ahead also filled me with gloom. The hearing of *Arnold v Taggart & Ors* was scheduled to resume in the Supreme Court and I was now in charge. Normally, that wouldn't have bothered me. I knew a lot more about the case than Terry ever did. But the events of the last 24 hours had left me exhausted. I'd have trouble focusing. In one sense, that wouldn't matter, because the case was going head-first over a cliff. Still, I liked to do a good job.



My watch insisted it was almost seven o'clock. Reluctantly, I rolled out of bed, padded into the living-room, turned on the TV and slumped onto the couch. A wiry woman in a leotard pranced up and down, barking out commands like a Marine drill sergeant: "Stretch, one, two, three, four..." She couldn't persuade me.

Mercifully, after about five minutes, the morning news program started. As I expected, the lead story was about Terry's death. A bouffant newsreader contrived a mournful expression and intoned ominously. "A prominent Sydney barrister was murdered yesterday afternoon. Terence Riley, a leading silk, was stabbed to death in the kitchen of his house. According to police, his wife found his body when she returned home. Police are still searching for the culprit. Action News Reporter Brian Gilbert is now at the scene..."

Terry Riley's large Federation mansion in Woollahra flashed onto the screen. Crime scene tape fluttered across the lawn. A police car was parked in the driveway. A bearded reporter in a trench-coat stood on the nature strip, shoulders hunched against the cold, holding a microphone.

The newsreader said: "Brian, any new developments?"

The reporter tapped his earpiece. "No Doug, afraid not. The Homicide detectives investigating the murder have no firm leads. However, they strongly suspect Mr Riley knew the killer and let him into the house."

The new-reader said: "Have the police found the murder weapon?"

"No, they're still looking for it."

"So this story is just developing?"

"Yes, that's right, Doug. There are a lot more revelations to come."

The newsreader moved on to another item and I went through my morning ablutions. Then I caught a ferry to Circular Quay and trudged up the hill, already incredibly tired. I didn't want to talk to anyone or do anything, and didn't expect my mood to improve for quite a while.

The NSW Bar floats on gossip seasoned with pinches of truth. News of Terry's demise would already be ricocheting around Phillip Street. Wherever barristers gathered—in chambers, courthouses, bars and coffee shops—it would be the number-one topic. Dark rumours about him and the identity of his killer would spawn and mutate, and harden into fact like drying manure.

Thomas Erskine Chambers had about 30 barristers whose rooms were spread around the outer walls. Secretarial cubicles and the library clogged the centre.

When I first joined the floor it had a certain Dickensian squalor. A recent refurbishment had replaced that with mahogany walls, brass fittings and a thick red carpet. The new fit-out should have cost a fortune. However, because builders love gouging barristers, it cost a hell of a lot more than that. I'd probably still be paying off my share when I retired.

On Monday mornings, the floor usually hummed with life as barristers scurried about preparing for court. Now there was a special tension. The first indicator was our receptionist, Melissa, twenty-one and, when her acne was in remission, quite pretty. Terry had—so far as I was aware—barely noticed her existence, except to berate her for losing calls or forgetting messages. Her eyes and nose were bright red, and tears rolled down her cheeks. She hadn't been so upset since her cat base-jumped out of her apartment.

She wiped her eyes with some tissues. "Oh, Mr Kennedy, it's terrible about Mr Riley, isn't it? Just terrible."

Her distress was a little embarrassing, as I could never hope to match it. "Yes. Your concern is very touching."

"Such a lovely man—so lovely."

"Yes."

"He gave me a big box of chocolates last Christmas." She choked up and her face pitched forward into a bed of tissues.

The Floor Clerk, Philip Milliken, occupied a small glass-fronted cubicle behind the reception desk. His chubby frame scuttled towards me.

His job was to manage the floor and market barristers to solicitors. He was competent at the first, which wasn't hard, and lousy at the second, which was. Certainly, he'd never steered any work in my direction. So, while I was polite to him, I usually paid him little regard.

His forehead was heavily creased and jaw trembled. I wasn't surprised. The murder of our Head of Chambers wasn't good for the floor's image. Solicitors would wonder what dark secrets lurked behind our mahogany-panelled walls. Philip also had to worry about his job security. He and Terry had a symbiotic relationship: Terry loved adulation and Philip loved giving it. Now Philip's investment in Terry was dust.

He said: "Mr Kennedy, have you heard the news? Unbelievable, isn't it? Who would murder Mr Riley? Incredible."

"It certainly is."

"He was a great man. A truly great man."

"You're right."

"Umm, I just got a call from the police—a Homicide detective—who said some detectives are on their way here. I hope they don't cause too much disruption. This is bad for our reputation."

"We could ask them to wear disguises."

He brightened. "You think so?"

"I'm joking. Did he say what they want?"

"Yeah. They want to search Mr Riley's room and maybe interview a few people on the floor."

A flutter of concern. Stay calm. "Did they say who they want to interview?"

"No. He also told me to stop anyone going into Mr Riley's room."

"OK, though there's a trolley of stuff in there I'll need for court this morning. I'll grab it myself."

"Alright."

"What's the rest of the floor saying about Terry's death?"

"They're shocked, of course. A floor meeting has been arranged for this evening."

Barristers love calling meetings and talking issues to death. I sighed. "Why?"

"To, umm, review the situation."

"What time?"

"About five, in Gary Eslick's room."

"I'll try to make it."

On the way to my room, I passed the cubicle of Terry's secretary, Rosemary Clarke, a big, buxom woman with a booming laugh. Now though, she was hunched over the phone, whispering, cheeks wet.

My secretary, Denise Roberts, sat in her cubicle, wearing earphones, typing hard. Denise was a stocky woman in her early forties with a mousy husband and three teenage kids. Despite her lowly position, she was smarter than any of the barristers on the floor, including me. She usually carried that heavy psychic burden with dignity. However, she could be quite waspish and, because one of her children was intellectually disabled, had no sympathy for my "first world problems".

Now, she whipped off her earphones, eyes like saucers. "My God, Ben, have you heard?"

"About Terry? Yes, I've heard."

"What do you think? It's terrible, isn't it?"

"Yes—poor Terry."

"On TV, they said he was murdered."

"I saw that."

She looked suspicious. "Do you know anything - any inside stuff?"

"A bit."

"What?"

I held up my hands and shook my head. "Sorry, I can't talk right now. I've got lots to do, including getting ready for court."

She looked ultra-annoyed. "OK. But you'll tell me later, right?"

I sighed. "Yes, we'll have a fabulous chat."

"Good. And, umm, Bob Meredith's already here. I said he could wait in your room."

"Thanks."

I ducked into Terry's room to grab the trolley holding the *Arnold* brief and discovered a colleague called Geoff Mantel kneeling behind the desk, rummaging through a drawer.

I've always distrusted men who comb their hair straight back, smile too much or get caught rifling through the desk of a deceased colleague. Mantel was guilty on all counts. Though he'd only been at the Bar for a few years, he was quite successful, mainly because several heavyweight silk, including Terry, had picked him as a rising star and bestowed their patronage. However, I had serious doubts about his brains and judgement, because he'd told me, several times, that Terry was a brilliant lawyer. I suspected his only real talent was for being a protégé.

His wife, Joan, was also a floor member and, like him, had tremendous drive harnessed to meagre talent. She once told me that she and Geoff were one of the Bar's "power couples", and took my stunned silence as assent.

Why was Geoff rattling Terry's belongings? I coughed politely. His head bobbed up and he looked close to a heart attack. Obviously, neither of us had been in this position before.

"Oh, shit, Ben, what the hell are you doing here?"

"I was about to ask you the same question."

Geoff used his thigh to close the drawer. "I'm, umm, umm, looking for something."

"Yeah? What?"

Despite his profession, he wasn't good at thinking on his feet. A long pause. Trembling hands. "I'm looking for, umm, ah, something."

"What?"

"Ah, something."

"Do you know Terry's dead?"

"Yes. I heard this morning, on the radio. Terrible, just terrible. That's why I thought I'd look for, umm, a book I lent him. That's right, a book."

Too bad I hadn't opposed him. "A book?"

"Yes, a contracts textbook. You know, Fosdick & Malone." Geoff edged towards the door as if this was a bad pantomime.

I said: "I don't think Terry kept any textbooks in his desk drawers."

Geoff feigned surprise. "You don't? You really don't?"

"No, I don't. What were you looking for?"

"Nothing, nothing. Just looking for the book, like I said."

"Come on Geoff, spill the beans?"

Geoff edged a little closer to the door. "Anyway, I'd better be going. I'll look later. Terrible about Terry, really terrible. See you."

He disappeared out the door, leaving me deeply mystified. What the hell was he looking for? Did his search have something to do with Terry's death? Too bad I couldn't torture him for that information. I would have enjoyed doing that.

The Homicide detectives would probably arrive soon. I pushed the *Arnold* trolley towards the door and noticed the golf-bag standing in a corner, a poignant reminder of Terry.

When I entered my room, the rumpled figure of Bob Meredith stood at the window, staring down at Phillip Street. He spun around, face and eyes red, voice white. "Shit, Ben, I can't believe it."

I parked the trolley. "It's incredible."

"Unbelievable." Meredith nervously rubbed his temples. "What sort of fucking bastard would murder Terry? He was one of nature's gentlemen. One of the kindest, most decent men I've ever met."

"He was a good man."

"We were friends for more than 30 years. Went to Sydney Uni together; admitted as solicitors together. And when he went to the Bar, I sent him his first brief. We were like brothers." He sighed loudly, slumped into a leather armchair and kept massaging his temples. "You know, we played golf together almost every Saturday for twenty years. Even went duck shooting together most seasons." He sighed loudly. "I just can't believe this. It's so crazy. I've been trying to get in touch with Doris. Have you spoken to her?"

In fact, I spoke to her *before* and *after* the murder. Best he didn't know that. "Yes, she's staying with her sister."

"How's she holding up?"

"Shattered, of course. But she's pretty tough. She'll survive."

"According to the TV news, she discovered the body. That true?"

"Yes."

"Poor woman." He looked at me. "You got any idea who killed him?"

Should I mention that, so far, my suspicions had tentatively fallen on Justice Sloan and Geoff Mantel? Why bother? My evidence was gossamer thin and Bob was a friend of the judge. Better keep mum.

I said: "No. I suppose the logical candidate is a disgruntled client. But they prefer to report barristers to the Legal Services Commissioner. Otherwise, I've got no idea. What about you?"

"No idea. Like I said, Terry didn't make enemies. He was too easy-going."

"Hopefully, the cops will catch the culprit." I plopped behind my desk. "But we can't focus on Terry right now. We've still got to finish the *Arnold* hearing. Have you told our client that Terry's dead?"

"No. I tried to call him this morning; no answer."

"So he might not know?"

"Correct. And if he doesn't, he's in for a fucking rude shock, isn't he?"

## Chapter 8

Thomas Erskine Chambers employed three junior clerks, all young and scrofulous, who ran errands and pushed trolleys to and from court. While I robed, Dan Butterworth, shambled into my room. Though he worked in a hive of ambition, Dan drove through life in first gear, elbow on the window sill. Denise claimed he was the biggest dope dealer in the building, with clients ranging from eminent silk to baby barristers and support staff. Maybe he was earning more than me. His demeanour suggested he liked sampling his own product.

He drawled, "Denise said you've got a trolley for court?"

"Yes, over there. I'm in 13A."

"OK."

As he pushed the trolley towards the door, I jammed on my wig and followed him, with Bob Meredith trailing behind.

When we reached level 13 of the Supreme Court building, we found Mick Arnold, still wearing a Wallabies jersey, sitting on a foam bench outside Court 13A. His parents seemed to have abandoned ship, a pleasure not available to his lawyers.

Mick looked puzzled. "Umm, where's Mr Riley?"

His ignorance was clearly genuine. "You mean, you haven't heard?"

His forehead furrowed. "Heard what?"

"I'm afraid that Mr Riley's dead."

An uncertain grin. "Dead? You're kidding, right?"

"No, I'm not. He's dead."

"Hah. You're really kidding, right?"

I shook my head solemnly. "No, I'm very serious."

Mick's brow wrinkled. "Dead? He was alive on Friday."

"True. But he's not alive today."

"OK, OK. How'd he die?"

"Someone killed him: he was murdered at home - stabbed to death."

Mick's eyebrows rose, eyes widened and jaw dropped like a cartoon character. "Shit. Wow. Shit. Have they caught who did it?"

"No."

I expected more questions about the circumstances of Terry's death. Instead, his eyes narrowed unsympathetically. "If he's dead, what's gonna happen to my case? Who's gonna take over?"

Usually, hearings are only abandoned if the judge or a party drops dead. Lawyers are replaceable. In other words, the show must go on. I said: "Don't worry, the hearing will continue."

He relaxed slightly. "Good. Who's gonna do all the talking?"

"If you want, I can ask for an adjournment and try to find a new silk to lead me; if you don't want that, I can finish the case on my own."

Mick looked worried. "Can you find another silk?"

"Unlikely."

He looked unhappy. "How come?"

If I asked a silk to take over, on a contingency basis, I'd have to reveal that Wild Bill's cross-examination sent our client spinning to the canvas. The silk would turn me down flat. No, I'd have to put out my own garbage.

I said: "It's hard to persuade a silk to take over half-way through a hearing."

"You sure?"

"Yes. In fact, if you want one, you'll have to pay him up front."

Mick looked shocked. "Really?"

"Yup. Cash on the nose gets you most things in life."

"You mean, you can't get a silk to take over on a - what is it? - contingency basis?"

"Afraid not."

"So you'll have to run my case?"

"Yes."

He looked at me with fresh eyes. "Can you do it?"

He'd just had a stroke of luck, because I'd do a better job than Terry. But why speak ill of the dead? "Of course. I've got plenty of experience; I've run dozens of cases bigger than this one."

Bob Meredith interjected. "Don't worry Mick, Ben will do an excellent job."

Our client still looked unhappy that his silk had got himself murdered and he had to trust me. But reaching into his pocket was not an option. He nodded reluctantly. "OK then, I guess you're the boss."

"Good."

"What's gonna happen to the hearing today? It going ahead?"

"I don't know. That's up to the judge. Let's go inside."

I led them into the courtroom where the two Bills sat at the Bar table with their instructing solicitor and clients just behind them.

As I sat, Wild Bill leaned over, looking upset. "Jesus, Ben, I saw it on the news this morning, about Terry—couldn't bloody believe it."

"Join the club."

Wild Bill shook his head sorrowfully. "You know, he was a good guy. I liked him. I really did. A very honourable opponent."

Wild Bill often harassed and humiliated Terry in court, once even telling a judge that Terry obviously hadn't read his brief. The accusation was probably true. But it drove Terry into a paroxysm of rage. I can still remember his trembling words: "Your honour, never, in thirty years at the Bar, have I been treated with such discourtesy".

Yet now the two were soul-mates. Terry's death would obviously trigger a serious outbreak of hypocrisy at the Bar.

An unseen hand rapped three times on the door behind the bench. The door opened and the judge led his small retinue into the courtroom. The Court Officer yelled: "All rise".

Justice Sloan dropped into his high-backed black leather chair, ashen. He'd obviously heard the news.

The Court Officer yelled for everyone to be seated.

The judge stared at me and rasped, "Mr Kennedy, I've heard what's happened to Mr Riley. This is tragic news, truly tragic. I'm absolutely shocked."

I returned to my feet. "We all are, your Honour."

"I knew Terry Riley for a long time. He was a close colleague at the Bar and often appeared before me. He was a fine lawyer and a fine man."

I bowed slightly. "He was, your Honour. I'll convey your sentiments to Mrs Riley."

"Thank you Mr Kennedy, I'd appreciate that." The judge leaned forward and sighed loudly. "Tell me, Mr Kennedy, does the plaintiff intend to replace Mr Riley or will you take over?"

"I've informed the plaintiff about Mr Riley's death, and my present instructions are to continue on my own."

The judge nodded. "Alright. I suppose the big question is whether we should continue today or adjourn for a while. Mr Riley's death has obviously distressed us all. So maybe I should adjourn and give everybody a chance to regroup. I'm also concerned that resuming today might look rather, umm, callous. What do you say, Mr Kennedy?"

In one sense, I didn't need an adjournment, because the case was hardwired into my brain. Indeed, I knew a lot more about it than Terry did. But I was still in shock and would have trouble focusing. I'd also be very busy for several days consoling Doris, helping to organise the funeral and dealing with the police.

I said: "Obviously, your Honour, I'm ready to continue today, if necessary. But I certainly would appreciate some time to regather my thoughts."

The judge stared at Wild Bill. "Mr Anderson, what do you say?"

Wild Bill saw the writing on the wall and was, for once, emollient. "Your Honour, I fully understand your concerns. Obviously, I'm ready to continue, if necessary. But I'm in your hands on that."

"Thank you. Well, all things considered, I don't think it would be appropriate to resume the hearing today. I'll adjourn for one week. We'll resume next Monday, if that's alright with you two gentlemen?"

Wild Bill and I both said: "Yes".

The judge was already rising. "Good, I adjourn until next Monday."

The judge had seemed genuinely shocked about Terry's death. Yet, as he departed I recalled his argument with Terry at the Bench & Bar Dinner. What was

that about? Just a minor squabble between friends? Or a catalyst for murder? If it was, I hoped that information never came my way.

I farewelled the two Bills and left the building with Bob Meredith and Mick Arnold. Once outside, we had nothing further to discuss and broke up.

I crossed the road and caught a lift up to Thomas Erskine Chambers where five bulky men stood in the reception area, talking to the Floor Clerk, Philip Milliken. They all had number-one haircuts and wore number-two suits. Obviously detectives. Their leader was easy to identify. He was in his mid-forties—at least ten years older than the others—with greying hair and a meat-and-potatoes face.

Philip looked at me nervously. "Ah, Ben, glad you're back. This is Detective Sergeant Malloy, from the Homicide Squad. He's here about Mr Riley."

The detective's handshake almost put me on my knees. Like many cops, he was powerful without being fit. "Actually, it's 'Malloy', with an 'a'".

"Hello, I'm Ben Kennedy."

Malloy frowned. He probably hated barristers more than criminals. "Mr Kennedy, you're one of the people I want to interview."

Despite a writhing stomach, I shrugged casually. "No problem. Happy to oblige. When's convenient?"

"What about now?"

What about next year? "Fine. Come into my room."

Malloy turned to his subordinates. "While I'm talking to Mr Kennedy, search the deceased's room. I'm sure Mr Milliken will show you where it is."

I was dying to ask what they'd be searching for, but restrained myself.

Philip nodded subserviently. "No problem."

"Good."

Philip led the junior detectives towards Terry's room and I turned back to the Detective Sergeant. "Please, follow me."

I led him past a wide-eyed Denise into my room, where I tossed my wig and gown onto my desk and pointed to an armchair. "Take a seat."

"Thanks."

It was a robust armchair that barely survived impact.

I sat behind my desk and finally let my knees tremble. "Do you want a cup of coffee?"

"No, I'm fine thanks. Trying to cut back." He studied me intently. Despite his rough appearance, he was obviously no fool. I'd take him lightly at my peril.

I said: "OK. What do you want to know?"

"You knew the deceased well?"

"For about fifteen years—since I arrived on this floor."

"Were you close?"

"Reasonably close. I mean, we weren't bosom buddies. But we often saw each other around chambers and appeared together in court."

"Did you see each other socially?"

"Sometimes we had lunch together or sank a few beers in a pub, after work. That was all." I couldn't contain my curiosity. "So tell me, you got any idea who killed him?"

"No. All we know is that his wife arrived home on Sunday afternoon and found him dead."



"According to the TV news, he was stabbed?"

He wriggled and the armchair creaked. "That's right. Killer used a big knife of some sort. We haven't recovered it. Must have taken it with him when he left." The detective took a small notebook from inside his jacket and put it on his thigh. "Tell me, you got any idea who killed him?" His eyes bored into me.

A casual shrug. "None."

"Did he have any enemies?"

"Not really. I mean, I'm sure that, like most barristers, he annoyed some people. But I can't think of anyone who wanted to kill him. That's pretty drastic."

"I understand you were appearing with him, in a hearing, when he died?"

"Yes, as his junior."

"What sort of case?"

"Just a garden-variety personal injuries action. We were appearing for a plaintiff before Justice Sloan in the Supreme Court."

"What's the case about?"

I gave him a thumbnail sketch of Mick Arnold's claim.

He looked unimpressed with how I earned a living. "When did it start?"

"Last Friday."

"Going to win?"

"Highly unlikely."

"Why not?"

I described how Wild Bill Anderson demolished our client in the witness box. "I'm afraid he lost a lot of blood."

"He's got no chance?"

"I wouldn't say that. Anything can happen in litigation. But I'll need heart massage if we win."

"What stage has the hearing reached?"

"Our—my—client's still in the witness box. And this morning, because of Terry's death, the judge adjourned for a week."

"And when it resumes, you'll step into Mr Riley's shoes?"

"Yes."

"So tell me, what sort of barrister was he? Any good?"

I smiled ruefully. "That's a tough question. I mean, there are no objective standards; there's no league table of wins and losses."

The detective half-smiled. "I understand that. But if you were forced to rate his ability, what score would you give him?"

I shrugged. "OK. For appearance and presentation, I'd give him ten out of ten—absolutely; for legal ability and judgement, maybe two or three."

Malloy grinned. "Ouch. You mean he was a bullshit artist?"

"Yes, but I'm probably being more complimentary than you think. The ability to spout bullshit is an essential quality that every barrister must have."

The detective threw a relaxed arm over the shoulder of the armchair and spoke casually. "You know his wife, Doris, don't you?"

Bloody hell. I gulped hard and forced words up my gullet. "Yes, of course."

His eyes dimmed and narrowed. "Indeed, I looked through her telephone records and saw you've called her a lot."

I'm paid to stay calm in a crisis and talk my way out of tight corners. But my lungs seemed to collapse. I only trusted myself to say a few words. "Umm, they do?"

He leaned forward, now in charge. "Yes, and I wondered why."

"We're good friends."

A faint smile that didn't expand. "Really? How good?"

"Oh, we've known each other for a long time. When she worked as a solicitor, she briefed me and Terry. In fact, that's how she met him."

"Really? When did they get married?"

"About five years ago."

"And after that, you continued your, er, friendship with her?"

I didn't like his look, expression or tone - not one little bit - but dared not complain. "Yes, I did."

"Is that why she telephoned you soon after she discovered her husband's body?"

Bloody hell. He knew that already. I mumbled, "She did?"

"You mean you've forgotten?"

"Of course not. Umm, yes, you're right, she did call me."

"Why?"

"She was upset. Wanted to talk to someone she knew."

He leaned forward. "You mean a close friend?"

Nasty bastard. My mouth was drier than the first time I appeared in the High Court. "I suppose so. But you'll have to ask her that, won't you?"

"Don't worry, I will. And after you spoke to her on the phone, did you talk again?"

I was tempted to say no, but didn't want to lie unless absolutely necessary. "Yes, I went over to her sister's house and saw her there, last night."

"What did you talk about?"

I shrugged. "Nothing really. I just tried to console her. She was very distraught, as you can imagine."

The detective leaned back in the armchair, wearing a half-grin dripping with foreboding. "Just out of casual interest, where were you yesterday afternoon?"

"You mean, when Terry was killed?"

"Yes."

Rising panic grabbed my throat and tried to throttle me. Why did he want to know? Did he think I murdered Terry? Christ, maybe I was already his prime suspect. Was I about to be arrested? Would I be handcuffed and led away, a jacket over my head? Status anxiety almost crippled me. Somehow, I produced enough saliva to talk. "Why do you want to know that? How's that relevant to your investigation?"

His tone grew harsh. "Because until I find the murderer *everything* is relevant, understand? So answer my question."

"Alright. I was at home."

"Doing what?"

I shrugged. "Laying on the couch, reading a book and watching TV."

He leaned forward and nailed me with his gaze. "Any company?"

The question I'd dreaded. I could tell him the truth, that I was in bed with Doris, or lie that I was alone. I didn't want to lie, but had no choice, because Doris had

already told the cops she spent the afternoon with her sister. Our versions had to match. I looked him in the eye. "No, I was on my own."

His left eyebrow flickered. "Really? You sure?"

"Of course I'm sure." I crossed my arms and leaned back, trying to look relaxed, but probably looked defensive.

"Really?"

"Yes."

I expected further interrogation. Instead, he scribbled something in his notebook and stood up. "Alright then, thanks for your time. I'd better go and poke around in Mr Riley's room. If I've got any more questions, I'll be in touch."

My breathing steadied. "You sure? That's all?"

A cool stare. "Yes. Unless there's something you want to tell me?"

I shrugged. "Oh no, nothing at all."

"Good. I'll be off."

He headed for the door. I'd just started to relax when he suddenly turned and looked amused. "Oh, by the way, do you know any good criminal barristers?"

He caught me off-balance, as planned. "Ah, yeah, a few."

"Good, because you might need one."

On that theatrical note, he disappeared out the door, leaving me with a thumping heart and sweaty palms. His heavy-handed attempt to frighten me went over a treat. If I wasn't already the prime suspect in his murder investigation, I was a strong contender in a slender field.

It's never smart to lie to the cops—unless you're guilty—because one lie leads to another and, before you know it, you're entangled in falsehoods and look guilty as hell. I'd already taken my first step in that direction and prayed I wouldn't have to take any more. However, I suspected I wouldn't have much choice.

My heart was still fluttering when Barbara Carmichael, a junior barrister on the floor, slipped into my room, looking excited. "Got a moment."

I normally enjoyed talking to her, but needed quiet time and frowned. "For what?"

"A chat."

I leaned back in my chair. "What about?"

She jiggled around as if the floor was electrified. "Don't be obtuse: Terry, of course. It's terrible news, isn't it?" She sounded excited rather than upset.

"Yes, terrible."

I stared down at a brief on my desk, hinting that I was busy. She pretended not to notice and dropped into an empty armchair.

She was in her early thirties, with an angular face and wiry frame that came from competing regularly in triathlons with her merchant-banker boyfriend. She recently disparaged my high-fat, high-calorie, low-protein, low-fibre diet and opined that a run around the block wouldn't kill me. I said that attempts to shame me never worked.

Most baby barristers have a wolfish gaze and toadying manner. She, though, had an open face and at least the afterglow of innocence. Indeed, she once told me she came to the Bar because she got tired of the brown-nosing and back-stabbing at the big law firm where she worked.

I laughed. "You think the Bar's a meritocracy?"

"Of course."

"Then you're delusional. You've got to do even more brown-nosing at the Bar. Know why?"

"Why?"

"Because at least, at a law firm, there's a chain of command, so you know whose arse to kiss. The Bar is chaotic, so you might have to kiss a dozen arses before you kiss the right one."

"I was told you're cynical."

"You were told right."

"Well, I won't kiss any."

"Good for you. I'm sure your example will discourage the others."

So far she'd been true to her word, though she tended to sound a bit girlish when talking to a top silk. That explained why her career as a building & construction barrister had not blossomed. If she really wanted to get ahead, she had to start networking and stop wasting her time chatting to me.

She said: "What do you know about his death?"

"Why would I know anything?"

"You and Terry were good mates, right?"

"Yes."

"So what's going on?"

Jesus, the cop had just interrogated me. Now it was her turn. I raised an eyebrow. "I'm pretty busy right now."

She waved dismissively. She loved gossip and this was the mother lode. "So am I. But this is the most exciting thing that's happened on this floor since I've arrived. It's amazing. What's happening?"

"You know as much as I do."

"No, I don't. The guy who just left your room: he was a Homicide detective, right?"

"No, he was a traffic cop."

"Hah, hah. He was here about Terry?"

"Well, he didn't mention any other murders."

"Don't be a wise guy. What did he say?"

"About what?"

She scowled. "About Terry of course. Does he know who killed him?"

"If he does, he didn't tell me."

"He must have some theories."

"He didn't mention any."

A pout. "Jesus, you're a useless source of information."

"Sorry."

"I hope they catch the killer. Doris must be devastated."

"You've met her?"

"Yes, a few times, at floor functions. You know her well, right?"

"Reasonably well."

A raised eyebrow. "Really, I've heard you two were very close."

A jolt of panic. She'd obviously heard some gossip about me and Doris being an item. Would that gossip waft into the cop's ear? My tongue went furry and hands resumed trembling. I couldn't ignore this issue. "What are you talking about?"

She blushed. "I've heard you two went out together, before she married Terry." *Before*. Thank Christ. I almost sighed with relief. "Really?"

"Yes. Did you?"

"Well, umm, yes."

She raised the other eyebrow. "And you stayed friends afterward?" It didn't take her long to start connecting dots.

"We bumped into each other—that's all." Definitely time to change the topic. "Tell me, what are people saying about Terry's death?"

"In these chambers?"

"Yes."

"I haven't had a chance to ask them."

"But you will?"

"Of course."

"And if you hear anything interesting, you'll let me know?"

A smile. "You mean, you want me to play detective?"

"No, I want you to be your usual nosey self. That's all. Don't go overboard. Just find out what people are saying."

"Why don't you ask yourself?"

"Because you're friendlier than me."

"That's true." She smiled. "And what am I supposed to do with this gossip?"

"Convey it directly to me, of course."

She got to her feet. "OK."

"The cops will probably be poking around for a while: keep an eye on them too."

"Why?"

"If they find out anything interesting, I'd love to know."

She smirked. "Sure. You know, if I'm going to be your spy, I should have a codename."

I grinned. "OK. Your codename is *Barbara*?"

She frowned. "Ha, ha." Instead of leaving, she looked concerned. "Will you be OK?"

"Why do you ask?"

"You don't look your usual self."

"Really?"

She blushed. "Yes. You usually look pleased with yourself; now you look rather stressed and snappy."

A low-watt smile. "Don't worry. I've had a difficult 24 hours. I'll soon be looking self-satisfied again."

"Good. But if you want to chat, let me know."

"Thanks."

She left and I tried to call Doris at her sister's house. The line was engaged.

I forced myself to start reading a brief I'd just received. However, my room was now a thoroughfare: within minutes, Joan Mantel—wife of Geoff—strode through the door. She had big hair, big shoulders, big teeth and a jungle-cat expression. Her great ambition, she told me, was to become a judge. She would probably achieve that goal because judgeships were no longer reserved for talentless white males with connections. Now, they also went to talentless females with connections.

A few hours ago, I caught her hubbie rifling through Terry's desk. Surely, her visit was related in some way.

She shrouded my desk in a heavy fog of sickly perfume and plastered on a coquettish smile. "Umm, what happened to Terry was just terrible, wasn't it?"

"Yes, shocking."

"You talked to one of the Homicide detectives, didn't you?"

"That's right: Malloy, the guy in charge."

"Did he, umm, tell you anything about his investigation?"

"What do you mean?"

"Like who the cops suspect? Where the investigation's going?"

Why was she pumping me for this information? Idle curiosity? Or because her husband, who I found rifling through Terry's desk, had something to do with his death?

I said: "No, I'm afraid not."

She looked disappointed. "Really? That's too bad."

"Yes."

Her eyes dimmed and she climbed off my desk. I was now as useful as a used condom. "Thanks. Just curious. See you at the meeting this evening."

"Yup."

She strode from my room, shoulder pads swaying, big calves bulging, leaving an odour of rotting fruit. For once, I felt some sympathy for Geoff, though it quickly faded.

## Chapter 9

I rarely attended chambers general meetings because most barristers believe that talking is doing and their eloquence can change the world, and won't listen to anyone who tells them otherwise. As a result, the meetings often became endless talk-fests. I'd been to meetings where we argued for hours about the arrangement of chairs in the reception area, whether to buy a new fridge for the kitchen or where to hold the Christmas party. Battle-lines were drawn, old feuds bubbled to the surface, factions coalesced and votes were traded. Then everyone deferred the issue to the next meeting.

However, nothing could stop me attending that afternoon's meeting about Terry. Just after five o'clock, I filed into the oak-panelled room of our Floor Secretary, Gary Eslick SC, and found almost 30 barristers seated or slouched against walls and bookshelves.

God rarely shows much care when assembling tax lawyers, and Gary was no exception. He had lank blond hair, nondescript features and a pear-shaped physique. On the few occasions I'd been trapped in a conversation with him, I felt as if someone was slowly injecting a paralysing agent into my brain. He only seemed to be interested in two topics: tax avoidance schemes and his vineyard, which seemed to be connected. However, his blandness didn't deceive me. His

personality was like a broad landscape of rolling hills and placid glens with a large unmarked minefield in the middle.

He now stood in front of a wall festooned with certificates and spoke with the Oxford accent he acquired a few years ago when he attended a legal conference at that university. "Gentlemen, I'm sure I speak for us all when I say how shocked and distressed I am about Terry's death. He was a great man and a great barrister. He'll be sadly missed."

Everyone said: "Hear, hear."

"As you know, Homicide detectives were here today. They searched Terry's room and talked to various people. I spoke to the detective heading the investigation. He confirmed that Terry was murdered - stabbed to death in his home. At present, there are no strong leads. So we'll probably have more visits from the police. Obviously, we should give our full co-operation. But it's important we minimise any damage to the reputation of these chambers."

Gerald Robins, a tax barrister with the standard beige personality interjected. "The police put crime scene tape across Terry's door. That doesn't look good to clients—not good at all."

Mumbled assents.

"I take your point. It certainly doesn't. I'll speak to the police and see what can be done."

Guy Vandervort, an insolvency barrister, said: "Yes, and Terry's name's still on the board in our reception area. Maybe, when appropriate, it should be removed. After all, he's no longer a floor member."

Someone else piped up: "That's right, not a member."

Wayne Chisholm was independently wealthy, gay and rarely busy. All three factors made him prone to cause mischief. "I think you're all being too sensitive. The floor's reputation will only be damaged if one of us murdered Terry."

Gasps detonated around the room and I almost fell in love with Wayne.

Eslick looked shocked. "I'm sure that's not the case."

Wayne stroked his dyed blond beard. "You never know. After all, we worked closely with him. We're logical suspects."

Eslick's neck reddened and he actually showed some temperament. "That's an outrageous suggestion."

"Maybe, but I think we should all keep an eye on each other and report any suspicious behaviour to the police."

My guffaw attracting several hard stares.

Eslick scowled. "That won't be necessary, because nobody here had anything to do with Terry's death."

Wayne shrugged innocently. "I'm not accusing anyone. I've got no idea who killed him." He scanned the room. "I just think we should be realistic."

Eslick gave him a death-ray stare. "Wayne, thanks for your contribution. I think we should move on."

Wayne shrugged. "Just trying to help."

"On a more practical note, I spoke to the Floor Clerk this afternoon. He indicated that Terry was five months behind with his floor fees."

More gasps. I wondered if Terry was in serious financial trouble when he died, or just hopeless at organising his finances, like many barristers. The latter seemed more likely.

Someone blurted out: "Five months?"

"Yes. The Floor Clerk said he was chasing Terry for the money and Terry promised to pay, but he died in arrears."

Someone to my right said: "Terry's room will have to be sold. The floor committee shouldn't approve a purchaser joining the floor until the fees have been paid."

Eslick said: "I'm sure it won't."

Vince Turner, a criminal barrister piped up. "Does anybody know what's going to happen to his law reports? Is Doris going to sell them?"

Even Eslick looked slightly aghast, partly because he had no interest in acquiring Terry's law reports. "I don't know. I'm sure you'll find out in due course." He shifted slightly on his feet. "Umm, I'm now the most senior silk on the floor, so I suppose I should become Head of Chambers, unless anyone objects."

Eslick was entitled to the position and obviously wanted it. Nobody demurred.

"Right then, I suppose that concludes our business. Thank you all very much."

As everyone trooped out, I sidled up to Wayne Chisholm. "The killer's in our midst, is he?"

A hooded stare. "I didn't say that—just raised the possibility."

"Really? And who's on your list of suspects?"

A gap-toothed grin. "Several people."

"Who?"

"You for one."

"Thanks—thanks a lot."

"Take it as a compliment. Most of these buggers wouldn't have the balls. Anyway, I'll keep you posted."

"Do that."

That evening, when I got home, I telephoned Doris. Her sister, Beth, answered and said Doris was asleep.

"How's she going?"

"OK. She spent most of this afternoon talking to the police. That left her exhausted. Afterward, she just climbed into bed."

"OK. Tell her I called. I'll call again tomorrow."

"Sure."

I usually sleep well, even before a major hearing. But that night I tossed and turned for several hours, wondering if Detective Sergeant Malloy really suspected me. Too bad I had a perfectly good alibi that I couldn't use. Except for when I was married, I'd always kept the world at an arm's length. Now it was much too close.

## Chapter 10



During his prime—which lasted more than three decades—my father was widely regarded as the best commercial barrister in Australia. Big law firms briefed him to advise major corporations on how to slip out of contracts, slide through legislative loopholes or sue their competitors. Big-wig chairmen and high-flying chief executives trooped into his chambers to receive his pearls of legal wisdom.

He also appeared in massive commercial hearings which ran for months and involved platoons of lawyers and squads of witnesses. Photocopiers worked day and night producing the exhibit folders. However, despite the complexity of those hearings, he never lost his bearings. He had a genius for isolating the key facts and legal arguments that would win the case, and bravely focusing on them. His oral submissions were concise and logical; his cross-examinations calm and deadly—witnesses were gently led up to the edge of a cliff and then pushed off.

Because he was generally regarded as the best barrister in his field, he was able to charge huge sums which, in turn, reinforced the general belief he was the best in his field.

During the second half of his career, he was offered many high judicial appointments, but declined them all, loving his status at the Bar and the cut-and-thrust of advocacy too much. But at seventy, still in peak form, he had a heart attack while cross-examining a forensic accountant in the Federal Court. He groaned, sat down and calmly told the judge that he needed an ambulance.

The surgeons kept him alive and did lots of re-plumbing, but he knew his glory days were over. My mother had died ten years earlier. So he retired alone to his small farm near Bowral, where a part-time farmhand helped him look after an orchard and about a dozen cattle that were really pets. It was a sleepy existence for a man who once made heads turn as he paraded along Phillip Street into the Supreme Court Building. But he seemed content.

During my childhood, he was a tough and demanding father, rarely bestowing praise or affection. But I admired him greatly and hungered for his approval. That was why I became a barrister and spent my first few years orbiting around him. He recommended me to solicitors and insisted they briefed me as his junior. I often appeared with him in Court, passing him documents or making sure his water glass was full, getting paid a lot for doing very little.

However, I grew tired of living in his shadow and wanted to voyage out on my own. I drifted into personal injuries litigation, where he had never practiced and his name meant little. To my surprise, I quickly developed a big practice and confidence in myself. I was soon typecast and couldn't go back.

My father acted as if I'd joined a band of gypsies, which was almost true. "Personal injuries? Not much law there."

He was right. Personal injuries hearings are usually bare-knuckle brawls over the facts that rarely turn on sophisticated legal arguments.

I said: "True. But at least my cases are about real people and real money."

He laughed. "I'm not sure that's a plus."

On Tuesday morning, instead of going to work and listening to everyone talk about Terry, I phoned my father and asked if he wanted me to visit.

He sounded surprised. "Today?"

"Yes."

"Sure, come up. You can tell me about Terry Riley's death."

"You've heard about that?"

"Of course. You know, in my day, barristers didn't get murdered. That was regarded as unspeakably poor form. Times have obviously changed, and not for the better."

I laughed. "Obviously. I'll fill you in when I get there."

My father lived in a colonial bungalow with a wide verandah sitting on the brow of a hill. At the bottom of the slope were a small apple orchard and a well-watered paddock with his beloved cattle. A narrow creek marked the far boundary of his farm.

As I drove up the gravel driveway, he emerged from the house. Once tall and robust, he was now gaunt and slow moving, though his eyes were still steady and clear.

He shook my hand and slapped me on the back with surprising warmth. "Welcome, welcome. How are you?"

"A bit shook up. I knew Terry well. In fact, I was appearing as his junior when he got killed."

"Really? Sit down and tell me all."

We sat on a couple of deck chairs overlooking the farm and I told him what little I knew about Terry's death, without mentioning my affair with Doris.

He said: "You've got no idea who killed him?"

Why mention the vague suspicions I'd formed? "No, Terry was a pretty harmless guy."

He crossed his arms and looked rueful. "You know, I only met him a couple of times—and shouldn't speak ill of the dead—but he was probably the last of the actor-barristers. When I joined the Bar, 50 years ago, there were lots of fruity orators. Now they're all gone. Everybody sounds like a clerk. Rather sad, really."

I giggle. "I think you're right: he was the last of his breed."

"Anyway, enough of that. Tell me: how's young Robert? When are you going to bring him up here? That boy's got brains. He'll do well at the Bar."

"Dad, he doesn't want to go to the Bar."

"You're kidding? What does he want to do?"

"He's thinking about becoming an engineer."

"Jesus, no Kennedy has ever had a practical or useful job. He's got to be stopped. Bring him up here and I'll talk him around."

A frown. "Dad, he doesn't need any pressure from you."

A cracked smile. "OK, OK. But bring him up, anyway."

"I will."

In Bowral, I'd bought a cooked chicken and some salad. We ate at a table on the verandah, waving away flies.

He refilled my wine glass. "How's business?" He spoke casually, the way he did when cross-examining a witness, just before he sank his venomous fangs into the poor bastard.

I wanted to tell him as little as possible about my practice because, with no outlet left for his own ambition, he liked to channel it through me, and I didn't like the pressure. I also sense that, while I'd risen high enough as a barrister to give him few complaints, I hadn't fulfilled his expectations.

I said: "Oh, I'm fairly busy. Not starving."

"Good." He leaned forward and I could almost see the words travelling to his tongue: "You going to apply for silk this year?"

The deadline for submitting applications to the Bar Association for appointment as senior counsel was four weeks away. When I was a baby barrister, I often dreamed about becoming a silk. Now, I was a lot less enthusiastic. That was partly because I'd grown to distrust the whole selection process, which was neither subtle nor just. It involved five senior barristers gathering together and, after carefully considering the merits of each applicant, appointing their friends. Certainly, I knew many silks I wouldn't brief to appear in the Local Court, and plenty of junior counsel I'd brief to defend my liberty.

I'd also seen lots of barristers turn their quest for silk into an unhealthy obsession, so that, every time they were rejected, bits of their self-respect flaked off. Some became quite unhinged. Why risk that sort of psychic damage? I had a good practice. If I took silk, the quality of the briefs I received would not improve much. I had better things to do with my life.

However, the main reason I was ambivalent about applying for silk was the delight my father would experience if I succeeded. I was loath to reward him for all the pressure he'd put me under over the years. While our relationship had improved a lot over recent times, we had yet to sign a final truce.

I said: "Why do you ask?"

He shrugged. "You've got a good reputation, a big practice. Maybe it's time you applied."

I shrugged. "Maybe. But I've only been at the Bar for 15 years. It's a bit early."

"Rubbish. Plenty have got it earlier than that."

"True. And plenty haven't. In fact, plenty haven't got it at all."

"Surely, you're not worried about being rejected. If you are, I've still got good contacts. I can make a few calls."

Now he'd really gone too far. I frowned and spoke sharply. "No. Don't get involved."

"You sure?"

"Yes."

"OK," he said reluctantly. "When you work out it's a dirty world, let me know."

"I've already worked that out. I just don't want to make it worse."

He smiled ruefully. "I've annoyed you, haven't I?"

"A little."

"Sorry, I shouldn't interfere. I know that. But you can't teach an old dog new tricks."

His hint of self-awareness surprised me. I smiled and shrugged. "Forget about it."

A shrug. "You know, it's hard to let go. Some nights, I dream that I'm back in Court, cross-examining witnesses—quite brilliantly, in fact. Then I wake up and realise that I've got to go and feed the cattle."

"So you miss it?"

"Of course. But I had a good run—a great run. When you're in the thick of the action, you think the system can't survive without you. Then you retire and it rolls on, remorselessly, without even the slightest hiccup, and all the words you've

spouted in Court dissolve into nothing. I can't even say I really helped my clients, because most were faceless corporations run by faceless executives."

It's certainly true that barristers don't get to drive past a place and say: 'I built that'. But maybe living on his own gave him too much time for gloomy reflection. I said: "You know, you could move back to the city and be closer to your kids."

"No, I enjoy it out here—I really do. It's serene and close to nature."

We spent the rest of lunch gossiping about my two sisters—both school teachers—and their families, and various friends. He also recounted some of his biggest court victories and rated, with surprising generosity, some of the well-known barristers he appeared against. I'd heard him traverse this ground many times before, so I turned my brain down to half-power.

After lunch, we strolled down through the vineyard to the paddock where large hoofed animals ambled about.

I said: "Nice cattle. Bet they'd make juicy steaks."

A scowl. "These cows aren't going anywhere near an abattoir. They've retired, like me." He slapped one on the rump. "Isn't that right, Aristotle?" The cow barely waved its tail.

"Is there any chance they might stampede and trample us?"

He laughed. "Only if I give the command."

"Then I'll behave myself."

We strolled along the creek. "You can stay tonight if you want."

"Can't, I'm afraid. But I'll be back on the weekend."

"With Robert?"

"Do my best."

"Great. I look forward to it."

Just after four o'clock, I headed back to Sydney, reflecting that every time I saw my father, our relationship improved. Yet, we still had issues to resolve and were running out of time.

## Chapter 11

When I reached my desk the next morning, I spread out the *Sydney Morning Herald* and read the news pages. Nothing about Terry. I quickly turned to the sports pages and had just started reading them when Barbara Carmichael bustled into my room. "Got a moment?"

Oh, hell. "What do you want?"

She plopped into an armchair, daring me to eject her. "I've got stuff to tell you."

My pulse quickened. "What?"

She leaned forward eagerly. "You told me to keep my eyes and ears open, right?"

"Yes."

"I've learnt some interesting things."

"Such as?"

"For a start, I was chatting to Dan, the junior clerk - you know, the one with all the pimples..."

"They've all got pimples. But yes, I know him. What did he tell you?"

"That last week—last Thursday—he was strolling past Terry's room and, guess what?"

Her habit of punctuating narratives with questions was truly annoying. "What?"

"The door was closed, but he heard Terry arguing with Phil Milliken. They were yelling at each other."

That quickened my pulse. "He's sure it was them?"

"Yes, he recognised their voices and afterward Milliken left the room looking upset."

"What did they argue about?"

"Dunno. Dan said he couldn't understand what they were saying."

I was surprised, because Milliken's nose had always hovered around Terry's arse. Why had he, all of a sudden, taken exception to the smell?

I said: "That's all Dan knows?"

"Yes."

"You sure? Maybe I should chat with him?"

She looked offended. "Don't worry, that's all he knows."

"OK."

"Interesting info, huh?"

"Yes, very. It's too bad we don't know what they were arguing about. Have you spoken to Rosemary about this?" Rosemary Clarke was Terry's secretary.

"No, she's off today—taken a sickie—which is hardly surprising."

"Though you'll speak to her, won't you, when she turns up?"

"Of course."

"Good."

Barbara bounced excitedly in the armchair and drummed her feet on the floor. "That's not all I've got to report: you told me to keep an eye on the cops..."

"Yes."

"Well, I chatted with one of them."

"Oh? How did that occur?"

"When he came out of Terry's room, I sort of bumped into him and asked if he wanted a cup of coffee."

"Good work, Agent Barbara. What did you learn?"

"Not much. I asked if they had any leads and he said they're stumbling around in the dark."

"I already know that. That's all you talked about?"

She batted her eyelashes. "No. We had a nice chat about his job and stuff like that. You know, he was very sweet. Quite cute, actually."

I smiled. "You mean, you flirted with him?"

She blushed. "Maybe a little. In fact, he invited me out to dinner."

"Oh, and what did you say?"

"I said I was pretty busy, but if I get a chance, I'll give him a call." A faux-innocent smile. "What do you think? Should I call him?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"You've already got a boyfriend."

A grin. "So what? I wasn't planning to invite him along."

None of my business. "Up to you."

"I've done well, haven't I?"

"You mean, as a detective?"

"Yes."

I shrugged. "Actually, I'm a little disappointed. I thought you'd have wrapped the case up by now. When you do, let me know."

She frowned and strolled towards the door. "In the light of your attitude, you'll be lucky if I tell you anything from now on."

When she'd gone, I pondered the argument between Terry and Philip Milliken. I didn't know what sparked it. But one thing was sure: Philip must have been sorely vexed to throw off his usual obsequiousness and argue with Terry. Vexed enough to kill him? Until I had more facts, it was best to keep an open mind.

I spent the rest of the day reading through my backlog of briefs, which were a surprisingly welcome respite from the turmoil around me. At about five o'clock I telephoned Doris at her sister's house.

"Doris here," she said in a bleary voice.

"It's Ben. How do you feel?"

She sighed. "OK, I suppose. Getting better."

"Want me to drop over this evening?"

Her voice brightened. "Yeah, I'd like that. In fact, there are a few things—some important things—I want to tell you."

"OK, be there in an hour."

Almost right on time, I pushed the front buzzer of the bungalow.

Doris opened the door, wearing jeans and a T-shirt, face drawn, hair dishevelled. She managed a wan smile. "Oh Ben, I'm so glad you've come."

I put my hands on her shoulders. "I'm here to help, you know that."

She got teary. "Thanks."

She led me to the living room. "Beth's gone out for the evening, so we're alone."

We sat on the couch, holding hands.

I said: "How're you feeling?"

"Not too bad. My GP gave me some tranquilisers, which help."

"Good. Have you spoken to the police again?"

"Yesterday afternoon. I gave them a formal statement."

"And told them you were with Beth when Terry died?"

"Yes. I mean, I had to, didn't I? I couldn't change my story about that?"

At least our lies dovetailed. "Of course not."

Her face darkened. "But that's not what I wanted to talk about. Something else has happened, something really terrible."

"What?"

"I got a call from Terry's accountant this afternoon. A guy called Fred Beaton, in Crows Nest."

"Yes."

Her face trembled. "He said that when Terry died he was broke—flat broke."

I'd never seen her so upset.

"You serious? No money at all?"

"Not a penny. According to Beaton, even if Terry had sold all his assets he would have still been about \$2 million in debt. He even owed \$1.8 million to the Tax Office. Can you believe that: \$1.8 million?"

"Christ. That's a lot of dosh. He couldn't pay any of it?"

"Not a cent."

"What about your house in Woollahra? Your beach-house? The farm? They must be worth plenty."

She shook her head. "All mortgaged to the hilt. The banks will take them."

I'd planned to ask her why Terry hadn't paid his floor fees for five months. Now I knew. "Where'd all the money go?"

"The accountant said he's still trying to work that out. But he said Terry made some bad investments—really bad investments. Terry also lived well and was paying money to Maureen and their son." She looked a touch embarrassed. "And, umm, I guess I spent a lot. I've always liked shopping."

Terry must have cleared well over a million dollars a year at the Bar. So, even with assistance, it took a big effort to go broke. Still, his financial strife didn't surprise me. Barristers are notoriously spendthrift. Indeed, there's an old adage that they spend their income three times over: first when they're briefed; then when they send out a bill, and lastly when they get paid.

Terry was also a sucker for get-rich-quick schemes. A few years ago, he wanted me to invest in a scheme to re-open a disused gold mine in western NSW, and a year ago he begged me to invest in a tourist resort that was going to be built in Northern Queensland. In both cases, he promised a fat profit and big tax deduction. Both projects sounded too good to be true, and I politely declined. Those decisions now looked very wise, because Terry must have lost a packet.

No wonder he looked so depressed at the Bench & Bar Dinner: he was heading for financial oblivion.

I said: "Just before Terry died, he looked very worried. Now I know why. But you had no idea he was broke?"

"No. He didn't breathe a word. I mean, sometimes he said I was spending too much on clothes and stuff like that—claimed I had a black belt in shopping. But husbands always say that sort of thing, don't they? I never thought he was in financial trouble and didn't really listen."

Terry often complained to me that Doris was a shopaholic, obviously with some justification. Still, I couldn't blame her. Being married to him wasn't easy. She deserved some retail therapy.

Her forehead creased and lips trembled. "God, I feel so guilty."

"Why?"

"My shopping."

"Forget it. I'm sure it was just a drop in the ocean. You didn't ruin him: he did that himself."

Her eyes brightened. "You sure?"

"Yes. And none of that matters now anyway: he's dead and has no debts at all. But I suppose this means you're broke too?"

"Not quite. Terry had a life insurance policy."

"Oh? For how much?"

"About one million. The accountant isn't sure whether he kept paying the premiums. I mean, if he was short of money, he might have stopped. The accountant's looking into that right now."

"Did Terry try to negotiate with the Tax Office?"

"Yes. According to the accountant, he tried to cut a deal, but the Tax Office wasn't interested. It wanted 100 cents in the dollar. So Terry was about to declare himself bankrupt."

For Terry, bankruptcy would have had many horrible consequences. The worst would have been the cancellation of his practising certificate. Until recently, barristers could ignore their tax liabilities, go bankrupt and keep working. Then the media revealed some prominent barristers hadn't paid tax for years. The subsequent public uproar forced the Bar Association to start rubbing out offenders.

So after more than 30 years as a barrister - including 15 as a silk - Terry was about to get the boot. That would have devastated him, because he loved being a silk and loved to swig on the attention he got when appearing in court.

Maybe, getting murdered was a blessing in disguise.

I said: "You know, because Terry couldn't pay his tax, the Bar Association would have rubbed him out."

Her eyes widened. "I hadn't thought of that. I suppose you're right."

"I am. He must have been desperate to get the Tax Office off his back."

"But he couldn't. He was flat broke."

"I know."

She frowned. "You think his tax debts had something to do with his death?"

"It's possible, though I can't see how."

She shrugged. "I can't either."

"Anyway, you'd better get in touch with the insurance company and find out about that policy."

"Sure."

Terry's financial plight was rather depressing. I changed the topic. "Have you spoken to Maureen?"

"Yes. She called a few hours ago. Didn't seem the least bit upset about Terry."

"They had a bitter divorce. Why'd she call?"

"Money, of course. Terry was supposed to make a maintenance payment every month, but was three months behind."

"And she wanted you to cough up?"

"Yeah. I said I didn't have a dime."

"Did she believe you?"

"No. In fact, she got very angry. Accused me of playing games and threatened to take me to court. I just hung up."

"You can't really blame her, I suppose. Nobody likes being taken off the tit. Requires a big adjustment."

"Yes. But that wasn't the end of it: half-an-hour later, I got a call from David."

I'd never met David, but Terry had often moaned that his son was a 25-year-old cokehead who couldn't hold down a job and would probably end up in prison. The kid had already been in rehab twice and survived by sponging off his dad.



Once, over a beer, Terry said miserably: "You know, he blames me for everything that's gone wrong in his life. True, I've been a lousy father: I was never around when he needed me. But I never smacked him and I sent him to a good boarding school."

I said to Doris: "What did he call about?"

"Money, of course. Said his father gave him about a thousand a week and he expected me to keep paying."

"Terry really had some big commitments, didn't he? Everybody had a hand out. What did you tell him?"

"What I told his mother: I don't have a brass razoo."

"How did he react?"

"Called me a bitch; said he'd sue and hung up."

"Mmmm, charming."

"Yes, adorable. You know, I've only met him half-a-dozen times, when he tried to bludge money off Terry. If Terry didn't stump up, he yelled and screamed."

"Terry never liked confrontations. I wonder..."

"What?"

"Where was David when Terry got murdered?"

Her eyes widened. "You don't think?"

"Why not? It's possible." I shrugged. "Though I suppose that's really a matter for the cops."

She stood, looking tired. "Anyway, let's stop talking about all this stuff. Come into the kitchen. I'll make you a cup of tea."

We strolled into the kitchen, where I sat on a high stool and watched her fill a kettle with water. She turned it on, leaned against the bench and sighed. "You know, when I married Terry, my motives weren't great: I didn't love him or anything like that. In fact, I liked you a lot more. But you didn't want me, so I married him. Yet, he was good to me. I mean, he could be annoying and fucking pompous, but he looked after me." Her eyes glistened and chin trembled.

"Yes, he was a good man."

Tears ran down her cheeks. "So, I feel guilty about cheating on him."

Though her guilt was understandable, I didn't plan to mimic it.

I said: "You shouldn't. I mean, you treated him well. You made him happy. That's what really counts. Whenever he talked about you, he always had a big smile on his face. Don't forget that."

That was a flat-out lie, but she brightened considerably. "Did he?"

"Of course."

She sighed. "I still feel guilty."

She stepped forward and buried her head in my chest. I'd heard that grief can unleash the female libido and prayed that didn't occur.

Fortunately, the kettle whistled and she went off to make us tea. While drinking it, we chatted about Terry's funeral, to be held on Friday. The coroner had promised to release the body in time.

Doris said: "Lots of people have rung up to offer their condolences. I even got a call from Justice Sloan. I didn't realise he was so close to Terry."

"He was. What did he say?"

"Just that Terry was a great mate and he'd miss him dreadfully."

No point revealing my faint suspicion that the judge bumped him off. "That was nice."

Soon afterward, I kissed her on the cheek and went home.

## Chapter 12

The next morning, on the ferry to work, I wondered if the Bar Association had known about Terry's enormous tax debt and was sharpening its axe. I'd been a friend of the new president of the association, Derek Tucker, since we attended the Bar Reading Course together. When I reached my desk, I phoned him and asked if he had time for coffee. "I want to chat about Terry Riley."

He laughed. "Then how can I refuse?"

"Good. Five minutes? Usual place?"

"Sure, see you there."

I strolled around to an outdoor café in Macquarie Street where I sat and watched commuters slouch towards their offices, grey-faced, and felt glad I didn't work for a living.

A few minutes later, Derek bounded towards me. A leading silk in the building & construction field, he earned a fortune appearing in hearings about defective structures that lasted forever and probed the outer frontiers of boredom. Despite that, he'd found time to become the President of the Bar Association.

The association was about as relevant to me—and most barristers—as the Government of Uzbekistan. It let people into the profession and sometimes booted them out. Apart from that, it collected fees and provided a well-stocked library with helpful librarians. However, barristers who wanted to play politics—and network hard—could stand for election to the governing Bar Council and try to climb the greasy pole to the presidency. It was a tough climb because, though the barristers involved were only amateur politicians, they backstabbed like professionals.

Derek dropped his spidery frame into a chair and frenetically beckoned a waitress. We both ordered cappuccinos.

I hadn't seen him since he took office a few months ago. "Morning, El Presidente. How's the job? The glamour worn off?"

He sighed. "What glamour? I shouldn't have taken the bloody job. I spend most of my time attending receptions, giving speeches to school kids and lobbying the A-G. My practice has gone to shit. It's costing me a packet."

I felt little sympathy because he was already as rich as Croesus and, after his two-year term, would probably get the standard invitation to become a Supreme Court judge.

I said: "I appreciate your efforts."

A sardonic look. "Then you're the only one." He leaned forward. "Anyway, bad news about Terry, huh?"

"Terrible."

"I've heard that, when he died, he was leading you in a case."

"That's right, before Dick Sloan."

"So, you knew him well?"

"Yes."

"Got any idea who killed him?"

"Afraid not."

"None at all?"

Why burden him with the scattered clues I'd collected so far? He'd just blow them out of proportion and blame the resulting confusion on me. "None, zero."

"Have you spoken to the police?"

"Yes. A Homicide detective sergeant called Malloy visited my chambers for a chat."

"What did you chat about?"

I smiled. "He asked what you've just asked."

"And you told him you know nothing?"

"Yep."

"Did he hint where his investigation's heading?"

I smiled. "Yes - nowhere. I think the cops are sifting through a mole-hill of evidence." I didn't mention that I might be the prime suspect because, like most barristers, Derek didn't believe in the presumption of innocence and was a chronic gossip. He'd put it around that I was a demonic serial killer.

He frowned. "Damn."

"Why are you so interested in Terry fate?"

"Because, when a top silk gets murdered, it reflects badly on the profession." He leaned forward, conspiratorially. "If there's going to be any more bad publicity, I want to be the first to know. Forewarned is forearmed, understand?"

A politician to his fingertips.

"I understand."

"So, if you hear anything interesting about his death, you'll tell me right?"

"Of course." I leaned back and crossed my arms. "In fact, I've heard one interesting thing about Terry, which might have something to do with his death."

"What?"

"When he died, he was in big financial strife: owed the Tax Commissioner almost two million and couldn't pay a cent. Did you know that?"

Derek smiled. "Yes."

"Really? How?"

"The Tax Office and the Bar Association have a protocol. They're supposed to tell us when a barrister hasn't paid his tax so we can take disciplinary action. They notified us about Terry four months ago."

"What did you guys do?"

"We wrote a 'please explain' letter."

"Did Terry respond?"

"Yes, a couple of weeks ago he wrote back that he had a temporary cash-flow problem, and would soon pay the debt in full."

"Then he died?"

"Yes."

"And, so far as you're aware, he never stumped up the dosh?"

"Correct."

"If he didn't pay his tax debt, you guys would have rubbed him out, right?"

Derek looked surprised at my naivety. "Of course. We'd have had no choice. We couldn't let a big silk like Terry off the hook. There'd have been public outrage. In fact, my term in office would have been permanently tarnished."

"Maybe you could have suspended him for a year or two, and then let him back in?"

"Nope. We'd have given his career a big green needle."

Terry really had sliced his career into the deep rough.

I said: "That would have destroyed old Terry. What if he managed to pay the tax man? What would you have done?"

"That would have changed everything, of course. We'd have told him to sin no more and sent him on his way."

"You mean, he'd have kept his practising certificate?"

"Of course, if he dodged the other bullet heading his way."

"What bullet?"

"One of his former clients recently lodged a complaint with the Legal Services Commissioner."

"What sort of complaint?"

"Oh, the usual: claimed Terry badgered him to settle for too little."

During settlement negotiations, the interests of a plaintiff and his barrister often diverge. The plaintiff is often greedy and overconfident, and demands top dollar; the barrister is usually acting on a no-win/no-fee basis. So, once the plaintiff has been offered enough to pay his legal costs, the barrister has a big incentive to switch sides and recommend settlement. Then the client wakes up the next morning and decides the barrister he loved and respected was, in fact, a dirty rat who sold him down the river, and complains to the Legal Services Commissioner.

I certainly wasn't surprised a client had complained about Terry, who was known as a "pioneer" because he was an early settler.

I said: "How strong was the complaint?"

Derek shrugged. "Don't know. It was still being considered when Terry died. But I'd be surprised if the commissioner found any professional misconduct. You know how hard it is to review settlements: the barrister says he made a judgement call and it's bloody hard to second-guess him."

"Have the police interviewed the former client?"

"Don't know. I expect they'll have a chat."

The waitress put our coffees on the table. Derek poured some sugar into his and stirred vigorously. He took a sip and stared at me. "How's your practice?"

"No complaints: briefs keep turning up; clients keep paying. I'm satisfied."

"Good, because applications for silk close in about four weeks' time. Did you know that?"

I sat up. "I saw the circular."

"You going to apply?"

"No."

"Why not? You've been at the bar for about 15 years; you've got a good reputation and plenty of clients. You should."

I didn't intend to apply because I didn't like the process, wasn't sure I'd succeed and, perhaps most importantly, didn't want to be a vehicle for my father's ambition. "Maybe, but I don't enter beauty contests."

"We're a bit more thorough than that."

"Bullshit. Five silk, most of whom I hardly know, get together and decide whether I'm good at my job. I don't need that: life is too short."

"You mean, you're afraid of getting turned down?"

"Of course."

He leaned forward. "What if someone on the committee—someone important—promised to support your application?"

I hid a shiver of excitement. "What do you mean?"

"I'll be chairman and I'll speak up for you. That should do the trick."

Because the rest of the committee would fall into line behind him, he was effectively offering me silk. I wouldn't have to risk damage to my ego. Of course, I hated having the prize slipped to me under the table and didn't want to reward my father. However, a surge of excitement swept those thoughts aside. I imagined myself parading along Phillip Street in a silk gown and ceremonial full bottom wig.

Still, I couldn't bring myself to accept his offer, yet. "Thanks, I'll give it some thought."

He looked surprised. "You mean you might not apply?"

"I'll think about it."

He leaned forward. "You deserve silk. That's obvious. Put your name forward."

"Look, I'll probably throw my hat in the ring, but I want to think about it first."

He looked perplexed. "What's the big issue?"

I smiled. "For a start, I'm not sure that becoming a silk will make me a better person."

He cackled. "I can guarantee it won't." He shrugged. "Anyway, it's your call."

We gossiped for a few minutes about some other recent scandals at the Bar. Then I paid the bill and we headed back to our respective chambers.

As I got into a lift, I wondered why Derek had encouraged me to apply for silk. Did he really think I deserved it? Was he obeying the Old Mates Act? Or did he want to give me an incentive to keep him informed about Terry's death? And if I didn't keep him informed, what would happen? Would he withdraw his support?

Anyway, I still had four weeks to agonise over what to do. Then, after exploring every nook and cranny of my conscience and carefully weighing all the issues, I would probably surrender to my ambition and apply for silk.

Upstairs, Denise held out some mail. "For you. I can feel a staple inside."

The classic sign of a cheque. "Good, then I might be able to pay you this week."

"You'd better. You seem happy?"

"Why?"

"Oh, you're whistling you whistle when you're happy."

"I do? What am I whistling?"

"Can't tell. You're pretty flat. What's going on?"

"Oh, I've been told I can go to the front of the queue."

"What queue?"

"I can't tell you. It's a secret."

She frowned. "Piss off."

I continued on to my room, still whistling a tune I couldn't recognise.

## Chapter 13

I'd arranged to dine with Yvonne that evening at a French restaurant in Milsons Point. I arrived first and sat pondering her agenda. Did she want to reheat our failed marriage? And if so, did I want to be the new-old thing in her life? Certainly, whenever I saw her my heart skipped a beat. But I still resented the way she left me for Rex Marston and couldn't forget how pushy and selfish she was during our marriage. Anyway, surely we could discuss our agendas like mature adults. Or was my greatest illusion that we had no illusions?

She arrived a half-hour late, wearing a simple black dress with a blue bolero jacket and the earrings I gave her on our honeymoon. Her hair looked freshly permed. She seemed to be sending me a message. Now I had to work out what it was.

I kissed her cheek. "You look lovely."

"Thanks." She sat and sighed. "Phew, sorry I'm late: had to pop home and change."

"How was your day?"

"A bugger."

"Why?"

"I had to listen to two idiots make their final submissions. After a two-week hearing neither knew what the case was really about. No idea."

"You enlightened them?"

She smiled. "I tried, then gave up. They can find out when they read my judgment."

"Anyone I know?"

"Yes. In fact, they're both on your floor."

"Who? Who?"

She smiled. "I'd better not say."

A half-serious frown. "Come on, you can't do this to me."

A small grin. "I'm afraid I must." She sipped some water. "Anyway, you must still be in shock."

"About Terry?"

"Yes. My God, murdered. I was going to give you a call, but decided you'd have enough on your plate. Any idea who did it?"

"Nope."

"You were appearing together?"

"Yes, before Dick Sloan. The hearing's been adjourned for a week. Then I'll run it."

"Did his death have anything to do with the case?"

I hadn't even considered that possibility. "Can't see how. I mean, it's just a garden-variety personal injuries action—a sad waste of Dick Sloan's intellectual firepower."

She fingered her serviette. "God, Doris must be in hell. Have you spoken to her?"

"Yes."

"How is she?"

"Shocked, of course. She found the body."

"Poor woman. You know, I heard that, at one stage, you two were, umm, seeing each other."

I shivered. What did "at one stage" mean? Did she know or suspect I was still seeing Doris when Terry got knifed? Play it cool. "Yes, before she got married, though we were never serious."

"You mean *you* were never serious?"

"I suppose so."

"Because you're never serious about anything, are you?"

If she was trying to build a bridge between us, she was going about it the wrong way. I pushed back. "That's not true. I was serious about our marriage until you left me."

She frowned and sighed. "OK, I'm sorry. Not fair. I've had a long day. You seeing anyone right now?"

"Nope."

She looked dubious. "Really?"

"Yes, really."

A female waiter took our orders. Yvonne leaned forward. "I'm glad we're having dinner together, I really am."

"Why?"

"Because, in your annoying way, you're still the most interesting man I know."

"Then why'd you leave me?"

She shrugged. "I was young and restless. For some crazy reason, I thought Rex would make me happier."

She also thought Rex would help her career. And once he'd done that, he became surplus to requirements. Long-dormant resentment bubbled up. "So what went wrong with him?"

"When I first met him, I thought he was a decisive, take-charge kind of guy. Eventually, I found he was a cold, manipulative control freak."

"So, right now, you're not seeing anyone?"

A sigh. "How could I meet someone? I'm too busy working and looking after Robert. About the only adults I meet are other judges, and they're all married."

The food arrived. We reminisced about the good times in our marriage and laughed a lot. She obviously had something on her mind, and I waited patiently for it to land on the table.

She said: "How's your practice going?"

I shrugged. "I'm keeping the wolf from the door."

"And that's enough?"

"Of course."

A slight frown. "You've never been serious about your career, have you?"

"Yes, I have. I've just never been serious about the Bar."

"Well, it's time you got serious about both."

I pushed away my plate. "How?"

"For a start, you should apply for silk this year."

Now I knew why she organised this dinner. I shrugged. "That's an option."

"Don't be obtuse. You should apply."

I raised my eyebrows. "Really? You know, I had coffee with Derek Tucker this morning and he said the same thing. In fact, he said he'll support my application."

A nervous smile. "Wow, that's great news. With him in your corner, you're a certainty."

I crossed my arms and grinned. "You've talked to him, haven't you?"

She glanced away. "Of course not."

I leaned forward. "Yes you have. In fact, you put the idea in his head?"

"I didn't."

"Don't lie."

She blushed. "OK, OK, I did. I bumped into him last week and put in a good word. What's wrong with that?"

Why was she now showing such a big interest in my career? Trying to expunge her guilt over leaving me? Trying to make me a more attractive companion? Wanting to ensure that Robert's father was a silk? However deeply I dug into her mind, I'd probably never find the secret chamber. Only one thing was certain: her intervention increased my resistance, as she should have expected.

I said: "Nothing, I suppose."

"Good. So you'll apply?"

I smiled. "I'll think about it."

A frown. "What's the problem?"

"I don't like having prizes slipped to me under the table."

She shook her head and grimaced. "God, you're a difficult bastard, you really are. I hate to disappoint you, but this is how the world works. You deserve silk. We both know that. You should apply."

I rather enjoyed annoying her. "If I honestly deserve silk, I should get it honestly."

"Unless you're prodded, you'll never apply."

I shrugged. "So be it."

She leaned forward and stared hard. "This is about your father, isn't it? You don't want to please him. You two still haven't sorted out the shit between you."

That insight struck hard. "I'm not that complex."

"Yes you are." She grimaced. "God you piss me off. You really do. So does your father, come to think of it. And what about Robert: you want him to be proud of you, don't you?"

"You mean, he isn't right now?"

"Of course he is. But he'll be impressed."

She obviously thought that, if I took silk, it would encourage Robert to become a barrister. Poor kid didn't have a chance.

I said: "The only way I can impress him is by giving him a new smart phone. Anyway, he wants to be an engineer."

"He's still not sure about that."

"I wonder why."

She saw I'd tumbled to her game and frowned. "You're bloody incorrigible."



For the rest of the meal, she was polite, though obviously annoyed with me. It felt like old times. Afterward, we strolled around to her car, and she said: "You'll pick up Robert on Saturday morning?"

"Of course. I'll take him up to Bowral, to see Dad."

"Good. He'll enjoy that. I think he's the only person in this family who isn't scared of your father."

"Give him time. Should I pick him up at nine?"

"He won't even be awake. Make it ten."

"OK."

She showed me her cheek. I kissed it and headed for my car with a lot on my mind. A week ago, I was cruising through placid waters with a full sail. Now Terry was dead, and I had to decide what sort of relationships I wanted with my father and my ex-wife, and whether I wanted silk. Too bad I'd got out of the habit of making tough personal decisions.

## Chapter 14

I sat in my room with a solicitor, Geoff O'Brien, and his client, Olga Mackay. Geoff was in his mid-sixties, thin and bald. Olga was in her mid-forties and slightly overweight. Her most notable features were a Chinese ideogram tattooed on her bare shoulder—I dared not ask what it meant—and a heavy orthopaedic neck brace that explained her permanent frown.

I put my elbows on my desk. "Alright, Olga, tell me how you broke your neck."

She grimaced. "I belong to the Church of the Risen Lord. I bet you haven't heard of it. It's a revivalist church, in Lidcombe. Anyway, at the Sunday service, Reverend Teague offers to heal the sick and lame."

"How?"

"He touches them on the forehead and tells the Devil to leave. Then they fall back into the arms of a helper."

"OK. And how did you break your neck?"

"I wanted him to cure my shingles. But, when he touched me on the forehead and I fell backwards, nobody caught me. I hit the ground with a big thump. That's how I broke my neck. Now I can't work, can't sleep, can't look after my kids and I can't have sex, though I've got a horny husband who still wants sex all the time."

"And you've still got shingles?"

"Big time."

"You have my sympathy. How did Reverend Teague react when you got hurt?"

"He told everyone it was the Devil's work."

I turned to my instructing solicitor. "Does the church have personal injury insurance?"

"Yes."

I turned back to Olga. "Then leave this to us. If the good Reverend gets in a witness box and blames the Devil, I'll send him straight to hell."

A tense smiled. "Good."

We all shook hands and I escorted them to the lifts. Back at my desk, I was about to open a new brief when I sensed a presence. Barbara stood a metre from my desk, looking excited as usual. Was that a chronic condition? Why didn't I hear her enter?

"Hi," I said.

"I've spoken to her."

"Who?"

"Rosemary," she said, obviously referring to Terry's secretary, Rosemary Clarke. "Don't you remember—you told me to ask her about the argument between Terry and Philip, just before Terry died?"

"Yes, of course. What did she say?"

"Said she knew nothing about it: must have been away from her desk at the time."

"You believe her?"

"Yeah. We get on well: she wouldn't lie to me, I don't think."

I sighed. "Oh well, too bad. Did she know why they might have been yelling at each other?"

"Nope. She sounded surprised—said Philip always sucked up to Terry."

"Mmm. Despite that, I'd love to know what Philip was doing on Sunday afternoon when Terry was murdered."

She bit her lip. "I've chatted to Phillip's wife a few times, when she drops in. If I get a chance, I'll ask her."

"OK, but be discreet."

"Of course." She hesitated. "But I did get one good snippet of gossip from Rosemary."

"What?"

"She said Terry was having an affair."

"Christ. You're kidding?"

"No."

"Who with?"

Denise crossed her arms and smiled triumphantly. "If I tell you, you won't believe me."

Exasperating woman. "Just tell me, OK."

Denise's smile broadened. "Sure, Joan Mantel."

My goodness, Joan, the masculine half of the floor's 'power couple'. "You're joking?"

"No. Rosemary's sure they were bonking."

"Why?"

"Because one afternoon she walked into Terry's room and found them shagging on the carpet, umm, doggie style."

I giggled. "She sure about that? Maybe Joan lost an earring."

"She's sure."

"Who was behind?"

She laughed. "I didn't ask."

"Jesus. Terry, on the floor, on his knees, pumping away—I thought he was more *debonair* than that."

She cackled. "Obviously not."

Though Terry was once a notorious womaniser, I'd assumed that age and marriage had slowed him down. Doris certainly thought he'd lost interest in sex. However, he obviously only lost interest in her.

Joan's interlude with Terry on the carpet was no surprise. Despite her wedding ring, she flirted with every silk who crossed her path to boost her career. In fact, on reflection, she'd been Terry's junior several times during the last six months. It seemed his clients had unknowingly subsidised his sex life.

I said: "Why did Rosemary tell you this?"

"Why not? Terry's dead. She doesn't have to be discreet."

"I guess so. You know, I thought Terry was a faithful husband."

"Hah. You should have asked me. I could have set you straight."

"What do you mean?"

"He once tried to grope me."

"You're joking?"

"No. About six months ago, I was in the kitchen making tea when he came in. Told me I looked very beautiful and brushed up against me."

"Yuk. What did you do?"

"Elbowed him aside and left."

"You should have told me."

She shrugged. "What would you have done? Given him a good thrashing?"

"Umm, probably not."

"If I told you about all the barristers who've hit on me, I'd be here all day."

"You serious?"

"Yes. Most of you are sleazy, sleazy bastards."

"I'm not."

She crossed her arms and smiled wryly. "You? The jury's still out on you."

Better than a guilty verdict, I suppose. "Thanks, I think. I suppose Geoff doesn't know about his wife's affair?"

A contemptuous look. "That little weasel? Head too far up people's arses to know what day it is. And even if he knew, he couldn't complain."

"Why not?"

"He's no better. Haven't you noticed the cute little junior solicitors who troop into his room for conferences and always leave smiling? Silly little poppets think that, because he's a barrister, he's some sort of knight in shining armour."

"Jesus. This place is a cesspit."

"What did you expect with so many barristers around?"

I shrugged. "See your point. Geoff and Joan got any kids?"

"No. She wants some, but he's hung out a 'not ready' sign, which is good, because they really shouldn't breed."

"Ouch. Bitchy."

She smiled. "You should see me on a bad day."

Barbara left and I pondering her revelations. On the morning after Terry was murdered, I caught Geoff Mantel rummaging through Terry's desk. When challenged, he lamely claimed to be looking for a book. Soon afterward, Joan strolled into my room and pumped me for information about the police investigation. And now I'd just found out Joan was bonking Terry.

Were all of those events connected? No idea. But I was very curious to find out.

## Chapter 15

For almost a decade, I'd had a boozy lunch once a month with about a dozen other personal injuries barristers. The next morning, I saw in my diary that we'd arranged to congregate at a restaurant in the Botanical Gardens. My mood improved and I steadily worked my way through a couple of neglected briefs. Then, just after noon, I strolled out to Denise, flipping through a fashion magazine and nibbling on a celery stick.

I said: "Busy?"

Raised eyebrow. "Frantic."

"Good. If anyone calls, I've gone to a seminar."

"You mean, you're lunching with the boys?"

"Yeah."

She rolled her eyes. "So you're finished for the day?"

"No, it's just lunch."

"Maybe. But you always come back pissed and sit in your room listening to loud music."

I tried to look affronted. "Perhaps, but not this time."

"Rubbish. What do you lot talk about anyway?"

I smiled. "We form small groups and discuss important issues in jurisprudence."

She snorted. "Hah. Like what?"

"Like when does the word 'judgment' have an extra 'e'?"

She laughed. "Bullshit. You just gossip and bitch, don't you? Gossip and bitch."

She'd nailed us good. I frowned. "Why do I pay for this abuse?"

"You don't pay much. And go easy on the dessert, huh?" She returned to her magazine.

Surely, she should reserve that sort of comment for her husband. I was obviously too indulgent a boss. Still, I sucked in my gut as I strolled off.

I headed down Macquarie Street and through the Botanical Gardens to the restaurant, nestled amid giant fig trees. Most of my colleagues were already present, drinking hard. I sat and immediately became the centre of attention because Terry belonged to my chambers.

Dave Smythe, sitting next to me, was a veteran silk with a mottled nose spread across his face. "Bad news about Terry, Ben—bad, bad. I couldn't believe it. Any idea who dun' it?"

No point revealing the threads of coincidence, slivers of fact and half-baked theories I'd assembled. This table was the equivalent of a parish pump. In no time, mangled versions of what I said would reach all four corners of the Bar.

"Afraid not."

Dave raised his glass. "I must admit, he wasn't the greatest lawyer I ever met. But he was always pleasant, and I can't say that about many opponents."

Others raised their glasses. "Here, here."

The ensuing speculation about who killed Terry fluctuated between a burglar, a mistress, a disgruntled client and home-invaders. The scarcity of facts gave wing to inspiration.

As food started to arrive, Terry was forgotten and there was a competition to find out who'd had the craziest client. Greg Hilderbrand led for a while. He once had a client who demanded an expedited hearing of his claim because he believed that a "galactic re-alignment" would occur in a few weeks during which the earth would disappear into a black hole. However, Dexter Austin trumped him with a client who claimed that, after hitting her head in a car accident, she lost her paranormal powers. She wanted compensation because she couldn't read other peoples' minds anymore. Dexter told us: "I couldn't make her understand that she really shouldn't have been doing that in the first place."

However, Barry Guevara won the competition with a client who claimed he was abducted by aliens and taken to the far side of the galaxy. The client wanted to sue them for false imprisonment. However, when Barry asked for their names and addresses, his client said: "I can't tell you, because I didn't understand their language—it was sorta squeaky—and planets all look alike to me. But it had oxygen—must have, because I could breathe."

Next, there was a competition to name the worst High Court judge. The debate got quite heated, because there were so many strong contenders.

Just after three o'clock, I realised that if I didn't leave soon I'd still be there when the most indomitable lunchers ordered dinner. I rose unsteadily and said I had to see a client.

Greg Hilderbrand said he'd stroll back with me.

We both left money on the table and lurched back up through the Botanical Gardens. The stiff sea-breeze was heavily scented with manure and mulch.

Greg had chubby features, wild grey hair and wild blue eyes. He was a happy warrior inside court and a trouble-maker outside it. After years of womanising, he'd recently married his secretary, a step he now regretted because she kept her job and watched him like a hawk. "I'm now under 24-hour surveillance," he complained. "I'm frightened to tell myself that another woman is attractive."

He said: "You know, I appeared against Terry a couple of times."

"What did you think of him?"

"Both times he button-holed me before the hearing and said my clients had absolutely no case and were wasting everybody's time. And both times I tore him a new asshole, because his clients had no case. But you know the worst thing?"

"What?"

"I really think he believed he was going to crush me."

"That sounds like Terry."

"And, in court, he kept forgetting the names of his clients and spouted total bullshit."

"That's because he wasn't very good at thinking and talking at the same time."

"So, you don't know who dun him in?"

"Nope, but I've gleaned some interesting information."

"Like what?"

Like most barristers, Greg was a chronic gossip. Confiding in him was not smart. But I was full of booze and wanted to unburden myself. "For a start, when he died, he was flat broke."

"You're kidding?"

"Nope." I told him about Terry's enormous tax debt and how the Bar Association was about to tear up his practising certificate.

"I bet they'd have torn it up. If those sanctimonious bastards could get away with it, they'd have stuck his head on a pike and paraded it around Phillip Street. How'd the silly bastard get into that much trouble?"

"Thought he was a canny businessman when he wasn't. His wife and ex-wife also had expensive tastes."

"Hah. Show me a chick who doesn't. Did his death have anything to do with his money trouble?"

"No idea. But that's not the only gossip I've heard."

Raised eyebrows. "Pray tell."

I described how Terry argued with Justice Sloan at the Bench & Bar Dinner.

Greg's eyes widened. "Shit. What was it about?"

"Dunno."

"Why not?"

"They kept their voices down."

"Are you sure they were arguing?"

"Absolutely. Scowls. Frowns. Finger pointing. If they had swords there'd have been a duel. They were close mates - they were even prefects together at Riverview—and Terry was appearing before Sloan, so whatever made them fall out had to be serious."

Greg shrugged. "Not necessarily. I mean, if you can't fight with your friends, why have 'em?" A frown. "You're not suggesting, are you, that the Honourable Justice Richard Sloan murdered Terry?"

I shrugged. "He's a candidate."

"He's a Supreme Court judge."

I smiled. "So what? We're all just primates pretending to be civilised. We just need the right provocation."

A shrug. "You're probably right, and he's definitely a miserable prick."

"You know him?"

"A bit. He was a member of my floor before he went to the bench. Unpleasant dickhead, even before his wife died."

That tugged a mental chord. "When did that happen?"

"Don't you remember? About five years ago, in a car accident."

I vaguely recalled reading about it in a newspaper. "Yes, but I've forgotten the details."

"He was driving her home from a dinner party: the car left the road and hit a telegraph pole. She died almost instantly. He walked away with hardly a scratch."

"What caused the crash?"

"He claimed he swerved to miss an oncoming car."

"Did he?"

A shrug. "The cops didn't press charges. But, even if it wasn't his fault, that's a bloody heavy burden to lug around, even for an arsehole. I bet his kids weren't impressed."

"He's got some?"

"Yep, three. In fact, his son's just arrived at the Bar. He's on my floor, being cuddled and caressed by his dad's old mates. Before you know it, he'll be one of the Bar's hereditary silk."

We strolled out onto Macquarie Street and headed up towards Parliament House.

Gary gave me a sideways look. "You know, applications for silk close soon. You gonna apply?"

"I'm toying with the idea." Best not to mention I'd been offered an inside run and would probably take it.

Greg frowned. "Really? You mean, you want to strut around and pretend you're a higher being? I thought you were better than that."

I grinned. "So did I, but I was obviously fooling myself."

Greg had built up a head of steam. "You ask me, they should scrap the whole charade. I mean, why should my professional association create its own home-brand barristers and tell people they're better than me? They should let the market decide who's good."

"You've no right to complain: you've applied before—you're no snowflake."

"That's how I found out it's an unjust system. I got knocked back twice. Did I tell you what happened the second time?"

He had, but why ruin his pleasure? "No."

"I asked the President of the Bar Council, Des Riordan, why I didn't get silk. He said I'd applied a bit early, and if I waited a couple of years I'd have a much better chance."

"What did you say?"

"I said: 'In a couple of years, you won't be here, so can I have that in writing?'"

"That was bloody diplomatic."

He shrugged. "Bastards weren't going to give it to me anyway. I didn't bother applying after that."

I sighed. Why were most of my friends troublemakers on the fringes of the Bar? "Anyway, if I do take silk, I hope we'll still be mates."

"I'll give it some thought."

I strolled into Thomas Erskine Chambers and tried to slip past the ever-vigilant Denise. She nailed me with an accusing stare. "You're pissed, aren't you?"

I tucked in my shirt. "Definitely not. I drank in moderation."

She frowned. "Crap."

I considered defending myself, but couldn't duel with her when my head was clear. I slouched into my room.

Her prediction that I wouldn't work that afternoon proved correct. While waiting for the fog to lift, I spent an hour with my feet up, listening to Jenufa, while foolishly trying to work out who killed Terry. Since I'd learnt that our floor clerk, Philip Milliken, had a screaming match with Terry, he'd become a prime suspect. Doris Riley had said Terry's funeral service would be held on Friday. So, still tipsy,

I strolled out to the front desk and informed Philip about the service. "Ask the Bar Association to e-mail all barristers about it, and this floor should send a wreath."

Philip said: "Will do. That all?"

Alcohol helped me ask the next question. "You know, umm, I've heard you had a big argument with Terry in his room, last Thursday."

He looked startled and half-shouted. "Who told you that?"

I shrugged. "Oh, it's just something I heard in passing."

His darting eyes betraying him. "It's not true—not true."

"Really? Then what did you talk about last Thursday?"

"Last Thursday? Nothing. Nothing. We didn't talk about anything."

"You didn't talk at all?"

"No, not at all."

He looked so upset I felt sorry for him.

I said: "OK. I obviously got a bum steer."

"Yes, you did."

I strolled away, convinced that Philip argued with Terry a few days before he died and was, for some reason, terribly nervous about that fact. Of course, his nervousness might be due to a reasonable fear that, though he was innocent, I intended to fit him up. Still, I considered informing the police about his yelling match with Terry. However, the police had recently done a good job of terrifying me, and my colleagues wouldn't thank me if I fingered our clerk and heaped more shame upon the floor. Best to let the matter drop, for now.

Back in my room, I spent the rest of the afternoon on the mentally undemanding task of dictating fee notes. By six o'clock the pea-souper in my brain had almost lifted and I headed for home.

I strolled past Denise's empty cubicle and reached the lifts. A lift door opened and Joan Mantel strode out, face scarlet. Her husband, Geoff, trailed behind looking desperate. The power couple had obviously short-circuited.

Joan sailed past me, oblivious.

Geoff said: "Darling, stop, stop. Let's talk."

She yelled. "Leave me alone."

"We can sort this out."

"Forget it."

She stalked into her room and slammed the door.

I got into the lift wondering what sparked their confrontation. Was it just another dreary scene from married life? Or did it have something to do with Terry's murder? The Mantels had been acting very suspiciously recently. With absolutely no consistency, the focus of my suspicion jumped from Phillip Milliken to them. Time to ask them some direct questions. But who should I speak to first? Joan scared me a lot more than Geoff, who as clearly the softer target.

## Chapter 16



The next morning, I arrived at Thomas Erskine Chambers, got out of the lift, strolled over to Geoff Mantel's room and glanced through the doorway. He sat at his desk, reading a brief. I entered and coughed politely.

He looked up. His tired face suggested he'd spent the night in a very turbulent marital bed. "Ben, how are you?"

"Fine, got a moment?"

He leaned back, looking puzzled. "Umm, yeah, though I've got a conference with some clients in about half-an-hour. Got to finish reading this brief."

"I won't be long. In fact, I just want to know one thing."

A slight frown. "What?"

I leaned over his desk. "Why were you looking through Terry's desk on the morning after he was murdered?"

Fear danced in his eyes as if it had the floor to itself; his soft lips formed a perfect circle. "Like I said, I was looking for a book."

Like my father, when cross-examining, I preferring to enter the House of Truth through the back door rather than kick my way in through the front. However, sometimes, there's no point being fancy. "Bullshit."

"Yes I was."

"Look Geoff. I know that's crap for two reasons: first, even you aren't that insensitive; and second, Terry, like most people, didn't keep books in his desk drawers."

Geoff's lower lip trembled and his body seemed to shrink. Did he react like this when a judge yelled at him? Many judges would see that as an open invitation to torture him. He said: "I looked on the shelves as well."

"Rubbish. You weren't looking for a book, were you?"

He petulantly crossed his arms. "Yes I was. And even if I wasn't, it's none of your business."

"Yes it is."

"Why?"

"Because Terry was a friend. So if the cops ask me who's been acting suspiciously, I'll have to mention you."

He looked like a big-game hunter without time to reload. "You won't do that, will you?"

"Yes, I will. I'm sure they'll ask and I'm sure I'll tell."

After a long nervous stare, he shrugged and sighed. "OK. If you really want to know why I was looking through his desk, I'll tell you."

"Please do."

"I was looking because I invested in a scheme Terry recommended."

"What scheme?"

"About a year ago, Terry and a few of his rich buddies were promoting a tourism development near Cairns. They were going to build a big resort and fly in zillions of tourists from Asia. Anyway, Terry claimed investors would get a big profit *and* a big tax deduction. He claimed it couldn't fail. So I invested about \$400,000."

Geoff was obviously telling the truth because Terry, who kidded himself he was a canny businessman, tried to persuade me to invest in the same project. However, I don't like the taste of pie in the sky and turned him down. But Terry could be very persuasive when dealing with a fool, like Geoff.

I said: "Terry mentioned that scheme to me; it sounded too good to be true."

Geoff signed. "It was. The whole project collapsed. I paid over my money and *nothing* happened: there was no development approval, no building work—nothing. Then the Tax Commissioner said the whole thing was a big wheeze and refused to allow any deductions. It was a disaster."

"And your money?"

Geoff frowned. "Disappeared. Evaporated. Poof. The two promoters were a couple of spivs who paid themselves huge management fees—with my money—and did nothing. It was really just theft."

"Did Terry get any of your money?"

"I don't think so. He claimed he was also duped and lost about a million."

"Did you believe him?"

"Yeah, I think they led him up the garden path too. You know, I feel pretty stupid now. But when your Head of Chambers claims an investment scheme's a winner, you believe him. Now I realise he was just a patsy, and I was the junior patsy."

Terry would have lied to himself before he lied to Geoff. That was what made him so dangerous.

"Did you consider suing the promoters?"

"Of course. But there was no point: they'd arranged their affairs so they were judgment proof. So I told Terry that he got me into the stupid mess and he should bail me out. In fact, I even threatened to sue *him*."

"How did he react?"

"Claimed he couldn't help: he was completely wiped out."

"Did you believe that?"

"Of course not. That's why I was looking through his drawers, to see if he—or, at least, his estate—had any dough."

"I'm afraid he was telling the truth. When he died, he was about two mill in the red. In fact, he owed the Tax Commissioner almost that much. If he hadn't died, he would have gone bankrupt."

A grimace. "Shit a brick."

Geoff looked too spineless to murder Terry, though maybe losing all of that money—and having to admit as much to his unforgiving wife—drove him over the edge. I had to know where he was on the afternoon Terry was murdered. My mouth went dry and I stared above his head at volume 196 of the Commonwealth Law Reports. "Look, don't get upset, but where were you on Sunday afternoon?"

He looked surprised. "You mean, when Terry was murdered?"

"Yes."

His usually moist eyes went hard. "None of your fucking business."

"I know, but..."

His voice jumped an octave and his chin wobbled. "None of your fucking business *at all*."

"Maybe, though I'm just curious..."

His face reddened and his backbone rematerialized. "I don't give a damn if you're curious. It's none of your business. I'm not telling you."

"OK. I'll leave you alone."

"Thanks," he snapped.

I headed for the door, wondering whether he faked his rage to hide his guilt. It seemed contrived. But so did all his actions.

As I neared the door, he said sharply, "I wasn't the only person in Terry's room that morning."

I turned back. "What do you mean?"

"There was another guy, a little guy, wearing a funny hat - I think it's called a Trilby. He was there before me."

"How do you know?"

"I saw him leave, just before I went in."

I knew only one Trilby wearer: Bob Meredith. What the hell was he doing in Terry's room that morning? He was instructing Terry in a case, so there could easily be an innocent explanation, though that didn't exclude a very dark one.

I left Geoff and headed for my room. Denise saw me and leaned out of her cubicle. "You've got a visitor."

"Who?"

"Barbara. She's in your room."

"Oh."

Denise's eyebrows laughed hard. "She's been popping into your room quite a bit recently."

I flushed slightly. "My, what big eyes you have."

"True. What's happening?"

"Nothing. We're working on a case together."

"What case?"

Pretending not to hear, I strolled into my room and found Barbara sitting on an armchair. "Hi."

She looked pleased with herself. "Hi. I know where Philip Milliken was on Sunday afternoon?"

I sat behind my desk. "Really?"

"Yeah. His wife, Greta, dropped in yesterday to see him. While she was waiting, I sort of sidled up to her."

I raised my eyebrows. "Sidled?"

"Yeah—I'm good at that. Anyway, I said I thought I saw her shopping in the city on Sunday afternoon. And she said: 'No, you couldn't have, because Philip doesn't let me shop anymore. I was at my mother's place.' So I asked if Philip enjoyed visiting her mother. And she said, 'Oh no, he didn't go: they don't like each other; he stayed home and did some gardening.'" Barbara beamed. "Brilliant, huh?"

"Very. So Philip doesn't have an alibi?"

"Correct. You think he did it?"

"Don't know. Just because he argued with Terry and doesn't have an alibi doesn't make him a murderer. But it does mean a cloud of suspicion is hovering over him."

"You want me to investigate further?"

I'd already developed a long list of murder suspects—Justice Sloan, Geoff Mantel, Bob Meredith, Philip Milliken—and was getting more confused by the minute. That wasn't surprising because, when I read detective novels, I could never follow the plots. So maybe I should stick to what I was reasonably

competent at—appearing in court—and leave sleuthing to the Homicide Squad, which had dozens of trained detectives, criminal databases and crime labs.

However, why stop Barbara poking about? She was obviously obsessed with Terry's death and needed an outlet for her prodigious energy. "Up to you. But be discreet, OK—very discreet; some on this floor might not appreciate your efforts. In fact, commit nothing to paper and trust no-one, except me."

"Why should I trust you?"

"Because I am a man of honour."

She snorted. "I bet. Anyway, leave the snooping to me."

"Maybe you should have been a cop instead of a barrister."

Her intense stare missing the sarcasm. "That has crossed my mind."

## Chapter 17

Terry's funeral service was held on Friday afternoon at St James Church, next to the Supreme Court Building. Judges—including Dick Sloan—barristers and solicitors outnumbered a sprinkling of friends, relatives and former clients. About twenty journalists slouched against the back wall, obviously wondering how God paid for the church and why He didn't give interviews. What was he hiding? Detective Sergeant Malloy and a couple of his colleagues stood near the door playing spot-the-murderer.

Terry lay in a big closed coffin at the end of the aisle, oblivious to the sort of public adulation he loved. He often quipped to me that he wanted to be buried in his wig and gown so that he could do some court work in heaven. However, he wouldn't get that chance, because Doris had decided to sell his court garb instead.

I sat in the front row, next to Doris, who held my hand and stared ahead with grim fortitude. Our proximity made me uncomfortable. We'd tried hard to keep our affair a secret, but nasty tongues must be wagging behind us. I could almost hear the knives whirring through the air towards my back. Grief, guilt and embarrassment launched a well-co-ordinated assault on my soul. As usual at a funeral, my tear ducts got leaky.

One of Terry's oldest buddies, Justice Gary Buscombe of the Supreme Court, delivered the eulogy. He was a dull probate judge who looked like he'd soon join Terry in the grave. He spent most of the eulogy describing, in a washed-out tone, their salad days together at Riverview High School and Sydney University Law School. Then he told a few golf anecdotes, outlined Terry's career at the Bar and finally said: "Terry was a role model for any young barrister. He was a fearless advocate with a fine legal mind. But most importantly, he was always ready to raise the trusty shield of justice to protect the poor and weak."

I was tempted to ask if they were burying the right person. However, as it dawned on Doris that she shared her life with a truly great spirit, she blubbed and squeezed my hand. It was her moment, and she deserved it.

While Buscombe delivered a verdict in Terry's favour, I tuned out and mentally replayed the horror of the last week. At least Terry's struggle with the world was

over. I was hurtling towards an abyss. The police were still hunting for Terry's killer and I might be their prime suspect. I was innocent, of course. But I'd been a lawyer long enough to know that meant little. My brethren certainly wouldn't protect me from a miscarriage of justice. If I became an embarrassment, they wouldn't even visit me in gaol.

After the service, I helped five other barristers carry the coffin from the church, through a thicket of photographers and cameramen, and slide it into the back of a hearse, which raced off to the crematorium.

The mourners flowed out onto the wide pavement. Terry's ex-wife, Maureen hadn't attended the service. But Doris had earlier pointed out the presence of Terry's son, David. He now stood alone, wearing an ill-fitting blue suit. His gaunt features bore little resemblance to his father and his hands jagged about nervously. It was easy to believe he'd been—and probably still was—a coke addict.

I said: "David, we haven't met before; I'm Ben Kennedy, I knew your father well. I just want to say how sorry I am about his death. He was a good man."

A blank stare and a shrug. "Yeah, thanks."

"If you need any help, let me know, OK?"

He nodded and stared over my shoulder. "OK."

Feeling uncomfortable, I shuffled away, looking for Doris, but found myself face-to-face with Detective Sergeant Malloy and one of his too-many-pies sidekicks. "Hi."

Tired grey suit and expression. "Hello. Quite a turn-up."

"He was very popular."

"Good of you to give the widow so much support," he deadpanned.

A touch of panic made me glance away when I really, really shouldn't have. "Ah, yes, doing my best. How's your investigation going?"

He casually slipped meaty hands into trouser pockets. "Oh, still exploring leads."

"Really?"

"Yes. In fact, I'd like to have another chat with you, if you don't mind?"

My stomach dropped and lay quivering. "That so?"

"Yes."

"What about?"

"I'll tell you when we chat."

That sounded ominous. "OK. When?"

"As soon as possible. What about early next week? Monday or Tuesday?"

"The *Arnold* hearing resumes on Monday. Not sure how long it'll go for—maybe a few days. I'll probably be available on Thursday."

A reluctant nod. "Alright, that'll have to do, though no later, understand? Don't make me chase after you."

"Of course I won't."

I slipped away and chatted to a few mourners until the crowd had almost dissolved. Doris and Beth were talking to the priest at the bottom of the steps. I strolled over and heard Doris thank the priest for what he'd done. He headed back into the church and Doris turned towards me, grey but obviously relieved.

I said: "Ready to go home?"

She sighed. "Definitely."

I escorted the two women over to a black limousine. We all climbed into the back and headed towards Beth's house.

## Chapter 18

The next morning, I drove over to Yvonne's terrace in Paddington to pick up Robert for an access visit. Yvonne opened the front door wearing a flannel tracksuit and no make-up. Her smile lopped 10 years off well-preserved features. "Hi. Come in."

I followed her up the hallway. "Robert ready?"

A laugh. "You kidding? He only woke ten minutes ago." Yvonne stood at the bottom of the staircase and yelled our son's name. No response.

Yvonne shrugged. "He'll be down soon. Come into the kitchen."

"Where's little Tanya?"

Tanya was her child with Rex Marston—six years old and bright as a button.

"Rex has already picked her up. They've gone to Luna Park. He always looks terrified when he's got to spend the whole day with her. Says it's harder than appearing in the High Court. He'll be exhausted when he gets back."

I followed her into a wide kitchen with a huge marble-topped island and big French doors opening out onto a small lawn. We sat on bar stools.

She casually touched my arm and said she really enjoyed our dinner on Wednesday night. "We should do it again."

I recalled that the dinner became rather tetchy after she pushed me to apply for silk and I pushed back. However, she was now trying to paper that over. Why? She still hoped to persuade me to apply for silk? She wanted to resurrect our marriage? Or she just wanted reassurance as she re-acclimatised to single life? Probably didn't know herself. However, I was getting a bit annoyed, because I was fairly sure I didn't want a relationship. However, I had a nagging fear I might not be resolute enough if she declared she wanted one.

I said: "Yeah, I'd like that."

"When?"

"The *Arnold* hearing starts again on Monday. So I'll be pretty busy for most of the week. Maybe the following weekend?"

"Fine."

She got me to describe Terry's funeral service, which she missed because she was in court. She didn't seem aware I sat next to Doris and I didn't enlighten her.

Eventually, our fourteen-year-old son wandered into the kitchen, wearing a T-shirt and shorts; tall and solidly built, with broad shoulders and short brown hair. Despite his size—I no longer dared box or wrestle with him—he was mild and sensible, and didn't seem to blame me for his long incarceration under Rex Marston's roof. Of course, he might be storing up his resentment and his hormones might detonate at any moment, but I'd been lucky so far.

"Hi Dad."

"Hi. Ready to go?"

"Yup. We still going to see Grandpa?"

"Yes, that OK?"

"Sure. Staying overnight?"

"No. I'll have you back this evening."

"Cool."

Yvonne looked at me. "You want a cup of coffee before you go?"

I shook my head. "We're already running late."

She shrugged. "OK."

At the door, she hugged Robert and pecked my cheek.

As we drove away, I glanced at my son. "How're you getting on with your mum?"

"OK. She gives me the shits sometimes. But I guess that's mutual."

"I guess so." Was Yvonne telling the truth when she said she had no time to meet any men? "She, umm, seeing anyone?"

A glare. "Dad, that's none of your business."

"I'll buy you an ice cream."

"That won't work anymore."

Sadly true. "Come on, spill the beans."

"I won't."

I hummed tunelessly for about twenty seconds until he cracked. "OK, OK, she's not seeing anyone. In fact, you're the only guy she really talks about."

"That so?"

"Yes, she says nobody else makes her laugh like you do. So what do you think, Dad—you two going to get back together again?"

"Nope."

"Why not? You get on well together."

"Only when we're not in a relationship."

"I don't understand."

"Join the club."

Robert went to a very expensive private school in Double Bay. I casually inquired about how my investment was going and he claimed he was studying hard and his grades were good. "In fact, I deserve a reward."

"Like what?"

"Next month, the ski club's going to New Zealand, and I want to go along." He spoke like a salesman talking through a screen door.

"What's the tariff?"

"Oh, about \$2,000."

"Jesus. To think that, at the start, I only had to put a dummy in your mouth. Are they serving caviar for breakfast? Is the Swiss Olympic team giving lessons?"

"It's not that much."

"It's money I can't spend on myself. I suppose your mum expects me to pick up the tab?"

"Looks like it."

I sighed. "Alright, I probably will. Otherwise you'll hate me for the rest of your life."

He smiled. "That's quite possible."

We chatted about his extra-curricular activities which ranged from playing break-away for the Second Fifteen to honking on a saxophone in the school band.

He said: "Mum wants me to try out for the debating team."

"Why?"

"Says I should learn to think on my feet." A half-smile. "I think she sorta hopes I'll become a barrister, like everybody else in the family."

"She said that?"

"Not straight out, but she drops hints."

"You want to be an engineer, right?"

"I think so..."

"Well, do what you want to do. Your mother is a very pushy woman. Ignore her."

"OK. You know, I might decide to become a barrister—I just don't know."

I wanted to tell him that being a barrister is a great life and he was probably well suited to it. But I didn't want to pressure him. "Just make sure it's your decision. Don't let your mother—or grandfather—push you around."

"Don't worry, I'll make up my own mind."

Bugger all chance of that happening: the kid was outnumbered and out-gunned. "Good."

We argued about which radio station we'd listen to: I wanted a classical station—nothing better than Bach on the open road—and he wanted to listen to ghetto rap. Soon I was listening to a guy called Dollar Bill recite doggerel about torturing and shooting various bitches who'd let him down.

For the rest of the drive, we dissected the strengths and weaknesses of the Wallabies team. I lost interest in the Wallabies when they started a long losing streak, but it was a safe-harbour topic.

Ten kilometres past Bowral, I turned onto a dirt track which I followed for a couple of kilometres until, with my usual mixture of pleasure and apprehension, I turned into my father's property.

As we climbed out of the car, he emerged from his house and smiled broadly at Robert. "Ah, my favourite grandson."

A hard stare. "I bet you say that to your other grand-kids."

"Of course, but I don't mean it when I do. You fellows hungry?"

I said: "Starving."

"Then let's eat."

His part-time farm hand, Bob Graveney, had set up a barbeque on the verandah. My father cooked the meat and we ate at a wooden table overlooking his tiny spread.

He pumped me for more information about Terry Riley's death. I told him what I'd recently discovered—naming the various suspects I'd tripped over—while editing out my affair with Doris.

When I'd finished, Robert said: "Dad, this is so exciting. Why didn't you tell me all this?"

"I didn't think you'd be interested."

"Are you kidding?"

My father mused. "Mmm, most detectives try to reduce their list of suspects; you keep adding to yours. Any idea why Sloan argued with Riley?"

"Nope."

"Well, I wouldn't be surprised if he dun it: I reckon he's quite capable of murder."



I was glad to see my father didn't subscribe to the view that, because Sloan was a judge, he wouldn't murder anyone. "Seriously?"

"Yes."

"You know him?"

"Yes, knew him quite well at the bar. Very smart and very devious. Never trusted a word he said, in or out of court."

Robert said: "But he's a judge."

"So what? You think that because he's sworn an oath to uphold the law he couldn't murder someone? When you get older, you'll realise we're just Great Apes with a veneer of civilisation." He took another sip of wine. "Still, this shows how exciting things can be at the Bar, doesn't it? A lot more exciting than—what are you planning to do?—engineering."

I glared. "Dad."

My father looked defensive. "What have I done wrong? Being a barrister's a good life."

"If it suits you."

"I'm sure it'd suit Robert." He stared at my son. "You get to be your own boss. No performance reviews. Nobody screaming at you."

I said: "Except judges."

"True, sometimes, but what can they do? Put you in gaol? Pelt you with rotten fruit? Hardly. They scream at barristers because they know they are powerless. Anyway, judges are a lot softer these days. When I was a baby barrister, there were some real animals on the bench—yelled like regimental sergeant majors." He turned to Robert. "Have I ever told you about my first hearing?"

Robert leaned forward attentively. "No."

"I appeared for a plaintiff in the District Court, before a grumpy old bastard called Arthur Gilbert. Anyway, when I made my final submissions, I talked for a whole day and left no stone unturned. When I'd finished, the judge growled and said: 'Mr Kennedy, I am going to find in favour of your client on one very strict condition'. I thought that was great news and said: 'What's the condition, your Honour?' And he said: 'It's that you don't say another word—not one. If you do, I'll find in favour of the defendant'."

Robert giggled. "You kept quiet?"

"I didn't say a word, and won, but I didn't feel as triumphant as I expected. After that, I talked a lot less."

I'd heard my father tell many stories about his time at the Bar—usually boasting about his triumphs—but I'd never heard that one before, because he rarely engaged in self-deprecation.

We spent the rest of lunch gossiping about family and friends. Then my father took us on a long walk around his property and introduced us proudly to each of his dozen cattle.

Just after five, Robert and I headed back to Sydney. As we drove off, I turned to him. "Was that OK?"

"Fine. Grandpa's a lot nicer these days. But boy, he talks a lot."

"A common affliction among barristers."

"I've noticed."

I stared at him. "I'm not that bad, am I?"

He grinned. "Sometimes. You know, I bet you can't stay quiet for more than five minutes."

"Yes I can."

"No you can't."

"Alright. Starting now."

After four minutes, words gurgled up my throat and burst out of my mouth, before dissipating in the air.

## Chapter 19

On Sunday afternoon, I sat at my desk, preparing for the resumption of the *Arnold* hearing the next morning. I re-read my brief and read the transcript of Mick Arnold's evidence to date. Then I decided to assemble the legal authorities I'd cite in my final oral submissions. There wouldn't be many: the case turned mostly on the facts.

I grabbed a few law reports and recalled Terry's statement that *Portland v Egan* would help Mick's claim. Perplexing. *Portland* was an important High Court case about the liability of property owners when trespassers get injured. But Mick wasn't a trespasser at the Royal George. He was what the common law calls an invitee. So how was *Portland* relevant?

Maybe Terry got confused. After all, he only had a passing interest in the law. Or maybe I was confused and the judgment contained an obscure *ratio decidendi* that helped Mick.

I couldn't remember which volume of the Commonwealth Law Reports contained *Portland*. But, sitting on the court trolley I took from Terry's room, was a CLR volume that looked about the right vintage. I opened it and studied the index. Yes, the *Portland* judgment started on page 610.

I turned to that page and a folded sheet of paper fluttered to the carpet. I casually picked it up, assuming it was a scrap Terry used as a bookmark. Instead, it was a pro forma NSW Police charge sheet dated 8 June, four years ago. It stated that "Richard Allan Sloan", 58, of Woollahra, had been charged with drink driving. His alcohol reading was a very healthy 0.16.

Richard Allan Sloan. Surely, not *Justice Sloan*; surely, he wasn't caught drink-driving. Jesus. Say it ain't so.

I grabbed a copy of the NSW Law Almanac and scanned the list of Supreme Court judges. Sloan's full name was Richard *Allan* Sloan. Hell. I also vaguely recalled that he lived in Woollahra. He was obviously the person charged. Unbelievable.

Greg Hilderbrand had reminded me that, about four years ago, the judge crashed his car into a telegraph pole, killing his wife. Was he drink-driving when he did that?

I scurried over to my computer, accessed the archives of the *Sydney Morning Herald* and read a three-paragraph story about the accident, which occurred on 8

*June.* My blood percolated. It looked like the judge was heavily intoxicated when he crashed his car and killed his wife.

A torrent of questions roared through my mind. If Sloan was drink-driving when his wife died, and charged with that, why the hell didn't the media report it? Indeed, why was he still sitting on the Supreme Court bench? A judge caught drink-driving - nothing more - would normally have to resign. One who crashed and killed his wife should now be in gaol.

I smelt a cover up. But who was involved? Terry? Was that why he had the charge sheet? Certainly, it was now obvious why he and Sloan exchanged angry words at the Bench & Bar Dinner. Terry, with a huge tax debt and facing professional oblivion, tried to use the charge sheet to blackmail the judge into bailing him out. But the judge couldn't, or wouldn't, stump up the cash. Indeed, it looked like the judge chose a cheaper option: murder.

The possibility that a Supreme Court judge murdered a senior silk to cover up a serious crime made me light-headed. Despite my general cynicism about the legal profession, and judges in particular, my whole world rocked on its foundations and refused to settle.

Yet that conclusion seemed inescapable. Sloan must have arranged to meet Terry at home on the Sunday afternoon. Maybe he planned to kill him. Or maybe they argued and he lost his temper. Anyway, Terry ended up dead as mutton.

That should have solved Sloan's problems.

However, Terry knew he was playing a dangerous game and cleverly hid the charge sheet where, if anything happened to him, I'd find it. For insurance, he even mentioned that *Portland v Egan* would help Mick Arnold's claim, which was true because, while Terry had the charge sheet, the judge wouldn't dare find against Mick.

I turned back to my computer, accessed the Supreme Court's database and punched up a list of all judgments Sloan had delivered in the last four years. I quickly saw that Terry had appeared for the plaintiff in seven cases and won them all. Jesus Christ. Sloan was notoriously anti-plaintiff. Yet Terry had a perfect record. That could only be because of the charge sheet. In other words, besides negligently killing his wife and murdering Terry, the judge was also corrupt.

Funnily enough, I found it easier to believe the judge was a murderer than corrupt. Judges have a difficult task and often make egregious errors. However, until now, I'd always assumed those errors were due to incompetence. The idea that a judge might be dirty never really crossed my mind. Yet, that conclusion seemed inescapable.

Unless, of course, the charge sheet was a forgery or the drink-driving charge was dropped for a good reason, in which case all of my nasty suspicions would dissolve to nothing. Maybe I was missing a vital piece of evidence that would exculpate Sloan. I certainly hoped so, because this information was the mental equivalent of a ticking bomb.

I could approach Sloan and challenge him to explain the charge sheet. But I was appearing before him in a personal injuries hearing and might be accused of blackmail.

Another option was to turn over the charge sheet to Detective Sergeant Malloy and let him sort out the truth. However, I wanted to be on very sure ground before

throwing a truck-load of mud at a Supreme Court judge. Nobody would thank me, even if I was right. I'd also developed a serious aversion to Malloy, who didn't have my best interests at heart.

It seemed my least-worst option was to contact the cop who signed the charge sheet. Of course, he might be part of any cover-up. Yet, I had little choice. I would proceed cautiously and, if the temperature got too hot, bail out.

I called the main police switchboard and asked a female operator for Senior Constable Brian Metcalfe. My heart throbbed so hard I feared a heart attack. I breathed deeply and struggled to relax. After a long pause, she said the only "Brian Metcalfe" on the force was a detective sergeant at Croydon Police Station.

Metcalfe must have been promoted; hopefully, not for his dazzling contribution to a cover-up. "That's him. Will you put me through?"

"OK". She connected me with the desk sergeant at the Croydon Police Station. I asked to speak to Detective Sergeant Brian Metcalfe.

A clipped male voice said: "Not on duty right now."

"When's he back?"

"His next shift is on Tuesday night."

"You mean I can't contact him until then?"

"Correct. You'll have to call back."

"Will you give me his mobile number?"

"Of course not. Call back."

"OK."

I put down the phone, rather relieved the cop wasn't available. What should I do now? Doing nothing until Tuesday night was easily the most attractive option.

I left my chambers knowing I had a hard week ahead of me, and the best preparation would be a good night's sleep.

I didn't get it.

## Chapter 20

I woke in the middle of the night, sweating slightly, and wondered if Terry had verbally black-mailed Justice Sloan to win his seven hearings before the judge. Or did he rely upon a tacit understanding between them? Probably the latter. Whatever the truth, now that Terry was dead, Sloan had a free hand to do whatever he wanted in the present hearing. That wasn't good news for Mick, because Sloan was usually tough on plaintiffs and Mick's case was already on its knees.

The next morning, I arrived at Court 13A with a jittery, sleep-starved brain, and hid trembling hands in the folds of my gown. To my surprise, my team was already there: Bob Meredith stood chatting to the defendants' solicitor and Mick Arnold sat on a foam bench, again wearing his Wallabies jersey. Considering the Wallabies' losing streak, that seemed like bad karma to me.

I said: "How're you feeling?"

He shrugged. "OK, I guess. How much longer am I gonna be cross-examined?"

Witnesses always ask that. "No idea."

"Can you tell him to hurry up?"

"I can, but he won't listen."

Meredith wandered over. "Morning Ben. Ready?"

"Yes."

He studied me closely, saw my tiredness, and said nothing. I briefly considered telling him about the charge sheet I'd discovered, but quashed that idea. He was a good friend of the judge so, until I knew the full story, I'd better keep quiet. "Let's go inside."

As we strolled into court, I realized I'd soon be face-to-face with Justice Sloan, who I believed: killed his wife while drink-driving; repeatedly betrayed his judicial oath, and murdered Terry. I wasn't this nervous before my first hearing. Sweat pooled under my wig and my bar jacket chaffed like a hair shirt.

I sat at the Bar table, next to the two Bills. The wild one was berating the mild one about something, but I shut that out. I had enough to worry about.

Five minutes later, Justice Sloan strolled onto the bench and bowed to the court. Everyone returned his bow and sat down, except me.

I studied the judge's frozen features for some sign he was diabolically evil, and realised I'd lived too sheltered a life to tell.

Sloan gave me a hard stare. I panicked. Was he reading my thoughts? Did he know I had the charge sheet? Impossible. Calm down.

The judge spoke in his usual grey tone. "Mr Kennedy, what's happening? Do you have a new leader?"

My nerves subsided. Back on familiar ground, discussing procedural matters with a judge. My voice was surprisingly steady. "No, your Honour. I'll be appearing for the plaintiff on my own."

To my relief, Sloan looked bored. "Alright. I'm sure the plaintiff's case is in safe hands."

"Thank you."

The judge turned to Wild Bill. "Mr Anderson, I assume you want to continue your cross-examination of the plaintiff?"

Wild Bill stood and adeptly rearranged his gown. "Yes, your Honour."

The judge stared at my client, sitting just behind me. "Mr Arnold, please return to the witness box?"

Mick limped ostentatiously to the witness box and gingerly sat down.

The judge looked like a zoologist trying to identify a new species. "Mr Arnold, you're still on oath, understand?"

"Yes, your Honour."

The resumption of battle made me forget about the charge sheet.

Wild Bill wanted to remind the judge of Mick's damning testimony ten days ago. So he cross-examined again about Mick's previous personal injuries action.

Eventually, Wild Bill reached a crescendo: "And the judge found your whole claim was a pack of lies, didn't he?"

Mick's Adam's apple was now an independent life form. "He didn't believe me? Yeah, that's right."

"Because you were lying, correct?"

"No, I told the truth. A lot of people call me a dickhead—and maybe I am—but I always tell the truth."

Neat work: taking a punch to give a punch. Part of me liked the little dickhead.

Wild Bill's stare could have stopped a clock. He bellowed: "No, you were lying then and you're lying now?"

He was entitled to revisit old ground. But now he was re-ploughing it.

"Objection".

The judge gave me a flat stare. "On what basis?"

"My learned friend has already cross-examined about this issue. If he doesn't move on, we'll still be here at Christmas."

The judge turned his acidic gaze on Wild Bill. "Mr Kennedy has a point, Mr Anderson. Maybe you should move on."

Wild Bill loved arguing with judges, but even he wasn't game to clash with Sloan. "Yes, your Honour."

The judge raised an eyebrow. "Perhaps Mr Anderson, you should deal with the plaintiff's claim for economic loss?"

"I was just coming to that, your Honour." Wild Bill tugged dramatically at his gown, and stared at the witness as if he wanted them to step outside and settle their differences the old-fashioned way. "You've already told the Court, haven't you, that before the incident at the pub you were earning about a thousand dollars a week as an electrician?"

"Yes, about a grand."

Wild Bill rocked forward menacingly. "That was another lie, wasn't it?"

Mick reddened slightly. "No it weren't."

"Yes it was. You earned nothing like that sum, did you?"

Appeal courts frequently warn judges against relying too much on the demeanour of witnesses because honest witnesses can look like scoundrels, and vice versa. But it didn't help that whenever Mick got a tough question his hands shook, his Adam's apple wobbled and he licked his lips. It was as if he was worried the judge would miss his first "tell" and throw in some back-ups.

He croaked, "Yes I did."

Wild Bill picked up a document and waved it in the air. "You lodged a tax return last year, didn't you?"

Mick smoothly displayed his usual tells. "Ah, yes, I did."

"And it showed you only earned about \$600 a week, didn't it?"

Oh fuck, another piece of damaging information Mick withheld from his lawyers. He obviously feared that, if he told us all the problems with his case, we wouldn't represent him. In that, he was entirely right.

Mick's tongue slithered over his lips. "Oh, ah, yeah, I remember that. But, umm, that weren't all the money I earned."

"Really?"

Mick looked defiant. "Yes, I did earn some cash."

Wild Bill looked like Pele in front of an open goal. "Are you saying you didn't declare those cash payments in your tax return?"

Mick stared angrily at me, for some reason, as if this was my fault. "I suppose I forgot."

"You mean, you tried to cheat the tax commissioner?"

I rose to my feet and said the witness didn't have to give evidence that might incriminate him. However, the judge, now looking mildly interested, wouldn't be denied some sport. He granted Mick immunity under the Evidence Act and insisted Mick answer the question.

Mick hunched his shoulders as if expecting a lash. "What's the question?"

Wild Bill smiled and repeated it.

Mick went through his tell routine and added a collar tug. "No, ah, that's not true. I weren't cheating nobody."

"You signed this tax return, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"And it contains a solemn declaration that it's true, doesn't it?"

"I guess so."

"So, when you signed it, you lied under oath, didn't you?"

Mick's earlobes twitched violently. "No, I just forgot, didn't I, about the cash; I mean, I'm not as bright as you, am I?"

I slid down in my chair and tuned out while Wild Bill spent ten minutes accusing Mick of deliberately lying on oath.

The worst witnesses are those who, when caught lying, try to hide behind more lies. Mick was a paid-up and practicing member of the club. He kept insisting he forgot about the cash payments. Nobody in the court—including the Court Officer dozing in the corner—believed him. I wanted to jump up and tell Mick to take the hit and let us all move on.

Eventually, even Wild Bill got tired of pulling the wings off a helpless bug. He grunted loudly and looked at the judge. "No further questions, your Honour."

Mick looked like he'd just received a gallows reprieve. "Shit, that it?"

The judge looked at me, faintly amused. "Any re-examination, Mr Kennedy?"

Re-examining a witness to clarify vague answers is probably the most dangerous of all forensic tasks because it gives the witness one last golden opportunity to stuff up their case even further. I wanted Mick out of the witness box as soon as possible. "No, your Honour."

The judge looked at Mick. "Mr Arnold, you can leave the witness box."

Mick grinned, tugged his earring and sprang to his feet, before suddenly realizing that was out of character and grimacing. He limped to a chair just behind me and whispered into my ear. "How did I go?"

He had successfully lied to me and unsuccessfully lied to the court and, as a consequence, I'd done my dough on this case. I had no desire to protect his feelings. "Badly, very badly."

Mick frowned. "Really?"

"Yes."

"Shit."

The judge looked at me. "Your next witness, Mr Kennedy?"

Our medical expert was Professor David McKenzie, an orthopaedic specialist at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital. He was a fussy-looking man in his early forties whose lank hair was cut with geometric precision. Expert witnesses are supposed to be independent and unbiased. But most fight hard for whoever pays their fee. Certainly, McKenzie rode for the brand. I liked using him because he had just the right combination of fake candour and rat cunning that his role demanded.

The Professor had already prepared a medical report which concluded that pinched nerves in Mick's back had severely impaired his mobility and caused him intense pain, and there was only a slim chance of recovery.

As the Professor strolled to the witness box, I tendered the report. Wild Bill, who'd received a copy many months ago, didn't object.

The report was very comprehensive and didn't need to be supplemented with oral evidence. I looked at the judge: "No questions in chief, your Honour."

The judge asked Wild Bill if he wanted to cross-examine.

Wild Bill jumped up. "Of course, your Honour."

The defendants' medical expert, Associate Professor Mahmood Khan from the Prince of Wales Hospital, had also examined Mick and, not surprisingly, written a report that said he was in tip-top shape.

Wild Bill took Professor McKenzie through each of Khan's main conclusions and pressed him to concede they were correct. That approach got him nowhere.

Wild Bill said: "But it's true, isn't it, Professor, that none of the X-rays or CAT scans show any pinched nerves?"

"Correct."

"Which demonstrates, doesn't it, that he's just malingering?"

The Professor looked slightly bemused. "Not at all. Diagnostic tests have little value when determining the existence of pinched nerves. Instead, one has to look at the patient's symptoms. In this case, Mr Arnold has reported reduced mobility and chronic pain, which is entirely consistent with pinched nerves in the spinal area."

"In other words, you think he's sick because he's told you he's sick?"

The professor stepped back so that he had room to throw a punch. "True, though everything I have seen suggests he's telling the truth."

Wild Bill kept battering away, with little success. The professor was playing in his own backyard and tough as teak. Looking detached and sounding matter-of-fact, he tigerishly defended his position.

About mid-afternoon, Wild Bill gave up and sat down, annoyed, and turned his anger on Mild Bill, snarling: "Where's my bloody pen?"

Mild Bill had obviously taken the sensible course of tuning out while his father berated the witness. Now he had to tune back in. "What?"

"My pen."

"You don't have it?"

"No. It's on the table somewhere. Find it."

Mild Bill nervously fossicked through a midden-heap of folders and papers before producing a gold-plated fountain-pen. "Here it is."

Wild Bill snatched it from him.

Professor McKenzie had performed well: if the judge wanted to, he could easily find Mick was badly injured when he tumbled down the stairs. However, Mick's appalling performance in the witness box made it highly unlikely the judge would find the defendants pushed him.

As Professor McKenzie disappeared from the court I informed the judge that the plaintiff would call no further witnesses.

"That's your case?"

"Yes, your Honour."



The judge looked at Wild Bill. "Mr Anderson, are you ready to open the defendants' case?"

Wild Bill climbed to his feet to make his opening submission. "Yes, your Honour. I will be very brief, because the defendants' case is very simple: they did not assault the plaintiff; rather, they asked him to leave the pub and he agreed to go. However, because he was drunk, he fell down the stairs. Further, even if your Honour concludes—contrary to the evidence—that he was assaulted, the medical evidence clearly shows he's fully recovered. That's all I need to say for the moment."

When Wild Bill was that economical with words, you knew you were in trouble.

Sloan said: "Alright then, any witnesses?"

"Yes. I call the first defendant, Vincent Taggart."

Taggart rose from the public gallery and walked pigeon-toed to the witness box. Tall and pony-tailed, he wore a shiny black suit and collarless white shirt draped over heavy muscles. He looked stupid and nasty, yet still more loveable than my client. However, I did feel the grudging respect that someone who works with words feels for someone who works with his fists.

The Court Officer administered the oath and Wild Bill asked his name and occupation.

"Vincent Taggart. I'm a crowd-controller at the Royal George Hotel in Bondi". I bet nobody had ever told him he had a squeaky little voice.

"You're the first defendant in these proceedings?"

"Yeah."

"Who's in charge of the crowd-controllers at the pub?"

"Me. I'm the Head of Security—that's my title."

"And you were at the hotel on the night the plaintiff was injured?"

"Yeah. Me and Des was on duty."

"You're referring to Mr Desmond Fuolau, the second defendant?"

"Yeah, Des over there." He pointed at a hulking Pacific Islander who shrank the courtroom.

"OK. Please describe what happened that night."

Taggart described how he and Fuolau were in the ground-floor bar when he heard on his two-way radio about a disturbance upstairs. "So Des and me went up there."

"What did you find?"

He pointed at Mick Arnold. "That guy over there was arguing another guy who wanted him to leave his girlfriend alone."

"Was there any physical contact between them?"

"Just a bit of pushing and shoving."

"Then what happened?"

"I saw that guy over there was totally pissed, so I asked him to leave the premises."

"Did he?"

"Yeah. I mean, at first he refused. But Des and me told him he had to go, so he headed for the stairs."

"Did you follow him?"

"Nah. We kept talking to the other patron, trying to calm him down."

"Then what happened?"

"We heard this loud scream as that guy went down the stairs, arse over tit."

"Did you push him in any way?"

Eyes widened dramatically. "Nah, course not."

"How far from him were you when he fell?"

"About ten metres."

"And Mr Fuolau?"

"He was standing right next to me."

"Thank you." Wild Bill looked at the judge. "That's my examination in chief."

The judge looked at me. "Mr Kennedy, any questions?"

"Yes." I rose, dropped my notepad on the lectern and turned to the witness. "Mr Taggart, you've called yourself a crowd-controller. That means you're a 'bouncer' doesn't it?"

"I prefer to call me-self a crowd-controller, because that's what me licence says."

"But many would call you a 'bouncer'?"

"Yeah, I suppose so."

"How long have you worked at the Royal George in that capacity?"

"About three years."

I asked what training he'd received before becoming a bouncer. He said he received none.

I said: "So nobody taught you how to control drunk and angry patrons?"

Taggart looked surprised. "I don't need training for that - it's obvious."

"Now, you say that when you reached the upstairs bar the plaintiff was drunk?"

"Yeah, drunk as a skunk."

"And loud and aggressive?"

"That's right."

"Indeed, he pushed and shoved the other patron, didn't he?"

"Sure did."

"And he swore at you?"

"What do you mean?"

"After you arrived, he swore at you?"

"Well, umm, yeah, he said some nasty things."

"Like what?"

"I think he called me a cocksucker." Taggart glanced at the judge. "Sorry, judge."

The judge gave him a man-of-the-world shrug.

I said: "How often did he call you that?"

"Two or three times."

"Because he was drunk and aggressive, correct?"

The witness knitted his eyebrows. "Yeah."

"And because he was drunk and aggressive you had trouble persuading him to leave, didn't you?"

"Yeah, at first. But we eventually talked him around."

"How?"

Taggart's eyebrows joined again. His stupidity did not seem an act. "How what?"

I raised my voice and leaned forward. "How did you talk him into leaving the pub? What did you say to him?"

"I threatened to call the cops."

"Really? And straight away, he agreed to leave?"

"Umm, no, not straight away. I mean, I said some other things."

"Like what?"

Taggart squirmed and his heavy eyebrows formed a straight line. "You want me to know exactly what I said?"

"Yes, exactly."

"It was a long time ago, so I can't remember everything."

I spoke sharply. "Tell me what you *remember* saying?"

"I said we'd call the cops."

I scowled. "You've already told us that. What else did you say, to make him leave?"

"Oh, I told him to behave himself, and stuff like that."

"Anything else?"

"That's all I can remember."

"And Mr Fuolau, what did he say?"

"Not much. I mean, I did most of the talking."

I put my elbows on the lectern. "Mr Taggart, the plaintiff never agreed to leave the pub, did he?"

"He sure did."

"That's a total fabrication, isn't it?"

"Nah, it's true."

"In fact, because he was drunk and aggressive, he wouldn't listen to you, would he?"

"No, we persuaded him to go."

"You mean, by threatening to call the police?"

Taggart started to look anxious. "I also said other stuff, like I said."

"But you've forgotten what you said?"

"Yeah."

"Mr Taggart, because Mr Arnold was drunk and aggressive, you had to physically *force* him to leave, didn't you?"

"No way."

"He wouldn't listen to you, so you and Mr Fuolau pushed him towards the stairs?"

"No, we didn't."

"And when you got to the top of the stairs, he called you both 'fucking cunts', didn't he?"

"Nope—definitely not."

"So you threw him down the stairs?"

"Nah, no way—crap."

To my surprise, Wild Bill sprang to his feet. "I object."

The judge looked askance. "Why?"

"My learned friend is badgering the witness."

That was nonsense, particularly coming from a forensic thug like him. I turned towards him. "Badgering? Rubbish. You're the one who beats up witnesses, not me. Sit down. You've had your go."

"How dare you."

We must have sounded like two old tarts arguing over a bingo prize.

Having spent most of the day looking either mildly or totally bored, the judge showed a flicker of interest, though he'd seen much better verbal stoushes. "Gentlemen, gentlemen, please calm down." He glanced up at the clock. "It's almost four. I propose to adjourn. You can resume your combat tomorrow morning."

We both nodded.

The judge looked at the witness. "Mr Taggart, please return at ten o'clock tomorrow morning. I adjourn until then."

The Court Officer called for everyone to rise and the judge scuttled from the courtroom, his associate close behind.

Wild Bill stared hard. "I'll keep objecting tomorrow morning."

"Go for your life."

A scowl crossed his grumpy features and he headed for the door, Mild Bill trailing behind.

For most of the day, I'd forgotten about the police charge sheet and a huge question mark hanging over the judge. Now, as the court cleared, anxiety exploded inside my head and squeezed my chest. What the hell should I do?

Mick Arnold said something. But I was too pre-occupied to understand. I turned to him. "What?"

"He's lying—he's fucking lying?"

"Who?"

"Taggart."

I focused on the case. "Yeah, he's pretty slippery."

"But you kicked him around—you really did."

"Thanks. I think I did some damage."

"So, you think I'm gonna win?"

"No."

Mick scowled. "Why not?"

"Because he's been dreadful, but you were worse - a lot worse."

Mick looked annoyed. "Really? How?"

"Don't get me started. But your previous tort claim and false tax return certainly didn't help the cause. You should have told us."

I'm usually prepared to molly-coddle clients. But since he wasn't paying, he got the no-frills package. Indeed, I rather enjoyed dishing out the harsh facts of litigation.

"Yeah, well, I didn't think they'd find out about them, did I? But you're doing good. I'm glad the other guy died. I mean, I know that sounds bad, but he wasn't much chop: lights on, but nobody home, if you know what I mean."

A more discerning consumer of legal services than I thought. "Really?"

"Yeah. Anyway, see you tomorrow morning, OK?"

"Sure."

He strolled off.

For most of the day, Bob Meredith had alternated between looking tired and bored, and texting furiously. Now, he turned to me. "At least our client's satisfied."

"Wait till he loses: then he'll send me a parcel bomb."

"Client's prerogative. But he's right. You're making progress."

"Not enough. Know what we need?"

"What?"

"A witness who saw what happened in the pub."

Meredith frowned. "I tried to find one. I mean, I even sent someone to the pub to ask around."

"Yeah? Who?"

Meredith shifted on his feet. "Don't worry—someone I trust."

Alarm bells tolled in my head. "Who?"

"Oh, one of my paralegals."

"A paralegal? You're kidding?"

"No. But don't worry. The guy's no dummy: been with me for about three years, studying for a law degree. If there was a good witness at the pub, he'd have found him."

Meredith's half-arsed preparation for the hearing didn't surprise me. He was a seat-of-the-pants litigator; the only thing he did with enthusiasm was overcharge.

I said: "I bet he just got pissed at your expense."

Meredith shrugged. "If he did, there's nothing we can do now."

I don't mind losing a case if everything possible has been done to win it. But that hadn't happened here. I could ask Meredith to go to the pub and look for a witness. But in the unlikely event he agreed to, he'd do a flaky job. To ease my conscience, I'd have to go myself and make a forlorn effort.

I said: "Maybe. But I think I'll drop into the pub tonight and have a look around. Who knows? I might find a witness."

"You're kidding, right?"

"No. I won't stay long. Just a quick look around, then home to bed."

"You want to waste your time, that's up to you. I've got a dinner engagement. If I don't make it, the missus will kill me."

"Suit yourself."

He glanced at his watch. "Anyway, gotta get back to the office. If you go to the pub, don't forget your trench-coat."

As he strolled off, giggling to himself, I felt an intense wave of despair. I was appearing before a judge who might be a murderer, in a case sinking fast and, as if that wasn't bad enough, I now had to do my solicitor's work.

At least, at the pub, I could have a few beers, which I deserved.

## Chapter 21

Most pubs in Bondi are trendy establishments where yuppies drink boutique beers and chat about the price of real estate, the price of cars, the price of stocks, and what's wrong with their kids and whether they should send them to a new school. But the Royal George Hotel was a working-class bastion with a mahogany bar, tiled walls, dust-covered chandeliers and a ragged carpet. The lighting was poor and it reeked of spilt beer; the only food on sale was nuts and chips. Even the pokie machines looked worn out. Most patrons were blue-collar boozers still swimming against the tide of gentrification.

I approached the pub cautiously in case the two defendants were on duty. But the only bouncer was a Maori as big as a two-door fridge. He wore dark glasses, despite the sun having disappeared.

The downstairs bar was full of mullets, tats, bushy beards, broken teeth, x-rated T-shirts and booze-fuelled "attitude". Heavy-set Pacific Islanders had commandeered the two pool tables. I would be very careful not to invade anyone's space.

I climbed the wooden stairs to the first floor, noting the steps were very solid with good adhesion. The upstairs bar only had about a dozen patrons. Three old geezers sat at the counter, hunched over their beers like boundary riders at the end of a long day, faces exuding loneliness and despair. If one had dropped off his perch, stone dead, I wouldn't have been surprised. I sat next to a decrepit guy with cherry-red eyes and post-mortem whiskers.

The barmaid was a handsome blonde in her early twenties wearing a tank-top and a lascivious navel stud. Sadly, I was too old and boring to attract a woman who was pierced in any place except her earlobes.

She sauntered towards me and spoke in a Scandinavian backpacker accent. "Do you want a beer?"

I struggled to stop the thoughts of a middle-aged pervert appear on my face. "A schooner of Coopers, please."

"OK."

As she pulled the beer, I essayed some small talk. "Not busy tonight?"

"It's always like this on Monday."

I made a crude leap. "I guess it's a lot busier on Saturday nights?"

She put the glass in front of me, took my note and handed back some change. "Of course—we're usually flat out." Like most Nordic backpackers, she spoke better English than the locals.

"Really? You know, a friend of mine was here on a Saturday night, about nine months ago. Fell down the stairs over there. They had to call an ambulance."

She obviously thought I was a weirdo making a weird attempt to chat her up, but couldn't be bothered getting annoyed. "Well, a few guys have fallen down them—usually drunk."

"Really?"

"Yeah." She shrugged. "But I've only been here about three months; don't know what happened before that."

As she sauntered away, I gloomily admired the wiggle of her arse and barely noticed a hand tugging my arm. Eventually, I turned and saw it was attached to a decrepit guy sitting next to me.

A raspy voice. "You wanta know about the guy taken away in the ambo?"

My nerves sizzled. "Yes."

His teeth were well-spaced and rotten. "Yeah, remember that; huge commotion."

My heart slapped against my ribs. "You were here?"

"Course. I'm here every night. This is my regular seat. Nobody takes it."

"What did the guy look like, who fell?"

"Skinny. Freckly. Carrot-topped. Fought with a guy over a girl. Then the bouncers arrived."

His description matched Mick Arnold and the events in question. My throat tightened. Was a miracle unfolding? "Shit. Really? So what happened? Why'd he tumble down the stairs?"

Bloodshot eyes stared out of a fissured face. "Why da ya wanta know?"

"I'm his barrister. He's suing the bouncers and the pub."

"No kidding?"

"Definitely not. What happened? Was he thrown down the stairs?"

The old guy shrugged. "Don't know."

Christ. He said he was here when it happened. He must know. Anger trumped politeness. My tone was textbook querulous. "What the hell do you mean, you don't know?"

"I was here that night. But I went off to the jake to take a piss. Bladder's a fucking mess these days: peeing all the time. My doc gives me pills—but then, that's another story, isn't it? Anyway, I went off to the pisser. And while I was there I heard this big hullabaloo. So I came out and carrot-top was already at the bottom of the stairs. A few minutes later, the ambulance pulled up."

Bloody hell. I demoted him from star witness to silly old coot who I wanted to throw down the stairs. "Did anyone talk about what happened? I mean, did the bouncers say anything?"

He shrugged. "Not really. By the time I got out of the dunny they were all down the bottom of the stairs and the guy was moaning like a baby. I sat down and had another beer. Funny, huh. Nuthin' usually happens. And when it does, I'm having a slash."

Funny as a fire in an orphanage. I frowned. "Why've you bothered telling me any of this?"

A lonely look. "Just trying to be helpful."

I scanned the other patrons and sighed. "Not your fault, I suppose. Were any of these other guys here when it happened?"

The old guy looked around slowly. "Dunno. Didn't pay attention. You'll have to ask them."

"Thanks."

I spent an hour circulating around the bar, asking semi-inebriated patrons if they saw a carrot-top take a tumble nine months ago. Their answers were all as I anticipated.

Eventually, I trudged down the stairs. Near the bottom, I casually noticed, just above the lintel, an unpainted patch with a couple of screw holes. At first, I assumed a light fitting was removed. My mind had almost travelled on when I noted the patch was off-centre. Strange place to position a light.

I had already reached the bottom of the stairs, and was fumbling around for my car keys, when I realised the patch was the logical place for a surveillance camera. Hell.

When I entered the pub, through the downstairs bar, I noticed a surveillance camera set high on a wall. I strolled over to it and studied the bracket. The configuration of screws was exactly the same as above the lintel.

My God. It looked like a surveillance camera once monitored the stairs. When was it taken down? *Before* Mick was injured? Or *afterward* to hide what was filmed?

The defendants were obliged to discover to the plaintiffs any relevant film, but hadn't done so. Why not? Maybe the camera was taken down before Mick's tumble, so there was no film; maybe it was taken down afterward, but the film had been automatically erased; or maybe the defendants still had the relevant film and were deliberately hiding it.

In a blink, Mick's story had gone from preposterous to plausible. Indeed, he might still win his case. Certainly, when I continued cross-examining Taggart tomorrow morning, the patch above the stairs would receive scrupulous attention.

However, my excitement faded fast. I only had a suspicion and no proof. Further, the main game in the hearing was no longer the case itself. I was appearing before a judge who was probably guilty of corruption, vehicular manslaughter *and* homicide. Somehow, I had to deal with those issues without betraying the interests of my client. That would not be easy.

I'd started the day tired, had a shot of adrenalin, and was now utterly exhausted. I slouched outside, my heavy head craving a pillow.

## Chapter 22

To my surprise, I slept for a solid eight hours and woke reasonably fresh. At chambers, I even managed to concentrate on the previous day's transcript, checking for errors and trying to think up fresh questions to ask Taggart.

At 9.40 a.m., I robed and headed for the Supreme Court Building, which looked even more forbidding than usual. Only the brown peddle-dash coating added a touch of whimsy.

The doors of Court 13A were open. Wild Bill and Mild Bill sat at the bar table, their instructing solicitor and clients just behind them. Mick Arnold was also present, sitting in the gallery, still wearing his Wallabies jersey, but Bob Meredith was nowhere to be seen.

Mick was chewing his finger-nails, looking sour, as if he'd finally grasped the downward trajectory of his case.

I said: "Morning. Where's Bob?"

"Dunno."

Meredith's firm usually had several hearings running at once, so he'd probably abandoned us for a more promising one. No point sitting around on his arse behind me, letting the meter ticked over, if he wouldn't eventually get paid for doing nothing. Better to do nothing at a hearing his client was going to win. Indeed, he might not even turn up today, a prospect which did not concern me at all.

As I sat at the Bar table, Wild Bill said to his son. "Got my notepad?"

Mild Bill looked like he'd just heard the first crack of an avalanche. "Umm, no."

Wild Bill's tone sharpened. "I told you to bring it."

"No you didn't."

"Yes I damn well did." Though Wild Bill had always been grumpy, I was starting to wonder if he had frontal lobe disintegration.



Mild Bill flushed with embarrassment, but stood his ground. "You didn't."

"I did. Go back to chambers and get it."

I usually don't let opponents get under my skin. But I was at the end of my tether with Wild Bill, and the rest of the world. I leaned over. "If you need a notepad, I'll lend you one."

Wild Bill's head snapped around. "What'd you say?"

"I said I'll lend you a notepad."

"You stay out of this."

"I can't stay out of it, because I have to listen to your bitching all the time like a whinny kid. It's bloody annoying."

Wild Bill looked like he'd just been slapped. "Shut up."

Mild Bill showed his palms. "Don't worry. I'll pop back and get it." He scuttled out of the court.

I said: "Jesus, you're a class act."

Wild Bill looked furious. "Bugger off."

It was a relief to dispense with niceties and trade a few blows. That was a more honest reflection of our relationship. I started shuffling papers and ignored him. Five minutes later, Mild Bill returned with the notepad, which Wild Bill snatched.

A minute later, a flushed Bob Meredith steamed into the courtroom and sat just behind me. He leaned forward and whispered: "Sorry I'm late. Had to put out a few brush fires at the office: the price of being indispensable. Any luck last night at the pub?"

"Not really. Found no eye-witnesses."

His eyes shone. "Told you that you were wasting your time, didn't I?"

If he'd done a proper investigation six months ago, we might have found an eyewitness. But telling him that would be like punching mist. "Yeah, you did."

He sat back, looking satisfied.

A few minutes later, Justice Sloan entered with his small retinue. Once again, I looked for some hint he knew I had the police charge sheet and saw none. But he caught me staring and gave me a curious look. I quickly sat and re-shuffled my papers.

The judge cleared his throat. "Now gentlemen, any transcript corrections?"

We both identified some errors in the previous day's transcript, argued over what was really said and noted his rulings.

The judge looked at Wild Bill. "Now, Mr Anderson, you'd better put your client back in the witness box."

Wild Bill waved Taggart towards the witness box. The bouncer strutted across the courtroom and sat in the witness box, wondering why he ever thought giving evidence might be difficult. He had this covered.

I feigned boredom. "Now, Mr Taggart, you said yesterday that you're the Head of Security at the Royal George Hotel?"

Big smile. "Correct."

"What duties does that involve?"

"I'm responsible for, umm, employing the other bouncers, rostering them and making sure they do a good job - stuff like that."

"I suppose that, like most pubs, the Royal George has surveillance cameras?"

No flicker of concern. "Yeah, three or four."

"You're responsible for them?"

"Well, there's a techie guy who looks after them."

"But, as Head of Security, you've got to know where the cameras are?"

He was too full of himself to admit he was clueless about the cameras. "Yeah, of course."

"And the technician reports to you?"

"Yeah."

Time for a frontal assault. I grabbed both sides of the lectern, leaned forward and barked. "So you know that, on the night my client was injured on the stairs, there was a surveillance camera filming those stairs, don't you?"

Taggart's startled look said I was on the right track. "Umm, ah, no."

"Come off it Mr Taggart, there was once a surveillance camera at the bottom of the stairs, wasn't there, pointing upwards?"

Time for a cheap trick. I picked up a piece of paper laying on the bar table and put it on the lectern. Hopefully, he'd worry I had a document that proved the existence of the camera.

His eyes followed the piece of paper. "Who told you that?"

"Mr Taggart, it may not seem fair, but you don't ask questions, I do. So answer this one: there was once a surveillance camera at the bottom of the stairs, wasn't there?"

Too many thoughts moved slowly through his brain, causing peak-hour congestion. His eyes glowed like a maze rat. He opened and closed his mouth several times.

"Answer my question Mr Taggart."

He shifted in his seat. "Well, umm, yeah, maybe."

"Not 'maybe'—there *was* one, wasn't there?" I picked up the piece of paper—a blank page I'd doodled on—and squinted at it with a wolfish grin.

Taggart glanced nervously at the piece of paper and nodded reluctantly. "Well, ah, yeah, there was."

"And that camera pointed up the stairs, didn't it?"

"Umm, ah, yeah."

"And it was removed, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Why?"

"Yes, why was it removed?"

Taggart's eyes danced nervously. "You know, I'm not sure."

"Why not?"

A shrug. "I'm just not, OK?"

"But you're responsible for the surveillance cameras, aren't you?"

"Yeah, I suppose so - sorta."

I leaned forward and barked. "Mr Taggart, you previously told this court you're responsible for the surveillance cameras, didn't you?"

Taggart's big frame shrank and his eyes widened. "I guess so."

"So you know why that surveillance camera was taken down, don't you?"

"It was a long time ago. I forget. I guess we just didn't need it there."

"Really? Why didn't you need it there?"

"Umm, hard to say. You don't need cameras everywhere, do ya?"

"Then tell me: *when* was the surveillance camera removed?"

The judge leaned forward and showed some interest.

Taggart rubbed his chin, buying time. "You said when?"

"Yes, Mr Taggart, *when*? It's a simple question."

"Umm, can't remember?"

"You sure about that?"

"Yeah, can't remember."

"Would you say that you have a bad memory?"

He saw that trap. "Nah. Sometimes it's good, and sometimes it's bad."

"Then tell me this: was the camera taken down *before* or *after* Mr Arnold was injured on the stairs?"

That was a no-brainer. "Oh, umm, I'm pretty sure it was taken down before he fell."

"You're sure about that?"

"Yeah, I'm sure."

"OK. So who took the camera down?"

"What do you mean?" he said to give his brain time to catch up.

I barked. "Come on Mr Taggart, you understand English. I said: *who took the camera down*?"

Taggart waved his fists around, clearly wishing he could use them. "Not sure. I think the pub got some sort of electrician to come in and take it down."

"Who was the electrician?"

"His name?"

"Yes."

"Dunno."

I looked up at the judge. "Your Honour, I call for the defendants to produce all documents—including any bills from an electrician—which refer to the removal of the surveillance camera on the stairs."

Wild Bill got to his feet. "Your Honour, I object: my learned friend is calling for irrelevant documents. The witness has already said the camera was taken down *before* the event in question."

I said: "Your Honour, I want to test that evidence."

The judge gave Wild Bill a flat stare. "Mr Anderson, he is entitled to test the evidence. I mean, that's why we're here, isn't it? Your clients should answer the call."

Wild Bill looked like a bull-dog minus the slobber. "I maintain my objection."

"On what basis?"

"This is just a distraction."

A lizard smile. "Really? Well, just to amuse me, please answer the call."

A loud grunt. "As your Honour pleases."

A stony expression. "Good."

I didn't think much of Justice Sloan, particularly after recent events. But, to his credit, he didn't take any rubbish from Wild Bill who, for once, knew he was outgunned.

"But, umm, we obviously don't have any documents here."

"Then get your instructing solicitor to search for them overnight."

"I will." Wild Bill dropped into his chair.

I said: "Your Honour, I also call upon the defendants to produce all surveillance film taken on the night the plaintiff was injured."

Wild Bill bounced back up and with his customary scowl. "Your Honour, I object again. This request is most *improper*."

If I leaned over and punched him I'd probably be struck off. But if I drew blood it would be almost worth it. "Your Honour, I won't even ask my friend to withdraw that slur. I want it to stay on the record so people see how he conducts himself in court."

The judge frowned at Wild Bill. "Mr Kennedy has made a simple request. I expect it to be answered. Please get your instructing solicitor look for any film as well."

"The witness has said there is no film."

"Then what are you worried about? Get your solicitor to check."

Wild Bill frowned. "Yes your Honour."

Having exhausted my cross-examination about the surveillance camera, I asked Taggart whether he had been trained to deal with inebriated patrons. He wasn't. Then I returned to what happened on the night Mick Arnold tumbled down the stairs, hoping he'd contradict his earlier evidence. He stuck to his script.

Just before one o'clock, the judge interrupted my cross-examination. "Mr Kennedy. It's almost time for lunch. I should have mentioned earlier that, this afternoon, I have to hear an application for an urgent injunction. So I'll adjourn this hearing until tomorrow morning. I hope you gentlemen don't mind."

Such interruptions were common. No point complaining.

Wild Bill said: "I don't mind, your Honour."

"Nor do I. Indeed, the interruption will give the defendants' solicitor even more time to look for the documents and film I've requested."

A wisp of a smile flickered on the judge's hard features. "I'm sure he'll give it his full attention. I adjourn until 10 a.m. tomorrow morning." He rose and left the bench.

My cross-examination of Taggart was going well. Mick would probably still lose. But at least he would go down with guns blazing, if that mattered.

Someone slapped my back. I turned and saw Mick Arnold.

"Bloody good stuff, mate—bloody good."

Meredith also popped up. "How did you know about the surveillance camera?"

"Got a whiff of it in the pub last night."

He nodded as if he'd been there holding my hand. "Smart work. Smart work."

Mick said: "Now I'm gonna win, right?"

I shook my head. "Don't get your hopes up. The judge could easily treat the surveillance camera as a red herring."

"You're kidding?"

"Nope. When he writes his judgment, he can arrange the facts any way he likes. You've got to understand that."

"But he's got to do what's right, right?"

"Says who?"

"Shit." Mick wandered off and I put folders back onto the court trolley.

Meredith said: "Well, I think we're going to win."

He'd always been confident the judge—despite being anti-plaintiff—would find for our client. It was as if he had a hold over the judge.

The penny dropped. Maybe Meredith, a close mate of Terry, had known Terry had the police charge sheet for a long time, and entered Terry's room on the morning after Terry was murdered to recover it. If so, he must at least suspect Terry tried to blackmail the judge and got murdered as a consequence.

I opened my mouth to mention the charge sheet, but the words cowered on my tongue. Meredith was not to be trifled with. Proceed cautiously.

I shrugged. "We'll find out soon enough, won't we?"

He wandered off and I pushed the trolley back to my chambers, wondering if Meredith suspected I thought the judge was a murderer. I soon found myself chasing my tail, and gave up.

To distract myself, I tried to work on some other briefs, but kept thinking about Detective Sergeant Metcalfe, back on duty that evening. Should I call him about the charge sheet? Or strangle my scruples and let the whole thing slide?

I should have let it slide. However, like most know-it-alls, I am painfully curious. I also wanted to give the Homicide detectives another target besides me.

Just after six o'clock, my hand reached for the phone receiver several times without picking it up. Finally, I nervously telephoned Croydon Police Station and asked for Detective Sergeant Metcalfe.

A receptionist said: "Please hold while I put you through."

Next, I heard a gruff voice. "Metcalfe here."

"Umm, Detective, my name's Benjamin Kennedy. I'm a barrister."

A pause. "What do you want?"

"I'm inquiring about a drink-driving charge you laid."

"When?"

"About four years ago."

"Really? Who got charged?"

"Umm, you charged a man called Richard Allan Sloan after a car crash in which his wife died."

After a long pause, Metcalfe's voice cracked. "Richard Sloan?"

"Yes."

Another long pause and a hard tone. "You said your name is Kennedy—you're a barrister?"

"Umm, yes".

The line went dead.

Christ. I put down the receiver with a trembling hand. Dumb, dumb, dumb. Panic grabbed my throat. I paced about. It looked like the charge sheet was authentic. So what would the cop do now? Call the judge? Try to silence me? Was I in real danger?

Bloody hell.

No point hanging around in chambers, because I was too frightened to work. I headed for home, knowing I would spend a long night pondering my mortality.

## Chapter 23

After four hours of broken sleep, I got out of bed before dawn and stumbled through my morning rituals. Then I slouched in to chambers, arriving as the sun started painting the sky, still worrying about the cop's abrupt reaction. Had he already told the judge I knew about the charge sheet? If so, the judge must know I suspected him of manslaughter and murder. My God. I'd already had plenty of setbacks in the *Arnold* hearing. But they would seem like golden triumphs if the cop had blabbed and the hearing turned into a screaming ride through hell.

I started reading the previous day's transcript. It took my frazzled mind half-an-hour to read five pages. Eventually, I gave up and tried to read the sports pages of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, and couldn't even absorb them. I kept wondering if the cop contacted the judge and how the judge would behave when he got onto the bench.

To calm my nerves, I exited the building and strolled around the block, weaving between pedestrians. That tired my legs without slowing my brain.

When I returned, I quickly robed and headed for court, arriving twenty minutes early. Neither my client nor instructing solicitor was there. However, Wild Bill stood outside the locked courtroom talking to Mild Bill. I'd almost forgotten about the material the defendants had to search for and produce.

He glanced at me. "Morning Ben."

"Morning. Got the documents I called for?"

He shifted slightly. "No, but we haven't finished looking."

A prickle of suspicion. Wild Bill was the sort of barrister who fastidiously observed all his ethical duties when it didn't matter, and threw them out the window when it did. I said: "Really? When will you finish?"

"Soon—today."

"Good. Let me know when you find something."

I strolled away with an uneasy feeling they'd already found prejudicial documents and were holding them back. But there was no way I could be sure, because physically torturing opponents to extract information is regarded as unprofessional.

Most of my brain was still focused on how the judge would behave when he came onto the bench. I strolled up and down the hallway for about five minutes, trying to calm my nerves without success, until Bob Meredith and Mick Arnold arrived together.

While we chit-chatted about the case, Meredith looked amiable enough, though a couple of times, he seemed to give me a deep stare. Why? Did he know I'd talked to the cop? Was he in on the joke? Or had tiredness stripped me of reason and locked me in a cellar of paranoia.

At ten o'clock, I sat at the Bar table with a thudding heart, praying the cop hadn't talked to the judge.

At least Sloan was, as usual, on time. An unseen hand rapped three times on the door behind the bench. I felt like a parachutist with a tangled chute. We all

rose and the judge entered quickly, wig askew, stony features flushed and eyes down. He sat clumsily and gave me an edgy stare.

My stomach flip-flopped and the hairs of my wig stood up. Jesus, he *knows*. He goddamn well *knows* I've got the charge sheet. The cop must have told him. Hell. I'd been a barrister for so long that courtrooms seemed as comfortable and familiar as my lounge room. My main fear was not feeling nervous. Yet this one had suddenly become dark and frightening. Judges were usually distant figures, embedded in their roles. But now a dark secret had roped me and Sloan together. I could dance around at the end of that rope, but couldn't break it.

We all sat, and I almost missed my chair.

The judge's voice quivered and he looked at a point above my head. "Mr Kennedy."

I stumbled aloft. "Yes, your Honour."

"Umm, do want to resume your cross-examination of the first defendant?"

I had half-expected him to accuse me of harbouring false suspicions about him. So his mundane question took me aback. Whatever was happening behind the scenes, the show must go on. Somehow, I had to pull myself together. I avoided his gaze and spoke with a burr. "I do your Honour. Umm, but first I renew my call for the documents and film I sought yesterday."

Wild Bill got to his feet and seemed to catch the outbreak of nerves. "Ah, your Honour, the defendants have nothing to produce at this stage. However, my instructing solicitor is still making inquiries."

"I understand."

Wild Bill's rare tentativeness heightened my suspicion. But I couldn't accuse him of lying—not yet, anyway. I'd await developments and, when an opening appeared, I'd show he had no monopoly on character assassination.

Though the judge had recovered some composure, he still didn't look me in the eye. "Mr Kennedy, you have your answer. Are you ready to resume your cross-examination?"

"Yes, your Honour."

The judge tersely recalled Taggart to the witness box and reminded him he was still under oath.

My cross-examination of Taggart was scratchy, to say the least. While the judge's eyes bored into me, angry and apprehensive, my mind kept wandering back to the dark information I had about him, and how it could destroy my career or even my life. Several times I couldn't think of my next question and had to shuffle papers on the bar table, pretending to look for something, while I scoured my brain. Often I didn't comprehend the witness's answer and had to ask him to repeat it. Somehow, though, I managed to question him about the removal of the surveillance camera. For half-an-hour, he stuck doggedly to his previous evidence and refused to acknowledge its gaps and inconsistencies. Tiredness and pressure made me narky: a couple of times I half-shouted.

It's always dangerous to cross-examine for too long and give the witness a chance to patch up his mistakes. I turned to the judge: "Your Honour, I cannot complete my cross-examination until the defendants answer my call for film and documents. However, subject to that, I have no further questions."

"Alright." He turned to Taggart. "You may leave the witness box, though you are not excused: you may need to be recalled."

Taggart scampered to the back of the courtroom and Wild Bill called the second defendant to give evidence.

When Wild Bill tried to elicit evidence from Desmond Fuolau, it was obvious why Fuolau was a bouncer rather than, say, a university professor. Many of his questions just bounced off Fuolau's blank expression. It was as if nobody had told him why we were all in the courtroom. Eventually, Wild Bill got frustrated and started asking grossly leading questions.

I objected. "Your Honour, if my learned friend is going to give evidence in these proceedings, he should get into the witness box and do it on oath."

The judge gave me a particularly venomous look. "If I don't give Mr Anderson some latitude, we'll be here forever, and I definitely don't want that."

I didn't want that either and sat down.

When it finally emerged, Fuolau's evidence in chief was similar to Taggart's. He claimed they went up to the first-floor bar and found Mick Arnold drunkenly pushing and shoving another patron. They calmed him down and he agreed to leave. However, at the top of the stairs, he tripped and fell.

Wild Bill said: "And your evidence is that you didn't touch him, isn't it?"

"That's right. Total truth."

"Thank you."

Wild Bill sat and the judge gave me a hooded stare. "Mr Kennedy, any cross-examination?"

I climbed to my feet. "Yes, your Honour."

As a party to the proceedings, Fuolau had been entitled to stay in Court when I cross-examined Taggart. So it must have soaked into even his tiny brain that the presence of a surveillance camera on the stairs was a big issue.

I had almost forgotten the monster lurking behind the scenery and immediately hit my stride. "There are surveillance cameras at the pub, aren't there?"

He shrugged. "Yeah, course."

"Do you have anything to do with them?"

"Nah, course not. I'm just a bouncer. Don't know nothing about that sort of stuff. Not interested, neither."

"But you know that there was once a surveillance camera on the stairs of the pub, don't you?"

"Yeah, think so."

"And there isn't one now, is there?"

He paused. "Umm, no."

"When was that surveillance camera taken down?"

"Oh, long time ago."

"You mean *before* Mr Arnold suffered his injury?"

He looked suspicious, wondering why I was prompting him to mimic the evidence Taggart gave to support their defence. "Umm, yeah—definitely."

"Mr Arnold, you've already said you had nothing to do with the surveillance cameras, haven't you?"

He chewed his lower lip. "Yeah, I said that."

"And that you weren't interested in the surveillance cameras?"



He chewed a fingernail. "Yeah, that's right."

"So you've really got no idea when that camera was taken down, have you?"

The witness saw he was trapped and produced a predictable lie. "Yes I do, cause I seen it done."

"That's just a lie, isn't it?"

Fuolau crossed his arms like a petulant child. "Nah, it's not."

"You mean you remember that, even though you had nothing to do with the surveillance cameras and weren't interested in them?"

"Yeah, I do."

"You're just making this up to help your case, aren't you?"

"No, I'm not."

I leaned forward. "Alright. Then tell me, do you recall the night Mr Arnold was injured?"

His pondered that for a while. "Yeah, pretty good."

I cross-examined him about that night and his answers were similar to Taggart's. Thus he also had trouble explaining why the inebriated and volatile Mick Arnold meekly agreed to leave the pub with no physical coercion.

While I cross-examined, the judge spent more time staring sourly at me rather than the witness, which was disconcerting, to say the least.

Eventually, to my relief, the wall-clock showed it was four o'clock. The judge also noted the time. "Gentlemen, I see it's almost four. I'll adjourn until ten tomorrow morning." He gave me one last frosty stare and scuttled off the bench.

When he'd gone, I breathed a deep sigh.

Wild Bill leaned towards me. "Jesus, he was in a shitty mood today, wasn't he?"

Now, I did some lying: "Really? I didn't notice."

Wild Bill again looked uncharacteristically nervous. "Look, there's something I want to talk to you about."

"What?"

"Let's go outside. Just you and me."

"OK."

We strolled out into the hallway, where Wild Bill stopped, stuffed his meaty hands into the pockets of his pinstripe bar trousers and stared down at the toe of his well-polished right shoe. "Look, umm, I've been wondering if we can settle this case."

That surprised me. My cross-examinations had done some damage, but hadn't counterbalanced Mick Arnold's disastrous performance in the witness box.

I said dryly: "Of course we can, if you make the right offer."

First, he had to soften me up, in the time-honoured way. "Well, before I make one you should know I've advised the insurance company it shouldn't offer a cent—not a cent. I mean, let's be frank, I butchered your little bastard in the witness box. But you know what insurance companies are like: sometimes they just look at the size of a claim and decide to spend a bit of money to get rid of it. So I've been instructed to offer your client \$200,000 including costs to go away. I mean, if I was him, I'd grab the money and run."

If Mick Arnold won the case and was awarded full damages, he'd probably get about \$1.1 million, plus his legal costs. So the offer of \$200,000 was pretty measly, particularly after Meredith & Co's fees (probably at least \$100,000) and

mine (about \$30,000) were taken out. But significantly, Wild Bill *didn't* say his offer was *final*. Thus he'd effectively told me that, if Mick made a decent counter-offer, the insurance company *would* go higher. The big question was, how much higher?

I feigned disappointment. "Piss-weak offer. I mean my client's legals are almost that much. I'll get some instructions."

"Do that."

Mick sat on a foam bench, with Bob Meredith next to him rummaging through his briefcase. I strolled over to them. "Well boys, the breaking news is that Wild Bill just made a settlement offer."

Mick's eyes widened. "You're kidding?"

"Nope. He offered you \$200,000."

Until now, Mick had greedily insisted he wanted at least \$1 million. However, his dire predicament seemed to have sunk in, because he looked pleased. "Shit, that's a lot of money."

"Not really."

"Why not?"

Meredith interjected. "Out of that \$200,000 you'll have to pay us. So you'd probably end up with about a quarter of that amount."

Mick looked annoyed. "Fifty thou?"

"Yes."

"Shit, you boys charge a lot."

Bob frowned. He often had to explain the harsh facts of litigation to naïve clients. "Look son, so far we've charged nothing. We've taken a punt on your claim. But litigation is expensive—very expensive—and we've both got bills to pay, like everybody else. In the light of that, I think our fees are very reasonable."

Mick looked doubtful. "I suppose so."

I said: "Don't worry, \$200,000 is obviously their opening offer. They've got more in the kitty. The big question is: how much more. So tell me: how much do you want in your pocket, after paying us?"

"If I could take home about 200 grand I'd be pretty bloody happy. I mean, the judge is a prick and really hates me. He's gonna slot me, right?"

Everyone around me was acting strangely except Mick, who had become an island of common sense. Normally, I'd have agreed with him. Sloan was anti-plaintiff and Mick's performance in the witness box was a train-wreck. But recent events had rocked me. It seemed that Terry Riley had used the charge sheet to blackmail the judge. And now the judge knew I had it. Maybe that put Mick in the box seat. It was hard to know. Further, Wild Bill was behaving suspiciously. After braying loudly that Mick wouldn't get a cent, he'd made a decent opening offer. Was that because my cross-examination did some damage? Or was he worried about something else? Maybe his solicitor had found the film and documents I called for and he wanted to settle before he had to hand them over.

I forced myself to stop speculating. Mick certainly wouldn't thank me if, on the basis of wild hunches, I advised him to reject a good offer and he lost. I had to keep reminding myself that Mick got smashed in the witness box and couldn't afford to be too greedy.

I said: "So you'd be happy to settle for \$350,000 and walked away with about \$200,000?"

Mick smiled. "Yeah. I'd be bloody happy with that."

A doubt tickled the back of my mind: maybe \$350,000 was too little. But Mick was happy with that amount and I couldn't think of a cogent reason to discourage him. I turned to Meredith. "What do you think—\$350,000 enough?"

Bob crossed his arms and tried to look thoughtful. If Mick settled for \$350,000, Meredith & Co would get paid in full. So Meredith certainly didn't want Mick holding out for more. "Ben, you've done an excellent job. No doubt about that. But Mick did poorly in the witness box and litigation is uncertain. You never know what might happen. I think \$350,000 would be an excellent figure."

Mick nodded and turn to me. "I agree, so ask them for \$350,000."

I smiled and shook my head. "That's not how the game's played. They'll think that's your starting offer rather than your bottom line. You want \$350,000, you've got to ask for about \$500,000, because they'll assume you want to settle half-way between your offer and theirs'."

Mick shook his head. "Jesus, you guys play bullshit games."

I shrugged. "I don't make the rules."

"OK then, ask for half-a-mill."

Wild Bill was now chatting with Mild Bill and their instructing solicitor. I strolled over and took him aside. "I've talked to my client. Your offer's rejected. He'll accept \$500,000 inkle costs."

Now it was Wild Bill's turn to feign disappointment. He frowned. "Look, there's no way the insurer will pay anything like that. We might have a bit more money in the kitty, but not that much. That's preposterous. Your offer's rejected."

I shrugged. "OK. I'll see you tomorrow morning."

I strolled back to Mick and described Wild Bill's reaction.

He scowled. "What happens now?"

"The ball's in their court. Got to wait for their counter-offer."

"What if they don't make one?"

"I'm pretty sure they will."

"Why don't you just say I'll take less?"

"Because, if you bid against yourself, you'll look piss-weak. Don't worry, they'll make another offer. Just a question of how much."

"OK."

As he strolled off towards the lifts, I noticed Meredith was studying me closely, as if we'd only just met. Jesus. I wondered if he, as well as the judge, somehow knew I had the police charge sheet and suspected the judge was a murderer. I prayed I was being paranoid, but my hopes weren't high.

He broke the spell by glancing at his watch. "I'd better get back to HQ and make sure the lazy bastards are working."

"I'll come out with you."

We silently strolled outside, where I said goodbye and crossed the road. I briefly wondered if \$350,000 was too little to settle for, then defaulted to obsessing about the judge's large catalogue of dark secrets. He obviously knew that I knew about them. So what the hell should I do? Surely, I couldn't just sit back and wait for

him to give judgment in the case. Somehow, before the hearing resumed tomorrow morning, I had to work out a plan. That wouldn't be easy.

I got out of the lift and headed for my room, so preoccupied that, at first, I didn't understand what Denise said.

I looked at her. "What?"

She waved a message slip at me. "You've got a call."

"Who from?"

"Justice Sloan's associate."

God almighty. Hand trembling, I took the message. "Thanks."

"She wants you to call her back right away."

I scuttled into my room, shut the door and flung my wig and gown onto an armchair. I shakily picked up the telephone receiver and dialled the number on the message.

A brusque-sounding woman answered. "Hello, Justice Sloan's Associate."

"Hello, Ben Kennedy."

"Ah, Mr Kennedy, his Honour wants you to come over here for a chat."

"You mean, with Mr Anderson?"

She hesitated. "No, he didn't mention him. He just wants you."

I'd never heard of a judge, during a hearing, seeing one barrister in his chambers without the other. A stab of panic. He obviously wanted to talk about his drink-driving charge. There could be no other reason. My voice seemed far off.

"Umm, you sure about that?"

"Yes. His Honour said it is about a personal matter—not the case."

"Alright. When does he want to see me?"

"Right now, if possible."

"Right now?"

"Yes, right now."

"OK, alright, I'm on my way."

A sweaty hand put down the receiver. Shit. A small tape-recorder lay on my desk. Should I secretly tape my conversation with the judge? Prudence said I should. But my ingrained respect for judicial officers made me leave it behind.

I passed Denise, touching up her make-up. She glanced up. "Where are you going?"

"To see Justice Sloan."

"OK, I'm off home. See you tomorrow."

"Sure."

Heart thumping, hands shaking, still wearing my bar jacket, I trudged back across Phillip Street into the Supreme Court Building, which looked even more brutal than usual. I desperately wanted to turn back. But deference to judicial authority and morbid curiosity drove me forward.

I went up to the 13th floor and used an intercom to contact the Associate. She asked me to wait. A few minutes later, a side-door opened and a woman in her mid-forties, with matronly features and a permanently dour expression, stepped out. Like most Judge's Associates, she was a combination of Praetorian Guard and typist. I bet she would lay down her life for the judge, and he would gladly let her, without a word of thanks.

She didn't know why I was there, but sensed I was not a positive force in her judge's life and eyed me suspiciously before crisply commanding me to follow her. She led me down a hallway past three judges' suites until we reached Sloan's. She guided me past her desk and into his room. Law books lined every wall, except the far one which had a long window overlooking the Eastern Suburbs and Pacific Ocean beyond.

Sloan stood in his bar jacket and bar trousers, staring out the window with slumped shoulders. His grey hair had the lank, sweaty sheen that comes from wearing a wig all day. He turned and stared at me, expression flecked with malice and fear. Instead of shaking my hand, he pointed towards two dilapidated armchairs near the window. "Take a seat."

As I obeyed, the Associate asked if we wanted tea or coffee.

The judge's head snapped around. "No, we're fine."

She looked concerned. "Will I be needed?"

He fidgeted. "No. Kindly leave us alone and shut the door."

She frowned and obeyed.

The judge sat and his tired eyes dug into me. "You're obviously wondering why I wanted to see you?"

"Yes."

He shifted heavily in his chair. "It's because I got a telephone call this morning from, umm, a Detective Sergeant Metcalfe."

I'd strongly suspected the cop talked to the judge. Now, with the truth out, I felt an odd mixture of panic and relief. A hot wind blew across my tongue. "Really?"

"Yes. He said you asked him about a charge sheet involving, umm, involving the accident in which my wife died. Is that true?"

Sweat stuck my hands to the leather armrests. My tongue baked even further. Still, words crawled out, as if to escape the heat. "That's right. I found it in one of Terry's law reports."

I studied him closely. Judges and barristers are good at masking their feelings, and he was better than most. But he was no longer an alpha-male judge. His jowls looked droopy, he'd missed some stubble when shaving and sweat popped out on his brow. Even his voice shook. "S-s-o you still have the charge sheet?"

"Yes."

"With you?"

"No."

"I'd appreciate it if ... if ... you'd give it to me."

His obvious fear calmed my nerves and helped me focus on my cross-examination. I leaned forward and stared hard. "Your Honour, I don't intend to do anything until you explain to me what happened."

"When?"

"When your wife died."

He stared at me for almost 20 seconds, wondering what to say, before his face crumpled slightly and voice cracked. "What happened? I made a mistake—a terrible mistake—and I regret it. But that's behind me."

"You mean, you were drunk when your wife died?"

He shivered and looked away. "I don't want to talk about that."

"You have to, because I've got the charge sheet; you talk to me or you talk to someone else, like a cop."

Another long and empty stare. "Well, I... I... I... went to a dinner party with my wife. I, umm, had a few drinks. She did too. Then I drove home. It wasn't far. I didn't think there would be a problem."

"Until you hit a telegraph pole?"

"Yes," he mumbled.

Though I'd never liked him, I pitied the burden of guilt he carried. "And after the accident, you were taken to a police station, right, and charged with drink driving?"

A long pause and slow nod. "Yes."

"Then the charge was dropped. Why? What happened?"

He slowly shook his head. "I don't want to talk about that."

I spoke sternly. "Judge, you can do what you like. But unless you tell me what happened—what really happened—I can guarantee the charge sheet will get a wide distribution."

Fear blazed in his eyes. "You wouldn't dare."

"Yes, I would. Tell me what happened."

After weighing me up, he sank back into his armchair, voice flat. "The police reviewed the charge and decided they wouldn't proceed—decided that, umm, the breathalyser reading was faulty."

"Bullshit. You measured 0.16. It couldn't be that wrong. You got Terry involved, didn't you—to help you out?"

"No I didn't."

He'd stopped being a judge and was now one of the many liars I battled with day in and day out. I started to rise. "Well, I suppose that's something the cops—the real cops—can sort out."

He held up a hand. "Stop. OK, OK, I got Terry involved." A long sigh. "You see, straight after the accident, I was a total mess. So I called Terry and asked him to come to the police station and help. When he arrived, he spoke to the duty sergeant and persuaded him to, umm, drop the charge."

I dropped back into my chair. "How?"

"Threw his weight around. Told them they couldn't charge a Supreme Court judge with drink driving; said they'd destroy their careers; told them to forget the whole thing."

"And they agreed?"

"Yes, eventually."

"But Terry kept the charge sheet - why?"

The judge shrugged. "I don't know. He made the police hand over all their records, including the charge sheet and the breathalyser reading. Later, he told me he'd destroyed them. He obviously lied."

"Then, despite knowing your dirty little secret, he kept appearing before you, didn't he?"

The judge looked surprised. "Umm, yes, a few times."

"No, more than that. I looked on the internet: he appeared before you at least seven times."

A shrug. "Maybe."

"And won all seven, didn't he?"

The judge hunched over and looked at a spot between his shoes, like a battered boxer between rounds. "Maybe. But, umm, I can assure you he never asked for any favours; never asked me to decide a case one way or the other—never."

"Funnily enough, I believe you, because he didn't have to ask, did he? I mean, he had so much dirt on you that he knew you'd play ball. However, your biggest worry isn't how you decided those cases."

"What do you mean?"

I leaned forward and took a deep breath. "What I mean is, you obviously had a strong motive to kill Terry."

To my surprise, the judge looked shocked rather than afraid. "You're being ridiculous."

"No, I'm not. Terry was desperate for money. If he didn't pay the tax office, he'd go bankrupt and lose his practising certificate. He couldn't cope with that. So he tried to blackmail you, didn't he? He said that if you didn't pay his tax debt, he'd use the charge sheet to destroy you: if he went down the toilet, he'd take you with him."

A blank stare.

I said: "That's what you two argued about at the Bench & Bar dinner isn't it? He wanted you to give him some money - otherwise, he'd blow the whistle."

A long pause and a croaky tone. "Yes, he did. But I just didn't have the sort of money he needed."

"So you decided to kill him?"

The judge's face regained its colour and animation. He half-rose and yelled: "That's a lie. Totally untrue. I didn't kill him. Yes, he tried to blackmail me. But I had nothing to do with his death."

"Really? Then where were you on the Sunday afternoon he died?"

A tight smile. "That's easy. I went to a legal conference in Coffs Harbour. Was there the whole day. In fact, I gave a speech at about three o'clock. You can check if you want. It won't be hard. There were about 60 barristers and solicitors in the room. So, you see, I have a perfect alibi." An odd note of triumph crept into his voice.

I was so certain he killed Terry that his blunt denial left me stunned. "An alibi?"

"Yes and, like I said, it's easy to check: speak to one of the lawyers at the conference. You're barking up the wrong tree."

I regained some composure. "Maybe. Or maybe you got someone else to do your dirty work."

"Don't be ridiculous." He leaned forward imploringly. "So please, please, give me the charge sheet and forget about this."

I was strongly tempted to do what he wanted and put this nightmare behind me. However, Sloan didn't deserve to remain a judge: he killed his wife while drink-driving and favoured Terry's clients. Further, I still wasn't sure if he killed Terry or not. And finally, if I buried the charge sheet while still appearing before him, I'd be as corrupt as he was.

I said: "Sorry, but I've got no choice. I'm going to tell the police about the charge sheet. They can work out what happened at the police station and whether you murdered Terry."

His whole face vibrated with fear as he contemplated his bejewelled career plunging into an abyss. "No, please don't do that."

He'd sat on the bench for many years, wielding absolute authority in his courtroom, and loved the status. The barristers who appeared before him were paid to pamper his ego. Yet now he'd tumbled from heaven and looked embarrassingly small. I shook my head. "Sorry. I've got no choice."

He half-rose from his armchair, eyes bulging and roared, "But you can't do that—you can't. I'll be ruined—ruined. I've had a great career; I've been a judge for almost ten years. You can't just destroy all that. You can't. I made a mistake and my wife died, and I've got to live with that. But I didn't kill Terry, I promise you. I had nothing to do with that. I don't deserve to be destroyed."

His sense of entitlement was rather impressive, in a way. I even felt some sympathy, but wouldn't be bullied. "Sorry, but I've got no choice. I've got to turn this information over to the police."

His eyes gleamed and he licked his lips. "But you're still appearing before me."

A shiver barrelled down my spine. "So what?"

He leaned forward, conspiratorially. "If you go to the police, I'll have to stop hearing the case."

True. In fact, he'd have to stop hearing any cases.

I said: "What're you saying?"

"You're doing well. Your cross-examination's been very effective. Why ruin things when you're so close to winning?"

Now he was trying to bribe me. Christ. I'd walked into a minefield. I shouldn't have agreed to see him in chambers. Incredibly foolish.

My tone was sharp. "You're trying to corrupt me."

He shook his head nervously. "No, I'm just telling you what I'll probably decide if I keep hearing the case—nothing more."

"Forget it."

His scowled. "You ruin me, you'll ruin yourself."

Another shiver chased the first. "What do you mean?"

"You can give up any hope of taking silk or getting a judicial appointment. I know a lot of people in this game—*important* people—and they won't forgive you. I'll make sure of that. But, if you play ball, I'll do everything I can to help you."

Our conversation was careering out of control. Definitely time to go. The room seemed drained of oxygen. I rose unsteadily, shaking my head. "We've talked enough. I don't want any special favours, understand. See you in court tomorrow morning."

I strode towards the door.

He raised his hand. "Wait."

I shook my head and yelled, "No, no."

I pulled open the door and strode past a surprised looking Associate. Out in the hallway, I realised I'd almost stopped breathing and desperately sucked in air. My trembling hand pushed the lift button.

A minute later, I spilled out onto Phillip Street. The fresh ocean breeze funnelling through it failed to cool me down. I'd just confirmed the judge was drunk when he crashed his car and killed his wife, and had a fantastic motive to kill Terry. True, the judge sounded very confident about his alibi, which would be



easy to check. But it wasn't my job to do that. My top priority was to contact Detective Sergeant Malloy and dump this scandal in his lap. And maybe, for added protection, I'd put a senior silk in the loop. The President of Bar Association, Derek Tucker, asked me to keep him informed if there were any developments concerning Terry. I'd make him wish he hadn't made that request.

If I continued to appear before the judge I might be accused—wrongly—of using the dirt in my possession for leverage. So when the hearing resumed tomorrow morning, I would have to ask him to abort it. I wasn't sure what pretext I would give. I certainly didn't want to reveal his dirty secrets in open court. Maybe I would accuse him of bias or something like that. Hopefully, he would jump at the chance to terminate the hearing.

Of course, I wouldn't need to make that application if the case settled before the hearing resumed. Fortunately, it looked like Wild Bill and my client were both anxious to compromise. Indeed, I was strongly tempted to call Wild Bill that evening and try to bridge the gap between us. No, I'd look desperate, and that could make it harder to settle. I had to hold my nerve and wait for his counter-offer.

I used a mill key to re-enter my building. When I got out of the lifts, Thomas Erskine Chambers was semi-dark and deserted. I pushed open my door, mentally rehearsing what I'd tell Malloy on the phone and immediately saw my room was a shambles. Dozens of books and the contents of my desk drawers were strewn across the floor. What the fuck...

Then I noticed Bob Meredith, standing in the far corner, arms akimbo, as if waiting for me, unperturbed about the mess. Did he create it? And, if so, why?

My voice rattled. "Bob, what the hell's going on? Did you make this mess?"

He shrugged. "Some of it. But my friend behind you made the most."

Shit. I turned and saw a huge bald brute, wearing a white T-shirt and jeans. His heavily indented skull sat on huge sloping shoulders; a savage scar bisected his right cheek and mangled part of his lip. A swastika tattoo pulsed on his neck. In short, a monstrosity.

My heart went into overdrive. Why the hell had my instructing solicitor and this one-man horror show turned over my room? And was I in great danger? I was pretty sure I wouldn't like the answer to either question.

The monster growled. "Don't fuckin' move."

"Jesus Christ. Who're you?"

As I turned to dash from the room, he took a few long strides and blocked my path. "You're goin' nowhere." His grammar terrified me.

I turned back to Meredith, my face trembling and voice white. "Bob, what's happening here? Who is this guy?"

Meredith sounded chilly. "His name's Gary Schwartz. I've defended him several times when he was charged with armed robbery or GBH. In fact, he's just finished four years inside for assaulting and robbing a guy in Kings Cross."

A cold hand stroked the back of my neck. "Yes, and what the hell's he doing here?"

"He's here to help me recover the charge sheet."

Shit. I'd been right to suspect that Meredith knew about the charge sheet. "What charge sheet?"

"Don't play dumb. Ten minutes ago, you discussed it with the judge. In fact, he just called me: said you wouldn't hand it over." Meredith frowned. "So give it to me."

"Why do you want it?"

Meredith crossed his arms and smirked. "Isn't it obvious?"

"No, it doesn't involve you."

"Not directly. But Terry wasn't the only old pal the judge called when he got arrested. He also asked me to go to the police station. Shit, he was desperate—paralysed with fear."

The judge didn't tell me that Meredith also attended the police station, but had no reason to.

I said: "And when you got there, you and Terry persuade the cops to drop the charge against the judge?"

"Yes."

"How'd you manage that?"

"It wasn't hard. We made a big scene. Said they couldn't charge a Supreme Court judge; that if they did, they'd end up playing the triangle in the police band."

"And it worked?"

"Of course. When it finally dawned on them who they'd pinged, they pissed themselves. Agreed to forget the whole thing."

"How did Terry end up with the charge sheet?"

"Don't know. Sneaky bastard must have trousered it."

"And after that, Terry kept appearing before the judge, with you instructing him?"

"Yeah."

"And you won every case."

A smug look. "Our record was good."

Now everything made sense: Meredith wanted to recover the charge sheet because, if it became public, he'd be accused of using it to blackmail the judge and might even get gaol time.

I said: "Everything was going swimmingly, wasn't it, until Terry got into financial trouble?"

"Yes. He was terrified of being struck off. Shit scared. So he tried to gouge money out of Dick and me. Threatened to destroy us if we didn't help. He said he had nothing to lose—that if he blew the whistle, he wouldn't suffer, because he was going down the tube anyway."

I could easily imagine the usually affable Terry, threatened with professional disgrace, getting feral. His ego feasted on being a barrister.

I said: "You could have helped him pay his tax debt. You're very wealthy."

Meredith frowned. "Yes, I am, because I don't pay other people's debts or let them stand over me, understand?"

I did. Meredith was a tough cookie. Nobody blackmailed him. Indeed, anyone who did could easily end up, well, dead.

I said: "And that's why you murdered Terry, isn't it—to protect yourself and the judge?"

Meredith looked shocked. "You're joking, right? I didn't murder him."

"Bullshit. You and the judge are the obvious candidates."

A grim smile. "Maybe, but I didn't. I mean, I'd love to meet the bastard who did and buy him a beer. Terry was an old mate. But after the way he behaved—trying to gouge money out of us—he deserved what he got. Despite that, I didn't kill him. Nor did the judge." Meredith laughed. "In fact, on the afternoon Terry got murdered, I played in a four-ball tournament at the Royal Australian. Two playing partners were barristers and the other was a dentist. I shot an 82. You're barking up the totally wrong tree."

I bet he sent Gary Schwartz to do his dirty work. However, I finally realised that accusing them of murder could be a very unhealthy activity, particularly with Schwartz in the room. "Then why do you want the charge sheet back?"

"Because I don't want to be accused of helping the judge cover up his drink-driving or corruption. The pissants in the Law Society will strike me off for that. I won't let that happen, understand?"

"But I don't have the charge sheet."

Meredith snarled. "Crap. You've got it. I know because you told Metcalfe and the judge that you do."

I hid the charge sheet in Volume 1 of my New South Wales Law Reports. If Meredith and his goon kept pulling down books, they'd soon find it. Still, why help them? "Yeah, but it's not here."

"Where is it?"

"I won't tell you."

A shrug. "Then we'll have to continue our search."

"No you won't."

"Really? Who's going to stop us?"

"I will."

"Don't make me laugh." He stepped over to the bookshelves, pulled another law report off the shelves and flipped through it before dropping it onto the floor.

I couldn't let this nasty little solicitor push me around in my own chambers. I briefly forgot the brute behind me, took a couple of steps forward and grabbed his arm as it reached for another book. "Stop."

Meredith looked surprised and tried to snatch his arm away.

I heard Schultz take a couple of steps behind me. A thick arm with a massive tattooed bicep and network of ropey veins wrapped itself around my neck like a python and squeezed my wind-pipe. Fuck. Schultz was twice as strong as me, or more. If he flexed the bicep, he'd snap my neck.

Schultz grunted. "Leave him alone."

I squealed with pain and released Meredith's arm. My vision narrowed and motes swirled in front of my eyes. Soon I wouldn't be able to talk, or even breathe. "Let me go," I gasped.

Meredith looked up at the thug. "Don't choke him to death—but don't let him go either."

The thug relaxed his grip, slightly. I sucked in air and tried to regularise my breathing. Oxygen restored some basic brain functions.

A female voice behind us yelled. "Let him go."

The thug looked over his shoulder. "Fuck off."

I heard a couple of quick steps. The thug yelped, let go of me and grabbed his thigh. "Bitch."

I lurched against a bookshelf, gasping for breath and saw that the intruder was Barbara Carmichael, big-eyed and flushed. She must have kicked Schultz in the thigh.

"Get out of here," I croaked.

As Schultz took a couple of steps towards her, she yelped and retreated. He was reaching out to grab her when Meredith yelled. "Stop, stop—don't touch her."

Schultz turned and looked puzzled. "You sure?"

For the first time, Meredith looked uncomfortable. His tweed trilby sat on the window-ledge. He picked it up. "Yes, it's time for us to go. Come on." He edged around me towards the door.

Jesus. After trashing my room and soiling his thug onto me, he was about to slip away scot-free. I barked: "You're not going anywhere. Stay here."

He kept sliding away, hand crushing his trilby. "No, I think we've finished our, umm, chat."

"You're kidding? You got this thug to attack me."

Meredith shook his head vehemently. "You're exaggerating. Gary never intended to hurt you—and he didn't, right? Anyway, goodbye." He glanced at Schultz, who looked ready to beat someone—anyone—to death. "Come on Gary, time to go."

Meredith disappeared out the door and Schultz reluctantly followed.

When they'd disappeared, I turned to Barbara. "You OK?"

Her eyes were bright and she trembled slightly. She nodded dumbly and took several deep breaths. "Yes, think so."

"Thanks for your help. You kicked him, right?"

"Yes, hard as I could. What the hell's going on?"

"That's a long story."

"Tell me."

"I will. First though, I've got to make a phone call."

I should have dumped this mess into Detective Sergeant Malloy's lap long ago; I took out his business card and dialled his mobile phone number.

He answered: "Malloy here." In the background, a television murmured and a child yelled happily.

I sighed with relief. "Detective, Ben Kennedy, the barrister."

A guarded tone. "How can I help?"

"Umm, I just caught two guys searching my chambers."

"Really? You mean, without permission?"

"Yes."

"Why did they do that?"

"They were looking for a police charge sheet. I think, it's the reason Terry Riley got killed."

A long pause. "You're serious?"

"Yes, though it's a long story."

"Who were the guys searching your room?"

"A solicitor called Meredith and a big thug called Schultz."

"You think they killed Terry Riley?"

"I think the thug did." Why mention there was also a Supreme Court judge involved.

A pause. "You're still at your chambers?"

"Yes."

"And they've gone?"

"Yes."

"Alright. Stay there. I'm on my way. Be there in fifteen minutes, or less."

"I'll see you downstairs and let you in."

I turned off the phone and turned to Barbara. "Why'd you turn up?"

"I had a drink with a friend who's going overseas. Then I came back to collect my backpack. Saw the light on in your room and decided to say hello. Instead, I found you getting molested. Was he going to hurt you?"

"Depends. If Meredith had told him too, he would have broken my neck."

"What's this all about?"

Instead of answering, I used a small step-ladder to drag down Volume 1 of the New South Wales Law Reports. I removed the charge sheet and slipped it inside my jacket.

Barbara said: "What's that?"

"It's what they were searching for."

"What is it?"

"I've got to go downstairs and let the cop into the building. I'll tell on the way."

We strolled across the deserted floor to the lift. She looked remarkably composed for someone who'd just kicked a thug in the thigh. I'd thought she was nice and a bit flaky. Now I realised she had a ribbon of steel running through her.

As we got into the lift, I described how I found the drink-driving charge sheet and the complications that ensued. I finished my story out on the pavement. I'm sure that, if she hadn't recently seen me get man-handled by a monster, she'd have accused me of pulling her leg.

Finally, she put her hands on hips. "Why didn't you tell me any of this before?"

That option never crossed my mind. "Because I didn't have time."

"God, it's all so unbelievable. So you think the judge killed Terry to stop him blabbing about the charge sheet?"

"I don't think the judge did the dirty work himself. Nor did Meredith. It sounds like they've both got good alibis. I reckon they got Schultz to kill Terry. Anyway, that's now a matter for the police. They can work out who's responsible."

She smiled wryly. "Meredith won't brief you anymore."

"Good. He was always a slow payer."

She frowned. "You're still appearing before Sloan, aren't you?"

"Yes, back before him tomorrow morning."

"Bet you're not looking forward to that."

"I'd rather chew glass."

A grim smile. "What are you going to do?"

I shrugged. "Ask him to abort the hearing."

"On what grounds?"

"Dunno. I'll think of something."

## Chapter 24

When Detective Sergeant Malloy arrived, I introduced him to Barbara Carmichael and we all caught a lift up to my room, where he studied the shambles. "Quite a mess. You'd better tell me what's going on." He looked at Barbara. "I want to chat with Mr Kennedy alone if you don't mind. I'll chat with you later."

She shrugged. "Fair enough. I've got some work to do. I'll be in my room."

The detective and I sat on the couch in the reception area. I explained how I found the drink-driving charge sheet in one of Terry Riley's law reports and it showed that Justice Sloan was intoxicated when he crashed his car and killed his wife. I described how Terry and Bob Meredith went to the police station and helped cover up the crime.

I said: "Terry obviously kept the charge sheet in case he needed it later. When he got into financial difficulties, he used it to blackmail the judge into bailing him out. However, instead of playing ball, the judge obviously murdered him - or, at least, arranged for him to be murdered."

The detective nodded. "OK, so what happened tonight?"

I described my meeting with the judge and how, when I returned to my room, I caught Meredith and his henchman searching for the charge sheet. Then I described how I Barbara rescued me.

The cop sucked in his cheeks and looked like I'd just handed him a spluttering stick of dynamite, which I had. "That's quite a story. So you think the judge murdered Terry Riley?"

"He claims he's got an alibi. So does Meredith. My guess is that they'll check out, because they sent Schwartz along to do their dirty work."

"Sounds logical, though Schwartz might have been told to intimidate Terry Riley and got carried away: he seems to lack impulse control." A wry smile. "Anyway, if you're right, you'll be in the clear."

"You were investigating me?"

"Of course. I'm sure you had an affair with Doris Riley. So I was going to focus on you two."

My gut turned cavernous. I'd almost become the prime suspect in a murder investigation. "I'm glad I've set the record straight."

"So am I, because I like to avoid miscarriages of justice, if possible." His smile didn't reach his eyes.

"That's a relief."

He sighed. "I'm not surprised the cops at the station shat their pants. Any cop who charged a judge with anything, let alone manslaughter, would get posted to Wilcannia. Better to let the whole thing slide."

"What about you? You going to let it slide?"

"I wish I could. But don't worry—I've got a job to do and I'll do it. Where's the charge sheet?"

I shrugged. "Close."

He scowled. "Don't mess about. Where?"

I reached inside my jacket and took it out. "Here."

The detective reached into his back pocket, pulled out a plastic evidence bag and opened it with practised ease. "Good. Pop it in here."

"You won't bury this, will you? You're not afraid of killing your own career?"

He looked sincere, on the surface at least. "Don't worry. I'll do the right thing."

Too late for doubts. I dropped the charge sheet into the evidence bag with relief and trepidation.

Looking unhappy, he sealed the bag, scribbled on the seal and rested it on his thigh. "Do you want to bring charges against Meredith and Schultz?"

"For what?"

"Trespass, assault—you tell me, you're the lawyer."

"No, no point."

He got to his feet. "OK then, you can go home. Sometime in the next few days, come down to police headquarters and give me a full written statement."

"Sure."

"And tell your colleague that I don't need to talk to her right now—though I might give her a call later."

"Will do."

He smiled. "You say she kicked Schwartz in the leg?"

"Yes."

"Does she do criminal work?"

"Don't think so. Mostly does building & construction cases."

"That's too bad. I'm always on the look-out for prosecutors with a bit of aggro. Most of them are so limp-wristed." He shrugged. "Anyway, I'll be in touch."

He strolled off towards the lifts and I wandered into Barbara's room where she sat at her desk, reading a brief. She looked up quickly, obviously waiting for me.

"Finished?"

"Yep. The cop said he doesn't need to talk to you right now, though he might contact you later."

A shrug. "OK."

I glanced at my watch—nine o'clock. "I'm off home. Flat out exhausted. Thanks for your help. You may have saved my life."

She smiled. "I'm sure you could have looked after yourself."

I laughed. "We both know that's rubbish. So thank you very much. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Ciao."

I strolled out thinking I could have handled that conversation better. However, that was true of many things I'd done recently.

## Chapter 25

After three hours of agitated sleep, I woke just after seven o'clock. As the events of the previous day marched through my head, I wondered if I was reliving a nightmare. No such luck. I soon realised they were distressingly real. And the day ahead would be even worse. The *Arnold* hearing resumed at ten o'clock. When it did, I'd have to appear before a judge who had some very dirty secrets—including murder—which I shared. Further, my instructing solicitor, in cahoots

with the judge, had ransacked my room with a huge thug. What started out as a garden-variety personal injuries hearing had hurtled around several hair-pin bends and would soon go off a cliff.

At ten o'clock, I'd ask Sloan to disqualify himself for bias, without going into details. If he was smart—which he was—he'd grab the chance to abort the hearing. I certainly didn't intend to dredge up the charge sheet and start a firestorm that would engulf both of us.

However, I wouldn't have to make that application if I settled the case before ten o'clock. Wild Bill had already offered \$200,000 and signalled he had more in the kitty. Further, my client would accept \$350,000. We weren't far apart, though settlement negotiations can easily go off the rails because a litigant changes his mind, egos get in the way, or greed and irrationality take hold.

When I reached my room in Thomas Erskine Chambers, there were still books strewn around the floor. It took me twenty minutes to shove them back onto the shelves, out of order.

I robed and stared out the window. I was desperate to resume settlement negotiations and kill off the hearing, but didn't want to arrive at Court too early and look desperate. Eventually, at 9.45 a.m., I strode past Denise and across the road into the Supreme Court Building. Outside Court 13A, Mick Arnold slouched on a foam bench. Bob Meredith was, not surprisingly, nowhere to be seen.

The two Bills stood in the hallway, chatting quietly. Wild Bill usually arrived late and made a dramatic entrance. Why was he here so early? Anxious to settle the matter? A small door opened in my chest and a silvery bird of hope fluttered out. I closed it and headed towards Mick.

But Wild Bill intercepted me, trying to look casual. "Ben, can we chat?"

I slowed. "OK. But I'd better see my client first."

He looked extra-peeved. "Oh sure. When you're ready."

Mick didn't bother to rise.

I said: "Hi."

"Hi. Where's Bob? I called him on his mobile. He didn't answer."

"I don't think he'll be here today."

"Why not?"

"Umm, he's not feeling well."

"You spoke to him?"

"Yes, last night."

Mick shrugged. "OK."

"So, tell me, do you still want to settle for 350 thousand?"

He stood up. "Yeah. I thought about everything overnight and, you know, I reckon this judge hates me guts. If they'll pay 350 large, I'll be bloody happy. Then I'll walk away with about 200 grand, right?"

"Yes." Though I was desperate to settle, I'd never sold out a client and didn't intend to start. "Are you sure about that? I reckon that, if you push them, you can get more. It's a risk, of course, but I think you can."

"Really? Why?"

"I smell a rat. All of a sudden, they seem anxious to do a deal. They're worried about something. Maybe you should hold out for more."

"What're they worried about?"



I shrugged. "Not sure. It's just a hunch."

He paused and shook his head. "You may be right. But I reckon the judge hates me. I'll take 350 grand if I can get it. That'll do. I want out."

My job was to advise and sometimes cajole. But clients called the shots. "OK, I'll see what I can do."

As I strolled over to Wild Bill, he analysed my body language, while I analysed his. I casually put my hands in my pockets and smiled. "Bill, you wanted to chat?" He could broach settlement.

"Yes. We going to settle this matter or not?"

Wild Bill's natural instinct was to fight rather than settle, even when staring defeat in the face. So his eagerness was a surprise. His strong aftershave didn't mask the smell of a big rodent lurking in the vicinity. He still hadn't produced any documents about the removal of the surveillance camera. Maybe that was why he'd gone from a goat to a sheep.

I said: "Before we discuss settlement, I want to see the documents I called for."

A mechanical frown. "What documents?"

"The ones about the removal of the camera. I called for them on Monday and renewed my call yesterday morning. Where are they?"

His gaze slid over my shoulder and drilled into the wall behind me. "Oh, them. Well, umm, we're still searching for them."

His forte was heavy-handed bullying, not barefaced lying. I took a half-step forward. "Really? Look me right in the eye and tell me you don't have *any* of the documents I called for—not one."

His gaze wandered and words stumbled out. "Like I said, we're still looking."

"You haven't answered my question."

"Yes I have."

"No you haven't. I asked whether, right now, you have any of the documents I called for."

Wild Bill went red. "Look, do you want to settle this case or not?"

I was desperate to settle. A couple of minutes of haggling would get my client \$350,000 and I could wash my hands of this terrible case. However, Wild Bill still hadn't answered my question, and I couldn't let him get away with that.

I spoke louder. "You've obvious got an important document you're withholding from me." My stare challenged him to deny that, but he stayed mute. "So, when the hearing resumes, I'm going to renew my call. And when you produce that document, *as you are required to do*, I'm going to raise hell until I'm told *exactly* when it came into your possession."

I'd been under a mountain of stress for 48 hours and sounded slightly hysterical.

I half expected Wild Bill to launch a blustery counter-attack. Instead, he looked anxious. Though he loved winning, why risk his reputation over such a trivial case? He'd pushed the envelope as far as he dared.

Mild Bill who, unlike his father, had some moral fibre, shifted on his feet, hands twitching, obviously the weak link.

I turned to him: "Do you agree with what your dad says?"

Mild Bill stared eloquently at his father, who finally frowned and said: "Shit, give it to him."

Mild Bill looked relieved. "The invoice?"

"Yes, the fucking invoice."

Mild Bill opened his large notepad, took out a small piece of paper and handed it to me. "This is what you're after."

I snatched it. "What is it?"

"An invoice, from the electrician who removed the camera."

I shook with excitement: the invoice showed that the surveillance camera was taken down a week after Mick Arnold commenced his action in the Supreme Court.

It hurt the defendants in many ways. For a start, Taggart and Fuolau both gave evidence that the camera was removed before Mick Arnold was injured. The invoice proved they were lying. Further, the removal of the camera so soon after the action commenced suggested it filmed something that hurt the defendants' case. Certainly, that was how I'd spin it.

Christ, I just might win this claim.

Then I remembered that, in a few minutes, I'd have to ask the judge to disqualify himself. Bloody hell. Still, I managed a broad smile. "Wow. No wonder you've been hiding this document."

Wild Bill scowled. "We've hidden nothing."

"Rubbish. And the film? What happened to the film in the camera?"

A nervous laugh. "We don't have it."

"You mean, you destroyed it?"

"Of course not. Nobody keeps film that old."

Only slight disappointment. The invoice alone gave Mick's case an enormous boost.

I glanced at my watch. "Alright. The way I see it, we can resume the hearing at ten o'clock and I'll cross-examine both of your clients about this invoice. Or, we can ask the judge to stay off the bench while we negotiate." I crossed my arms. "Up to you."

Wild Bill's scowl showed he was recovering his poise. "I suppose that, if there's a chance of settlement, we should explore it."

"OK. Let's speak to the Associate."

We strolled into Court and found the Judge's Associate arranging her boss's materials on the bench.

I said: "Morning. Will you please tell his Honour that the parties are engaged in settlement negotiations and request that he remain off the bench for a while?"

She usually looked ready to bite someone. Now, she gave me an especially dirty stare, obviously for upsetting her judge. "Alright, I'll call him." She picked up a phone and conveyed our request to the judge. Most judges are happy to stay off the bench when asked and use the opportunity to plough through their chamber work. I bet Sloan was doing cartwheels.

The Associate hung up. "His Honour said you can take as much time as you want; just let him know when you're ready to resume."

We both thanked her and left the courtroom. I strolled over to Mick, who rose expectantly: "Settled?"

"No."

He frowned. "Why not?"

"There's been a development."

"What?"

I told him about the invoice.

Blank expression. "So what?"

I explained why it hurt the defendants' case.

A watermelon smile. "Oh, yeah, now I get it. Told you I was telling the truth, didn't I?"

For the first time, it struck me that maybe he did deserve to win this case. "Yes, you did. Of course, the invoice isn't conclusive. It all depends on how much weight the judge gives it. If he wants to reject your claim, he can give it little or no weight."

"He can do that?"

"He can say black is white if he wants."

"But the invoice is better than nothing, right?"

"Definitely. It's certainly got our opponents frightened and will make settlement easier."

"Do you think I should ask for more than 350 thou?"

"Yes."

"How much more?"

Though it was very helpful, the invoice didn't guarantee victory. Further, if I didn't settle this case now, I would have to ask the judge to abort it. Holding out for top dollar would be greedy and stupid.

I said: "I reckon that if you get about \$750,000—out of which you'll have to pay your legal costs—you'll do well."

Mick looked surprised. "Really? You think I should settle for that much?"

"Yes, about that figure."

Mick smiled and nodded. "OK then. You get me that much, I'll be over the moon."

I was warming to the bogan runt. "I'll do my best. Leave it to me."

Of course, if I put that figure straight to Wild Bill, he'd assume I was making an ambit claim and Mick would settle for a lot less. So I told him Mick now wanted \$1 million.

Wild Bill grunted loudly and said that was a ridiculous amount. "You only asked for half a million yesterday."

I shrugged. "Your clients should have accepted that offer, shouldn't they? Now it's been adjusted for inflation and a change in circumstances."

"What circumstances?"

"The invoice means I've got your balls in my pocket. Wanna see them?"

"Bullshit." His neck went scarlet and he double-grunted. "Bloody outrageous."

"Deal with it. That's our offer."

He snorted like a wounded bull and strode over to his solicitor. They conferred for a couple of minutes. Then the solicitor pulled out his mobile phone and talked to someone: probably the insurance company's claims manager. After nodding his head a few times, the solicitor turned off his phone and again conferred with Wild Bill.

Wild Bill strode back and gruffly said his clients were prepared to pay \$500,000 inclusive of costs.

We spent the next hour haggling, slowly bridging the gap until we finally settled the case for \$780,000 inclusive of costs.

The temptation to gloat in front of Wild Bill was almost irresistible. I'd taken Mick's claim from death's door to a very handsome settlement. Further, unbeknownst to Wild Bill, I struck the bargain just before I had to ask for the hearing to be aborted. Mick would get paid; I would get paid; even that scumbag Bob Meredith would get paid—when he resurfaced—for doing nothing.

However, professional decorum stopped me doing fist-pumps. When the deal was done, I shrugged and said: "I guess we can both live with that."

Wild Bill frowned slightly. "Guess so."

When I told Mick the final settlement amount, he smiled broadly and slapped my arm. "Fuckin' unreal. Thanks, mate. Thanks a lot."

I smiled. "Just doing my job."

"Yeah, and doing it bloody good." He hesitated slightly. "In fact, you know, it's lucky how things turned out."

"What do you mean?"

"How the other guy got murdered and you took over. I reckon you're a lot better than him."

He was clearly becoming a sophisticated consumer of legal services. But he didn't know that Terry would have won the case anyway, because Terry knew the judge's dirty secrets. I shrugged. "I'm sure he'd have got a good result."

Mick shook his ratty features. "No way. He was full of shit - I could tell," he said with uncanny insight. "You know, I can't wait to tell Mr Meredith what's happened. Funny he's not here."

"He's a busy man: got a lot on his plate."

"I'm sure he'll be bloody impressed with what you've done."

I smiled because Bob Meredith would definitely never ever brief me again. "We'll see."

I pulled out my foolscap pad and quickly drafted some terms of settlement which required that the defendants pay \$780,000 into the trust account of the plaintiff's solicitor within 14 days, after which the defendants would be released from all further claims. I was sure the money would be paid to Meredith & Co, because an insurance company would cut the cheque, and that Meredith & Co would pay me, because, if it didn't, the Law Society would kick Meredith's arse all over town.

I showed the terms to Wild Bill, who nodded. "They'll do."

We both signed them and I said: "Alright, let's see the judge."

Everybody strolled back into the courtroom, except for the defendants, who had disappeared.

The Judge's Associate sat below the bench nattering with a court reporter. I told her we'd settled.

She phoned the judge and relayed that information. After listening briefly, she hung up and said the judge would resume the hearing in five minutes.

While we sat at the Bar table, Wild Bill reminisced about some of his courtroom jousts with Terry Riley. "You know, we had some pretty nasty clashes—I'll admit that—but there was always an underlying respect."

I almost laughed. In court, Wild Bill persistently tried to humiliate and embarrass Terry, who now must be spinning in his grave. He further threatened my composure when he described how upset he was at Terry's funeral. "But it was a wonderful send-off," he intoned, "just wonderful." I preferred him mean and nasty to hypocritical. Then I didn't have to choke back laughter.

In the back of my mind, I wondered how the judge would behave when he came onto the bench. Angry or timid? The Judge's Associate rapped three times on the side door and the Court Officer ordered that everyone rise. Sloan shuffled out with hunched shoulders and avoided my gaze, a shell of the arrogant brute I'd always known. Fortunately, because he only had to accept the terms of settlement, I wouldn't have to ask him to disqualify himself.

When everyone was seated, the judge looked at Wild Bill with bloodshot eyes and spoke thinly. "Mr Anderson, you've settled?"

Wild Bill stood up. "Yes, your Honour."

He handed the terms of settlement to the Court Officer, who passed them up to the judge. At one point, while the judge read them—probably when he saw how much the defendants had agreed to pay—he arched an eyebrow. Then he sighed. "Alright, I make orders in accordance with the terms of settlement, which I have initialled and placed with the court papers."

Judges usually congratulate parties for settling. However, Sloan just mumbled "I adjourn" and shuffled out the door, still ignoring my presence. I wondered if that cameo was his swansong on the bench. Only time would tell.

When he'd gone, Wild Bill leaned towards me. "Gee, he looked like shit, didn't he? Probably got the flu. A lot going around."

"Yes, there's a bad strain."

"Well, I'm off." He turned to Mild Bill. "See you back at chambers."

He carefully arranged the drape of his gown and strode off to prepare for his next battle, leaving Mild Bill and his instructing solicitor to load several folders back onto a trolley.

Mick Arnold waited in the back of the court while I loaded mine. I'd almost finished when Mild Bill approached, looking nervous.

"Sorry about that."

I straightened up. "What?"

"The invoice. Dad should have produced it yesterday morning. I told him he should."

My blood pressure jacked up. "So he did have it?"

Mild Bill flushed. "Yes, but he wanted to settle before handing it over."

"You mean, he lied to the court and me?"

Mild Bill shifted on his feet and looked down. "I suppose so, in a way."

A deep anger welled up inside me. I didn't expect much from my colleagues—particularly those like Wild Bill who often pontificated about professional ethics—but I expected better than that. "Thanks for telling me, though you should have stopped him."

Mild Bill looked downcast. "I know."

The Bar is often like a guild into which parents introduce their offspring. After sending them to the "right" private school, they help them join the "right" set of chambers, in the "right" building and introduce them to the "right" connections.

That is how their children inherit the "family firm". I knew that better than most, because my father ushered me into the profession.

Mild Bill had more talent than most such epigone. However, while he operated in his father's shadow, he wouldn't grow as a barrister. I crossed my arms. "My advice isn't worth much, but maybe you should get away from your dad."

"I know. In fact, I'm about to move to a different floor."

"You've told him that?"

"Not yet."

"You're doing the right thing, seriously."

"I know. Thanks."

After loading the trolley, I phoned my Floor Clerk, Philip Milliken, and asked him to send a junior clerk to collect it. Then I took Mick up to the cafeteria on the fourteenth floor.

In the lift, I wondered what really happened at the Royal George Hotel. Did the defendants throw Mick down the stairs? Was he hurt as badly as he claimed? The defendants removed the surveillance camera in suspicious circumstances. But that didn't necessarily mean it filmed something incriminating. Maybe the film got erased and they feared being accused of a cover-up; or maybe the removal of the camera was just a co-incidence. Cock-ups are more common than conspiracies. And even if Mick got thrown down the stairs, he might have exaggerated his injuries. However, it wasn't my job to sit in judgment on him. If he managed to cheat the casino, good luck to him.

We drank coffee at a table overlooking the Garden Island Naval Base and chatted idly about rugby league, cars and women. He had surprisingly interesting things to say about all of them. Then I gave him some useless advice. "Look, I'm not your father, priest or financial advisor. But you're about to get a large sum of money. Maybe you should buy something useful, like a house."

"Yeah, I will, though first I've gotta take Mum and Dad on an overseas trip."

"Where?"

"Disneyland and Vegas. We've never been. And then, maybe, I'll buy a speedboat and a chopper. A few things like that."

"That's up to you. Just remember, you're only getting about \$600,000 in the hand. Though that sounds like a lot, you spray it around and it'll disappear fast."

"Don't worry. I won't be stupid."

I seriously doubted that, but had already said more than I should have.

We finished our coffees and left the building. On the pavement outside, we shook hands and he thanked me again. As he strolled off, I studied his gait. He was still limping.

I crossed the road, caught the lift up to Thomas Erskine Chambers and stepped into Barbara's room. She was at her desk, reading a law report.

I said: "Hi. I thought I'd better make sure you're OK after last night."

She looked up and smiled. "Yeah, I'm fine."

"No damage to your foot?"

"None. It's ready to kick someone else. What happened in court?"

I described how I'd settled the case.

She smiled. "You must be ecstatic."

"Over the moon. You know, I owe you lunch at an expensive restaurant of your choice."

"No you don't."

"Yes I do. If you hadn't turned up, that thug might have garrotted me."

She smiled. "I'm sure you could have dealt with him yourself."

"We both know that is, with respect, bullshit. So come on, let me buy you lunch."

A shrug. "OK, if you want to waste your money."

"I do. When?"

"I'm pretty busy at the moment. Early next week?"

"Done."

Denise was in her cubicle, on the phone, talking to one of her gossip-pals. The moment she saw me, she hung up. "What on earth happened to your room?"

"What do you mean?"

"Lots of the books are out of order and there are some on the floor."

"Umm, there were some trespassers, last night, trying to steal something."

"Who? What?"

I sighed. "It's a long story—a *very* long story. I'll tell you when I get a chance."

She frowned. "You mean, you've got good gossip?"

"The mother lode."

"Then tell me now."

"No, I don't have time."

She grimaced. "Alright then, I'll re-sort the books when I get a chance."

"Take your time."

"Anyway, you're back early. What happened?"

"We settled for \$780,000."

She smiled. "Good work. So you're pretty pleased with yourself right now?"

"Yes, and with good reason."

"You want me to prepare a bill for Meredith & Co?"

"Of course."

That night I climbed into bed feeling tired and doused in self-regard: I'd discovered who killed Terry Riley and settled the *Arnold* case. All my problems were now behind me. I'd even resolved my misgivings about applying for silk. I would apply and wait for it to be conferred, as promised. Life was good and could only get better.

## Chapter 26

"You must be joking?" I yelled down the phone the next morning at Detective Sergeant Malloy. I'd solved the case for the idiot, and now he was trying to unsolve it. I'd thought he was a smart cop. Maybe there was no such thing.

He said: "I'm not. None of your suspects—the judge, Meredith or Schwartz—murdered Terry Riley: they're all in the clear."

"You sure?"

"Yes," he said confidently.

I was so certain that one of them killed Terry that my mind refused to validate that information. "You must be wrong."

"I'm not."

"Why are you so sure?"

"Because I spoke to them all and checked their alibis. They're cast-iron: the judge was at a law conference in Newcastle, Meredith was playing golf and Schwartz was, funnily enough, in prison. He only got out a week ago."

"You sure he wasn't on day release or something like that?"

"I am. When Riley was murdered, he was snug in his cell."

"And you're sure about the other alibis?"

"Yes, they're legit. *None* of them murdered Terry Riley."

Jesus, I'd been barking up the wrong tree. "If they didn't kill him, who the hell did?"

"I don't know. I'll have to explore other lines of inquiry."

"Like what?"

He paused ominously. "That's something I'd like to discuss with you when the time is right."

Hell, I was about to win back the mantle of prime suspect. Maybe, after a brief glimpse of sunshine, my life was heading back into the toilet. I blurted out, "Well, it wasn't me."

His voice remained neutral. "Don't worry, I haven't drawn any conclusions."

In other words, he hadn't concluded I was innocent. Damn. I tried to control my rising panic and gather my thoughts. "OK. But what about Schwartz assaulting me? What're you going to do about that?"

"You'll have to decide if you want us to press charges," he said without enthusiasm. "If you do, I'll consider it?"

He obviously disliked me. Why? Because he hated all barristers? Or did he have a special grievance against me? Still, I could understand his reluctance to charge Schwartz. I suffered no harm. So, even if the big thug was convicted, he'd only get a slap on the wrist. But I didn't want to wave a white flag just yet. "I'll think about it and let you know."

"Good."

"And what about the death of the judge's wife—you going to charge him with vehicular manslaughter?"

A pause. "No."

"Why not?"

"I've spoken to two police officers who were at the station when the judge was brought in. They deny he was charged with drink driving; the judge says the same thing."

"You've got the charge sheet."

"They claim they've never seen it before—it's a forgery."

Unless someone authenticated the charge sheet, it was worthless. "They're all lying—you know that."

"No, I don't."

"So the judge won't be punished for anything?"



"Correct. I've got no evidence that would stand up in a court of law." He sighed. "So think about whether you want us to press charges against Schwartz, *then* give me a call." He hung up.

I put down the phone with a trembling hand and leaned back in my chair, still not able to believe my three murder suspects were all in the clear. Maybe Malloy was crooked and covering up for them. His solid and methodical manner belied that, but I might as well check their alibis myself. After some hesitation, I rang a solicitor mate in Newcastle and asked if he attended the legal conference.

"Yeah, why do you want to know?"

"I understand Justice Sloan gave a talk. I'm trying to lay my hands on a copy of his paper."

"Can't help you, I'm afraid. He spoke but he didn't provide anything in writing."

"OK, thanks."

Next, I called a friend at the Department of Correctional Services to inquire when Gary Schwartz was released. He confirmed Schwartz was released from prison a week *after* the murder.

Though I couldn't check Meredith's alibi, because he hadn't named his alleged golf partners, I was now convinced he'd told the truth. He had much less reason to kill Terry than Sloan and was unlikely to kill someone face-to-face. Of course, he could have hired someone besides Schwartz to do the job. But professional killers were a lot harder to find than other tradesmen, and even less reliable.

So if they didn't murder Terry, who did? I was anxious to find out because Homicide cops like making quick arrests. If they don't, they get twitchy and charge the nearest patsy which, in this case, was me. Suddenly, all the dumb judges and sleepy jurors I'd seen during my career lined up in my brain and yelled that I was guilty and going straight to gaol. Oh God. I'd always thought the legal system was lousy and unfair. Those drawbacks seemed rather comical, until now.

## Chapter 27

About an hour after I spoke to Detective Sergeant Malloy, I got a call from my ex-wife, the judge, sounding a touch excited. "Ben, how are you?"

"Fine. Why do you ask?"

"I've been hearing things about you."

"What?"

"You found a document which is rather, umm, sensitive."

Word travels fast in the nose-bleed reaches of the legal system, where she resided. "Yes, I did."

"Then let's have lunch today, and you can tell me everything."

"You're not in court?"

"Today's hearing settled."

"OK. Where do you want to go?"

We arranged to meet at noon at The Twenty-Fifth Floor, an upmarket restaurant high above Martin Place on the eponymous floor.

When I got there, a touch early, Yvonne, who was chronically tardy, was already seated, obviously keen to chat. This lunch would be interesting.

Our table overlooked the flat expanse of western Sydney. Wispy clouds crawled across a hard blue sky. Heat haze smudged the horizon. I reflected that there were millions of people out there who rarely encountered the legal system, and were untouched by the law, and much happier for that.

I said: "You're early."

She leaned forward, conspiratorially. "I hear you've had a very exciting time."

I instinctively leaned towards her. "Why?"

"You thought a certain judge murdered Terry Riley."

Well informed, as usual. "I had some suspicions."

"But you were wrong?"

"Seems so."

"You suspected him because you found a document—a police charge sheet—that showed he was drunk when he crashed his car and killed his wife."

"That's right."

"I've also heard you had an altercation with a solicitor and a thug who tried to relieve you of that document."

"Goodness, your spies are everywhere. Who gave you this information?"

A wry smile. "Can't say, I'm afraid."

Detective Sergeant Malloy must have been the original source of the information. He told the Police Commissioner, who told the Chief Justice, who told my ex-wife to pull me into line.

I said: "Then I suppose you also know that the police aren't going to do anything about Sloan getting pissed and killing his wife."

"I've heard that."

This conversation reminded me of those we had just before we divorced: stilted and never getting to the point. "OK. Then tell me this: if you know so much, why are we having this lunch?"

"Because I'm concerned about you."

I raised an eyebrow. "And..."

She nervously fingered her wine glass. "I want to know what you're going to do next."

"You mean, about the judge?"

"Yes."

"That depends..."

"On what?"

"Whether he continues sitting on the Supreme Court bench. If he does, I will cause trouble—lots of it." That was an empty threat because, if the police wouldn't act, nobody would be interested in what I had to say about Sloan and Meredith. Indeed, I'd hurt myself more than them. Still, I was in the mood to kick over the traces and machine-gun the messenger.

"Don't worry, he won't get off Scot-free. He's been told to retire. It'll be announced in the next few days."

I scowled. "Really? The drunken bastard ran into a telegraph pole and killed his wife. Now he's going to retire on a big fat pension and join the brigade of retired judges hobbling up and down Phillip Street earning a fortune as mediators."

"I'm afraid we don't live in a perfect world. And if you keep quiet, people—important people—will be very grateful."

"You mean, they'll send me Christmas cards?"

She frowned. "Smart-arse. No, you'll be looked after."

I crossed my arms. "You mean, I'll get silk?"

"Definitely. And in a year or two, you'll be offered a judicial appointment—probably the Supreme Court bench. Ironically, by causing so much trouble, you've put yourself in a very good position."

"You know, a very nasty word is floating around in my brain that starts with 'B'".

She shook her head. "It's not a bribe. It's a reward for being sensible. I'd also be very grateful." She softened her gaze and touched my arm. It was a familiar gesture, which I had learned to distrust.

I arched an eyebrow. "Really?"

"Yes. So don't rock the boat. Though I admire your principles, this isn't the time or place."

"And if I do cause trouble? What then?"

"Your career would be more, umm, problematic."

"Though you'd support me, right?"

She hesitated. "Of course, though that wouldn't count for much."

Time to throw in the towel. Feeling empty, I said: "Don't worry. I won't rock the boat."

She smiled triumphantly. "Good."

Detective Malloy had indicated he still suspected that I murdered Terry. Maybe Yvonne knew where his investigation was heading. "Are the cops any closer to catching the murderer?"

She shrugged. "Don't think so. It's still a big mystery."

It seemed Malloy hadn't pointed the finger of blame at me. That was some consolation.

We spent the rest of the meal gossiping about friends and discussing Robert's performance at school. Yvonne was very cheerful, obviously pleased to have achieved her goal. Afterward, as we rode down in the lift, she said: "You alright?"

"Why do you ask?"

"You look a bit upset. I'm just trying to help, you know."

Our lunch had reminded me what a bully she could be. I decided our relationship had thawed enough—I didn't want us to get any closer. We would be good friends and, hopefully, good parents—no more.

I sighed. "I know. Don't worry, I'm just tired. I've had a very stressful week."

"I understand. Let's have dinner one night?"

"Sure, maybe sometime next week. I'll give you a call."

"OK. And make sure you apply for silk."

I wasn't sure if I would apply, but didn't want a fight. "Don't worry, I will."

"Good."

I kissed her on the cheek and trudged off to my chambers, knowing I wouldn't give her a call about dinner and might not apply for silk. She'd be annoyed with me if I didn't do both. But she'd be even more annoyed if Malloy charged me with murder.

## Chapter 28

On Saturday I drove up to Bowral to visit my father. While we sat on the patio, eating a salad lunch, I recounted the events of the last week. However, I didn't mention my affair with Doris or that I might now be a murder suspect, just in case he still harboured some illusions about me.

When I'd finished, he leaned back, shocked. "My God, you were assaulted in your own chambers. That's something I never worried about when I was a barrister. Times are changing. I'm glad you're alright."

"So am I."

"Lucky that woman turned up and rescued you."

I frowned. "She didn't rescue me: she distracted Schwartz just long enough to give me an edge."

He giggled. "Yes, I see your point."

"Anyway, what should I do about Sloan and Meredith? They might not be guilty of murder, but they've committed a lot of other heinous crimes."

He frowned. "Follow Yvonne's advice and do nothing. They've got you beaten, I'm afraid."

I was half hoping he'd say that. "I know, though the whole thing pisses me off."

He smiled. "You, as a lawyer, should know that the legal system is neither just nor fair."

"True."

"So, I hope none of this will deter you from applying for silk."

"You're worried it might?"

"It had crossed my mind."

I took a long breath. "Well, if you must know, I don't think I'll apply this year—maybe later."

He frowned. "Why?"

I looked down at the cattle, chewing the lush grass without a care in the world. The creek sparkled in the distance. "I didn't like being offered silk under the table, but came to accept that. However, when Yvonne told me it would be a reward for keeping quiet about Sloan, she went a bit too far. That really soiled it."

"You deserve silk."

"That's not how it was presented."

"You're being too sensitive."

"I don't think so."

A wry smile. "I was worried you might react like this. You know, sometimes I feel you make everything hard for yourself, just to prove you're better than me."

I often felt he didn't understand me at all. Then he said something like that and made my head spin. I shrugged. "Maybe. But not this time: this time, I'm really pissed off—and not with you."

He made a bold attempt to look happy, without success. "It's your decision. Though I'd like you to take silk, you've got to feel comfortable about it."

"Thanks. I'll probably apply in a year or two," I said sincerely.

"Good."

"Sorry, Dad."

He smiled. "Don't worry, I understand. At the end of the day, it's just a bauble. It doesn't change much. If you weren't happy before you got a silk gown, you wouldn't be happy afterward."

"You're getting very philosophical."

"It comes from talking to the cattle."

We spent the rest of lunch chatting with real affection. The competition between us would continue, of course. But at least we were both starting to enjoy it.

## Chapter 29

When I got out of the lift on Monday morning, Greta Milliken, the wife of our clerk, sat in the reception area, reading a magazine. I'd met her several times when she accompanied her husband to floor functions.

I said: "Hello Greta. What brings you here?"

A dark-haired and olive-skinned, her bird-like frame looked ready to take flight. "Oh, just waiting for Philip. We're going to inspect an apartment."

"Really? Where?"

"Pyrmont."

"So you want to move into an apartment?"

"Yes. Philip thinks that, with the kids gone, we should downsize."

"Well, good luck."

As I strolled towards my room, a shapeless thought attached itself to the base of my brain. I tried to jimmy it free, but nothing happened. Maybe, if I ignored it, it might detach.

As I passed Barbara Carmichael's room, I remembered that she once mentioned that Greta complained her husband didn't let her shop anymore.

*Didn't let her shop.*

The trapped thought detached, floated up to the surface of my consciousness and exploded like fireworks: maybe the Millikens were downsizing because they were in financial trouble. That seemed unlikely because Philip earned a good wage and his kids had all left home. But many middle-aged couples did very stupid things with their money.

I stopped in front of Denise. "Morning. Could you get Dan, the junior clerk, to see me ASAP?"

"Sure."

"Thanks."

Thirty seconds later, my door opened and Dan Butterworth slouched in as if doing me a favour. Dan cruised through life with the world's steadiest pulse.

I said: "Hi. Take a seat."

He dropped into an armchair and threw an arm over the back, as if about to interview me. His cockiness would carry him a long way, if he didn't over-reach. "Yeah?"

"Look, I've heard that Philip Milliken and Terry Riley had a big fight in Terry's room, a couple of days before Terry got murdered?"

For once, Dan looked uncomfortable and stroked pimples embedded in downy whiskers. "Yeah, they did: a big argument; lots of shouting. I don't know what it was about. The door was shut so their voices were kinda muffled."

"Fair enough. But, just out of curiosity, who did most of the yelling?"

"Philip, I think."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Which kinda surprised me."

"Why?"

"Well, because he's such a... a..."

"Suck-arse?"

Dan smiled. "Yeah, sorta."

"OK, thanks."

Dan looked surprised. "That's all?"

"Yes."

Dan got to his feet. "No probs."

As he left, I reflected that Philip had thrown his heart and soul into grovelling to Terry. Only a gross provocation would have persuaded him to launch an insurrection. I was starting to get a good idea what that might be. After a few minutes of reflection, I made some phone calls.

About mid-afternoon, I phoned Philip and casually asked him to come and see me.

"What about?"

"Oh, just something I want to discuss. Take your time."

"No problem. I'll be right around."

A minute later, he bowled into my room and smiled like a turkey who's voted for an early Christmas. "Hi, how can I help?"

I pointed casually towards an armchair. "Take a seat."

He sat, still smiling. "OK."

I leaned back. "How's life?"

He shrugged. "Fine."

"I ran into Greta this morning. She said you two were going to inspect an apartment."

He looked wary. "Did she? Well, umm, yeah, we did."

"You're selling your house?"

"Yeah. It's on the market."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why's it on the market?"

He frowned. "We need something smaller. I mean, the kids are gone."

"Really? Or is it because you lost so much money on the tourist resort project that Terry Riley recommended?"

His face went white. "The what?"

"The tourist resort project that Terry recommended."

His face exploded with colour and eyes bulged. He opened and closed his mouth several times, but no words emerged. Finally, he croaked. "Don't know what you're talking about."

I leaned forward and he stared straight past me. "Then let me explain: this morning I asked Doris Riley to look through Terry's papers for a list of investors in the project. She found one that showed you invested \$500,000. That's right, isn't it? And you lost the lot, didn't you? The promoters took it as so-called management fees." His face remained frozen. "You lost \$500,000, didn't you?"

After a long pause, his voice seemed to come from far away. "How do you know I lost it?"

"Because everybody lost their money: the project was a scam from day one."

Another long pause and a slight nod. "That's true."

"That's why you're selling your house and looking for an apartment, isn't it?"

He sighed. "Yes."

"It's also why you shouted at Terry in his room a few days before he died, isn't it?"

Philip's plump cheeks seemed made of red jelly. I hadn't noticed the gin blossoms before. "H-h-how do you know about that?"

"You did, didn't you?"

"Ah, yes."

"You were demanding repayment, weren't you?"

Philip looked shocked. "Who told you that?"

Nothing annoys a barrister more than a witness asking questions. I yelled: "You demanded repayment, didn't you?"

His whole body trembled. "Yeah, I did. I mean, he told me it was a safe investment; told me he'd keep an eye on my money, and I believed him. So I invested most of my retirement money. But he betrayed me. I wanted my money back."

"He couldn't pay you back, could he?"

"He claimed he was broke."

Time to go bare-knuckle. "So on Sunday afternoon, you drove over to his house and killed him, didn't you?"

Milliken's eyes fogged up and he emitted a meaningless high-pitched squeal, as if releasing huge psychic pressure.

"You killed him, didn't you?"

"No, no."

"Then where were you?"

"I... I... I can't remember."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"I can't."

I yelled. "You kill him, didn't you?"

"No."

"Then where were you?"

He slowly put his head in his hands and surprised me with a loud wail. "OK, OK, but I didn't mean to. I didn't ... didn't .... mean to."

"What happened?"

He sobbed hard for almost a minute, before looking up, red-eyed, obviously desperate to unburden himself. "When I saw him, in his room, he said he'd only talk to me at his house. So I went over there to discuss everything. But when I got there, he kept saying he didn't have any money. We argued again, I got angry, grabbed a knife off the kitchen bench and ... and ... stabbed him." Another heavy bout of sobbing. "Jesus, it was a mistake—a big, big mistake. You understand, don't you?"

I felt some pity. Terry bullshitted Philip that he was a great barrister and businessman, and persuaded Philip to invest far too much money in the resort project. So, when Philip realised that Terry had a brain of straw and feet of clay, he discarded his natural servility and flew into an immense rage.

I stood up. "Thank you. That's all I wanted to hear. Now, you'll have to talk to the police."

He looked stunned. "The police? I won't talk to them."

"You just admitted you killed Terry."

His lower lip vibrated. "Yeah. But I won't talk to the police. I'll deny everything—everything."

"I'm afraid you can't."

"Why not?"

"Our conversation was taped."

His jaw dropped. "Taped?"

"Yes. While you were out having lunch, the police wired this room. They've recorded everything you said."

He scowled at me. "You bastard. You fucking bastard."

I hit the button of my intercom. "Detective Malloy, you can come in now."

Malloy's voice: "On my way."

Philip glared hard. "Shit, you bastard. You can't use this stuff."

I raised my eyebrows. "Why not?"

"What I said was privileged. I'll claim legal professional privilege."

A little law is a dangerous thing. I shook my head. "If you try, you won't succeed. You didn't brief me to do anything: I was never your lawyer. Sorry, you're going to gaol."

Malloy came through the door with a burly detective holding a pair of handcuffs. "Mr Milliken, you're under arrest."

Philip jumped up and took a few steps back. The burly detective grabbed him, snapped on the handcuffs and told him his rights. While being led away, Philip gave me a crimson glare and yelled: "Barristers, fucking barristers; I hate you all—all of you. You're scum, fucking scum."

Those words lingered in the air and clung to the walls long after he'd gone.

## Chapter 30



Numerous barristers, and visiting solicitors and their clients, watched in goggle-eyed silence as the detectives frogmarched a handcuffed Philip Milliken towards the lifts.

My secretary, Denise, sidled up next to me. "What's he done wrong?"

"He killed Terry."

"My goodness. Why?"

"Terry recommended a dud investment. Phillip lost half a mill."

"Lot of dough."

"Sure is. You know, Philip now claims he never liked barristers."

She smile. "That's hardly surprising, is it?"

"Why?"

A sardonic grin. "He worked for you lot."

Why did I employ such a smart-mouthed secretary? Wouldn't make the same mistake next time. Hopefully, she wouldn't start cheering and clapping our murderous floor clerk as he made his final exit. "Ouch. We're not that bad, are we?"

"Yes you are. In fact, I can think of several more he should have bumped off. He just wasn't ambitious enough."

"But not me?"

"No, you pay my salary."

"Thanks."

"You know what everyone will say about Phillip now?"

"What?"

"They never did like him; always thought he was a bit odd."

It was as if she'd read my intentions. "I'm sure you're right."

Thomas Eslick shuffled out of his room, wearing a cardigan, head slightly tilted, as if his thoughts about tax law were too heavy on one side. He saw the detectives shove Philip into a lift.

Eslick turned to me. "My God, what the hell's happening? Why're they taking him away?"

"He's been arrested."

"I can see that. Why?"

"He murdered Terry."

"Shit, you're kidding?" His thousand-dollar-an-hour Oxbridge accent had disappeared through a grate, leaving only a faint whine.

"Nope, he dun' it."

"Why?"

"Terry talked him into making a poor investment. Poor guy lost most of his money."

Eslick's eyes widened. "Oh hell, then that explains it."

"What?"

"When I became Head of Chambers, I got our accountant to audit the books. Last week, he found about \$40,000 missing."

"Goodness. You think Philip stole it?"

"Must have. I was going to ask him about it. Now it's obvious, isn't it? Stole it to cover his loss. We'd better have an urgent floor meeting."

The meeting would focus on how to stifle any embarrassment to the floor, which would not be easy considering we had spawned both a murderer and murderess, and our floor was not well equipped to handle sticky public relations messes. Someone would undoubtedly propose we waste money on a PR consultant.

I said: "Good idea."

He gave me a hard stare. "I hope you'll attend."

No chance. I was about to become a pariah for discovering that our Floor Clerk whacked our Head of Chambers, and for not somehow magically sweeping the whole sorry mess under the carpet. Of course, they'd forgive me in a year or two. But I'd better lie low for a while.

I looked him in the eye. "Oh, don't worry. I'll be there."

"Good."

I couldn't help a final dig. "You know, the last thing he said to me was that he hated barristers."

Eslick frowned. "Ungrateful bastard. After all that we did for him. Deserves no mercy. You know, I never did like him—was thinking about getting a new clerk—and how right I was!"

More barristers had emerged from their rooms and added to the hubbub. I retreated into mine, closed the door, telephoned Doris and explained what had happened.

She said: "That's wonderful news. What a stupid man."

Was she was talking about Terry or Philip?

"You're right."

"I've had some other good news."

"What?"

"The insurance company is going to pay out Terry's life policy. I'll get almost a million. Looks like I won't have to go back to work, after all."

Now the murderer had been caught, I felt an obligation—almost duty—to resume our relationship. "That's great. So, umm, do you want me to drop over this weekend?"

"No, I won't be here."

I was relieved. "Why not?"

"I'm going to Melbourne to visit some relatives."

"OK. I'll see you when you get back."

"Definitely."

A couple of hours later, Barbara Carmichael strode into my room, wearing her bar jacket, obviously just back from court, looking excited. "I've just heard."

I leaned back and looked innocent. "About what?"

"Philip killed Terry and he's been arrested."

A puzzled expression. "You know, the police were here earlier: that must have been why."

She glared. "Don't play games. What's been going on?"

"Short version or long one?"

She sat down. "Long one."

I explained how I fingered Philip—using the information she obtained from Greta Milliken—and helped the police arrest him.

"So the big thug I kicked didn't kill Terry?"

"Correct, Philip did. Somehow, Philip got the weird idea that Terry had some business sense, took his investment advice and lost a bundle."

"In a way, I feel a bit sorry for him."

"So do I. Terry believed his own bullshit and could be very convincing."

She frowned. "I suppose you think this makes you a better detective than me?"

I smiled. "I'm convinced it does. But you did provide the vital clue. You deserve credit for that."

A scowl. "Yes, even though I didn't see its significance."

I shrugged. "You needed more pieces of the puzzle."

"True, and you weren't keeping me informed. In fact, I should have been in at the kill, so to speak. I thought we were a team."

"You weren't around. You were off pretending to be a barrister."

"You could have waited."

"Sorry, events were in the saddle."

"Mmm, I suppose that's a bit of excuse. Now, I'd better get back to pretending I'm a barrister."

"OK. Don't forget we're having lunch on Monday."

"I won't."

She strode from my room.

Soon afterward, to my great surprise, I got a call from Bob Meredith who, understandably, sounded a little hesitant. "Umm, I just want to congratulate you."

What a cheek. "For what?"

"Settling the *Arnold* case. Brilliant. I'd written that one off. I hope you've sent you bill."

"I'm about to."

"Good. I also hear your clerk's been arrested for murdering Terry."

"That's right."

"So, you see, I was innocent."

"Of murder, yes, but you helped the judge cover-up a serious crime and then kept appearing before him, very successfully."

A surprising chuckle. "That was a bit naughty of me, I admit, but I understand the police aren't going to do anything more about the judge's conduct or mine. So, even if you make a fuss, nobody will care."

Though I wanted to get angry, I didn't have the strength. "So it seems."

"Let's put all of this behind us, including the incident in your room."

"Incident? That what you call it?"

"Yeah. Schwartz wasn't going to hurt you. And if he was, I'd have stopped him, I promise."

"Really?"

"Yes. So I hope we can keep working together. In fact, I've got a few briefs I'd like to send you."

Now I was angry. "I don't want your work, ever again."

"Look, I understand that you're upset."

"Of course I'm upset. I'm also relieved. Know why? Because, from now on, I won't have to read the shit your firm puts together and calls a brief. A two-year-old could do a better job of preparing cases. From now on, you'll have to rip off clients without my help."

"I'm sorry you feel like that."

"I'm not. Pay my bill and piss off." I hung up knowing that diatribe was water off a duck's back. But it made me feel better.

## Chapter 31

The following Monday, I took Barbara to a high-priced Italian restaurant in the Rocks for lunch. As soon as we sat down, I realised it was a bad place to take a fitness nut. I ordered the bloody sausage while trying to avoid her disapproving eye. She ordered a seafood salad with no dressing. She also asked for tap water and, despite wanting a glass of wine to tame my sudden nerves, I did the same.

I said: "How was your weekend?"

"OK. Did a triathlon."

"What's that?"

"Swimming, running and bike riding."

I grimaced. "Ouch. How did you go?"

"Set a P.B."

"P.B.?"

"Personal best. Finally cracked three hours."

"Wow. And how'd your boyfriend go?"

"He wasn't there."

"Why not?"

A dismissive wave of her breadstick. "Oh, we broke up a couple of months ago."

My heart squirmed, though I didn't dare ask myself why. "What happened?"

She shrugged. "I should never have gone out with a merchant banker."

"Why not?"

"Because they only talk about two things: money and themselves. That gets pretty boring after a while."

"You didn't talk about triathlons?"

"Yes, his P.B.s." She munched on the bread-stick. "Did you read the *Herald* this morning? It said Justice Sloan has resigned."

A small item in the paper had reported his retirement. Sloan was quoted as saying that, after a long and fulfilling career on the bench, it was "time to pull up stumps and see the world".

I said: "Yep. No whiff of scandal. Are you surprised? The legal system will do almost anything to protect a judge."

"So it seems. They don't teach that in law school, do they? Have you spoken to Detective Malloy since Friday?"

"Yes, this morning. He said they've got heaps of physical evidence implicating Philip. His DNA and fingerprints were found all over the murder scene. So, it seems, he was not much of a clerk, not much of an investor and not much of a murderer. He'll go away for a long time."

"And Doris? How did she react?"

"Pleased, of course."

A hard stare. "You've seen her recently?"

I flinched. "No, I only spoke to her on the phone. She's gone to Melbourne to see some relatives."

She didn't blink. "Anything happening between you two?"

"No. We're just friends—that's all."

"Really?"

"Yes," I said, knowing that was true for the future. Her curiosity about my private life woke a snake in my belly. What was her agenda? I dared not guess.

The waiter arrived and served our food. While I ate and she nibbled, she described how our colleagues on the floor had reacted to Philip's arrest. "The poor dears are having terrible trouble sorting out their feelings: they spent their whole careers sucking up to him, hoping for work; now they claim they never really liked him."

"They're not noted for their loyalty."

"They're also pretty amazed that a wimp like Philip had the guts to kill Terry."

"So am I. It shows, doesn't it, how far Terry pushed the poor guy: offered him the world, and didn't even give him an atlas."

As a waiter removed our plates, she twisted her serviette and looked a little nervous. "I've got some big news."

"What?"

"I've bought a room on another floor."

My chest constricted and stomach dropped. Barbara had been licensing a room on our floor while its owner appeared at a long-running royal commission in Perth. I tried to sound relaxed, and failed. "Shit, really?"

"Yes. Felix said he's coming back next month, so I've found somewhere else: I bought a room at Frank Barton Chambers. I'll be moving in about a fortnight."

A smart move, because lots of barristers on that floor specialised in building & construction litigation. "When did all this happen?"

"Oh, about a week ago. I would have told you earlier, but you were so busy."

I struggled to sound supportive. "It's a good floor for you: you'll fit in well."

"I hope so."

I suddenly realised that I'd liked her for a long time, but, because she was always around, had taken her for granted. Damn.

Frogs jumped around in my throat. "I'm sorry to hear you're going, I really am."

"Well, I've really enjoyed being on your floor."

"You have?"

"Yes, even though you usually ignore me."

"No, I don't."

A frown. "Yes you do. You know, I've wondered if you think I'm a bit, well, tough."

"Tough?"

"Yes. It's hard for women at the Bar: everyone expects us to be tough, but when we are, they think we're bitches."

"I don't think you're too tough."

"You sure? I'm quite sensitive, you know. Maybe, sometimes, I act tough to overcompensate."

"Don't worry: you're not too tough and not too soft—you're just right."

A frown. "You don't show that."

"Show what?"

"That you think I'm just right."

Was she teasing, or more interested in me than I thought? My hands tingled. "You mean, I'm supposed to hold up a sign that says 'Just Right'?"

"No, but you could be nicer."

"How?"

She put her elbows on the table and gave me a steely stare. "By paying more attention to *me*."

Christ. She obviously did like me more than I thought. "Really?"

"Yes."

Nerves fried my brain and I groped around for a response. "Umm, when do you move?" Christ, hadn't she already told me that?

"In about a fortnight. I hope we'll stay in touch."

"So do I." Recent events had shaken me out of my complacency and given me a taste for adventure. She'd laid her cards on the table. Time for me to show some courage. "In fact, umm, let's have dinner one night before you go."

A broad smile. "That would be nice—very nice."

Desire swelled in my chest and my left foot trembled. "Great. Maybe on the weekend."

She carefully smoothed her napkin and placed it in front of her, aware she was now in total control. "OK. But if I have dinner with you, you've got to do something with me."

"What?"

"Come for a run."

"A what?"

"A run. It's like walking, except sometimes you have both feet in the air."

My God. What was I getting into? "OK. How far do you run?"

A grim smile. "Don't worry, the first few times, it won't be far and I'll go slow. I don't want you to have a heart attack."

*The first few times.* "Goodness, maybe I was wrong about you."

"What do you mean?"

"You are tougher than I thought."

She looked disappointed. "If you don't want to run, you don't have to, but you might enjoy it."

Why didn't she have knitting as a hobby—or crochet? If the running got too strenuous, I'd fake an injury. "Don't worry, I'll run."

"Good."

A waiter arrived and asked if we wanted dessert.

I looked at her nervously. "Can I?"

Her eyes narrowed slightly. "That's entirely up to you."

I glanced at the waiter. "No, just a cappuccino thanks, with skim milk."

A slight nod of approval.

