

Prologue

Cock-Crow time

He fought for breath, choking, his heart pounding fast, clammy mist swirled around him. He peered through the steam and saw hot, bubbling water. Out of the foam, a large, wet, pink blob with wide, staring eyes bounced up at him.

No!

Joe Wilson lay in his bed, breathing heavily, shaken by the nightmare that had woken him so violently. The dream's vivid images still danced before his eyes in the dark. He took a deep breath and his heartbeat slowed down to its normal rhythm.

He forced a smile to his face, then shivered and stretched. "Come on, you idiot, it's only a nightmare. Snap out of it."

It was cock-crow time. The deep blue-black velvet cloak of the night sky was beginning to disappear as dawn approached. There was total silence. Even the frogs in the creek at the bottom of the hill were quiet. It was even too early for the morning chirps of the birds that would later scrounge for worms and other tasty morsels for their young.

Joe's mind began to wander quietly through the list of things that he needed to do that day. Check the vineyards, talk to the boss - Sir Peter - about the wine stocks, and also catch up with the work-experience boy from the local high school.

As the manager of Woodburne Wine Estate, Joe lived in the cottage at the foot of the hill. Sir Peter Percival's grandfather George Percival had built the manager's cottage and the mansion Woodburne, which squatted on top of the hill, overlooking the vines that grew on the estate. This imposing estate dominated the local township of Sunbury nestled at the foot of this hill.

Joe stretched again and turned over onto his side to look at the clock. It was almost six. He cancelled the alarm just a few seconds before it was due to ring, then got up and turned on the radio at a high volume so he could hear it from the bathroom as he showered.

Despite the warmth of the shower, as the steam fogged up the glass cubicle, a cold shiver tore down Joe's spine. Vivid images of the dream seemed to appear in the steam. He hurriedly turned off the water, stepped outside the cubicle into the cool air of the bathroom, dried himself, and then returned to the bedroom to get dressed. Sooty, his black cat, purred around his feet asking for some food.

* * *

At the same time Joe was dressing, there was movement in the chicken shed at the end of the home paddock. The big cockerel instinctively stretched and flapped his wings. He strutted out through the flap-door and hopped onto a low branch of the gum tree that stood inside the farm's fowl run, or walk. He was a magnificent creature, with black plumage that glistened with a bluish tinge when the streaks of the approaching light of dawn shimmered on them. The cock puffed out his chest and feathers, stretched up his neck, and opened his beak as wide as he could.

"Cock-a-doodle-dooooooooo!" he shrieked, then strutted around looking very pleased with the loud noise that he had just made.

The eastern sky was streaked with the orange glow of scattered clouds. It was nearly time for the sun to light up the countryside. As if in response to the cocks heralding, the sun crept up from behind the distant hills. A new day had begun at Sir Peter Percival's farm, Woodburne.

"Birds of a feather"

One of Detective Inspector Andy McNab's dogs nudged his hand. Andy yawned, looked at his watch, and muttered, "All right, Snow, I know it's time to get up."

More movement indicated that White, Andy's other poodle, had woken. Andy stretched his long legs, rolled to the side of the bed and got up to let the dogs out for their run.

Andy led a fairly solitary life. Most of his waking hours were spent dedicated to his police work. Any spare moment was carefully spent enjoying the solitude of the local countryside where his home was built on a ten-acre property. He had bought the property for his new bride Rhonda. However, the reality was that Rhonda had never lived at the farm as not long after their wedding, Rhonda became chronically tired. A visit to her doctor, and subsequent blood tests, confirmed an aggressive form of cancer.

Andy felt that he was now too selfish to be able to cope with someone else living with him permanently. He had thought about it of course, but he liked the fact that he did not have to clean the dishes if he didn't want to, or make his bed before rushing out of the door. In fact, he could easily produce dozens of reasons for living alone with only his dogs for company.

He was, however, a healthy active male with sexual desires. Any relationships were only with females outside the police force. He had no desire to get involved with a work-mate. Too many of his friends had succumbed to office relationships, which seemed to inevitably end up in a tangled mess with both parties retreating like injured dogs to lick their wounds. He had no intention of being wounded by love again.

Andy quickly showered, dressed and grabbed a quick breakfast. He took a brisk walk around the home paddock with the dogs following in his shadow. After the walk, he got into his car for the hour drive south to the city of Melbourne.

As his car cruised down the motorway, his thoughts turned to what the new day might have in store for him.

Joe carefully maneuvered the four-wheel drive truck around the rows of vines, whilst observing the local wildlife. Energetic birds rushed about their daily, dawn tasks of finding worms for little baby chicks nestled in the nearby gums that bordered the northern paddock.

Joe smiled at the young adult magpies, still begging for food from their stressed parents who were constantly dashing back and forth looking for tasty morsels of underground food to carry to the magpie teenagers and promptly shunt down the open beaks. The young birds almost choked with the food, but each time they bounced up squawking for more.

It was during these morning inspection tours around the Woodburne estate, that Joe fully related to the saying of "being at one with the earth." He loved his job and hoped that he could stay at Woodburne forever. These moments of contemplation and reflection always made him feel good at the end of the drive.

He turned the truck around the last vine-covered paddock and headed back towards the homestead. The sun was well up into the sky now, and, as the land began to warm up after the cool night, steam rose, creating an almost eerie look, like a medieval landscape. With a little imagination, one could envision a knight in shining armour riding over the top of the hill. As if on cue, a horseman appeared, startling Joe out of his reverie.

He waved and Jason, Sir Peter's son, waved back, before turning his horse and cantering over the hill, heading down towards the creek at the back of the property.

Joe drove to the foot of the hill, then opened and passed through the paddock gate. A cold shiver shot through him as he closed the gate. He shrugged his shoulders, got back into the truck, and drove up the driveway that wound up the hill towards the imposing house that dominated the top.

Woodburne was a blue stone, two-story, rambling house, with the traditional colonial verandas surrounding the lower and upper levels. The verandas were very elegant, with fine wrought iron framing each section. At the centre of the second level, a tower emerged. The tower enclosed a spiral staircase that led to a small balcony situated just beneath the dome. There was a magnificent view of the valley and the town of Sunbury from this lookout.

When Sir Peter Percival was in residence, the housekeeper Joan Rogers, made sure that the Australian flag was hoisted up the pole on top of the tower during the daylight hours. She was a proud believer in her colonial heritage. At the same time, she was quietly amused by the fact that the locals seemed to regard Sir Peter as almost local

royalty.

Joe parked the car, then went through the gate into the side garden, his shoes crunching the fine shale chips on the footpath.

The gate at the end of the formal garden opened into the secluded, private garden surrounded by a high hedge and fence. Elm, oak and ash trees were scattered about a large, manicured lawn, while at the eastern edge of the garden there was a pool and enclosed spa. Sir Peter habitually used both every evening before retiring to bed. Joe frowned, watching steam hiss and spurt from underneath the spa door.

"Why on earth is the boss using the spa at this hour? He never uses it in the morning." Joe opened the spa room door, then gasped as hot, chlorinated steam billowed out at him. Lungs screaming for air, heart pounding, he pressed the "off" button at the edge of the spa, and waited for the steam to clear. When it did, he drew back in horror. A pink, wet body floated in the tub, eyes staring blankly his way. He stumbled backward, fell to his knees and retched.

When he recovered, he scrambled to his feet and half ran, half stumbled through the back door of Woodburne. He picked up the phone in the kitchen and with trembling fingers dialed 000. As he waited to be connected one word dominated his thoughts.

Dead! Sir Peter's dead.

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"Morning, sir."

Detective Inspector Andy McNab returned the greeting with a genuine, warm smile. His piercing blue eyes cast a quick look of approval at the woman who had made the greeting

"Morning, Sarah. Another day, another murder?" he asked.

"You'll regret you said that," the Detective Sergeant replied.

"A suspicious death has been reported to us; ten minutes ago from Sergeant Dennis Sinclair of the Sunbury Police Station."

"Sunbury? That's a job for the locals, surely!"

"Sergeant Sinclair has asked us to go and investigate this one, sir. The deceased is Sir Peter Percival."

Andy started. *What? Sir Peter? Dead? Damn.* He took a deep breath.

"Sir Peter Percival? I drove past Sunbury only forty-odd minutes ago." He sighed. "Go ahead, lass, tell me the story so far."

"According to Sergeant Sinclair, According to Sergeant Sinclair, Sir Peter was found dead this morning at seven-thirty. He was in the spa, which was superheated, and had been dead for several hours. The local doctor's first impression is that he died of a possible heart attack. However, Sergeant Sinclair and the doctor want us to go and check the area before the body is moved to the morgue for an autopsy." Sarah paused a moment. "Sergeant Sinclair knows that there have been recent allegations of corruption within the local farmer Co-op, and that Sir Peter Percival, as the local Member of Parliament, had asked for your unofficial advice about these allegations. Sinclair also realizes the possible implications of Sir Peter's death."

"Implications? That's a lovely generalization. Thanks, Sarah. Looks like we're going to Sunbury. Ask Detective Constable Ng to grab his gear. This will be a good case for him to cut his teeth on, eh?" Andy grinned.

Sarah smiled back. "There's time for a quick coffee. I'll get your usual de-caf and, while I'm out, I'll tell Vincent the news. He's been waiting for the last week for a murder investigation."

"Careful, Sarah, it's not officially murder - yet. I need to make some calls before we go to Sunbury, so the coffee will go down well, lass. Besides Sir Peter won't be going anywhere."

"Yes, boss. I won't mention the M word to Vincent yet. He's going to be too keen on the job as it is." She slipped out of Andy's office. Andy sighed and leaned back in his office chair, his thoughts in a whirl.

Sir Peter was dead? It was only two days ago that they had dined together at Woodburne, talking about the Co-op's missing funds. The books showed an average amount of funds had been deposited and accounted for, whilst members said substantially larger funds had been originally collected. The question was - what had happened to those extra funds? Had Peter been getting too close to the answer? Had he, indeed, been murdered?

Andy looked up at Sarah as she returned with the coffee.

"Are you all right?" she asked, handing him the mug.

"I only saw Sir Peter two days ago. It's going to be awkward investigating the death of someone I know. Not that I knew him intimately, but we'd chatted on a few times." He stroked his moustache with his right index finger.

"Vincent is on his starting blocks, ready to go," Sarah said. "I'll get ready myself. Won't be long."

Although he watched her leave, Andy was again deep in thought. If it was murder, it would cause a rumbling like an earthquake through Parliament. Sir Peter was the Premier's golden boy. Andy sighed, made two quick phone calls, then sipped his hot coffee. He smiled after the second call. Good, Sir John Grey was available and ready to go to the death scene. Andy had great respect for Sir John. He was one of the most capable Forensic Pathologists in the country. Grey lived near to Sunbury and was still at his home in Romsey, which meant he would arrive at the scene before they did.

Sarah returned with her satchel-style handbag over her left shoulder. "Are you ready to go, sir? Vincent is rearing to go and I'm ready when you are."

"As you asked so nicely, yes, let's go."