

Wednesday, 24 August

BRENDAN O'LEARY opened one eye. Two black paws and a small black snout. 'You think I need company don't you, old girl?' he said to the dog, who'd once spent her nights sleeping on the floor before there was a vacancy in the bed. He turned to face the uncurtained window. The lights on the Westgate Bridge glimmered in a pale Melbourne dawn.

'Okay, Maggie,' he said, 'let's go.' His neck muscles corded as he tied up size 11s, grinning as the dog hurtled down the hallway before skidding to a halt at the backdoor.

Out in the park, winter had come and gone before anyone had noticed, leaving the ground dry and the air even drier. Leaves scrunched under his feet as he set off along a creek lined with river red gums, courtesy of a long-ago community tree-planting. Not like the lake in Ballarat that he'd run around almost thirty years ago trying to beat the eighteen-minute time set by the local Olympian. He picked up the pace, pounding along a gravel path rutted by the last violent downpour. Maybe July. Could have been June. Four laps. Five kilometres.

Heading in through the back door, he ripped off his singlet and threw it at the almost full washing basket. Five years ago he could have run the distance in under twenty minutes. This morning, 25 minutes 34 seconds. No doubt about it, he was slowing down.

A phone shrilled in the kitchen. He found it on top of paperwork he hadn't dealt with last night. 'O'Leary,' he wheezed.

'Sir, a suspicious death,' a duty officer said. 'Inspector wants you to take charge.'

'Yeah,' he said slowly, mentally ticking off the other cases on his

desk. A backpacker's inexplicable vicious killing. The assassination of a drug dealer. An old man on his own in a tumble-down cottage, battered to death before whoever did it set the whole place alight. He wondered why him. Enough other lazy bastards taking up space in town. He sighed heavily. 'Who else has he assigned?'

'He said to tell you DC Micelli's already at the scene.'

'Right,' he said, aware his voice had taken on a different tone.

'And Forensics have got a crew on site.'

'Which is where?'

'Malthouse Theatre, 113 Sturt Street, Southbank. From here you'd turn left after the Art Gallery and head towards South Melbourne ...'

'Who's dead?'

'Not sure. Want me to send a car?'

'No mate, a taxi'll do. Quicker.'

He pulled off the remainder of his gear, turned on the shower. A taxi hooted in the street before he had time to select a tie. He seized the first one his fingers found, shoved it in his pocket, grabbed the pile of papers from the kitchen bench and slammed the front door to. Time to tie shoelaces in the car.

Once settled in the back seat, he pulled out his phone. 'You heard anything definite yet, Ange?'

'Victim's about forty, they think. Body's located in the Green Room, top floor. Head injuries, but not clear if that's the cause of death.'

'Any ID yet?'

'Yep. A woman by the name of ...' Her voice was muffled by a B-double careering too fast and too close to the taxi, its engine brake bellowing as it came to a jolting halt at the Williamstown Road lights. Fourteen, maybe fifteen loaded prime movers belching diesel waited to turn onto the Bridge. Yarraville, a once sleepy working-class suburb had been transformed by mum-and-dad renovators and savvy developers wanting a piece of close-to-the-CBD real estate action. But they couldn't get rid of the trucks.

'Who was it again?'

‘Deborah Dangerfield.’

O’Leary breathed sharply. ‘You sure?’

‘According to the bloke who found her, Russell Chamberlain. He’s the chief of some festival on at the Malthouse. She was booked for today’s keynote.’

O’Leary was silent for a moment. He knew Deborah Dangerfield. Or, to be more accurate, he *had* known her. Known her well, but that was many years ago. He didn’t get much time to read these days but even he knew her forthcoming book was tipped to rip the guts out of Melbourne’s social set. ‘It’s my story, claims socialite divorcee’ and ‘Fiction or faction? You be the judge’ were a couple of the teasers he’d seen splashed over magazine front covers at the supermarket checkout. And her photo. A beaming Deborah, cleavage plumped, pink painted lips, expensive-looking teeth.

‘Want me to locate family?’

His mind raced through possible scenarios. ‘Not until I’ve checked out the scene.’ He hoped it wasn’t going to be one of those sicko cases involving rape and a slow death by hog-tie. Trying to keep his voice even, he added, ‘Important to get details right before we speak to anyone.’

He didn’t let on that he knew her parents. Dick Weston was the principal partner in a Ballarat legal firm, Weston, Weston and Armytage, a firm as old as the city itself. O’Leary and his brother had used their services the year before when they took over the leasehold of another of Ballarat’s establishments, a run-down pub called The Golddiggers’ Arms.

* * *

O’Leary’s taxi came to a stop outside the Malthouse, an old red-brick brewery and malting house. When it was past its use-by-date, the brewery donated it to the city as a place for Australian theatre. Corporate generosity. Micelli was waiting for him. She stood head and shoulders above the crowd milling in the forecourt.

‘You got here quick,’ she said, handing him a coffee. Her skin was the colour you’d end up with if you mixed caffè latte with ripe olives.

He prised off the lid, licked it clean of froth. ‘Great work, Ange.’

‘Here, hold this.’ She thrust her cup at him. ‘Who tied your tie this morning?’ Deftly, she moved the knot up so it covered the top button of his grey and white striped shirt, and a perfect match for his grey eyes. She patted down his lapels, retrieved her coffee. ‘That’ll do you,’ she said, and turned on her heels.

Following her into the foyer he noticed her hair was caught up with a tortoise-shell clip, the same way his wife used to wear her hair when she wanted to look business-like.

‘Victim’s on the top floor,’ directed a pimply-faced constable. ‘Protective gear’s on the bar round to the left.’

O’Leary nodded, turned into the gloom of a foyer flanked on one side by a long counter stacked with glasses, coffee machines and crockery. His eyes were drawn upwards to a row of framed posters advertising long-gone performances. ‘Baal.’ Two men, wet, hairless chests exposed, one strumming a folk guitar. ‘Porn.Cake.’ The actress was about to throw a cream cake in a man’s face.

‘What do they do here exactly?’

‘All sorts I think,’ Micelli said, handing him a set of overalls.

He shrugged off his jacket and threw it on the counter over his pile of papers, then hauled the disposable suit on over his pants.

‘Arts stuff. Probably not your scene.’

O’Leary lifted an eyebrow. ‘Yeah?’ The night he played Joseph in the school nativity play, the girl who was Mary wet herself. He’d watched the piddle trickle closer and closer until it swamped his bare feet. His stomach growled as he downed the remaining coffee. ‘Get onto CCTV. Security. Staff on duty last night. Come up when you’re ready,’ he said, ping-ponging the cup into a bin.

Arriving at the doorway of the Green Room he paused, casting his eyes over leather chairs the colour of strong tea, the polished occasional tables, pink and white flower arrangements. The room smelt like a cross between an expensive florist’s and a bar on Sunday morning. Smears of wine on glasses. Half a dozen or so uncorked bottles on one of the sideboards. ‘What’s a “green room”?’

‘Dunno for sure, sir,’ said the constable on the door, ‘but I heard

Mr Chamberlain saying it was going to be another one of his problems today.’

Deborah was near the doorway, slumped on the floor, both legs bent at the knees as if she’d pitched headfirst from a sitting position. One black stiletto decorated with a cream velvet bow, barely worn if the sole was anything to go by, was off to one side of the body. He noted her coiffed blonde hair and expertly made-up face. Much more elegant than her pictures in the trashy mags. A black handbag trimmed with what he hoped wasn’t real zebra hide was propped against a nearby chair, maybe the same chair she’d been sitting in before she was killed. Would he have recognised her if she’d passed him by in the street? He couldn’t say. She was a long way from the plump-faced teenager he’d known in Ballarat.

The room was full. Chief forensic investigator Rod Jones was crouched down, talking quietly to one of his crew, eyes fixed on a wine glass that had rolled onto the floor. Professor Frank Sutcliffe, the state’s chief pathologist, was on hands and knees, eyes focused on something obscured by the body. O’Leary ducked under the police tape, cleared his throat. ‘What’s caught your eye, Frank?’

Sutcliffe looked up. ‘Bag of pills. She’s lying on them. Jones’ll test them, but they look like Es to me. Branded with a bulldog. Seen that before?’

O’Leary moved round, following Sutcliffe’s finger. ‘I’ll check with Drugs.’

‘My daughter came back from Rome last week with something similar,’ he said, gesturing towards the handbag. ‘Said she’d paid a small fortune for it.’ His rimless spectacles caught the reflection from a set of arc lights. ‘Maybe we should become writers.’

‘Too dangerous for me, mate. But I’d like to check the contents.’

O’Leary expected to find a lot of stuff in her handbag. He placed it on a sideboard near the window, pushed aside stacks of books to make room. He plunged in, taking out item after item and laying each carefully side-by-side, ready for bagging. Full makeup bag – lipsticks, brushes, tubes, mirror. Filofax. Tissues. Bottle of perfume. Sunscreen. Umbrella. A wallet with more cash than he’d seen in a

day at the races. Several business cards, none of them hers. One of those spiral bound notebooks reporters use to scribble in. Only the first page written on. A shopping list. Pens. White lace handkerchief. Tin of breath mints. Penlight. Faded receipts. He checked the inside pockets. He turned the bag upside down and gave it a good shake. 'Anybody come across a phone? Or a bunch of keys?'

A few glanced in his direction. They shook their heads and continued on with what they were doing.

O'Leary swept the room again. The forensics team. Jones. Sutcliffe. A cameraman standing in the doorway. Blue overalls, booties, pull-on suits, latex gloves everywhere he looked. It could have been the theatre they wheeled Zoe into at the Royal Children's that night two years ago. A room full of surgeons, anaesthetists, nurses. All kitted out in an effort to save his daughter.

He was deep in thought when Sutcliffe said, 'Think that's me done, so I'll get going. Maybe see you in the rooms. Probably tomorrow because of that level crossing smash last night. We're not even halfway through yet. That alright with you?'

O'Leary shrugged. He'd heard about the accident on the way in. A truck ploughed into a Maryborough-bound train, killing six passengers and injuring twenty or more. No use arguing, he'd have to wait his turn. 'Anything obvious for us to go on in the meantime?' he asked.

'Nothing definite,' said Sutcliffe, 'but I doubt that's what's killed her.' A large hard-cover book was lying propped against her right temple, smeared with what appeared to be a bloody mash of hair and flesh. It was a copy of Deborah Dangerfield's book, *My Father's Mistress*. According to a whiteboard over in the corner, it was to have been launched this morning by the Victorian Minister for Racing.

* * *

'Fucking global warming,' growled the Honourable Phillip Sinclair, Minister for Racing, as he squinted into the morning sun. Droplets of sweat beaded on his forehead, trickled down his spine, soaked the sheets. 'And fuck you too,' he said in response to a phone threatening to vibrate itself clean off his bedside table. He squinted

towards the clock. Quarter to nine. Christ. Probably Sally. Shit. He'd forgotten to call her last night. He could feel another thumper of a headache taking hold behind his eyes. 'Ughhhh ...' he groaned, teeth thick with too much red wine and cigar smoke. He brought the phone closer. Caller ID Athanasou, C. What? Athanasou was the dickhead who'd signed him up for last night's prostate fundraiser. Should have known, would have known, a late finish inevitable. He fumbled the phone to his face. 'Yeah?' he snarled.

'Phil, you awake?'

'Course I'm fucking awake. What choice with you on the blower at sparrow's fart?'

'Look, I think you'd better come in.'

Sinclair groaned.

'Soon as you can. Bit of bad news.'

He groaned again.

'I wouldn't have ...'

'Go on,' he snorted. 'Have we got to cancel the Cup?' The news about a mystery disease spreading through thoroughbred stables had been getting worse all week. Sydney had already cancelled their spring carnival.

'Phil, it's not the Cup,' Athanasou said slowly. 'It's Deborah.'

'What about Deborah?'

There was silence on the line.

'Well spit it out, man.'

Athanasou stammered, 'Seems like she's been murdered.'

For thirty or more seconds Sinclair didn't breathe, didn't say anything.

'You still there, Phil?'

Fuck. He pictured a sea of journalists pushing sheepskin mikes at him, barking out questions for which there were no answers. Another image came, this time of himself, pale, composed, uttering monosyllabic denials. Then his wife Sally striding up to the closest and prettiest of the reporters, yelling in her face, 'Of course he's been fucking Deborah. You didn't think he was out legislating five nights a week did you, you stupid bitch!'

‘Get a grip,’ he said out loud. ‘Get a fucking grip.’

‘What was that, Phil?’

Sinclair struggled upright. ‘I’ll call you back.’

He sunk his toes into the chocolate carpet of the Flinders Street apartment he stayed in most nights. Heading into the ensuite he threw up in the toilet bowl, retching and sobbing like a common drunk full of too much cheap booze. He ran the shower, tried to soap away the remnants of his night. Snot ran down his cheeks, slipped into the eddy of soapsuds and water. Twenty-five litres a minute for ten minutes beat down, until finally his stomach stopped heaving.

He dressed quickly, selecting a crisp white shirt and a dark navy suit, blended wool and silk, subtle self-stripe. When the mirror confirmed he looked presentable, he dialled Athanasou. ‘Pick up, damn you,’ he breathed into the phone, drumming his fingers on the kitchen bench. He opened the fridge and pulled out a container of orange juice, poured a glass. He was halfway through it when Athanasou finally picked up. ‘Now tell me what happened from start to finish. No bullshit. Just the facts,’ Sinclair demanded.

‘You remember how you went to the Malthouse last night before the ...’

‘Yes, of course I fucking remember,’ Sinclair spat. ‘Do you think I’m demented?’

Athanasou took a deep breath, kept his tone even. ‘She was in the Green Room when Russell the Love Muscle found her. Reckons her head was staved in. His words, not mine. By the time he got hold of me he could hardly speak. Said he was sorry about ringing the cops first. Panicked apparently.’

‘Typical Chamberlain,’ scoffed Sinclair. Chamberlain’s appointment as the Imagine Festival director resulted from a deal with the Arts Minister, a little matter brought to account. He was an import from the Western District, son of a well-to-do pastoralist, knew nothing about the arts as far as Sinclair knew, but no doubt knew the back end of a fine wool merino better than most. ‘I’ll worry about that stupid prick later. What I want to know is what happened, and what’s the damage.’

‘She’s dead.’

‘Tell me something I don’t know.’

‘Ah ...’

Sinclair could hear him swallowing, epiglottis working overtime.

‘When I got over there Forensics were already carting stuff out. According to O’Leary from Homicide, she sustained severe head injuries. He spoke to the media about fifteen minutes ago ...’

‘Bludgeoned? Knifed?’

‘He’s not saying anything. Calling for full cooperation from the public. Usual stuff.’

‘Who’s this O’Leary? Do we know him?’ he asked, phone squashed between shoulder and ear, as he attempted to buckle his belt.

‘Not that I’m aware of,’ said Athanasou. ‘Looks pretty sharp, though. Says they’re going to be looking at all her movements, so I reckon you’ll be fingered pretty much in the first cull. My advice, for what it’s worth, is hold the line. Deborah was a recent but good friend, you admired her, you’d been looking forward to catching up at the festival, you dropped into the Malthouse last night on the way to the fundraiser, got caught up with Jack Adams discussing racing matters, you and she hardly said more than hello. And,’ he added, ‘we keep Sally out of it altogether.’

Sinclair drew back the curtains and surveyed the cityscape to the south. The bay was studded with container ships. Highrises ringed the foreshore, patches of yellow sand just visible in the gaps. Closer in, it wasn’t hard to pick out the Malthouse next door to one of the Burnley tunnel’s exhaust stacks.

Surely no one had noticed him slip out for a few minutes last night.

‘You’ll need to be with me all the way on this one, Chris.’

* * *

Micelli strode down the stairs from the Green Room, pulled off her gear and tossed it behind the counter. She found a spot near the box office well out of the way of the action, pulled a table closer, opened her notebook. Stale cigarette smoke filled her nostrils. She looked

up. Thickset, six foot two or more, pacing the floor. The phrase 'slick dresser' came to mind. Well-cut grey jacket, a silk and fine-wool blend, Italian for sure. Black shirt open at the neck, and the pièce de résistance, a pair of shoes made from leather that looked so thick and fresh and lifelike, that she had to stop herself from looking for the crocodile that had just stepped out of its skin. Pity about the fag habit. You could smell him a mile away.

'How much longer do you reckon your people will be here, officer?' he barked at the pimply-faced cop standing watch near the exit.

'Not sure,' she said, 'maybe out of here some time this afternoon.'

'What?' He exploded like a teenager's mother finding a joint at the bottom of a schoolbag. 'Have you seen the crowd out there?' He swung round on his heels and marched in Micelli's direction. Throwing his hands into the air he shouted to no one in particular, 'I've got a bloody festival to run.'

So this was Russell Chamberlain.

Micelli was on the point of introducing herself when he veered towards the main doorway and flung it open. Sunshine shafted the foyer. She shielded her eyes against the sudden glare.

'You all have to go home!' he bellowed, grammar school vowels resonating into the middle distance. Arms outstretched, he was like a farmer rounding up a mob of sheep. 'The police have closed us down for the day.'

Micelli heard raised voices. Someone demanded their money back.

Pimples peered out into the forecourt, quickly ducked her head back inside. Raising her shoulder, she spoke into the radio attached to her shirt lapel.

Chamberlain slammed the door and leant his full weight against it. Perhaps he was expecting a storming of the barricades.

'The officer in charge'll send someone to see you shortly, sir,' Pimples said. Chamberlain grunted, hardly registering her presence.

Micelli watched a man looking as dark as his regulation black catering apron mincing towards Chamberlain. 'What am I going to

do with seventy dozen smoked salmon baguettes?’ he demanded.

‘Can’t you freeze them?’ Chamberlain said.

‘Baguettes, already filled, do not freeze.’

‘What about the staff?’ asked Chamberlain. ‘Or the police? There’s a few of them about.’

‘We’ve got seventy dozen items, Russell, and when I multiply seventy by twelve I get eight hundred and forty. Unless I’m missing something, I can’t see eight hundred and forty people, police or otherwise. Can you?’

Micelli lowered her head in case her giggling became obvious. If the caterer had any sense he’d go and trade the lot at half price and claim insurance. Double his money. That’s what her dad would have done.

Chamberlain faced the caterer and said, ‘I’m really sorry, Stewart, but there’s nothing I can do. I suggest you contact head office and see if they can assist. Now if you’ll excuse me.’ And he walked off in the direction of Rod Jones who’d come downstairs and was giving directions to a new group of blue-suited forensics.

‘I assume you’ll require me for an interview,’ Chamberlain said, fiddling with the top button on his jacket, smoothing what little hair remained on his head. ‘Russell Chamberlain, Festival Director. Pleased to meet you.’ He proffered a hand.

Jones looked up. ‘Perhaps you have me mixed up with Detective Senior Sergeant O’Leary,’ he said. ‘I’m with Forensics.’

‘Oh,’ stammered Chamberlain. ‘I thought you ...’

Jones cut across him. ‘I’m sure the police’ll want to talk to you soon. Now if you’ll excuse me, we have a bit more to do here than we can get out of your way for good.’

Micelli waited a few moments before walking up behind him. ‘Mr Chamberlain? DC Ange Micelli.’

He stared at her. ‘Thought they said it was a man who’d be talking to me.’

She smiled broadly. ‘Detective Senior Sergeant O’Leary will catch up with you in good time, but for now you’ve got me.’

He exhaled a lungful of air, pungent with smoke. Turning his

back, he motioned her to follow him through the box office door into a small cramped office. Books, papers, files, bundles of newspapers, San Pellegrino bottles, coffee cups, the remains of about twenty-five Asian takeaways. He waved to one of two vinyl chairs. He sat down behind a desk cluttered with papers and office equipment. A large silver-framed photograph of a man standing on the deck of a very long white yacht took prime position.

‘To get started, Mr Chamberlain, can you let me have a list of all the guests invited to the function last night?’

‘Well ... yes and no.’

Micelli looked straight at him and said, ‘Let’s do the “yes” first.’ Her firm tone had the desired effect.

He fidgeted with a jar of pencils. ‘You see, some of those who said they were coming didn’t show, and some who weren’t invited did. How accurate does it have to be?’

‘Very. Is there anyone you could work with to make sure you’ve got all the attendees listed?’

‘There’s the publicist. Her show really.’

‘And she is?’

‘Sarah Jarrett. Best in town.’

‘Details?’

Chamberlain stopped spinning the pencil jar and picked up a phone. Swiped and jabbed. Swiped some more. Swore under his breath.

‘You don’t happen to have the guest list handy? Perhaps Miss Jarrett emailed you one?’

‘Oh yes, she did too. Hang on a minute.’ He swiped some more.

Expensive technology was wasted on blokes like him. All he really needed was a good old-fashioned pen and notebook. ‘Could the information be on your laptop?’ she enquired icily.

When he eventually managed to print the guest list, she watched while he crossed through names, scribbled others on the bottom.

‘Will Miss Jarrett be able to provide me with their contact details? I’ll need to speak to each person individually.’

He snorted and tossed her the printout. ‘It’s all there.’

Micelli flicked through the pages. Guests' names cross-referenced with titles of works, publicists, agents, publishers, producers, websites, hotels, phone numbers. She smiled.

'What about this morning, Mr Chamberlain, can you tell me what you saw when you arrived at work?'

'Look, how much more time is this going to take? I've got artistes and booksellers and caterers, as well as the great unwashed, all wanting to know what's going on. Quite frankly, none of what I say is going to get Deborah back, is it, and that's the hole that I have to plug.'

'Must be stressful for you, but it won't take long,' she assured him as genuinely as she could muster. 'Let's just start at the start, shall we?'

He leaned back in the chair and faced her sullenly. 'I got here about six this morning. Probably a couple of minutes before. I came in a taxi, so the firm can doubtless check the drop-off time exactly.'

'Do you know which one?'

'Can't remember. I catch so many of them.' He was still fiddling with his phone.

'How did you pay?'

'Credit.'

'That's something,' she said and made a note. 'Colour?'

'Colour of what?'

'The taxi, Mr Chamberlain.'

His eyes flashed and his cheeks reddened. 'God, the bloody thing was yellow. Aren't they all yellow these days?'

Micelli kept her gaze steady. 'What did you do then?'

'I opened up, came in, locked the door behind me, went into my office and tried to find my phone.'

'The room we're in now?'

He nodded.

'What made you go upstairs?'

'Last night I went to the Green Room to check on something. I went back this morning because I couldn't find the bloody thing.' He waved the phone at her as if this was proof enough of his words.

‘You found it. Obviously?’

‘It was under some papers on my desk.’ He indicated a particular pile of papers. ‘Just there. Thought I might have left it upstairs in my hurry to get everyone organised and out of there.’

‘Do you know who else went up there last night?’

‘Umm ... David Karpiak, Ali Kishan, Maureen O’Murphy, I think.’

‘What about Miss Dangerfield?’

‘She was already in there when I went in.’

‘Was anyone with her?’

‘There were two or three others, I think. Let me see. Victor Rizzoli, Nancy Lee Rosenbaum, Kathleen Goldfinch.’

‘All writers, Mr Chamberlain?’ she asked as she scanned the list.

‘Three writers. The rest are visual artists. All except Maureen, who’s my counterpart, so to speak. From Galway.’ He added, ‘In Ireland.’

Micelli had once spent a day in the teeming rain at the Galway races. She’d backed a winner and when she went to collect, the bookie was nowhere to be seen and neither were her winnings. But with another few Guinness under her belt she forgave him, as she did the horses she’d backed that didn’t win, as well as the rain. ‘About what time was this?’

‘The function finished at ten-thirty because of the catering arrangements. It would’ve been about quarter to when I got up to the Green Room.’

She tilted an imaginary drink to her lips. ‘You all kicked on? Had a few more drinks?’

‘I wasn’t keen on it, big day ahead and all, so I said after a while that we should call it a night, and re-convene at tonight’s festival dinner.’

‘Must get very hectic during a festival,’ she said soothingly. ‘Can you recall what time it was when you suggested calling it a day?’

‘Probably about eleven-thirty, I should think.’ He checked his phone again as if that would provide a more precise answer.

‘Did you go home in a taxi, Mr Chamberlain?’

'I shared it with Maureen. We went to her hotel first, then to my place.'

'Which is?'

'What? Home or the hotel?'

'Both.'

'The hotel's The Walter Lindrum. Home's unit 2, 21 Grey Street, St Kilda.' He added, 'Familiar with that part of town, Miss Mitchell?'

Refusing to take his bait she said, 'The taxi company could confirm this, and the time of pick-up outside the Malthouse?'

'I expect so.'

'Did everyone leave at the same time?'

'I thought they did, as I had to lock up. Security comes round later, but it's my job to clear the building. Seemed like there was quite a crowd waiting for taxis.'

'Did you see Deborah Dangerfield leave?'

'Not exactly.'

Micelli took a moment to make a note. 'Is there anyone else whom you didn't see leave? Exactly?'

'Well, if you put it like that I can't be really sure who left, apart from Maureen and myself. There was a large group milling about. I don't recall specifically who was there and who wasn't. I'm pretty sure Nancy and Kathleen were there, probably Victor. Not sure about David and Ali.'

'Or Deborah?'

He snorted air in through his nose. 'No, that's right. Nor Deborah,' he snapped.

'Didn't you say it was your job to check the building before locking up?'

'Yes, but ...'

'Would that have included the toilets, stage areas?'

'Ah ...'

'Therefore anyone could have been locked in the building?'

His face was turning a deep shade of crimson. 'It's security's job to make sure anyone entering has the right identification,' he thundered. 'Therefore if they've done their job, there shouldn't be any

need to check toilets.’

Micelli felt her phone vibrate in her pocket. She checked. No message. This didn’t deter her from saying, ‘Something’s come up. I’ll be in touch later, Mr Chamberlain.’ She strode out of his cramped office and breathed in a lungful of air.

* * *

The sun was high when O’Leary returned to the colourless twelve-storey building, headquarters for Homicide and a few other criminal divisions. A north wind scattered lolly wrappers and cigarette butts, sending them dancing along the footpath. He missed the old place, the smell of newly mown grass from the school ovals across the road, reminding him of half-arsed footy matches played in his youth. Up the steps, into the lobby, into the lift. Shit. He hadn’t been quick enough to sidestep someone’s lunch, a paper bag smeared with tomato sauce oozing meat pie. He kicked it to a corner, pulled out a handkerchief, managed to wipe most of it off his polished shoe before the lift doors opened onto the carpeted foyer that differentiated senior management’s floor from the others. He chucked the handkerchief onto the pie mess, straightened his tie.

Inspector Goddings was sitting at his desk, reading glasses perched on the end of his nose, a stack of files at his elbow. Navy suit. Blue shirt. Navy tie. It was like he’d never got used to wearing civvies. O’Leary knocked.

‘Yes?’

‘Time for an update, Inspector?’ O’Leary’s nose twitched at the smell of musty foolscap clipped neatly into dog-eared manila folders with brass paper fasteners. Archive files. The Cold Case Unit was to be resurrected?

‘Malthouse?’

O’Leary nodded.

‘In your assessment, accidental or deliberate?’

‘Deliberate, sir,’ O’Leary said. ‘I’ll need another couple of detectives to work on the case.’

‘Any preferences?’

O’Leary gave two names. He’d worked with these blokes before.

‘Good-oh. Well, don’t want to hold you up,’ he said, pointing towards the door. ‘Report by five today.’

O’Leary understood he was dismissed.

It didn’t take him long to reach the Homicide floor. ‘Hey Ange,’ he said, ‘Nguyen and Landafino are joining us. I’d like you to ...’

‘Ah, just a tick ...’ She clicked her mouse a couple of times before swivelling round to face him. ‘Good team, then.’ She smiled at the memory of the four of them, packed into a 4WD, heading up the foothills of Mt Macedon on a drizzling July night. They got him in the end, a calculating silver tongue who’d made a habit of encouraging the older generation to change their wills in his favour, only days before they unexpectedly died. ‘By the way, security’s working on getting us the CCTV tapes. I’ve made a start on her contacts.’

O’Leary hesitated. ‘Remember we have to wait for Ballarat to advise us they’ve informed the family. I take it that hasn’t happened yet?’

Micelli shook her head. ‘Not surprising. It’s only a tad over two hours since we notified them,’ she said, checking her watch. ‘Any theories as to what happened at the Malthouse?’

‘An argument over some unresolved issue perhaps.’

‘Premeditated?’

‘Too public. Too many risks. Whoever did it bashed her with her own book.’

Micelli raised an eyebrow. ‘Yeah. I saw that too when I went upstairs. Think that’s the cause of death?’

‘More as a finishing touch. Maybe the killer’s got an acute sense of humour.’

‘Oh, I dunno. Guess if you’re into writing about sex and intrigue, anything might happen.’

‘You know what her book’s about?’

Micelli ran fingers through the thick mane of hair she’d pulled loose from its clip. ‘Read a review in the paper over the weekend. Meant to be a blockbuster.’ She turned back to her screen. ‘Quote: “It’ll blow the lid off Melbourne society”, unquote.’

O’Leary nodded and grinned. No stopping Angela Micelli. A

while back he'd invited her for a drink, wanted to know how her application for promotion was going. Front bar in one of the new breed of gastro pubs in the west. 'My shout, what's it to be?' he'd said.

'I'll have a Pure Blonde, thanks.'

The barmaid cocked her head towards O'Leary.

'Same please. Got to keep the weight down. Not getting any younger.'

Sipping beers, O'Leary asked her why she'd joined the police force in the first place.

'That's a good a question.' Spent time telling him she wanted to join the air force when she was still at school, mother had other ideas, including a husband, two or three kids, proper wog house. 'But that's unlikely now.' She draped one of her legs over the other and shifted on her stool to face him square on.

'What do you mean?' he said, trying not to stare.

'You know, age, opportunity. That type of thing.' She'd fingered a bowl of salted peanuts, popped a couple in her mouth. 'But getting back to the application, I have to describe the highlights of my time in Crime Scene Services, would you believe. What do you think I should put down?'

O'Leary told her about his time in CSS. Lugging tripods and arc lights, picking up body bits under the Westgate, winding tape around crime scenes, dusting for prints. All the tech stuff done at Macleod. 'We were little more than evidence baggers.' He shrugged and ordered another round. 'When I went for promotion I was asked to describe the first job I had.'

'Which was?'

'Digging spuds.'

'Of course. You're a country boy,' she said, looking him up and down.

'More spuds than we knew what to do with. Spuds to plant, spuds to water, spuds to harvest. Spuds everywhere you looked. Mum cooked them every night for tea, and you know what, we never ran out.'

She'd laughed and slid more peanuts into her wide mouth. 'Yeah, parents. Keep you busy when you're a kid. I was the fourth, another girl. Mum was ecstatic, more hands for the kitchen. But she hadn't figured on Dad taking me over. Must've given up on getting his precious heir, so I got to do stuff a son would normally do.'

'Like?'

'Fix the car,' she said. 'That damn car. I swear it broke down every Friday night just so as Dad could have something to do on Saturday mornings while he waited until it was time to go to the game.'

'Which was?'

'You know, good old Aussie Rules. Like up there,' she said pointing to a huge ladder board affixed to the pub's front wall, which showed the progress of an in-house tipping competition.

'What about soccer? Isn't that what you Italians lay down your lives for?' How had he not known before that she liked football?

Micelli grinned. 'My dad was a smart bloke. He worked out the best way to be an Aussie was to barrack for a footy team. Chose Collingwood. The black and white stripes reminded him of Juventus.'

'You follow in your old man's footsteps?'

'You mean by being smart, or by barracking for Collingwood?' When she giggled, her face creased into laugh lines. 'Love the Maggies, always have.'

'Me, too,' he said, swallowing the last of his beer.

'Hence why your dog's called Maggie?'

'We're up against the Hawks at Docklands this Sunday. Wanna come along?' The invitation had slipped out before he thought about it. Pulled him up short. 'Although you've probably got something else on.'

Funny how things change. The promise of that evening lay between them for a time, but never got off the ground. How would he describe her now? His sounding board definitely, and if he thought about it, a good friend. Maybe his best.

'What do you want me to do now?'

Her raised eyebrows made him realise he'd not heard anything she'd said.

‘Phone the others ...?’

‘Yeah. Get Landafino and Nguyen here then we can set up a schedule,’ he said, breaking off to jot something in his notebook.

* * *

The club situated at the Paris end of Collins Street is a stone’s throw from the old Treasury buildings. The façade is nothing flash, elephant-grey stucco with large timber sash windows. But once inside, a visitor might think they’d walked into a different era. Phillip Sinclair was sitting at one of several clusters of small tables and chairs that dotted the expansive timber-panelled drawing room. Bill de Havilland entered right on eleven. Sinclair rose to greet his father-in-law. ‘Morning, Bill,’ he said. ‘Good of you to come in. Short notice, I know.’ He shook de Havilland’s weathered hand, helped him off with his jacket, draped it over the back of a chair. ‘Coffee or tea?’ He beckoned to one of the butlers standing ready to service the assembly of gentlemen, who were either perusing the morning’s newspapers or engaged in discreet conversations.

‘Tea please, Phillip, and some of those scones, too, if they’ve got them.’

Sinclair ordered, removed his reading glasses and placed them in a black leather case that lay on the table alongside a copy of the morning’s *Times*, open at the Moonee Valley form guide. He smiled at his father-in-law, asked after his health, assured him all was well, or at least well-enough on the domestic front, and agreed that the forthcoming election hadn’t really developed much of a profile as yet and it was hard to get key messages across to the media.

‘Speaking of messages, must say Marion found your message intriguing,’ said de Havilland, spreading a thick dollop of blackberry jam onto a scone.

Sinclair knew he should have waited for de Havilland to come on the phone before he said anything to his mother-in-law, but he’d been so worked up it was a wonder he hadn’t blurted out the whole thing. ‘Before we go on,’ he said hesitantly, ‘have I got your word that what we say here today remains within these walls?’

‘I’ve been round long enough to know some things have to be