

Prologue

Melbourne, Australia

March 31, 2016

Sitting anxiously in the driver's seat, Brian Monroe gripped the steering wheel with both hands and let out an involuntary shiver. A storm front swept through the city earlier in the afternoon. The brief squall cleared the air and cleansed the streets, leaving in its wake a cloudless sky and a brisk evening.

- *Can I turn on the heater?*

The older man in the passenger seat turned slowly to the driver, his piercing glare the only response.

- *I guess that's a no.*

Brian nuzzled back into the cold leather seat and surveyed the dashboard. He'd stolen the late-model Volkswagen Jetta that morning from the Northland Shopping Centre parking lot. Then swapped out the registration plates with those of an abandoned vehicle at his cousin's scrap metal yard. He was impressed with the styling of the German vehicle, it didn't have the power of the Holden Caprice he'd lifted earlier in the week, but the handling was smooth and responsive. He thought it a waste knowing he'd have to torch it after the job, but better safe than sorry.

Nine o'clock and the Thursday evening traffic was light on Johnston Street. A smattering of parked cars lined the street outside Abbotsford's Yarra Hotel. Inside, a raucous band entertained the small crowd. From their vantage point across the road, the sound was muffled. Just a low-pitched hum from the bass guitar and the soft thud of a drum kit seeped into the cabin to break the silence.

Occasionally, when the front doors swung open, above the music and crowd noise, they could make out some of the vocals.

Their target entered the bar a little over two hours ago. A tall, thin, young man. Collar-length brown hair. Casually dressed in blue jeans and a black leather jacket. A perfect match for the man in the photo squirreled away in the glove compartment.

They now waited impatiently for him to depart.

Steve Slattery slunk into his twelfth-floor office. At the side of his desk, he dropped his battered leather briefcase to the floor. Then collapsed his wiry 178-centimetre frame into the high-backed leather chair behind it. For the acting chief commissioner of the Victoria Police Force, it was another far too early start to the workday. At least, it being a Friday, the prospect of a peaceful weekend away from it all beckoned alluringly.

He also thought *acting* an accurate description of his current role. An imposter. A man wishing to be anywhere than where he found himself. Slattery presumed he'd be able to survive the ordeal relatively unscathed until one morning he awoke, peered wearily into his bathroom mirror, and a stranger stared back. The lines on his face grew deeper and longer by the day. Lines deeply etched, reading like a road map of his life.

He hadn't gained weight like many blokes his age, but as the final kilometres of middle-age disappeared in the rear-view mirror and the road ahead angled down sharply towards the valley of old-age, he knew someone, somewhere, was playing fast and loose with the laws of gravity. Skin and muscle were losing the battle against time. Even his once taut, rosy, cheeks had turned an appalling shade of grey and begun a slow migration southward.

- *Jowls!*

He'd moaned.

- *I'm getting bloody jowls!*

Lamentably, he'd become an "in his day" man. He'd been: handsome, a decent club-cricketer and a bloody good detective *in his day*.

The chief commissioner retired at the end of December, and for the past three months, Slattery had struggled mightily to keep the behemoth that was the Victoria Police Force afloat until the Premier selected a full-time replacement. As the former chief's deputy, this should've been the opportunity of a lifetime. A chance to prove himself. To snatch the brass ring enticingly dangled before his eyes. To prove to the politicians he had the mettle to succeed and was more than up to the task. He lacked just one essential ingredient – ambition.

Thankfully, he'd been sheltered from much of the day-to-day political minutiae by his good friend, the now retired Chief Lay, allowing him to do what he did best, lead his men in his inimitable hands-on style. There was no guarantee the new Chief would maintain the status quo.

He would celebrate his 60th birthday this September. The force his life for the past 40 years. But as the days passed, trading in his office for his bungalow down at Rye became a more and more enticing proposition. He could feel it in his bones that the time to move drew near. The fire in his belly no longer sufficient to power the engine of commitment. Though not a messy divorce, no bitterness, more like a long-held passion that no longer responded to nurturing and had died on the vine.

Slattery dreamt of having nothing to do all day but dig his toes into the soft sand, a good book by his side and just the rousing crash of surf meeting shore followed by the soothing hiss of its retreat to invade the silence. Then, of an evening, as seagulls searched for their dinner amongst the shallows and rock pools, walk the trails along the coast; winding his way through the sand dunes dotted with spinifex and tea tree. To Pirates Bay, twenty minutes to the north-west, where the waves crashed violently against the rocky outcrops. Or the same distance to the south-east and St Andrews beach, where the surf approached the shore with far less anger.

He sensed the aroma of lamb chops searing on the barbecue, the pop and crackle of fat dropping onto the fire. Imagine the vegetables softening and turning ever so slightly translucent as he sautéed them

off to the side. And taste the fruity, pungent, tones of an elegant Munari Shiraz.

No meetings to attend, budget reports to prepare, personnel issues to quell, or the need to kowtow to pampered politicians. The cumulative effect of all that bullshit, he knew, was slowly transforming his brain into something resembling chocolate pudding. Hell, if he wished – a man could dream – not even a computer or mobile phone in sight.

Nirvana.

Brian checked his watch, 10:30 turned to 10:31 and he grew ever more impatient. His fingers beat out a steady tattoo on the steering wheel to a tune only he could hear. He craved the adrenaline rush of his chosen profession; however, he bemoaned, the monotonous waiting game he often endured was for the birds.

- *How much longer do you reckon?*

Again, the icy stare.

- *As long as it takes, just be ready when I say go.*

As instructed, he'd collected his passenger that morning from outside The Blarney Stone Hotel. Just minutes, ironically, from where they now sat. Brian mused, the dozen words the old bloke just uttered were the most he'd gotten out of him the entire day. He'd been his driver on another job earlier in the week, but the old bastard – as Brian considered him – acted as if they'd never met. Brian bristled at the lack of manners; no name offered, no small talk, just spitting out orders in that butchered Irish accent of his.

He turned away from the slight man in the passenger seat and concentrated his attention on the pub across the road, looking into those wild eyes for too long did strange things to his guts. The older man was short and wiry, not an ounce of fat to be found. His thin mousy-brown hair shot out at various angles like he'd played chicken with an electrical socket and his eyes were just this side of the

boundary line from being bat-shit crazy. And judging from the sickly pallor of his skin, it appeared he spent a lot of his time inside, the kind where you can't go outside anytime you wish.

Brian had given it some thought over the past week and if he had to guess, decided the old man looked like that bloke in the movies: *What was his name? He was in Fargo, played the crazy bastard that stuck people in the wood chipper. Steve ... something.* It would come to him sooner or later. No, "Steve" wasn't the type of bloke he'd want to have a beer with, but this was work, they'd a job to do, and none of the niceties mattered.

Slattery smiled at the prospect of being "electronics free", until the sight of the blank monitor on his desk dragged him back to reality. He punched the power button, leant back in his chair and stared out the window to the city below. It was the beginning of another gorgeous Melbourne day, an endless blue sky above, wisps of high white clouds off on the horizon. The northern suburbs spread out like a tapestry before disappearing below the horizon. The perky Channel 7 weather girl on last night's news promised a high of 24 Celsius. Summer may be over, yet autumn was in no hurry to make an appearance.

The rising sun still hid behind the buildings on Spencer Street. Yet below, Victoria Harbour, Etihad Stadium and the Southern Cross train station were streaked with intermittent bands of sunlight winkling their way through the canyons of concrete and steel. The hustle and bustle of the awakening city were mute to him, only the hum of the central air-conditioning system and the computer's hard drive broke the silence.

Slattery had only himself to blame for his current dilemma. His fatal flaw? He was good at his job and couldn't say no to a superior. At age 24, after just four years as a constable, he became one of the youngest homicide detectives in the history of the force. For the next 23 years, he worked homicide, then in 2003 was tapped on the shoulder to join Taskforce Purana. Slattery spent the next five years investigating, and bringing to justice, several high-profile gangland figures. His strong work ethic, and unimpeachable integrity didn't go

unnoticed. His appointment to assistant commissioner soon followed, culminating in the deputy chief position in 2012.

However, the higher he climbed, the more political his role became. And his rancour grew. In his mind, he was no longer a cop. Just another paper-pusher. An administrative flunky.

The streets were his true love. He could still remember his first homicide case, the Mitak case, and the thrill of the chase. Of course, it *was* one of the more sensational crimes of the past few decades. Threatening, for a time, to expand into a full blown civil war between Croatian and Serbian gangs on the streets of Melbourne. Five murders in all before they were able to extinguish the flames.

Brian straightened in his seat, clutching the steering wheel to pull himself forward. Across the road, the front door of the Yarra Hotel swung open, and three patrons stepped out. Two young women stood on the kerb facing each other as one dug desperately in her purse, but Brian's attention was elsewhere. The third, a male, turned away from the females and began walking briskly along Johnston Street.

- *There he is.*

The young man wearing jeans and a black leather jacket, collar raised against the chill, quickly headed in the opposite direction away from the Jetta. A passing Silver Top Taxi momentarily blocked their view, but even from 50 metres, they were sure they had their man.

Brian rubbed his hands together before blowing into them to generate some warmth, then slipped the gear shift into drive.

The older man slowly arose from his trance, stretched out his neck first to the left then the right and sat forward in his seat. Now fully engaged and ready for the hunt to begin.

Brian eased the Volkswagen Jetta out of the parking spot and merged into traffic just as the young man in the black leather jacket crossed Johnston Street 120 metres ahead.

"Steve" rubbed both palms back and forth over his thighs.

- *Looks like he's going back to his car. Perfect. Easy now, give him some space.*

Out of the corner of his eye, Brian watched "Steve" come to life, like a bloodhound roused into duty, tracking the scent of his prey.

Slattery turned away from the city vista to face his computer screen. He hunted and pecked his way through three password prompts before able to stare at the inbox of his internal email *system*. The depressing sight of 238 new messages greeted him. He stared for a moment, sighed, then swivelled 180 degrees in his chair. He selected a CD from the stack on his credenza – Van Morrison's *Moondance* – and popped it into his disc player. Anything to delay the inevitable. He paused to let Morrison begin telling his tale about a county fair before spinning back around to face the other music. An idea flashed through his mind to set up a new task force to uncover the devious bastards that, apparently, got paid per email. A vision of bureaucrats pacing to and fro at busy intersections throughout the city wearing signs that read "I'm a serial emailer" brightened his morning.

But what was he to expect? Over 17,000 officers and civilian personnel made up the Victoria Police department. Three hundred plus stations throughout the State with an annual budget of over \$2.5 billion. And, for the present, it all flowed up to his desk. He wondered, wasn't shit supposed to flow in the other direction? Thankfully, the general public didn't have access to his internal email address. After multiple screenings, and with the vast majority delegated out to other departments, only those requiring his attention were tagged with a priority designation and redirected to his inbox. Around 70 of these, mercifully none bearing the moniker "high priority", now stared back at him. Which is precisely where, he mused, they would remain for another day or two.

Among the remainder, based on the sender's address, the majority were from internal departments. Those with requisition requests attached he forwarded to his assistant so she could sort the chaff from

the wheat. Like a salmon swimming upstream, he was slowly making progress, but even still, more than 100 remained.

Slattery performed another sort to highlight State government addresses. He sighed deeply, the 68 emails from state parliamentarians could wait until after lunch. It wasn't healthy to read those on an empty stomach. He reflected on how many: speeding, parking, drug possession, shoplifting, driving while intoxicated, public intoxication – you name it – cases would he be asked to “take care of” for someone's little prince or princess this week?

With some warmth restored to his hands, the older man pulled the Walther PPX 9mm from his pocket, screwed on the Octane 45 silencer he'd drawn from his other pocket and pulled back on the slide. His employers supplied him with the weapon earlier in the week after they'd agreed upon a price for his services. Although “agreed” was superfluous, Sean Costello – the driver needn't know his name – wasn't doing it for the money. Since Sean was knee-high to his granddad, this line of work was destined to be his calling. When his employers snapped their fingers, Sean, the ever-faithful, quickly came running.

As the Jetta inched forward along Johnston Street, Sean rested the matte black weapon on his thigh and gently caressed the safety catch with his index finger.

The young man in the leather jacket, hands thrust deep into his pockets, turned the corner, left, into Rich Street. Sean had no idea what the young man had done to piss off his employer, but it mattered little. It was enough to know an order had been issued and being the ever-obedient good soldier; Sean would see it through.

*Let me out at the corner and be ready. I'll take him as he
unlocks his door.*

Brian slowed to a crawl as he turned the corner and the older man – *Steve Buscemi, yeah, that was the name of the actor. It finally popped into his mind* – was out of the vehicle and stalking his target.

The young man in the black leather jacket stopped beside the front bumper of a Holden Commodore station wagon parked under a towering elm and withdrew a set of keys from his pocket. Holding the key ring up to what little light was available, he searched for the correct key.

Slattery was very careful to whom he gave his internal email address, so the **@auscom.net.au** address stuck out amongst the remaining messages like the proverbial sore thumb.

craig.walters@auscom.net.au

The name rang a bell. Where had he heard that name before? Slattery opened the email looking for another clue to jog his memory.

Chief Slattery,

I'm hoping you will remember me. We met recently at La Trobe University when you spoke before the graduating class of Finance majors. I introduced myself after your presentation and mentioned that we shared a mutual friend/relative. Years ago, you were good friends with my great-uncle, Bert Walters.

Bert Walters.

For Slattery, the memories came flooding back. As a rookie detective, he'd resided at a small one-bedroom flat in Northcote where Bert was his neighbour and, over time, became a close friend. Bert, as he recalled, had also been close with one of the victims in the Mitak case. Slattery reflected, what a strange coincidence, and what a good bloke. He fondly remembered Bert as being quite the character.

Bert passed away in '94 or '95, if his memory served correctly, and he met Bert's brother, Les, at the funeral. Les and his wife only just moving back to Melbourne after spending eight years in Brisbane. He and Les continued to meet occasionally for a beer but having little in common other than the deceased Bert, eventually lost contact. On the day of Bert's funeral, he vaguely recalled being introduced to Les'

son and daughter-in-law. She with a young two-year-old attached to her hip by the name of Craig.

This past December he'd spoken to one of the graduating classes at La Trobe. Afterward, a tall, shy, kid approached and introduced himself. When he discovered it was Les' grandson, Bert's great-nephew, he was only too happy to sit down for a chat. Over scones and a latte, he heard how Craig's grandfather, Les, passed away in 2000. Les' son – Craig's father – died in a car crash the same year. And, more recently, his mother had been hospitalised with a terminal illness. The poor kid had had it rough, he mused, so he left him his business card and an assurance that if he could ever help to get in contact.

Sean Costello closed to within 20 metres and released the safety. The pathway remained deserted. Street lights overhead, diffused by the elm's thick canopy, barely penetrated the deep shadows.

As the young man paused to select a key, Sean stepped up behind him and from less than five metres squeezed the trigger. Two nine-millimetre slugs found their mark at the base of the young man's skull; his lifeless body crumpled to the ground with barely a sound. Blood and skull fragments splattered the side of the Holden and the trunk of an elm tree. A small trail of blood seeped from beneath the man's head and filled the cracks between the bluestones lining the gutter.

Sean had not even needed to break stride.

Slattery continued reading.

I hate to impose, but I don't know where else to turn. I thought of going directly to the local police station, but I was afraid of not being taken seriously.

I've uncovered a conspiracy rising to the highest levels of power in the State, and I've attached documents to this email to

prove I am not crazy. I trust you will take this matter seriously.
The attachments will reveal all.

Sincerely,
Craig Walters

P.S. I know that I'm in imminent danger. I'm being followed
and need protection. They've already killed one man. If you're
unable to contact me over the coming days, then I will have
suffered the same fate.

Slattery re-read the message before clicking on the first
attachment. He briefly scanned the first document before opening
the next. His eyes glued to the screen, all peripheral vision
extinguished, finding it hard to believe what he was reading. Despite
the air-conditioning in his office, he felt a cold sweat prickling his
scalp.

Brian heard the faint report of two pistol shots from three car
lengths away, the sound similar to the firing of a nail gun on a distant
building site. He pumped the accelerator and sped forward. The older
man with the wild eyes stepped out into the street from between two
parked cars. He slowed just enough for the man – who looked
uncannily like Steve Buscemi – to climb in the passenger side. Before
the passenger door swung shut, Brian had turned left into Turner
Street and was picking up speed.

As they sped past the gutted shell of the Victoria Park football
ground, Brian marvelled at the simplicity of the job. Beside him,
“Steve” spoke not a word as he retrieved the envelope from the glove
compartment and slipped it into his coat pocket. Inside, a photo of
their now deceased target; a young man by the name of Craig
Walters.

Slattery's hand trembled as he clicked the mouse to open the next
document. The final lines of the email still ringing in his head.

... If you're unable to contact me over the coming days, then I will have suffered the same fate.

The shaking showed no signs of abating as he reached for the phone. Slattery called the contact number for Craig Walters listed in the email. An automated voice told him the number was out of service. He disconnected the line and tried again; the same result.

A ceiling tile in the middle of his office sat slightly askew. Slattery began to process the ramifications of the email as his eyes bored into the offset tile. The final strains of *Into the Mystic* faded from the speakers as the embryonic beginnings of a plan began to form.

He paused a moment to take a deep breath. It had the desired effect of quelling the tremor in his voice but did nothing to restore his sense of calm. He lifted the handset a third time.

- *Margaret, please hold all my calls. And please get me Commissioner Colvin with the Federal Police on the phone. After that, I'll need to speak with the Premier. Thank you.*
- *Yes, sir. And, sir, were you aware of the murder in Abbotsford last night?*