

## What a Way to Earn a Living

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With eyes like cyclones the killer lunged at me. The knife was held at waist level ready for an upward jab straight through to my heart. I focussed on the black handle of the weapon, trying to work out if I had time to kick the hand that held it. But I'd left it too late.

I knew my death would be quick. It had been for the last victim. There had to be easier ways to earn a living.

This latest job began on Friday night. I was in a club when my mobile sang.

'Sandi Kent?' said a female voice, 'Remember me?'

It was hard to hear. I told her to wait a minute, while I weaved my way through pulsating women.

Under a dull street lamp, I could see my breath as I asked who was calling. As soon as she spoke, I recognised the quiet voice of my old friend. Bian Nguyen and I had studied first year law together at Monash Uni. She went on to get high distinctions in everything. We'd lost touch after Bian landed a job in a prestigious law firm.

Bian told me that her mother had passed away. Gradually, I extracted the details. Mrs Nguyen had not slipped away in her sleep as I first imagined. She'd been shopping at Footscray Market, early Wednesday morning, as she usually did, when she was stabbed. Bian's mum collapsed and was dead in five. One of the stall owners found her, face down in a thick red sludge of her own blood.

'My family don't trust the police,' Bian said. 'It's too close for me. I heard you're a Private Investigator. I need your help.'

She could afford it. I named a steep hourly rate.

It didn't make sense that someone would murder Mrs Nguyen. I'd met her a few times and she was as sweet as a fairy-wren. Bian said she couldn't think of anyone who had a grudge. The police suggested it might be a Vietnamese gang.

'They would,' was all Bian said.

Next morning, after scraping ice off my windscreen, I drove across town to Footscray Market. Thetis, who had more wrinkles than seemed necessary for her age, had found the body. She showed me the

gloomy corner between the veggie stalls and the meat arcade, where Mrs Nguyen had died. There was a smell of fish that had been out of the ocean way too long.

'She lay there,' Thetis leaned over and pointed a knobbly finger at a drain in the concrete. 'Fish scales on her. Maybe they fell off me. Also, oranges all round. Fell out of her bag.'

Thetis straightened up. I followed her slowly back to her fish stall. A John Dory with bulging eyes stared at me.

'Did you see anything?' I asked of a man with curly hair as black as a Kalamata olive.

He dropped a blue crab into a plastic bag for a customer next to me.

'My son, he was here early. Got everything ready, before he went. Kristos, he's a good boy. Works two jobs.'

Kristos nodded and smiled with half his mouth. He was quite good looking if you were a gay man. Or a straight woman.

'You know,' said Thetis, 'Two weeks ago. Last time Mrs Nguyen buys fish, she had a big black eye.'

My next visit was to the Nguyen's house. I wanted to follow up Bian in person anyway, and thought the black eye was definitely worth grilling the family about. Bian still lived at home, I guess because she hadn't married yet. At uni, she'd always had guys hanging around. Last I remembered, she'd paired up with some bloke who'd lost his brain to dope. For a smart woman she had terrible taste in men, but who was I to talk. Although my choices were usually brilliant, my girlfriends disappeared faster than a summer beer.

The Nguyen's house was close to Footscray Market on a busy truck route. A semitrailer would squash my VW within seconds if I parked on the road. I pulled into their driveway behind an old blue van. Bian answered the door and looked as if I'd caught her in the middle of something. She led me into the kitchen with her head hanging. Mr Nguyen, who grimaced at me more than smiled, was putting bok choy into a fridge full of vegetables. The kettle was calling and Bian made green tea for us all. Holding a warming cup, I sidestepped two sewing machines to get through the lounge room.

'Mum liked sewing in this room,' said Bian, 'She could talk to us, while she was working.'

Bian offered me a seat on the couch, after shifting a pile of dresses.

'She earned two dollars an hour. You know what retailers sell these clothes for?'

'How did your mum come by the black eye?' I asked.

Bian began folding a pile of white shirts on the ironing board. 'She wouldn't tell me.'

I asked her to interpret my question for her father. He swayed as he watched us from the kitchen. The Nguyen's took turns talking in Vietnamese until I butted in.

'She told my father she walked into a door.'

Mr Nguyen stared at the brown speckled lino.

'You're paying,' I pushed myself off the low couch.

Mr Nguyen began chattering. My client didn't interpret. I turned to go.

'Union man,' he said, 'He's trouble.'

Bian gave me the union guy's phone number, but her mouth was a stubborn pistachio nut. I drove home fast. Why was Bian so cagey? And who was lying? Was Mr Nguyen a wife basher or had Mrs Nguyen lied to him about how she came by the black eye? Why did I have this feeling it was Bian I couldn't trust?

It was Monday morning before I could get onto Paul Bonello, who worked at the Textile, Clothing and Footwear Union. He said I could come in straight away. When I arrived, I ran up the stairs two at a time, having missed my morning workout. Paul's office was crowded and small.

'Shocking,' Paul said rubbing his hand through his spiky hair. 'How did it happen?'

I took the seat he offered on the other side of his desk.

'She was stabbed by someone who knew exactly how to get to her heart,' I said.

Paul took out a hanky with a P embroidered in one corner, and wiped tears at the edges of his eyes.

'How do you know Mrs Nguyen?' I asked.

'About a year ago, Bian talked her mum into being part of our media campaign on outworkers. Then about two months ago, Mrs Nguyen came to see me. Alone. Her subcontractor hadn't paid her for a hundred skirts she'd sewn.'

Paul picked up two green folders on the desk and slid them into the three-drawer filing cabinet behind him. 'We were going to take the subcontractor and the manufacturer to court.'

'Who are they?'

'I wish I could help but professionally I don't feel I can really give you that sort of information.'

'There has been a murder,' I said.

'It's confidential. I'm really sorry. Get the police to request it, and there won't be a problem.' Paul stood up. 'How's Bian coping?'

'How well do you know Bian?' I asked.

The union guy yanked the door open. 'Bian's firm does a lot of work for our members. We've consulted on quite a number of cases over the last few years. I'm sorry, I've got so much on this morning.'

As I left, I wondered why this guy was crying over a client's death. Maybe I was becoming too hard hearted or else he was more involved than he had reason to be. I had more questions for my old uni friend about why she'd been withholding information about the court case. I didn't get why she was employing me but not giving me the facts.

A phone call to Bian revealed few answers. She said that the issue was between her mother and the union. She did tell me that Paul had asked her out once and maybe that explained his tears. Maybe, I thought. I considered chucking the job back in her face, but I could smell an answer to her mother's murder.

I waited outside the union office in my cold VW. My watch rolled over aching slowly. My head throbbed from caffeine withdrawal. Finally, at one o'clock Paul headed down the road for what I hoped was an extended lunch.

I sprinted up the stairs again.

'Just needed to speak to Paul again for a sec,' I said to the receptionist. 'Won't keep him long.'

'He's just popped out for lunch, dear.'

'Oh bugger. Is it alright if I wait?'

The receptionist's permed blue hair bounced as she nodded.

'Is there a bathroom I can use?'

She smiled and pointed down the hall. Towards Paul's office. I tried to saunter down. I turned the handle of his unlocked door, shut it quietly behind me and tiptoed over to the corner. It was outside my jurisdiction, but I was sure it held the answer. The filing cabinet resisted my tug, but in Paul's top drawer, I unearthed a small silver key in amongst paper clips and drawing pins. Searching through the names on the green manila folders, I saw one that glowed like a jellyfish.

Back at Footscray Market, I headed straight for the fish stall where Thetis and her son, Kristos, worked. The one with two jobs. He was behind the counter, slicing shark.

'So Kristos, you were Mrs Nguyen's subcontractor,' I said.

He stared at me with the butcher's knife poised.

'What did Bian say?' said Kristos.

'You were waiting for Mrs Nguyen that morning, weren't you?'

'Get out of here before I...'

'Mrs Nguyen didn't have time to buy fish. Those fish scales all over her were from you,' I said.

'Shut up.' He pointed his knife at me.

'You tried to scare her off by punching her, but that didn't work, so then you stopped her talking permanently.'

Kristos skidded around the counter, holding the black handle of his weapon.

'It wasn't my fault. My boss told me to shut her up. He said if she didn't pull out of the court case, he was going to sack me. That stupid woman wouldn't listen.'

His eyes were popping out like the John Dory. Customers next to me had vanished, but Kristos' mum appeared beside me.

'Kristos! You crazy?'

'Get out of the way mum.'

'Give me the knife,' said Thetis.

That's when, with cyclones in his eyes, Kristos lunged at me. Only, his mum got in the way. She reached out a hand to him before slumping onto the concrete. A stream of blood seeped out of her shoulder. Kristos sank next to her, kissing her face.

A customer must have called 000. The police and ambulance service arrived within minutes. The cops clamped Kristos into handcuffs and both Thetis and her son were carted off. Things didn't look so bright for Kristos.

Later that afternoon I knocked on the Nguyen's door. Bian opened it. When I told her the news, she held onto the doorframe.

'You and Kristos an item?' I asked.

She looked behind her, then nodded. 'We were. When I found out he hadn't paid my mother I called it off. When she was killed, I wondered if it was him. I couldn't tell you.'

'Couldn't? You could have given me a hint Bian.'

'It was better I kept quiet. Otherwise I might have influenced you. Don't tell the police, please.'

As I walked away with her cash payment, I thought about getting a regular job. Did I really need lunatics with knives and clients with secrets? Mind you there were worse jobs. At least this one paid well enough.