

Dead Drunk

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My new case led me to the wrong side of town. I slammed the door to my VW, trudged towards the wrought iron gate and jabbed a black button on the intercom. Sentry-like pillars guarded the two-storey Brighton mansion. Hedges, seemingly trimmed with nail scissors, formed a second layer of defence.

A whispery voice hissed, 'Hello, is that Sandi?'

As I arrived at the arched doorway, Mrs Tompkin, her grey hair perfectly manicured like the hedges, edged the front door open. She blinked as she took in my spiky bleached hair and the tattoo bleeding from under my sleeveless T-shirt.

No doubt, I didn't match her image of a female PI.

She ushered me into the living area where we perched at one end of a ten-seater dining table, its party days long gone. We drank Earl Grey from fine china, my large fingers awkwardly pinching the gold-leafed handle. The chair's middle rung gouged my back.

I'd only taken the job to pay the rent. Not to sound mercenary, but it was clear Mrs Tompkin could pay top rates.

Before she'd taken a sip, Mrs Tompkin rose and hobbled to the other end of the living room. From a hardwood bookcase, she hauled out a thick photo album.

'David was a kind soul.' Her voice quavered. 'The sweetest boy.'

She presented the album to me as if it was a sacred text. I absorbed an abridged version of David's life. A cheeky toddler scoffing chocolate birthday cake. A wistful boy clutching a daffodil. When he donned a navy-blue blazer, David's expression plummeted to sullen. I scrutinised photos of David and his parents roaming the ruins of the Colosseum and admiring the golden gateway to Versailles. Mrs Tompkin and her son angled their heads towards each other, their expressions simpatico. Mr Tompkin was always a step away, without a grin, his demeanour grim.

I flipped back and forth. Not a single photo featured any other kids.

'Was he happy at school?'

Mrs Tompkin hovered at my shoulder. 'He had a difficult time, from the day he began grammar school.'

'Bullying?' I asked. If David was mild natured, he could well have been a target.

'Children can be cruel, can't they?' She sank into her seat. 'He never found his niche at school. His father was a keen cricketer. David loved watching football but could never catch a ball.'

Her teacup rattled on the saucer. 'David never achieved, academically. Perhaps, in retrospect, another school might have suited him better. My husband was a successful chemical engineer.'

She stopped abruptly, as though her husband's career explained everything: the disappointment, the family's academic standard. I knew how fathers could crush your spirit.

'What did David get up to when he left school?' I asked.

'Even as a toddler, David loved helping me in the garden. He was fascinated with bonsai. I still have several in the back garden if you'd like to see them.'

My smile was noncommittal.

'After finishing school, he completed a horticultural certificate. I must admit, I was proud. He always worked so hard on his studies, in spite of how difficult reading was for him. After that he gained a position in a nursery and saved enough to purchase an apartment.'

No doubt with a little help from his folks.

'What about friends and partners?' I asked.

'David was shy; he never mixed much, although he did make a friend at Bunnings in Chadstone, where he'd last been working. Gavin came to David's funeral, which was kind.'

We'd reached the nub of the interview. I'd let her warm up and now I had to tackle the real reason I was there.

'How did David die, Mrs Tompkin?'

Her cheeks shuddered. 'The Coroner's Court are doing more tests, but when I spoke to them over the phone, they said the preliminary results made it look like he passed away from a brain injury.'

Her eyes flicked to the side, sourcing a memory. 'Acute subdural haematoma. The police said it appeared that he'd been drunk and must have fallen and hit his head outside St Kilda Library. They said this is common—for homeless men.' She faltered as the cops' bluntness bit her. 'I believe there is more to it.'

Was it a mother's instinct that had brought her to delve deeper or guilt that she could have prevented David's demise?

'What do you think happened?' Despite my determination to keep my distance, I could hear my tone soften.

Mrs Tompkin cleared her throat, pale fingers shielding her mouth.

'About two years ago, I noticed David's trousers were baggy. He would eat a huge meal when he came home for dinner and I would pack him leftovers to take with him. When I quizzed him, he admitted he was broke. We believed David must have been gambling.'

'What made you think that?'

'Well, he never drank, you see. Where else was the money going?'

'I'm guessing the toxicology showed alcohol in his system,' I said.

'If he did start drinking, that must have been recent. He hated us even having a glass of wine with dinner.'

Mrs Tompkin's grief seeped out. Not that she allowed a tear to be seen or a sound to escape. She averted her head as she dabbed her eyes and nose.

'David had a tiff with his father about where the money was disappearing to and after that our son didn't contact us, didn't answer our calls – nothing, even after his father died. I wasn't aware that he'd lost his apartment.'

It wasn't what you expected of a Brighton family, for a kid who'd been sent to a posh school to end up destitute.

I asked Mrs Tompkin for a recent photo of David. As I filed it in a thin purple folder, my chest tightened. Nightmares still stole my sleep, following a gruelling murder I'd investigated last year. I hoped for both our sakes that David's death was accidental.

The old woman clutched my hand at the front door. I stared at her ridged veins and sensed her loneliness in the giant house. She was clutching at memories through photos and bonsai. I had an urge to reassure her that I'd work it out and she'd find peace. In my experience, though, the truth was tougher than uncertainty. At least with uncertainty lay hope.

St Kilda Library was my next stop. With unusual luck, I claimed a free two-hour spot outside the clunky concrete building. I waited for a tram to lumber past before locking my car.

Inside the library, an assistant pounced on me. Since the introduction of self-serve borrowing machines, it seemed to me that librarians all roamed around in search of meaningful encounters.

When I showed her David's photo, she said, 'My colleague Lucy knew him. In fact, she was the one that found him. He'd been hanging around here for weeks. He was frightening the children.'

'What did he do?' All sorts of possibilities crowded my mind.

'One of the mothers in Tiny Tots complained about him. She said her toddler, Chloe, was scared to come back here, after he'd tried to talk to her. I'm sure he meant no harm, though he did look—' she hesitated, 'unkempt.'

She pointed to the rear of the building. 'A group of them congregate outside.'

'Is Lucy around?' I asked.

The librarian checked the roster. 'She'll be in tomorrow from ten am.'

There was no hope my investigation would be wound up in a day, then.

Before I left, I charged my laptop and hotspotted from my phone. I'm all for a free charge-up but I don't trust free wifi. My internet search showed that David lacked a Facebook or Linked In profile. If David had consulted Doc Google after knocking his head, he would have speedily scrawled a will. Even treated, an acute subdural haematoma was a virtual death sentence, and an alcoholic could die from a hit to the head after something as simple as falling over. Perhaps the cops were right.

On the Landata website, I paid for a historical land title search – Mrs Tompkin was covering expenses. Within seconds, I received an email with a PDF attachment. I printed out the search history. It revealed that two months ago the St Kilda property had been transferred from David Tompkin to a Michael Branigan.

Behind the library, I spotted a guy with tight black curls bivouacked on a concrete ledge. He was rocking, his head bowed.

'Hi there,' I called, as I approached. I wasn't fearful, but it was his turf.

The lanky guy bolted upright and grasped his maroon sleeping bag. The stench of sour sweat crept up my nose. I resisted sliding back a step.

When I explained my purpose and passed him David's photo, he released the sleeping bag.

He drew the image close to his walnut-coloured eyes. 'It's my second night in this part of town. Sure is quieter than the city. First decent sleep I've had in ages.'

'Less traffic here?' I asked.

'Nah, the problem with Flinders Street is the minute I close my eyes some shopkeeper's telling me to get lost.'

'That's shitty,' I replied. 'Apparently David died out front.'

That made him squirm, but his mouth betrayed no secrets.

'Need anything?' I asked.

'Cappuccino and pecan pie.'

Luckily the café nearby sold what he craved. After he'd consumed the honey-scented dessert, he supplied a lead. 'Maybe Brad knew him. He's moved on. Scored a bedsit.'

'Know where?'

‘Nah, but the housing joint’s around the corner.’

Five minutes’ walk away, in the non-swish end of Chapel Street, I entered a red-brick shopfront.

I had to wait while a cluster of women with bleak kids and men with sunken cheeks were served. Not that there was any point in them waiting. They all received the same message. All the beds were occupied.

When I arrived at the counter, a woman my age with dark wavy hair beamed at me as if she was serving ice-cream. I guessed that kind of work took a certain type. I grinned back for the first time in what felt like weeks. She blinked exotic eyelashes at me. It was probably too early in our encounter to ask for her number.

‘Did you hear about the homeless guy, David?’ I asked.

‘Tragic.’ Her features scrunched into a frown.

It mightn’t have scored front-page news, but in this pocket of town, most seemed to know of David’s death.

‘His mum asked me to find out what happened,’ I said. ‘Apparently one of your customers, Brad, knew him. I hear he’s scored a room through you guys, which sounds like a miracle. It’d help if I could talk to him.’

‘If he’s got a mobile, I could ask him to call you.’

‘That’d be mighty cool.’ I smiled, as I slipped her my card. ‘Feel free to contact me if you need anything.’

As I drove home over the Westgate, I glimpsed the chaotic city towers and wondered where the unlucky customers were going to end up for the night. I thought about how my mum, my sister and I could have faced the same nightmare if my grandparents hadn’t welcomed us, after we escaped our hateful home.

When I unlocked the door to my one-bedroom unit, Flicker, my tortoiseshell cat, rubbed herself along my blue jeans. I wondered where she’d finish up if I had to ditch the flat. I stroked her silky coat as she dug into her tinned dinner.

After Flicker and I were fed, I sat on my frayed couch reading a feminist dystopian novel.

I was immersed in young women electrocuting abusive men when my phone bellowed. I didn’t recognise the number.

‘You knew Davo?’

‘Brad?’ I queried.

‘I can meet tomorrow, at the library.’

I battled my way through traffic jams to cross the city from Yarraville. It took twenty minutes just to turn off the freeway. By the time I arrived in St Kilda, I was edgy with unspent adrenaline.

Before heading out the back to meet Brad, I strode through the expansive library and dodged two men decked with yarmulkes and strong accents.

The librarian leading Tiny Tots thought she was auditioning for a musical, upstaging the three-year olds as she belted out, ‘If you’re happy and you know it, clap your hands’.

After the rendition, I introduced myself.

As she packed away picture books, a twitchy-mouthed Lucy said, 'Please pass on my condolences to his mother. That would be the worst, don't you think?'

I nodded. 'You found him?'

She gasped. 'God, that was so awful. I'd arrived early for an author event that morning, to set up seats and microphones. I got off the tram, and was walking along Carlisle Street when there he was slumped in the gutter. Other people must have seen him, because it was about eight, but they probably thought he was drunk. That happens around here. People make assumptions, don't they?'

I dug my nails into my palm during her long-winded response. Patience has never been my strong point. The advantage with someone like her, I reminded myself, was that she'd relay details others might miss.

'I saw him lying half off the footpath with his legs on the road. I didn't realise it was David at first. I called to him, "Excuse me, are you okay?" When there was no answer, I stepped closer. Then I saw his open eyes. That was the worst.

'I called an ambulance, but he'd already passed away. That was so sad, especially since he was doing everything he could to solve his situation.'

'What do you mean?'

'He was still working, even though he was homeless. Isn't that amazing? It took him an hour to get from here to Chadstone, but he said St Kilda was his home. He told me he was getting back on his feet. Last time we spoke, he said he couldn't take the smile off his dial.'

'Your colleague told me David had scared a kid,' I said.

'He was being friendly. Chloe just got rattled. In fact, David told me to apologise to Chloe's parents. He didn't mean to frighten her. He said she reminded him of Shirley Temple.'

I saved Lucy's number in case I had further questions.

Behind the library, the pecan-pie guy was absent. I wondered if he'd moved on of his own volition.

I spotted two bearded guys propped on the concrete ledge. The stick-insect man with deep-set eyes and an oversize jumper was doing all the talking. His jockey-sized mate, a hoodie shadowing his face, seemed oblivious to his chatter.

A bitter wind blew through the courtyard and I buttoned up my denim jacket. This was summer—I wondered how these guys survived winter nights.

'Brad?'

The stick-insect man untangled spindly limbs. 'Sandi? You knew our mate Davo, hey? The most generous bloke I ever met.'

His quivering hand stretched towards me as if to clasp my arm. I intercepted to shake his thin fingers.

'His mum asked me to find out what happened to him.'

'Nice he had family who cared,' said Brad.

'If she'd have cared, he wouldn't have been sleeping on a concrete bed.' The short guy tugged his hoodie over his forehead.

'Known him long?' I asked.

'He came about three months ago,' replied Brad.

'You know why?'

Brad batted a coke can along the ledge. It rattled as it somersaulted. 'Some chick did him over.'

I'd wait until I had more evidence before I swallowed that accusation. The number of men I'd encountered who claimed a woman had caused all their woes would sell out the MCG.

'She had him twisted around her little finger.' The hooded guy shoved aside a Demons backpack.

'He borrowed a truckload for her month-long European bus tour,' said Brad.

Howls of laughter escaped the ragged men. I could see the irony from their point of view.

'She never paid him back a red cent. Kept borrowing from him even when he had to sell his house to pay back her loans. To top it off, a few weeks ago, he lost his job 'cos of her too,' said Brad.

'Know her name?' I asked.

'You remember, Jono?'

'Who cares.' The hooded guy's lips and eyebrows set into unforgiving lines.

'Cops said he drank himself to death,' I said.

'Without a roof there's nothing else to keep you warm and help you forget your troubles,' Brad agreed.

'Do you know how he died?'

Jono yanked his hood back. 'Some stuck-up bloke in a suit threatened him. He was like, "If you come near my daughter again, I'll deal with you".'

I wondered if Chloe's dad had assaulted David.

'Did you notice if Davo was feeling unwell before he died, like a headache?'

'Nope,' said Jono.

'He said he had an upset gut,' said Brad. 'That's nothing new out here.'

Luckily Bunnings lay outside Chadstone Shopping Centre. I was relieved I could avoid entering that monstrosity. Last time, it had taken me an hour to find my car again. Not that I had a bad sense of direction, but Chadstone was the urban equivalent of the desert: you lost your bearings in the glare of glass and shiny metal.

At the back of Bunnings's nursery, I found David's friend, Gavin, lugging bags of top dressing off a trolley. His red shirt was buttoned tight around his tree-trunk neck.

When I told him my connection, Gavin scratched his greying crew cut.

'Sad to hear about poor old Dave,' he said, through clamped teeth. 'But can't really talk. The bosses will be annoyed if I slack off.'

I thought about offering to ring him later, but from experience I knew punters' priorities differed from mine.

'I'll only be a sec. You were close to Dave I hear.'

'Wouldn't say that. We were work mates.' Gavin's tone was languid. 'My weekends are chock-a-block playing taxi driver to ungrateful teens. Occasionally, after we'd knocked off, Dave and I would grab a beer.'

'Do you know if he gambled?'

'He'd buy the occasional scratchie and a weekly lotto ticket. He had as much luck with that as with his footy team. Barracked for Melbourne, poor bloke.'

'Can't remember them winning a premiership,' I said.

'I was in nappies last time they won,' Gavin chuckled.

I laughed along as I cued my next question. 'How did Dave lose his job?'

Gavin's cheek bulged to the size of a strawberry. He was clearly weighing up whether to confide in me.

When his silence continued, I asked, 'Did you know he was living on the street while he was still working here?'

'Get out. What happened to his house?'

'Apparently he had to sell it to pay his debts.'

Gavin's blue eyes twitched. I couldn't interpret his expression.

'Did he get the sack?' I guessed.

Gavin glanced around. Giant urn-shaped pots, stacked on metal shelves, loomed above us.

'He went AWOL a lot.'

'How come?'

'Don't s'pose it matters now,' he said.

I murmured encouragingly.

'He had a lady friend, Misty.'

'His girlfriend?'

'They weren't exactly an item,' he said. 'They had been at one point. He kept hankering after her.'

I knew where that led. The last three months of my life had been drowned by an ex-girlfriend obsession.

When I asked where to find her, Gavin replied, 'Misty and her boyfriend moved in with Dave. Something about how they were kicked out of theirs. Dave was a sucker, poor bastard.'

'Know the boyfriend's name by any chance?'

Gavin squeezed his eyes half closed. 'Rick or Mick, from memory.'

The pale stuccoed apartment block lay in a tranquil nook of St Kilda, around the corner from the botanical gardens. I nudged the metal handle to the stairwell entrance. It clicked and, surprisingly, opened without a key. I leapt up the scuffed grey stairs two at a time.

My knuckles pounded on the woodwork. From inside, an insistent yapping needled my skull.

A woman overloaded with bohemian jewellery appeared. No doubt men would call her pretty. At her feet, a fluffy white dog, wearing a gem-studded collar, kept up its high-pitched alarm.

'Can I help you?'

I caught a whiff of musky perfume.

'Michael home?' I asked.

'Who wants to know?'

I displayed my PI card. 'I'm investigating the illegal transfer of this property into his name.'

Misty scooped up the pooch and tried to slam the door. My Doc Marten was an easy fix.

'Get your skanky attitude off my porch.'

'Did your boyfriend force you to do his dirty work?'

'What the fuck you on about?' Her crimson lips concertinaed in an attempt to gain control.

I drew the title-search document out of my backpack. She snatched at it.

I stepped back and heard the splitting of a plastic pot and the squelch of wet soil under my boot.

'Unless you tell me what's going on, you and your boyfriend are going down for theft and manslaughter. At a minimum, for gross negligence,' I added as an afterthought.

'Don't be ridiculous. I never hurt Dave. He lent me money a couple of times, that's all. I paid him back.'

'Then stole his flat.'

'We paid for this joint, fair and square. Geez. You should talk to the guy he worked with. Gavin ripped Dave off to buggery.'

'Yeah, what did he do? Shout him a beer?'

'Gavin's kids only played soccer 'cos Dave paid for their uniforms, club fees, petrol and the rest.'

I clicked: the twitch of Gavin's eyes when I mentioned David was broke. At least he felt guilty.

'Hardly compares to fraud.'

'What the hell. Dave loved helping people. He was the one who doled out the money. Though last time I saw him he said he'd had enough.'

'What do you mean?'

'Some guy at the library was hassling him.'

'Which guy?'

She shrugged dismissively.

I shoved my file into my backpack. 'Forget the other fall guys, you strangling parasite. The cops are going to be mighty interested in the link between you swindling David and his subsequent death.'

The pooch scrambled out of Misty's arms and skated around the pot plants on the porch. Misty dived towards the dog. At least I thought that's what she was doing. Cold fingers gripped my wrist and, as I clamped Misty's hand with mine, I watched in disbelief as she dug her nails into my forearm.

I lifted my boot in retaliation, the metal toe aimed directly at her kneecap. It hovered in the air before I planted the rubber sole back on the concrete. That kind of revenge only brought momentary satisfaction. Misty slammed the door and I descended the stairs, staring at the curved imprint of her nails on my flesh. She'd pierced the skin in a couple of spots.

I unearthed a first-aid kit from my car boot-cum-office. Dabbing pungent Betadine on the wounds, I forced myself to face facts. I'd hoped the men's stories were false, but her actions indicated that Misty was capable of more than theft.

After making a statement at St Kilda police station about Misty and her boyfriend ripping off David – my forearm seemed too minor to mention – I returned to the library. I had an urge to tie up loose ends.

Lucy had finished her shift moments before. I rang her phone. Her voicemail clicked into a chirpy message.

I sprinted towards St Kilda Road and spotted her at the tram stop. The pedestrian button copped a drilling, as a number 67 headed Lucy's way. My shouting and semaphore waving failed to catch

her attention across the five lanes of traffic. As soon as the lights flicked to green, I belted across the road.

Lucy had already boarded. I sprang through the front door and nudged past passengers towards the back of the carriage.

Some guy bumped into my backside as the tram swayed. Peak hour public transport was personal space torture.

Lucy clung to a lime green anchor-shaped handle.

I tapped her shoulder.

'Sandi. Any news?'

We were squeezed closer than was comfortable for our second meeting. Yellow blemishes tainted her blue eyes.

'Did the Tiny Tot's dad threaten David?' I asked.

'Oh, I don't think so. I apologised to him about David scaring Chloe and he said he'd already spoken to David and there were no hard feelings.'

'When did you last talk to David?'

'The day before he died, which is so tragic, isn't it? I keep thinking I could have done more.'

'You mentioned David told you he was getting back on his feet. I'm wondering why he would say that when he'd been sacked.'

'He lost his job?' said Lucy. 'That's strange. He said his luck had turned.'

I returned to St Kilda by tram. As I peered through advertising-coated windows, my thoughts trickled into a clear creek, each pebble defined.

I slipped out my phone and searched for lotto outlets. Disembarking near the library, I pounded past a graffiti-sprayed corrugated fence into a petrol station. I showed the photo of David to the middle-aged attendant.

'Is he okay?' she asked.

'What makes you say that?'

Her efficient fingers tidied chocolate bars.

When I explained that David had died, she whacked her forehead with her palm.

'Oh my God, that's terrible. David, did you say? He was here, regular as clockwork. Every Saturday morning. Happy as Larry last time I saw him. Won Div Two. Just about had to mop up his tears of joy. He was peeved though, when I told him he had to fill out a form to collect his nine thousand. He grumbled a bit, so I printed out the form for him. I told him to come back when it was quiet if he needed more help.'

We were interrupted by a queue of customers.

When they'd been dealt with, I asked, 'What happened?'

'A couple of minutes later, a regular poked his head inside and told me a guy was injured near a bowser. I dashed outside. David was sprawled near number one. I was going to call an ambulance, but he had a friend who helped him up. David had a bit of a gash near his temple; but he seemed fine.'

'Can you describe the friend?'

She beat her fingers on her upper lip. 'That's right. Pint-sized fella. I remember thinking I couldn't see his face because of his hoodie.' She gulped. 'Is that what killed David?'

As I returned to the library, I put in a call to the cop I'd spoken to earlier. He'd asked me to let him know if I uncovered more. I didn't want to let him down.

Jono was absent, but the Demons backpack lay in the same spot. A troop of guys huddled on the concrete ledge gaped at me, as I slipped on latex gloves and upended the backpack. It must have seemed low, me rifling through a homeless guy's belongings. When I dragged out a woollen coat, a photo of Mrs Tompkin and a folded piece of paper floated out. I flapped the paper open and a lotto ticket slipped out. Jono's details were neatly printed in black pen on the claim form, all except his address and phone number. Seemed he hadn't figured out a workaround.

'Anyone seen Jono?' I asked.

All the guys kept mum.

After storing Mrs Tompkin's photo, I strode into the library and interrogated parents in the children's section about whether they'd spotted a guy with a hoodie outside. As a woman whisked her kid away from me – clearly my interrogation style had ramped up – a flash of black made me glance out the window. Jono had emerged from the bushes. He clearly wasn't making the best use of the facilities.

I sped through the obstacle course of avid readers and looming bookshelves.

When Jono spied me, he bolted back towards the scrub. I raced after him, stuck my boot out and he hit the grass on all fours. I grabbed his wrist and locked his elbow up behind his back. Jono had no choice but to surrender.

'Couldn't you have stolen the ticket in his sleep?' I asked.

He tried to wriggle away. I kept a firm hold on him until I heard a siren out the front and the wiry cop, the one I'd made a statement to, appeared beside me. I released Jono and left them to it.

My final obligation was to inform David's mother. I could have rung, but she deserved a face-to-face.

As Mrs Tompkin led me on a tour of gnarly miniature trees, I listed the collective crimes of David's so-called friends and what no doubt led to his death.

'This was David's favourite,' Mrs Tompkin interrupted. She indicated a miniature bonsai hobbit house, replete with tiny red bricks circling a rough wooden door. 'He'd seen it on a gardening show and replicated it, quite successfully I thought.'

I ran my forefinger along the mossy roof. 'The cops doubt there's enough evidence to charge Mick and Misty with fraud. I bet they're scheming against their next victim.' The thought bulged in my throat.

Mrs Tompkin's grip around my wrist belied her age. 'They might have got away with it this time.'

A spark ricocheted between our eyes.