

CHAPTER ONE

Duncan walked into town. He could have driven the three kilometres to the business centre, but he needed time out to rearrange his perspective. His brain was revving in overdrive as he tried to make sense of the events that had taken place during the past weeks.

He had not expected to be so messed up by the stuff that happened after he stormed out of Truscott's office. It should have been clear-cut. Over. Finished. He should have just moved on with his life. What life? He didn't have a life. He had a mess that kept getting messier.

Two marriages down the drain. A business partner who swam in the deep end with killer sharks. Two kids who only made contact when they wanted something, usually money. Now a murder investigation and he was a prime suspect.

He knew he had nothing to do with his partner's death, but the police had other ideas. Of course, the fact that he had been to Jake's apartment the morning of his murder did have a bit to do with the police zeroing in on him. And the fact he and Jake had had a very public falling out in a bar that was packed with lawyers and paralegals, made the coppers very interested.

But hey, just because a man made a house call to tell his partner to clean up his act, that didn't make him a murderer. The cops were keen to nail someone and shut the file. The press was all over it.

Jake had some bad-boy friends, and that made for great copy. Some smart-arse reporter had already tried camping on the front patio and taken shots of Duncan's cliff-top house. Seeing the guy, with a telephoto lens the size of an elephant's trunk had really pissed him off. "Hey jerk. Yes, you, asshole. Piss off and don't come back." he'd yelled.

His outburst did not faze the journo. Abuse was an occupational hazard. It went with the territory, so it was like water off a duck's back. "Take it easy pal. Just doing my job." He had what he came for, so what the hell, moving on was fine by him. He hitched the camera over his shoulder, and sauntered down the grass track, towards the road.

Duncan watched and yelled at the exiting jacket. "You're all blood sucking arseholes." The jacket gave him the finger. Duncan burned with rage, "Bastard" he mumbled.

CHAPTER 2

Halfway into town Duncan left the roadway, scrambled under the guardrail, and sat on a rock ledge. He watched the sea rolling in and the waves breaking on the sandbar below. The steady rhythm calmed him and slowly his head began to clear. His mind did an action replay of everything that had happened since the police paid him a call.

The visit had been from Senior Sergeant Tony Vascelli, and a fresh-faced young constable, named Brady. They had wanted to know why he'd gone to Jake's on the morning he was killed.

The words still rang in Duncan's head. He recalled every one of them. "To give him a letter," he told the officers with attitude.

"A letter? What letter?" Vascelli growled, interrupting Duncan's account of his activities leading up to Jake's death.

“A bloody pay-up-or-suffer type of letter. Jake’s best mate from the casino sent it special delivery.”

Vascelli, an old timer, looked cynical. “A letter of demand you say?”

“You might call it that.” He replied, his voice hardened by anger. “I’d call it a threat.”

“A threat?”

“Yeah. A threat like, you’ve got less than 30 hours to deliver the cash. All of it. Or else.” He snorted with disgust. “The autograph was Danny Brewster’s.”

“Danny Brewster? The casino boss?”

“That’s the one.”

“How much cash are we talking about?”

“Half a million.”

“Do you have any idea what this money was for?”

“Oh, come on Sarge.” Duncan had

said. "Brewster's the craps-table king. He has the power to write the loans and extend them if he's feeling in a good mood. If he's having a bad day, he releases the hounds on any poor sucker who has missed the payment due date." Duncan didn't miss the eye movement across the table. It told him the lawman agreed.

"Brewster's letter wasn't a love note. Straight up the line. You owe. You pay. Now."

"So why was the letter sent to you and not your partner?"

"The courier came to the office. Jake wasn't in, so I signed for it."

"And did what with it?"

"Put it on Jake's desk."

"You said you took it to his apartment to give it to him."

"I did. But not until the next day." The officer frowned but waited for Duncan to explain further. "Look do you guys want to sit down?" He

motioned toward the chairs around a small conference table at the end of his office.

“Sure, we don’t want to rush this.” Vascelli had said his grey eyes hardening. “People tend to forget details when they tell their story in a hurry.”

Duncan waited for them to take a seat before he continued. “Ok. Let’s go back to the beginning.”

“Good idea.” Vascelli said. Duncan knew the detective wasn’t missing a thing. He could almost see the brain cogs whirling inside the guy’s head. Vascelli had probably listened to thousands of stories before and instinct told Duncan the old boy could sort wheat from chaff as fast as a computer crunched numbers. He was right.

CHAPTER 3

The waves rolling in sharpened Duncan's memory. He remembered Sergeant Vascelli settling back in the chair and studying him while he spoke about the letter Jake had received before his death.

The older man had been storing Duncan's every expression and word, while the rookie's attention was frequently diverted by the great view outside the conference room. It was easy to see the young officer was impressed by the seventeenth-floor vista and was probably trying to guess how much Duncan was worth.

The monthly equal profit share from the business was a nice round figure. But, when the two fancy homes each former wife scored was subtracted, along with the annually adjusted, monthly mortgage and alimony payments, the number changed drastically. If the loans to grown up children, that would never be repaid,

were factored in, and his half- share of lease payments for the office furniture, state of the art equipment, and the Range Rover, were also taken into account, the bottom-line result was nothing to get excited about.

His ex-wives lived in houses big enough to accommodate three families. While Duncan lived in his parents' cliff top house; the place where he had spent his childhood and much of his adult life. He inherited the house two years earlier when his parents were both killed in a car accident.

A tragedy. The result of heavy rain, fog, and another vehicle, travelling at high speed on the wrong side of the road. When the police told Duncan of his parents' death, he felt like a light suddenly went out. It had not been easy for the officer who broke the news to him either. Frank and Judy Scott were his best friends. In twenty years, they had rarely missed a Friday night Bridge game together. He was their son's Godfather.

Senior Sergeant, Tony Vascelli, cried when he told Duncan his parents had been killed. He'd hugged him and called him son. His steel grey eyes dulled with the pain of losing his best friends and being the one to tell their only child.

Duncan listened to the surf crashing on the rocks. The loneliness he'd experienced since his parents died was intense.

They had been his best friends too.

CHAPTER 4

About a year after his parents' death, Duncan gave up his rented town apartment and moved back home. Ten years had passed since he had last lived there. He'd had an exceptional childhood. Great parents. Great mates. At eighteen he'd moved out to go to college and returned at twenty-two. Stayed for a few years, then moved out again after his first marriage.

Following the divorce, he moved back, remarried, divorced again and returned after divorce number two. Funny, but he really liked living there. To him it had always been home. It was where he felt safe.

He loved the old house. His dad had been proud of all the finishing touches he'd made to it over the years. His dad had been a banker, and a damn good one, but his real talent was making magic with wood. He always said it kept him in touch with reality.

His mother claimed his dad could turn any old piece of wood into a work of fine art. The furniture and the staircase Frank Scott had built, stood in silent testimony to his great craftsmanship.

Duncan's thoughts returned to the interview with the police officers. Vascelli had been impatient to get the facts. When Duncan paused for a moment, he almost barked, "Go on. You were telling us about the letter."

"Well, as I said, a courier brought it to the office; I was standing at the reception desk when the guy came. He said he had a special delivery for Jake Collins. The receptionist said he wasn't in but told him I was Jake's partner. A partner was fine with him, so I signed and took the letter. I got my file, went into Jake's room, put the letter on his desk, and went back to my own office."

"What time was this?"

"About ten thirty I guess."

“Then what?” Vascelli asked. His voice lost a bit of its hard edge.

“I worked on financial forecasts until around 1 p.m. I remember the time because Penny, our practice manager, came in to tell me she was going to lunch. She had a bundle of letters with her.

She said she had opened Jake’s mail and wondered if I would check to see if any of it needed urgent attention. She said she’d be back at two and would take care of it then.

She left. I gave the letters the once over. Found nothing that couldn’t wait a day or two. Well, all but the one on the bottom of the pile. That one needed immediate attention.” He didn’t wait for the other man’s prompt, “This baby was on classy paper with the casino’s logo in the left-hand corner.

It was typed, short and straight to the point:

TIME'S UP JAKE.

\$500K by 3 p.m. tomorrow.

You know the drill

Danny B

PS. No hard luckers please.

The Sergeant had moved forward in his chair. He had clearly been interested and said, "Tell me more." Duncan had obliged.

"We have an in-house system of attaching envelopes to the back of all the letters we receive. To check dates if we need to. I flipped the letter over, and the envelope was the same special delivery I'd signed for earlier."

"Who opened it?"

"Not me, but when Penny came back, she asked me if I wanted her to action any of the mail stuff. I showed her the special delivery envelope and asked her why she'd opened it.

She said she didn't realize she had. She explained she had taken Jake's mail into his office, sat at his desk, and used his slicer to slit the back of all the envelopes.

She said she must have picked up the one I'd put there earlier, without realising it. As always, she attached the envelopes to the letters, and then gave them to me."

"Did she read the letter?" Vascelli asked.

"I don't think so. She would have said something about it. Penny's been with us for eight years. She knows more about the business than we do. She would have said something if she'd read it."

"What then?"

"I read the note a few times and tried to phone Jake. He wasn't home or wasn't taking calls. I left a few messages on his voice mail. Told him he had a problem that needed urgent attention. A big problem. I told him to call me on my cell."

“Did he call?”

“He hadn’t by lights out. I tried his number again just before I went to bed.”

“And that was, what time?”

“One-thirty a.m., give or take a few minutes.”

“Then what?”

“I slept until five-thirty a.m., had coffee, showered, dressed and phoned Jake again.”

“Did you talk to him?”

“Not by phone. At seven I drove over to his apartment.”

“And he was there?”

“Not when I first arrived.”

“When?”

“Steady. I’m getting to it. I buzzed his intercom; it’s a secured building. There was no answer, so I decided to

sit it out in the car for a while. Finally, I went with a hunch and buzzed one of his neighbours. Cute. Young. Friendly. Big fan of Jake's."

"Does cute-and-friendly have a name?"

"Natalie. Natalie Jenkins."

"Did Natalie answer?"

"She did. When I asked her if she knew where Jake was, she giggled and said, in her bed."

"Convenient."

"Very." Duncan smiled at the older man, "One of the few perks of apartment living I guess."

"Go on."

"Well, in a nutshell. Nat called Jake; he came on the blower and said he'd meet me at his place. He buzzed me in and was waiting for me at his door.

I showed him the letter and asked him if he wanted to tell me the story

behind it. He said no. Said it was none of my business. Told me I was his business partner, not his wife. He said he'd take care of it."

"Did you two of you have words?"

"No we didn't. We'd already had them the week before. There wasn't anything else to add to what I'd already told him in the bar, so I left and went to work."

"What time did you get to work?"

"About eight a.m."

"Anyone else in?"

"Dawn. The cleaner."

"Tell me about last week and the words you and Collins had." Vascelli said.

"Not much to tell really. For a few months now, Jake hasn't really had his eye on the ball. Late starts, long lunches, early exits and a few no-shows.

Some of his clients were not happy.

They could never contact him. We lost two big clients last week.”

“That must have made you pretty angry.”

“Fairly pissed. Yes. Not my best week.”

“So, what about the dust-up in the bar.”

“It wasn’t a dust-up.” “

What was it?”

“Last Tuesday Jake didn’t show for work. Penny phoned the apartment and a few of his haunts. She tracked him down in the Trial Bar opposite the courthouse.”

“The place where the local legal boys let off steam after a hard day in court?” Vascelli asked, raising his right eyebrow and tilting his head.

“That’s the one.”

“And you did what?”

“I went there.”

“To the bar? To take him home?”

“No. To call him all the names I'd been practicing, in between the calls I took from clients.

The clients who were busy tearing up our contract.”

Vascelli nodded. “Go on.”

“I found Jake in a dark corner, at the back of the Trial. It was around six p.m., so the bar was packed. Standing room only when I arrived. I went over to him, noticed his glass was empty so I offered to buy him a drink. He declined.

I stood there checking him out.” Duncan sighed deeply before he continued. “Jake held his alcohol well, but I’ve known him long enough to read the signs. Withdrawn. Morose. Volatile.”

“Then what happened?”

“I just stood at his table, still sizing him up. He was jumpy.”

“Jumpy?”

“Edgy. Ready to lash out if anyone who pissed him off.” Duncan noticed Vascelli was taking notes.

“Go on.”

“I told him I needed to talk business. Asked if we could go somewhere quiet. He said he didn’t mix business with pleasure. Told me to phone the office and make an appointment.”

“What did you do?”

“I went to the bar, bought a beer and went back to Jake’s table. I promised myself I’d stay cool. I said, “Mind if I sit down?”

“I do mind. I told you to make an appointment.” He told me again. Jake wasn’t checking his volume needle.”

The louder he got, the more spectators he had. But they were civilised and didn’t stare. Most people tried hard to avoid direct eye contact.”

“How’d you handle it?”

“Took a few sips of my beer, and then tried a new approach. You know we’ve missed you at the office pal.”

“Sure you have.” Jake said.

“A few of your clients are pretty keen to talk with you.” I told him.

“Yeah, I bet they are.” The bar tender delivered a double Scotch. Jake took a swig and glared at me. “Well you can tell those pricks to get fucked. Tell them to get themselves a new man, because this one has had it with their whining and bitching. Tell them I ain’t jumpin’ hoops no more.”

That’s when I started to lose it. Not a lot, but the voice shot up a few decibels “Hoops? Bullshit. You’ve never jumped through anyone’s hoops. You’ve always been the ringmaster.

You're the one who called the shots Jake. But not anymore my friend. You’ve dropped the ball big time. It's

time you got a grip. Or you'll end up in this place full-time. As the glass-jockey.”

“Nasty.” The Sergeant shook his head.

“Maybe, but a fact. Jake was forty years old. It was time for him to grow up. He had lost two major accounts. Important clients had lost patience with him. The rumour was out that his casino pals had pulled the plug on his credit, and to top it, his business partner had a bad day and was thinking seriously about going solo.”

“Did you tell him you wanted out?”

“It was still something festering in my brain. However, Jake’s attitude that night made it seem like a great way to go.”

“Ditch Jake and run the show.”

“I’d been running the show for the past six months, so a split would have only been a formality.”

“Go back to the bit about the bar.”
Vascelli said.

“My shot about him ending up stacking empty glasses got to Jake. Maybe he had been dreaming of doing it solo too. Anyway, he told me to leave him alone. Said he was expecting a friend. I made a crack about his casino pals. He didn’t like it and he gave me a shove.”

“Tell me about that.”

“I think I said something like, friends care about each other Jake, and help each other out. From where I’m standing buddy, you’re on a luxury liner with a bunch of strangers.”

Jake didn’t agree, so he jumped off his stool and gave me a shove.”

“A shove?”

“He grabbed me by the coat flaps. Up close and personal. Told me to get off his case. Then he let go of the lapels and pushed me into a group of suits.

That’s when I decided it was time to leave. I apologized to the legal boys, straightened the jacket and started

for the door.”

Jake yelled “And forget about shedding the partner’s contract pal. I’m not going anywhere. I heard. Everyone in the bar heard it too.”

“When he manhandled you, did you shove him back?”

“No. He took me by surprise. I guess I was just focusing on staying upright.”

“Can you give us the names of people who saw the two of you?”

“Not really. I know the place was packed, but I wasn't there to socialize. I didn’t check the guest list.”

Vascelli nodded to the rookie, “Try to pull together some names.” He turned back to Duncan, “And when was this again?”

“Like I told you already. Last Tuesday. Around six or seven.”

“And you got the letter when?”

"The following Tuesday."

"And you took it to your partner's apartment when?"

"Wednesday morning about seven a.m."

"You got to work at eight a.m.?"

"Yes. That's right."

"And that was the last time you saw Jake Collins alive?"

"Very much alive."

CHAPTER 5

Vascelli walked into the office the team was using as their workroom. Newman and his sidekicks were already there, busy with the whiteboard.

“How’s it going everyone?” he greeted his colleagues with a tired smile.

“Not bad. Yeah, not too bad.” Newman said, nodding slowly to reinforce the words. He was feeling mildly confident that they were finally matching some of the pieces of information into a fit.

Not many, but some. There were still big gaps, but hell, two weeks wasn’t long to deal with the donkeywork.

Newman shook his head again, surprised by the fact that only two weeks had passed since they were called out to the fancy apartment with the great ocean views and enough electrical gadgetry to impress

even Bill Gates and his R&D smart guys.

The Collins place almost made fingers obsolete. Laser sensors scoped you when you entered the room and turned on soft classical music and atmospheric lighting. Everything in the place was designed to create a mood. Especially, the breath-taking ocean panorama, which never failed to amaze everyone who was privileged enough to visit the penthouse.