

## PROLOGUE

Adrian Weston could see an orange glare reflecting off the shotgun's barrel, but not the face of the person silhouetted against the blazing afternoon sun. However, he knew the voice – a voice from decades past, a voice cemented in his memory.

'There's no need for this,' Weston said nervously. 'I've paid my dues. Thirty-one years in prison is more than enough, don't you think?'

The gun barrel wavered slightly.

'No,' was the reply.

'Would forty years have been enough for you? Or fifty, perhaps?'

'No.'

'This won't fix things.'

This time, there was no reply.

'I'm sorry, alright?' Weston's voice was feeble. 'Would it help if I got down on my knees and begged forgiveness?'

Again, the gun barrel wavered a little. 'No.'

'I don't deserve this. You understand what happened wasn't really my fault, don't you?'

The silhouette's head shook, but there was no answer.

'I'm about to come into some money,' Weston said, more confidently. 'Well over a million dollars is the estimate. Perhaps we can come to an agreement. Surely what happened is chickenfeed compared with a million dollars.'

The muzzle flash reached Weston's retinas just milliseconds before the tight formation of lead pellets, way too quickly for him to appreciate that he was paying the true fee for his atrocities.

# CHAPTER 1

Detective Inspector Greg Bowker put down the phone and stared out the window of the police headquarters on Spencer Street. *What goes around, comes around*, he thought. *An eye for an eye, and all that. But who squared the ledger?*

He pondered this for a moment or two before turning in his chair and calling across the room. 'Sherlock. You got a minute?'

Detective Sergeant Darren Holmes wandered over and dragged a chair up to Bowker's desk. 'What's the go?'

'Fancy a trip to the Mallee tomorrow?'

'No can do,' Holmes replied. 'In court for the next two days. The Trigoni trial. Thursday would be a goer, though.'

'That'll have to do. I'd like you in on this one with me. You were born up there in the sand, so you won't start sooking about the heat and isolation. Murrayville, wasn't it?'

Holmes chuckled. 'Yeah. Capital city of nowhere.'

'I think I'll drive up in the morning. If you come up on Thursday, that'll still work.'

'What have we got?' Holmes asked, crossing his legs and linking his hands behind his head.

'Body of a male. An Adrian Weston. Found between the grain silos at the Cocamba siding, just south of Manangatang.'

Holmes grinned. 'They're racing at Manangatang. Isn't that how the saying goes?'

Bowker leaned back in his chair. 'Yeah. But this bloke won't be doing much racing. Face blown off with a shotgun, according to the Swan Hill boys.'

Holmes raised his eyebrows. 'Subtle.'

'Yeah. Whoever killed him really meant it.'

'Aren't you still working the Madigan investigation?'

'Louise can handle that. Peter will give her a hand if she asks for it.'

'What's the attraction of this Mallee case?'

Bowker folded his arms across his chest. 'The victim was released from prison a month ago. Just finished a thirty-one-year sentence for the murder of a schoolgirl and incest with his stepdaughter.'

Holmes shook his head. 'What a depraved prick!'

'I put him away back in the mid-eighties.' Bowker paused for a moment. 'Well, me and Jack Moloney.'

Holmes raised his eyebrows. 'The legendary Jack Moloney?'

'Yeah. Top operator.'

'Thirty-one years ago? Shit, you were young to be working Homicide.'

'I was a senior constable in the one-copper station at Manangatang. Was up there for twelve years.'

'Twelve years?' Holmes laughed. 'Don't get that for murder, these days.'

'Ha, ha. Believe it or not, Rachael and I could've happily stayed there forever. But the kids were growing up, and my ambitious itch needed scratching. Applied for a move to Homicide and, unbelievably, I got in first try. I think Jack might've put in a good word.'

'You must've impressed him.'

'The schoolgirl went missing a month before her body was

found, so I'd done most of the legwork before Homicide became involved. Everything pointed to the girl's boyfriend. Jack charged him, and he was remanded in Melbourne. I wasn't fully convinced he was guilty, but no other suspect fitted the facts of the case, so I put my feelings down to inexperience. A month or so later, new information came to light that proved we had the wrong bloke, and that Adrian Weston had murdered the girl. He spent thirty-one years inside, and now he's met his fate.'

'And you reckon the two cases are connected?'

'Yeah.' Bowker looked to the window again, as decades-old memories resurfaced. 'The schoolgirl's body was left at the Cocamba silos as well.'

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Bowker stepped off the Number Three tram on Balaklava Road and jogged across the street to his home in Caulfield North. He found his wife, Rachael, in the kitchen preparing dinner. She turned and smiled when she saw him, and they kissed gently. Rachael was in her mid-fifties but looked twenty years younger. Her brown hair displayed no hint of grey, and she was still in great physical shape. She played sport several nights a week and conducted a jazz ballet class on Thursday evenings.

Bowker dragged off his tie and unbuttoned the neck of his shirt. 'Want to go up to Manang for a few days?'

Rachael looked puzzled. 'Manang?'

'You're not due back at the kinder until next week. Got a few days of leave left. Thought we could go for a drive back to God's country.'

Rachael sat down at the kitchen table. 'What's suddenly brought

on all this nostalgia?’

Bowker joined her. ‘Remember Yvonne Bryant?’

‘Of course I remember Yvonne,’ Rachael replied sadly. ‘I often think of her, and what she’d be up to if she was still alive.’ She smiled. ‘Whether she’d still be a hellraiser, or dancing with the Australian Ballet.’

‘She’d be a bit old for the ballet. If Weston hadn’t killed her, she’d be forty-seven years old now.’

Rachael sighed. ‘How time flies. So, what’s a trip to Manang got to do with Yvonne?’

‘Adrian Weston was released from prison about a month ago.’

‘Yeah, I know. You told me he was out. I was hoping the bastard would die in jail, then rot in hell.’

‘He’s been found dead. Shot in the face.’

Eyes widening, Rachael put her hand to her mouth. ‘You’re joking, right?’ she asked. Bowker shook his head. ‘Killed at Manang?’

‘It’s more bizarre than that. They found his body at the Cocamba silos.’

Rachael leaned back in her chair. ‘It has to be a square-up for Yvonne, surely?’

‘That’s my guess. Why leave his body there if it wasn’t to avenge her murder?’

‘No doubt you’ll be looking at those who were hardest hit by her death.’

‘That’ll be our starting point, yeah,’ Bowker said. ‘But in my eighteen years at Homicide, I’ve learnt not to rule anything out until you can rule it out.’ He thought for a moment. ‘Occasionally, when I remember that Bryant case, I wish I’d dug a bit deeper around Adrian Weston. Once we had him dead to rights on the

murder, and on the molestation of his stepdaughter, we drew a line under his name.’

Rachael frowned. ‘I’ve got a feeling this might be another jigsaw puzzle.’

‘The first question we’ll need to answer is why Weston was back in the Mallee after his release,’ Bowker said. ‘Unless, of course, he was shot somewhere else, and his body was dumped at Cocamba as a symbolic gesture.’

‘There was a Back-To-Manangatang celebration about a week or so ago,’ Rachael said. ‘Remember? We were keen to go, except that Jacinta had her graduation that weekend.’

Bowker screwed up his face. ‘A Back-To isn’t the kind of event the most despised man in the town’s history would attend. Unless he was looking for someone.’ He shrugged. ‘Like Jimmy Cobb, maybe, or Skeeta Allender, if they’re still around.’

‘Or you,’ Rachael added quietly.

‘Easier ways to find me than hoping I’d be at a reunion in a place I hadn’t lived in for the best part of twenty years.’

‘Who else is going up?’

‘Sherlock Holmes. But he’s in court until Thursday. I thought you and I could take a little trip down memory lane, drive there in our own car, and Sherlock can bring a police vehicle up later in the week. If the investigation drags on, then you can head back in time to start work.’

‘It’ll take you half a day alone to brief Darren on the intricacies of the Bryants’ family tree.’

‘Thought I’d leave that until he’s up in Manang and I can go through Yvonne’s murder file with him. If I try to explain the various connections in the abstract, he’ll be totally confused

before we even start the inquiry.’

‘Where will we stay? Can’t really impose three visitors on the local policeman.’

‘I’ve already booked a couple of rooms at the pub.’ He smiled. ‘A twin for you and me. A single for Sherlock.’

‘I’m surprised the pub’s still there.’

‘There’ll always be a pub in Manang.’ Bowker walked around to Rachael’s side of the table, took her hands, and hoisted her to her feet. He put his arms around her. ‘This could be our second honeymoon, Rach. Romance under the Mallee sky.’

Rachael laughed and kissed him on the nose. ‘A twin room at the Manang pub in the middle of a murder investigation. Gee, you know the way to a girl’s heart!’

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The next morning, the couple set off early and were in Swan Hill by lunchtime. A more direct route would’ve taken them through Sea Lake via the Calder Highway, but Bowker was keen to retrace their journey of thirty years earlier, when they’d been banished from Ballarat and sent to the purgatory of the one-copper station at Manangatang. The route may have been the same, but the weather couldn’t have been more different. The spring day was fine and cool, a light southerly breeze barely disturbing the leaves in the eucalypts beside the road. Thirty years earlier, their journey had been brutal. Temperatures in the high forties had generated a blistering inferno, and a roaring northerly had lifted dust, leaves and bark into a swirling maelstrom. Their old Peugeot had struggled with the heat, its air conditioner finally giving up just a few miles short of their destination.



‘Remember when we first came up here, Rach?’ Bowker said, with a smile.

‘I’ll never forget that day. I honestly believed we were driving through the gates of hell. If you’d suggested giving it a miss and finding another job, I would’ve turned the car around.’

Bowker put his hand on her knee. ‘Think what we would’ve missed, eh?’

‘Yeah.’ She put her hand on top of his.

As they passed through Nyah, Bowker indicated a boarded-up milk bar with faded ice cream and newspaper advertising hoardings. ‘That was the shop where I bought drinks that first day. Remember? My shoes got stuck in the melting bitumen.’

Rachael rolled her eyes. ‘I thought the wind would tip the car.’

‘I wonder what happened to the grumpy old bastard who ran the shop. Called me a dickhead for being out in the heat.’

Rachael laughed. ‘He was right.’

Although the weather was pleasant, the drive took a depressing turn where the highway paralleled the river. Most of the verdant grape blocks that had once lined the road had now returned to nature, as small-scale sultana growing became unprofitable in the face of cheap imports and the rising price of diminishing irrigation water. Former orange orchards had also been abandoned, or the trees removed, as they followed the grapes into unprofitability. Even the scenic Nyah golf course that formerly followed the river like a green snake lay abandoned, indistinguishable from the landscape that had reclaimed it. Had it been a lack of membership from the departing population that led to its demise, or the advent of the monolithic Murray Downs Country Club across the river from Swan Hill? Particularly sad for Bowker was the

demise of the Nyah Harness Racing Track, with meetings now being conducted on a new circuit inside the thoroughbred track in Swan Hill. Gone were the colour and close-up excitement of the picturesque riverside track, ditched in favour of a circuit so distant from spectators that the few patrons who attended watched the races on monitors in the dining room.

Bowker made the familiar turn onto the Mallee Highway at Piangil, one he'd made hundreds of times in the twelve years he and Rachael had lived in Manangatang. Piangil had always been a one-horse town, but it was looking shabbier and more neglected than the last time he'd seen it.

Stunted mallee scrub soon replaced the river red gums and irrigation, but unlike on their initial journey, the paddocks were an undulating carpet of green, the light wind carving waving patterns in the crop. Early spring rains had promised a bumper season, and a bumper season was required to cancel a series of wipe-outs from the preceding few years.

Bowker smiled to himself as he remembered the good times he and Rachael had spent in this area. He was well over six foot and measured a good axe handle across the shoulders, still fit despite closing in on sixty. His hair was greying at the sides, but he maintained the good looks of his earlier years. Fellow officers in Homicide were surprised when he spoke of retirement, assuming he was well short of the minimum age.

The kilometres slipped by without the angst of their first journey, and the couple marvelled at how they still knew by instinct how far they were from Manangatang. Rachael laughed as she recalled the Saturday they'd run out of petrol ten kilometres short of the town after a morning's shopping in Swan Hill. Bowker had been

due on the football field at two o'clock, so had to jog into town and send out one of the locals to rescue her pregnant self, left abandoned on the side of the road with a toddler.

Over the final rise, the town came into view. From a distance, nothing appeared to have changed in a decade and a half. But as they crossed the railway line and came to a stop at Manangatang's main intersection, any illusion of a town trapped in time was shattered.

On the corner diagonally opposite, a new construction housed the Arenz agricultural business, but the rest of the main street was a shell of its former self. Most of the shops were vacant or boarded up. Gone was the old post office, and gone were the pharmacy, the supermarket, the banks, the newsagency, Pengilly's, Herbert Solicitors, and basically everything else in between.

Rachael stared sadly at the town's carcass. 'Oh, Greg. What's happened to the place?' she whispered.

'What's happened is exactly what Tom McColl predicted thirty years ago when I rode in his Cessna searching for lost sheep. He forecast Manang would eventually go the way of Chinkapook and Chillingollah. Unfortunately, that's happening.' He pointed up and down the street with his left hand. 'A couple of ag businesses, the café and the pub. That's it, by the looks of things. Shit, it's depressing.'

Neither of them spoke again until they pulled up in front of the motel-style accommodation attached to the Manangatang hotel. Bowker dragged their suitcase from the rear of the Subaru and placed it under the grapevine-lined walkway outside the rooms. 'I'll go grab the key,' he said, as he left Rachael to retrieve the last few items from the car.

The lounge was empty when he entered the hotel via the side door, so he made his way through to the public bar. A group of middle-aged men sat around a veneer-topped table, each fondling a pot of beer. An elderly man, his forearms on the bar, balanced on a stool as he chatted quietly with a woman washing glasses behind the counter.

The woman, who Bowker estimated to be in her sixties, walked to his end of the bar. 'What's your poison, mate?'

Bowker raised both palms. 'Nothing to drink right now, thanks. I've booked a couple of rooms for the rest of the week. I'm just chasing the keys.'

'I'll go and grab them. Won't be a minute.' She lifted a hinged section of the bar and started towards the lounge door.

'Booking will be under Greg Bowker,' he called after her. One of the men at the table looked up.

'I figured that,' she said. 'You're the only booking we've got this week.'

The man stood and strode over, hand outstretched. 'Greg Bowker, our ex-copper. Haven't seen you up here for twenty years. Shit, you've aged well. Hardly changed at all.' They shook hands. 'You remember me?'

Bowker thought for a moment, scanning his cerebral filing system for a name to fit the man with the bald, bowling-ball head. Finally, he had it. 'Yeah. Ball-Bearing Brodie. Got a farm out Daytrap way.'

Bowling-Ball-Head burst out laughing. 'Ball-Bearing was my old man. Died a couple of years ago. Hit the piss a bit too hard. Still, he made it to seventy-six, so his liver did a pretty good job.'

Bowker frowned. 'Sorry to hear it.'

‘I’m Jim. Jim Brodie. Most people call me Pellets – you know, little ball-bearing.’ Brodie chuckled. ‘You would’ve known me as James when you were here.’

‘Can’t place you off the top of my head,’ Bowker said. ‘Must’ve kept your nose clean.’

‘Went away to school in Ballarat, then to Longerenong Ag College, and played footy over at Nandaly. I wasn’t around Manang much when you were here. You scared the shit out of me when I was a kid, so I wasn’t keen to poke my head up again. You probably don’t remember that night, but I bloody well do, I can tell you. Especially after what happened later.’

Bowker shrugged. ‘You better remind me, mate.’

‘Me and Donno Donovan were drinkin’ piss under the pepper tree out there with Yvonne Bryant. You sprung us. You remember that?’

Bowker remembered the blond-headed fifteen-year-old version of Brodie but remained noncommittal. ‘Vaguely.’

‘You remember Yvonne, though? You solved her murder.’

Bowker nodded. ‘Yeah, I remember Yvonne,’ he said wistfully.

‘She the reason you’re back here? Heard you were a bigwig in the homicide squad nowadays.’

As the barmaid returned with two sets of keys, Bowker played a straight bat to Brodie. ‘Yvonne Bryant’s case was closed over thirty years ago.’

‘Yeah, but you’re here to investigate who killed that Weston prick.’

Bowker gave nothing away. ‘You think that’s got something to do with the Bryant girl’s death?’

‘You’re takin’ the piss, right? Body of her killer found at Cocamba

where he dumped her all those years ago? Somebody's taken revenge, and good on 'em, I say.'

The barmaid was happy enough to throw in her two bob's worth. 'I wasn't around when the girl was killed, but from what the locals say, getting his head blown off with a shotty was too good for the pervert. Rooting bloody kids. It doesn't get any lower than that.'

'People around here will be barracking for you to solve this one so we know whose neck to hang a medal around,' Brodie added. 'Shouldn't be an offence to kill fuckers like him.'

'Well, it is.' Bowker accepted the keys from the barmaid. 'Thanks for these. Do I need to sign anything?'

'Fix it up when you leave. Rooms Four and Five.'