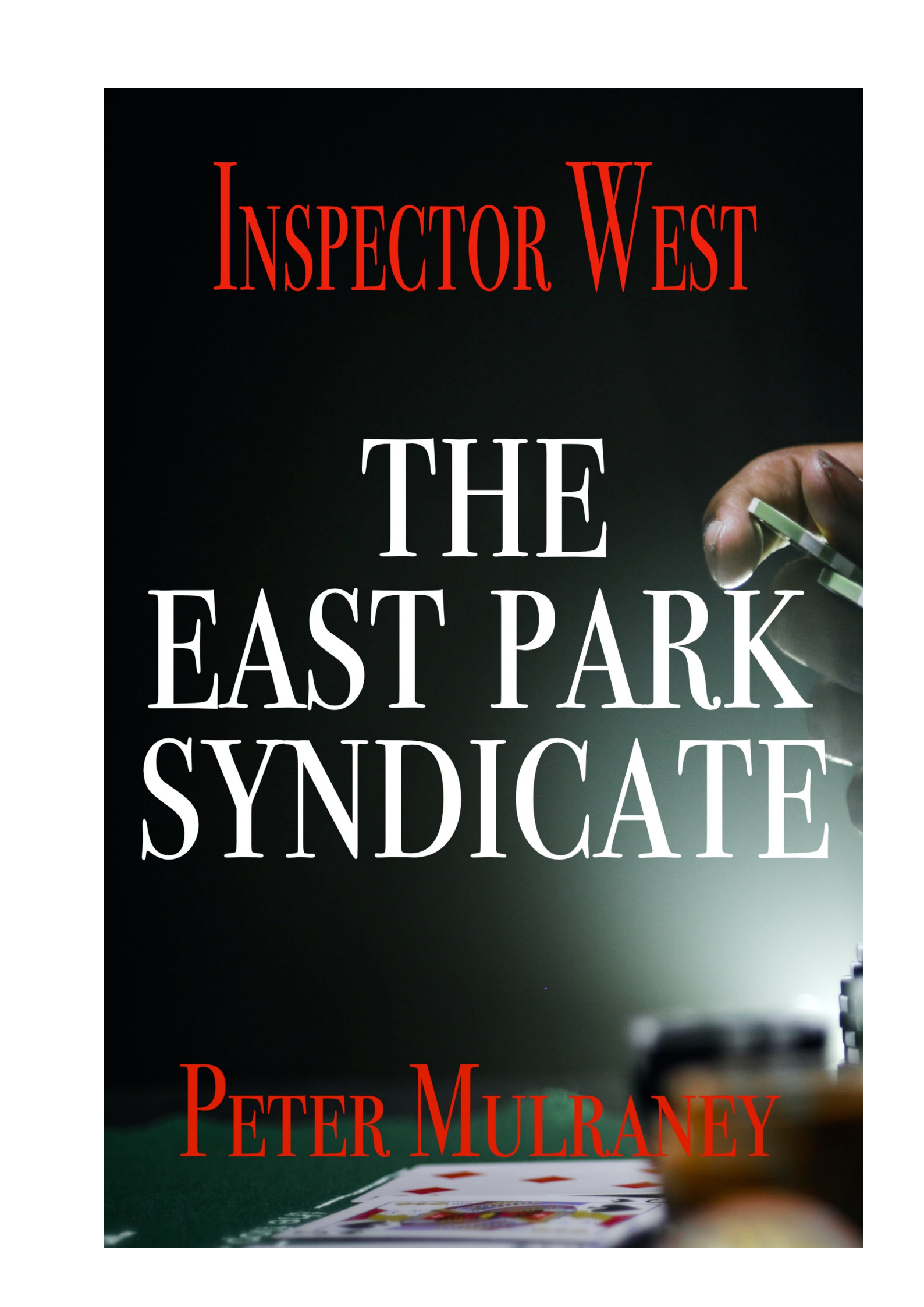


A hand holding a magnifying glass over playing cards on a green felt surface.

INSPECTOR WEST

THE
EAST PARK
SYNDICATE

PETER MULRANEY

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Chapter 1

Joanna Clarke looked at her watch, and then across the table at her older son, Justin, who was on his phone.

‘He’s still not answering, Mum,’ said Justin. ‘I hope he’s on his way.’

It was ten minutes to two. Joanna didn’t know what to think. It wasn’t like Doug to be late, especially when it came to being in the spotlight, and today he was supposed to be introducing the Premier to launch Justin’s election campaign.

She looked across the restaurant. People were eating and drinking at every table. The air vibrated with the sounds of clinking cutlery and excited voices. She felt an inner glow of pride. Justin had certainly attracted a large crowd of supporters to launch his campaign to become their local member.

She looked at her watch again, and then towards the foyer, expecting to see Doug striding across it to make a grand entrance. But there was no sign of him, and the Premier was due to arrive in less than ten minutes.

Not wanting to show her concern, Joanna took a deep breath and set her smile, although she knew something had to be wrong. This launch meant as much to Doug as it did to Justin. He’d worked for years to get Justin selected as the party’s candidate, and she knew there was no way he’d be missing the launch of his campaign if he could help it. What worried her was she hadn’t heard from him since he’d left the house that morning to keep some appointment before joining them at the restaurant, and Doug was a stickler for letting her know when he was running late.

She looked at her watch again and turned to her younger son, Richard, sitting on her left with his wife, Kathy. ‘You’d better think of a few words to introduce the Premier. It doesn’t look like your father is going to make it in time.’

Richard, who was president of the local branch of the Liberal Party, smiled at her. 'He's sure cutting it fine.'

'Something unexpected must have come up,' said Joanna, 'but I'm surprised he hasn't called.'

Richard placed his hand on his mother's. 'I've got it covered, Mum. I've got a copy of Dad's speech in my pocket. I wrote this one.'

Joanna cocked an eyebrow. She'd always believed Doug wrote his own speeches.

'He didn't have time,' said Richard, 'besides, the Premier's office sent us the text, so it's not as if he could have ad-libbed much in any case.'

A white car with a state flag fluttering from a short staff at its front end pulled up outside the restaurant and all heads turned to watch the Premier and his minders make their way inside.

Richard stood, walked out to the foyer to greet the Premier, and then escorted him to the microphone set up in front of the bar.

The noise level abated as the serious part of the campaign launch got under way. Richard introduced the Premier using the glowing words of the text the Premier's office had sent him. The Premier spoke for ten minutes outlining the party's policy platform and then introduced Justin Clarke as their local candidate.

Justin spoke to loud applause and answered several questions from the floor.

The Premier shook hands and posed for photographs with the party faithful who had come out to support their candidate. Then, he waved to the crowd and left with his minders to return to the never-ending list of duties that came with his office.

Joanna allowed herself to be swept up in the euphoria of the moment but, when it was over, she reached into her handbag and pulled out her phone. There was still no message from Doug.

Richard sat down beside her. 'Dad's going to be disappointed he missed this.'

'I can't believe he didn't turn up,' said Joanna.

'Why don't you try calling him again, Mum?' said Kathy.

Joanna picked up her phone and pressed the button to call Doug's number. She listened until his voicemail message came on.

'He's still not answering.'

'Something must have happened to him,' said Kathy.

'I'm going home,' said Joanna, gathering her things. 'If something's happened to him, that's where people will come looking for me.'

'Do you want me to come with you?' said Kathy.

‘I should be okay,’ said Joanna.

‘Might be a good idea,’ said Richard, ‘especially if something has happened to Dad.’

Joanna didn’t want to go there but the sinking feeling in her stomach told her Richard was probably right. ‘Thank you.’

‘I’ll drop round when we finish up here,’ said Richard.

Chapter 2

Detective Inspector Carl West gazed at the mansions, set in extensive gardens and shielded from prying eyes by high fences and hedges, as Detective Sergeant Harry Fuller drove them deeper into East Park. The ambience of the suburb, created by galleries of overhanging street trees and the foliage of the urban forest growing in the park that gave the area its name, did nothing to lift Carl’s sense of unease. He’d never enjoyed dealing with the self-important people that lived in East Park and wasn’t looking forward to having to do it again.

Harry turned their silver Ford onto the roadway leading into the park and drove between the trees. After a few minutes, they came to a parking area next to one of the playing fields hidden within the forest, where several police vehicles and the coroner’s grey van were parked.

‘Ever been in here before, Boss?’ said Harry, as he parked next to the patrol cars.

‘Not for a long time,’ said Carl. ‘Not since I played football for the academy.’

‘That sounds like ancient history,’ said Harry.

‘I’m not that old,’ said Carl, ‘but, to be honest, I don’t remember the trees being this big.’

Harry laughed as they got out and walked around to the rear of the car to slip on their protective clothing.

‘Sure is quiet in here,’ said Carl.

‘Hard to believe the city’s just out there,’ said Harry, pointing back towards the road they’d followed into the depth of the forest.

They walked over to the constable controlling access to the crime scene and signed themselves in.

‘Who’s in charge?’ said Carl.

‘Senior Constable Head, Inspector,’ said the constable, lifting the crime scene tape for them.

They walked across the vacant parking area beyond the tape to where the scene of crime team had erected their blue tent.

Carl looked through the open side of the tent pitched in the grass on the edge of the parking area. The lifeless blue eyes of a white-haired man, dressed in a dark grey suit, soft pink tie, and a torn white bloodstained shirt, stared back at him. He wondered what a man dressed in a suit and expensive looking black shoes was doing in the middle of the East Park forest on a Saturday morning.

Harry squatted and studied the wound in the man’s chest.

‘Not much blood here, Boss,’ said Harry, pointing to the ground next to the body.

Carl turned to SC Head, who was standing near the entrance of the tent.

‘What do we know, Charlie?’

‘Body was found about an hour ago by a couple of boys walking their dog.’

‘How old?’ said Carl.

‘The older one is thirteen,’ said Charlie. ‘His little brother’s a ten-year old.’

‘They okay?’ said Carl.

‘Seemed okay. Their father was here when we arrived,’ said Charlie. ‘The boys had a mobile phone and called their father. He’s the one who called us.’

‘Get a statement?’ said Carl.

SC Head nodded. ‘Yeah, but nothing useful from the boys. They didn’t see anyone or hear anything but we know who the victim is, Inspector. The father recognized him as the local mayor. A man named Doug Clarke.’

The name didn’t mean anything to Carl. ‘Have you been able to confirm that?’

‘Did a quick check on the council website. Looks like him.’

At least that would give them somewhere to start, thought Carl. ‘Get an address, Harry.’ He turned back to SC Head. ‘Anything found on the body?’

‘Nothing in his pockets, Inspector,’ said Charlie.

Carl wondered why someone would remove the victim’s ID and then dump his body in the middle of the suburb where he was the mayor.

‘Anybody else in the vicinity?’

‘We haven’t seen anyone,’ said Charlie, ‘not even any spectators.’

‘Thanks, Charlie.’ Carl walked over to where Dr Mike Jonas, the police pathologist, was packing up his equipment.

‘Nice place for a picnic,’ said Mike.

‘Or for boys to walk their dog,’ said Carl.

‘Yeah, but I guess stumbling across this might have ruined their day,’ said Mike.

‘Be something to tell their mates at school on Monday,’ said Carl. ‘What can you tell me about our friend here?’

‘Someone stuck a knife into him, right up under his ribcage.’

‘Doesn’t seem to be much blood on the ground here,’ said Carl.

‘Can’t argue with that,’ said Mike.

‘How long do you think he’s been dead?’ said Carl.

‘Not long, Carl. Probably only a matter of hours.’

Sgt Lang from the scene of crime team came over to join them.

‘What do you think, Dean?’

‘I’d say the body was dumped here, Inspector.’

‘What makes you think that?’

‘There’s bugger all blood on the ground where the body is or anywhere else in the immediate vicinity and, if you look there,’ said Dean, pointing at the ground between the shoes of the victim and the edge of the parking area, ‘you can see the body was dragged into the grass from the car park.’

Carl looked where Dean was pointing. There were two faint lines of depressed grass that ended at the heels of the victim’s shoes. ‘Any other footprints?’

‘Only impressions in the grass,’ said Dean. ‘Nothing conclusive.’

‘Anything in the car park?’ said Carl.

‘Nothing we can use,’ said Dean. ‘I guess it’s fair to assume whoever left him here drove in and out in a vehicle but this uneven surface makes it difficult to pick up any tread marks.’

‘Any sign of a murder weapon?’

‘We’re still searching the area, Inspector, but it might take a while. Could be anywhere along the length of the road into here, if it’s here at all.’

‘Let me know if you find it,’ said Carl.

* * *

The house at 14 Orange Drive was set well back from the street behind a high stone wall but, to Carl’s surprise, the gate giving access to the driveway was open. They drove in and parked behind the Mercedes sedan at the top of the driveway.

‘Nice house,’ said Harry, as they got out of the car.

‘Must cost a fortune to maintain a place like this,’ said Carl, admiring the stonework adorning the front of the two-storey dwelling.

‘You’d definitely want someone to cut the grass,’ said Harry, pointing towards the sweep of lawn in front of the house.

‘Even I have someone come in and mow the lawns,’ said Carl. ‘Can’t see the point of wasting my free time walking around behind a lawnmower.’

Harry pushed the doorbell and they waited on the veranda until the door was opened by a woman Carl decided was too young to be the victim’s wife.

‘Detective Inspector West, City Police,’ said Carl, showing her his ID. ‘We’re looking for Mrs Clarke.’

‘I’m Kathy Clarke. I’m married to Richard, but I guess you’re looking for my mother-in-law if you’re here.’

‘Is she home?’ said Carl. ‘I need to speak to her.’

‘Something’s happened to Dad, hasn’t it?’

‘Why would you think that?’ said Carl.

‘He didn’t show up for the launch and we can’t get him to answer his phone.’

‘Who is it?’ said Joanna, walking up behind Kathy.

‘The police, Mum. They’re here about Dad,’ said Kathy.

Carl wondered if she’d read his body language or knew more than she was letting on.

‘Has he been in an accident?’

‘Might be best if we come in, Mrs Clarke,’ said Carl. ‘I’m afraid it’s a bit more serious than that.’

The color faded in the older Mrs Clarke’s face and Carl thought that she, at least, appeared surprised.

‘He’s dead, isn’t he?’

‘We need to make a positive identification before I can confirm that, Mrs Clarke, but we have a body that’s been tentatively identified as being your husband. I’m sorry.’

‘What was your name again?’ said Joanna.

‘Detective Inspector West.’

‘You’d better come in and give us the details, Inspector’ said Joanna, ‘in case it is him. We can go into the library.’

Joanna led them into the first room on the left off the entrance hall. The walls were lined with shelves holding the Clarke’s extensive collection of books. She invited them to sit in the comfortable looking armchairs occupying the space between the bookcases.

‘Where was this body found, Inspector?’ said Joanna.

‘Near the playing fields in East Park.’

‘What would Doug be doing in the park?’ said Joanna. ‘He never goes in there.’ She looked at Carl. ‘What makes you think it’s Doug?’

‘The father of the boys that found the body told us he recognized him,’ said Carl. ‘Do you have a recent photograph of your husband, Mrs Clarke?’

‘I’ve got one on my phone,’ said Kathy. ‘I took one of him with Dougie the other day.’

They waited while she scrolled through her photos. ‘Here, this was taken last weekend.’

Carl took her phone and looked at the image of a smiling Doug Clarke holding his grandson. The man in the photograph had the same blue eyes that had stared back at him in the park.

‘Show them the photo, Sergeant.’

Harry opened his tablet and showed Joanna the head and shoulders shot the police photographer had sent him.

‘That’s Doug,’ said Joanna, sinking back into her armchair.

Harry turned the tablet so Kathy could see the image. She took one look and raised her hands to her face.

Carl waited. Mrs Clarke did not appear to be going to pieces on him.

‘What happens now?’ said Joanna.

‘I’ll need to ask you some questions,’ said Carl, ‘and we’ll need to arrange for a family member to formally identify the body.’

‘One of the boys can do that,’ said Joanna.

‘How many sons do you have?’ said Carl.

‘Just the two. Justin and Richard.’

‘Richard should be here soon,’ said Kathy. ‘I’m sure he’ll do that for you.’

Carl waited for Harry to take out his notebook.

‘When was the last time you saw your husband, Mrs Clarke?’

‘This morning. He left around ten. He was supposed to meet up with us at the restaurant.’

‘A special occasion?’ said Carl, taking in the attire of the women he was interviewing and thinking of the grey suit and pink tie the victim had been wearing.

‘The launch of our son’s election campaign, Inspector. Justin’s standing to be the local member. Doug was meant to be introducing the Premier but Richard had to do it.’

Carl glanced at Kathy. She was sitting with her arms wrapped around each other. For the moment, now that he understood the context of her earlier statement, he was prepared to give her the benefit of the doubt.

‘Where was your husband going when he left this morning?’ said Carl, wondering how extensive Doug Clarke’s network was if he knew the Premier and his son was running for parliament.

‘Said he had a meeting.’

‘Did he say who he was meeting?’

‘Doug was the mayor, Inspector. He was always going to meetings.’ Joanna shrugged her shoulders. ‘I have no idea who he was meeting this morning.’

‘Did he keep a diary?’

‘Be on his phone.’

‘Do you have the code for opening his phone?’

‘It will be in his little black book in the study,’ said Joanna, making no move to retrieve it.

‘Did he have his phone with him when he left this morning?’ said Carl.

‘He didn’t go anywhere without it. Wasn’t it in his car?’

‘What was he driving?’

‘A Mercedes like the one outside,’ said Joanna, looking from Carl to Harry and back again. ‘Wasn’t it where you found the body?’

‘No,’ said Carl. ‘Did Doug normally carry a wallet?’

‘Is that missing as well?’ said Joanna.

‘Yes,’ said Carl. ‘You’ll need to contact your bank to get a stop on his accounts.’

The sound of the front door closing, followed by the tapping of footsteps in the hallway outside the library, interrupted Carl’s train of thought.

‘In here, Richard,’ said Kathy.

A man Carl immediately recognized as a son of the victim appeared in the library doorway.

‘Who are you?’ said Richard.

‘They’re the police, honey. Dad’s dead.’

Richard stepped into the room and stood behind his mother’s armchair. ‘What happened?’

‘We’re treating it as a homicide,’ said Carl.

‘And, you are?’

‘Detective Inspector West,’ said Carl, showing Richard his ID, ‘and this is Detective Sergeant Fuller.’

‘Homicide? You mean you think somebody killed him?’ said Richard.

‘Yes.’

‘How?’

‘I’d prefer not to go into details at this stage, Mr Clarke,’ said Carl. ‘Perhaps you could each tell me where you were this morning between say ten and noon. Mr Clarke?’

‘Are we suspects now, Inspector?’

‘Everybody who knew your father in any way is a suspect, Mr Clarke, until we can eliminate them from the list.’

‘I was at home with Kathy until eleven,’ said Richard, ‘then we took our son to Kathy’s parents’ place. We were at the restaurant by twelve. I had to help set up.’ He looked at his wife.

‘That sounds about right,’ said Kathy.

‘And you, Mrs Clarke?’

‘I was here on my own after Doug left,’ said Joanna. ‘I left for the restaurant just before twelve thirty.’

‘Thank you,’ said Carl.

‘When can we see the body?’ said Richard.

‘We’ll need someone to make a formal identification,’ said Carl. ‘Could you do that when we finish here?’

‘Can I bring my brother?’ said Richard.

‘By all means,’ said Carl, passing him a card. ‘The address you’ll need to come to is on here.’

‘I can’t believe this is happening,’ said Richard.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Carl. ‘Believe me, I wish it wasn’t either but it’s a reality you’re going to have to deal with.’

‘Where do you start?’ said Joanna. ‘How do you find his killer?’

‘Did your husband mention anything about being threatened by anyone?’

‘Doug was everybody’s friend, Inspector. That’s why he’d been elected mayor three times. He didn’t have enemies.’

Carl doubted that was true. He turned to Richard. ‘Did he say anything to you?’

‘Nothing,’ said Richard.

Carl pushed himself up from the armchair. ‘Can you give me your husband’s mobile phone number, Mrs Clarke? It might help us trace his last movements.’

‘I’ll give you one of his business cards.’

Carl waited while Mrs Clarke retrieved a business card from her husband’s study.

‘When you contact the bank, Mrs Clarke, ask them if anyone has used your husband’s accounts today?’ said Carl. ‘It may help us identify the killer.’

‘And how will I tell you about that?’ said Joanna.

Carl handed her one of his business cards. ‘My contact details are on here if you need them.’ He turned to leave and then stopped. ‘By the way, is your husband’s car registered in his name?’

‘No. It’s registered in the name of Doug Clarke Real Estate,’ said Richard. ‘All our cars are, but Mum and Dad’s are the only Mercedes we have on the books.’

* * *

Carl kept his eyes on Richard and Kathy Clarke standing on the veranda as Harry reversed their car out of the driveway into Orange Drive.

‘What did you make of that, Harry?’

‘They didn’t seem all that shocked when you told them he was dead. It was almost as if they’d been expecting it.’

‘They must have known, at least suspected, something had happened to him,’ said Carl. ‘After all, he hadn’t turned up for what sounds like an important event or answered his phone.’

‘But they hadn’t reported him as missing either, Boss.’

‘Maybe they were hoping he’d turn up,’ said Carl.

‘Wonder how connected these Clarkes are to the Premier, Boss. That could be a problem.’

‘I’ll let the chief deal with that. Let’s see if we can trace his movements through this phone number and get an APB out on his vehicle. We might get lucky if we find his car.’

‘Or if the killer uses his credit cards,’ said Harry.

END OF SAMPLE

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Peter is also the author of the **Stella Bruno Investigates** crime series.

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