

SIX MURDERS?

THE STRANGE CASE OF THE WELLY ALLEY STRANGLER

By
Robert Philip Bolton

Preview file information

This preview file of *Six Murders?* contains the first six chapters of the book. The complete book comprises twenty-seven chapters and 180 pages.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Six Murders?* is a work of fiction and the characters it depicts are the products of my imagination. Any resemblance to any real person living or dead is therefore entirely coincidental.

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For Kath

PART ONE

Chapter 1

‘Benjamin Cedric Pye, you have been found guilty of assault with intent to injure Sione Edward Christian, a good and innocent person going about his work honestly and earnestly, on the evening of the first of October this year.’ At this point the judge paused and, looking over the top of her reading spectacles, added sternly: ‘Look at me as I address you please, Mr Pye.’

At this point the guilty Pye man was guilty of looking to the back of the number one permanent criminal court and grinning evilly at two dull-looking young men – hardly more than teenagers – who were sitting together grinning evilly back. The guilty Pye man, holding his humourless smile, slowly and arrogantly turned his gaze back to the front of the court and to the severe-looking lady judge who was still humourlessly looking down at him from the bench over the top of her spectacles.

‘Listen to me now, Mr Pye,’ continued The Honourable Justice Dame Alexandrina Prohm, OBE, the principal judge of the number one permanent criminal court of Wellington. ‘Due to the severe nature and extent of the injuries to Mr Christian caused by your actions that terrible evening it is my duty—’ (she wanted to say “it is my delicious pleasure, you evil prick” but didn’t) ‘—to impose the maximum sentence allowed by law. You

are therefore sentenced by this court to imprisonment for thirty-six months. You will now be removed from this place, taken down to the cells and thence to Te Whareherehere prison where you will remain confined at Her Majesty's pleasure for the duration of your sentence.'

Thus was sentence grimly passed on a grinning Benjamin Cedric Pye by the principal judge of the number one permanent criminal court in her gloomy Wellington court-room on that otherwise bright December afternoon. And when it was pronounced, and before he was led away to the basement cells by the C and C security guards, whence he would be transported to Te Whareherehere prison – known by its inmates, exmates, employees, visitors (official and otherwise), journalists, politicians and others, indeed by everyone in Wellington, as The Lake – for the duration of his sentence, the said Benjamin Cedric Pye, a huge man now gone somewhat to fat, a former heavy-weight boxer known for the mighty power behind his punches and the great size of his meaty fists, with wrists so thick that no handcuffs could be found large enough to encircle them, merely looked again to the back of the court, to the two young thugs, from whom any shred of gorm they might once have possessed had long since departed, dressed unfashionably alike in their tight black trousers, black vinyl jackets, black heeled boots and white open-neck shirts, and grinned evilly at them again.

'He looks happy as a fart,' said Eric the Limp, the taller and spottier of the two young apprentice thugs, to his shorter and squatter companion as they made ready to leave the court.

'He shouldn't be,' said Tatts McIndoe, the short round one. 'Thirty-six months.'

'How much is that in real proper years?' asked Eric the Limp.

'Thirty-six months, my brother,' said Tatts McIndoe, 'equals three years. Three whole years in The Lake.'

‘Then why’s he so farting cheerful?’ asked Eric the Limp.
‘Why indeed, brother?’ said his brother. ‘Why indeed?’

Twelve days later, that being Christmas day, the two obnoxious and gormless young brothers Tatts McIndoe and Eric the Limp, seen together in court at the sentencing of Big Ben Pye – for that is how he was known in the Wellington underworld and beyond – were standing together beside the concrete plinth of one of the six great fluted pillars which stand majestically at the front of the Metropolitan Cathedral of the Sacred Heart and of Saint Mary His Mother, better known locally as Sacred Heart Cathedral, on Hill Street. They were with another young man – a big man, as big as Big Ben but much younger – known simply as Simple Simon. Simple Simon towered over his two companions whom he made look not merely small but weak, weedy and pasty-faced. Indeed, Simple Simon was not only as big and bulky as the recently incarcerated for three years Big Ben Pye – with whom, by associating with him recently, and with some of his associates, during a couple of brief terms in Te Whareherehere, he had become well acquainted – but was also considerably younger, healthier, stronger and fitter than the older man although evidently only marginally more intelligent; and he was certainly better looking which wasn’t necessarily a great accomplishment as Big Ben was noted for an ugliness of appearance to complement the gross ugliness of his nature.

‘There is two-and-a-half thousand there now, my friend and ally,’ said Tatts McIndoe with faux ceremony as he handed Simple Simon a plastic Countdown shopping bag. ‘Do you understand?’ he added slowly, carefully enunciating each word.

‘Get on with it, Tatts,’ said Eric the Limp quietly, impatiently, to his shorter brother. He was looking nervously at the moving line of incoming Christmas morning worshippers passing them

in the narrow passage to the main door. ‘He’s not your friend or whatsiname. And don’t forget, he’s thick as pig shit. Why waste time on him?’

This blunt and coarse communication from brother to brother was not what one would expect to hear in the portico of a Roman Catholic cathedral on a Christmas morning while preparations were being made within for the celebration of Holy Mass; but it did occur, is germane, and thus must be reported.

‘Be quiet, Limpy, I beg of you,’ said Tatts McIndoe as loudly as he dared. And then – the Countdown shopping bag having been officially transferred – he said to the said Simple Simon, slowly, in a dreary monotone, as if speaking to a rather dull child: ‘Big Ben said that you know what to do and that you shall receive the balance when he receives confirmation that you have completed the contract satisfactorily on new year’s eve precisely as arranged and understood by parties of the both parts.’

‘Eh?’ said Simple Simon as he dropped his missal into the shopping bag with the money.

‘It’s a down payment, cockhead,’ said Eric the Limp. He reached up – and despite his own tallness he did have to reach up – and gripped Simple Simon’s crookedly-tied paisley tie, looked up at him, and he really did have to look up, and said threateningly, as a few curious and puzzled-looking parishioners brushed past: ‘You get it, shit face?’

Quite how the addressee could simultaneously be a cockhead and a shit face did not occur to the addresser but such crude speechmaking came to him naturally although it made his slightly better educated brother cringe.

But Simple Simon did not cringe; indeed Simple Simon never cringed. ‘I get it, Limpy,’ he said calmly but thickly and dully, without expression.

‘And if you stuff up?’

‘I won’t, so back off, eh,’ said an unperturbed Simple Simon.

Eric the Limp was noted for his aggressive and threatening disposition but Simple Simon was not easily intimidated by such a young, thin, sickly-looking, acne-faced petty crook and was perfectly capable of meeting aggression with aggression.

‘Now you know exactly what to do don’t you,’ said Tatts McIndoe – slowly – who didn’t himself know what Simple Simon was expected to do for his total of five thousand dollars but pretended he did.

‘Yes,’ said Simple Simon slowly and without expression. ‘Big Ben told me the other day when I visited him in The Lake. And he told me not to say nothing to you. Now I’m going into Mass if that’s okay with you, Tatts? Limpy? It is Our Lord’s birthday you know.’

‘We know, Simon,’ said Tatts McIndoe kindly. ‘Merry Christmas, mate.’

‘What does he bloody-well have to do for Big Ben to get five farting grand?’ asked Eric the Limp of his brother when Simple Simon was gone into the church carrying his Countdown bag of money.

‘I really don’t know,’ said Tatts McIndoe. ‘Drugs maybe?’

‘Farting Jesus, it must be a big deal,’ said Eric the Limp.

He was right of course. It was a very big deal indeed.

Chapter 2

Angela Ravensthorpe arrived in Wellington late that same Christmas day more than thirty hours after her sudden and urgent departure from England.

On a dreadfully chilly morning two days previous she had found herself in the over-heated office of the chief constable of the Merseyside police – to whom she had been compelled to surrender her warrant card, her radio, her phone and her own cell phone, her watch, even her wallet and its entire contents – being debriefed by a number of important-looking people whom she didn't know including three senior police officers (only one of whom was in uniform) and some mysterious men from the Home Office who had evidently trained up especially from London. Her own commanding officer from the drug squad was there as well as an observing representative from the federation, an older woman from police welfare, and of course the chief constable himself who sat behind his desk, rolling a biro between his thumb and first two fingers, saying nothing. She listened carefully, obediently, to what she was told, sat down nervously and carefully on the edge of a hard chair in the corner of the spacious office and read all the papers and documents she was given, stood up and went to the chief constable's desk to sign two of them where she was shown, as she was instructed to do, while the others in the room watched and waited silently; when she was finished she slipped her copies of the papers into the thin black valise from which she had taken them and looked up questioningly, nervously, at the woman from police welfare. That woman then led her to another room – taking the valise of documents with her – where she was required to remove her clothes (rather flashy, gaudy and cheap-looking by design)

including her tights, underwear and shoes, and change into the clothes she was given which were in an especially and consistently cheap and casual style – worn, faded and somewhat frayed jeans, a black polo-neck sweater, a black scarf and a wine-coloured puffer jacket – from which she saw that all labels and brand identifications had been removed. For her feet she was given a pair of new white ankle socks and a shabby pair of white Nikes. Finally she was handed a cheap wrist-watch.

‘But what about–’ she wanted to ask: –my flat, all my clothes, my makeup, my Kindle and CDs, my furniture, all my belongings, Katsue my cat, everything? My whole life is back there. And my phone? I need my phone. And they’ve got all my money and my cash card and everything. Instead she said meekly: ‘I was told that everything would be–’

‘Everything’s been taken care of, dear,’ said the older woman sympathetically. ‘Exactly as planned. As you were told. You’ll see. So don’t worry. But you must hurry now. There’s no time to lose.’

She wasn’t returned to the chief constable’s office and she never again saw nor heard from him or any of the other men. She and the police welfare woman left by the garage exit where an unmarked car was waiting, blowing fumes into the frigid air. They were then driven by the federation rep to John Lennon Airport where he unloaded a somewhat battered suitcase on wheels and handed her a large black handbag.

‘Good luck, Ange,’ he said quietly, grimly, before returning to the idling car.

‘Good luck, dear,’ said the older woman, kindly and gently, as they shook hands. It was freezing cold outside the terminal but Angela noticed and remembered how warm and soft the other woman’s hand was. ‘Remember,’ said the welfare woman before she returned to the car, within the warmth of which the driver

was waiting, ‘tickets, passport, a wallet, money, all in the handbag, everything else in the valise. Don’t let them out of your sight.’

And then before she knew it – hot, tired to the point of exhaustion, stiff and somewhat confused, aching to use the toilet, have a shower, wash her hair, brush her teeth, and change into fresh clothes which she assumed were in the suitcase – she was turning in her new passport to a young and friendly New Zealand immigration officer at Auckland airport.

‘Welcome home, miss,’ he said.

Home? Of course. A New Zealand passport. Home.

Where did those, what, nearly thirty hours go? she wondered. Was I *really* in Hong Kong last night? Hong Kong. All that time flying. She was amazed, astonished, shocked, but, it must be admitted, and she admitted it to herself, hugely relieved. And then, somehow, another short flight and she was in the terminal at Wellington airport on an unbearably hot and sunny Christmas day – Christmas in the summer seemed so strange and foreign to her – where she was met by a man and a woman who didn’t give their names, didn’t speak, who took her to a flat somewhere on the fringes of the city.

‘We’ll be in touch,’ said the man as he unloaded the suitcase from the car and handed her the keys to the flat.

Once inside the small flat, and without even looking around, she stripped to her underwear, lay on the soft bed, and fell into a dreamless sleep, unaware of her surroundings, unaware that it was Christmas day, a hot, sunny Christmas day afternoon at the end of the world. She awoke when it was almost dark, which was precisely when she should be waking up on Christmas morning at home in Liverpool, having no idea at first quite where she was.

And so, from the excitement and danger of the Liverpool underworld, this former member of the Merseyside police drug

squad was left to her own devices in Wellington for the next few days. What a sudden change it was: for almost eight years she had worked undercover, day and night, successfully infiltrating the Liverpool underworld and helping in the identification, arrest and prosecution of three of that city's most notorious gangland leaders. Now she had nothing to do in a small, quiet antipodean city in the middle of the summer holidays; a place she didn't know; a place where no one knew her and she knew no one.

Part of her undercover success in Liverpool – in fact the principal contributor to her success – was that she was an orphan with no known relatives; this was quickly identified by the Merseyside police as making her ideal for undercover work for which early in her career she had been taken aside and trained. But finally, eventually – inevitably some said – when her identity became known to the Liverpool criminal class and her life was at risk the Merseyside chief constable arranged her new identity, a new name and everything that went with it including a New Zealand passport, and sent her as far away from England as it was possible to go.

After a few idle days of rest – which, she admitted to herself, she needed to collect her thoughts and gather her strength – she was taken to the Wellington Central police station in Victoria Street where she was to assume a new life and a new job as a humble uniformed woman police constable.

But her transition to the relatively simple and quiet life of a New Zealand WPC was quickly and rudely interrupted.

Meanwhile, early in the new year, the Merseyside police determined that Angela Ravensthorpe was no longer being sought by the Liverpool underworld; it seemed that the world of crime had in fact lost interest in her and her whereabouts when

its citizens learned that she had fled to New Zealand where she had been brutally murdered.

Angela Ravensthorpe was never heard from again.

Chapter 3

Just after dawn on the first day of the next year the low summer sun, casting long very-early-morning shadows across Wellington, was almost as bright and hot as at noon-time. Two bored uniformed police constables – their caps pulled well down to shade their eyes from the low sun – stood more at ease than attention in the empty street at the opening of a nameless downtown alley now closed by police tape.

In the depth of that grimy and desolate canyon-like alley, where the air was warm and moistly humid despite the deep shade, a somewhat hung-over Detective Inspector Tim Glante stood looking glumly at the grey and lifeless-looking body of a young woman slumped back awkwardly against the alley wall of roughly pointed brick. She looked like a street prostitute, like the others, but unlike the others there were no signs of addiction.

Having seen enough, more than enough, Glante turned away, looked down to the crudely graffitied brick-wall end of the blank alley – what the hell's the point of graffiti if you can't read it, you dumb-arses, he thought – and ran his open hand down over his mouth, under his unshaven chin and down his neck and around the inside neck of his white t-shirt. It was the same t-shirt he had worn at the new year's eve party, now somewhat grubby, and stained with the expensive *pinot noir* he knew so well; too well. And so he felt distinctly gritty, grimy, sweaty, odorous and unkempt, in need of a shower and a shave, and dreadfully dry-mouthed. And a shit, he thought. A shit would be good, he thought. But the early-morning call from Central meant that bowel release and relief, and the niceties of morning ablutions, had been necessarily abandoned. And he felt vaguely nauseous.

Too much of the *pinot* as usual, he thought. He briefly envied Pansy, his wife, who hadn't drunk much – surprisingly, or perhaps not given her heritage, she never did – and, having got up with him, to make him a cup of his favourite sweet black tea, was now almost certainly asleep again in their bed in their large and rambling Hataitai home.

He glanced again at the unmoving figure against the wall. He noted the torn low-cut top, the dull grey face, lips turned blue, and the typical red bruising around her lovely slender neck and under her chin. Amazing, he thought. Exactly the same as the others, he thought. Five others. All exactly the same.

He decided then that he was utterly sick of violence; sick of the sight of dead bodies; sick of the sick and twisted minds of so many criminals; sick of the slick over-educated barristers who belittled his work as they defended the indefensible. Altogether, after more than forty years as a policeman, the last twenty-five in CIB, he was utterly sick of his work. And now just when he thought he'd got the bastard – as he referred to him – he found he hadn't. He's slipped away, again, he thought. The bastard's slipped away.

His birthday later in the year would mark the beginning of his retirement and he was glad. Pansy too was glad. They were going to sell the Hataitai house and move to tranquil friendly Martinborough away from all the crime and everything else unpleasant in Wellington. Martinborough. He never could have afforded such a lovely house and all that land in such a beautiful part of the country but it had been left to them – to her – when Pansy's widowed father died. A bit of luck there for a change he thought at the time. Still did.

But that – retirement amidst the timeless and beautiful vineyards of Martinborough – was months away. This was the ugly here and now: a Wellington alley. Now, on this already-hot

summer morning, in this nameless blind alley littered with newspapers, greasy and sticky flattened pizza boxes and their buzzing blowflies, cigarette butts and used condoms, and the odour of stale urine, he stepped even deeper into the shade, closer to the clever young scientist working alone on his hands and knees in the filth and grime and squalor that was the floor of this sunless place.

The young scientist automatically stretched out his coveralled-arm and a latex-gloved hand – without looking around or up – to stop Glante from going closer. Glante stopped and stooped wearily to talk to the young man.

‘So you got the call, Hawxwell?’ he asked.

‘Yep,’ said the younger man. ‘On duty as planned.’

‘On your own?’ asked Glante.

The young and somewhat socially-awkward genius Hawxwell, dressed in a blue forensic coverall, now turned to look around and up at the bent detective, whom he had always liked and admired – because he had always given the younger man the respect he thought he deserved, and did – but who on this early morning, bending over so his white-bristled face sagged and bagged horribly, looked tired and old. The young scientist felt vaguely sorry for the weary-looking detective.

‘I thought it was best,’ he said, pushing up his spectacles on his nose. ‘New year’s day and that. Overtime. And the fewer who know about this right now the better.’

‘Good. I agree,’ said Glante. ‘The world will know about it soon enough. Photographer?’

‘Been and gone.’

‘Did you supervise?’

‘Watched him like a hawk.’

‘Hawxwell, eh. And nothing iffy or butty? No nosey-crap questions?’

‘Nope. I know him well. He was fine. Bored. Just wanted to get home to his kids. Going to the beach I think. Very routine.’

Evidently satisfied, Glante relaxed. But only a little. ‘I’ve got the wagon on the way to get her out of here,’ he said. ‘He’s pretty wide but he should be able to back in here alright. But he won’t be able to block the rubber-neckers – not that there are any yet – or press. But there will be. They’ll be able to see everything.’

‘Press are there now,’ said Hawxwell. ‘Look.’

Glante looked up the alley; the two constables were now having to deal with a dozen or so people jostling with each other.

‘It’ll be okay,’ said Hawxwell reassuringly. ‘They won’t see anything out of the ordinary. Just enough. I’ll see to it.’

‘By the book, eh. Strictly by the book.’

‘By the book absolutely, Aunty,’ said Hawxwell. ‘For sure.’

Glante hated the rhyming nickname but it had been his since the old days at Trentham and it was too late – and too hard and not worth the bother – to object to it now.

‘The press though,’ he said. ‘Look at them. They would’ve got something already with their big-cock lenses I bet. One’s even got binoculars.’

‘Will it be alright?’ asked Hawxwell anxiously.

‘Yeah. For sure,’ said Glante. ‘Awkward angle though. But whatever they get, a sight like that?’ He looked again at the young woman propped up so awkwardly against the alley wall. ‘Jesus Christ, let them have what they get – I don’t care – but they won’t print it. Or air it. It’s disgusting.’

‘So what’ll they do? What’ll *you* do?’

Glante turned back to the working Hawxwell. ‘I’ll get an identikit done later. They can have that,’ he said. ‘So, what have you got so far?’

‘I’ll be down here for ages yet,’ said Hawxwell. ‘The full monty. For the record, you know. By the book as you say.’

‘But? Meanwhile? I’ve got my own interim to do.’

‘Well there’s the handbag. Wallet. A few dollars. Some change. Nothing much else. No driver’s licence though. No phone. No cards or keys. But it’s okay. I made sure.’

‘Give us a look,’ said Glante.

‘Over there,’ said Hawxwell, pointing to his own hard black box-like case on the ground behind him; a black leather handbag lay beside it.

Glante bent painfully, picked up the wide-mouthed handbag, opened it, rifled through the contents and drew out a mustard-coloured women’s wallet. He dropped the handbag to the ground and straightened up slowly, elbows out, his free left hand pressing into his lower left side, under his grubby white t-shirt, in a futile attempt to ease the aches in his lower back. The young coveralled and latex-gloved scientist – tall, thin, lithe, short-haired, bespectacled and distinctly boyish – evidently comfortably at ease in this ghoulish setting, on the filthy alley floor, frowned with concern.

‘You alright, Aunty?’ he asked the older man.

‘Headache, nausea, dry horrors, lumbago, sciatica, rheumatism, arthritis, gout in one knee, slipped disc, muscle spasms down the back, enlarged prostate, old age, cancer of the every-damn-thing probably. You name it, boy, and I’ve probably got it,’ said Glante from his now erect and less painful position.

‘You’re kidding, right?’ said the younger man. Hopefully.

Glante nodded patiently while opening the wallet. ‘Kidding? Yeah. Fit as a fiddle,’ he said with bitter sarcasm.

He looked up from his wallet inspection.

‘No ID,’ he said. ‘No licence, no credit cards, no ATM card, no nothing. Twenty-five dollars only.’

‘I know,’ said Hawxwell. ‘No phone either. Going to make it hard isn’t it?’

Glante nodded thoughtfully. ‘Hard alright,’ he agreed. ‘But the identikit.’

‘So—’ said Hawxwell hesitatingly, doubtfully. ‘—everything *is* okay isn’t it?’

‘Amazing,’ said Glante brightly. ‘Excellent. Thanks.’ He dropped the wallet into the open black handbag.

‘No witnesses I suppose?’ asked Hawxwell kneeling up, resting back on his heels, a fine brush in one hand. He adjusted his spectacles again.

‘I doubt it. New year’s eve? But we’ll check all the clubs around here,’ said Glante. ‘What do *you* think?’

Hawxwell shrugged. ‘Doubt it,’ he said.

‘Here’s hoping,’ said Glante ‘Don’t need complications though. I’ll need that report but. Quick as you can but every little detail. Crossed Is and dotted Ts and all that crap-shit. Can’t be too careful. Upstairs and that. I’m treading on eggshells *and* thin ice with this one.’

‘I know. Tomorrow afternoon latest,’ said the young scientist. ‘Don’t worry.’

‘I’m not. But it really does look like him doesn’t it.’ It wasn’t a question.

‘Definitely does. No one could doubt it. He’s all over it.’

‘The one-handed strangulation. The strength. The grip. The brutality,’ said Glante, thoughtfully stroking his bristled chin. ‘Amazing really.’

‘I know,’ said Hawxwell. ‘Every detail. But,’ he added, ‘I better get on.’

‘Yeah, me too,’ said Glante wearily. ‘But you take care of her when the wagon comes, eh. You know what to do.’ He looked up to the street where the two constables at the alley’s narrow entrance were having to deal with reporters, photographers and

television cameras, their long lenses straining to get a view down the alley to the crime scene. ‘Vultures waiting,’ he added.

‘Quick, eh,’ said Hawxwell.

‘Wonder why?’ said Glante with a wink. ‘Still, better get it over and done with.’

He waved to the small group still jostling at the head of the alley so early on that first day of the year. ‘I’m coming, I’m coming,’ he called. And then, to Hawxwell: ‘I can see it now, mate. The Welly Alley Strangler strikes again. Fear stalks the capital’s streets. Pretty young prostitute victim number six. Mayor questions police action. Etcetera-blah.’

‘It’ll blow all their theories out of the water, won’t it,’ said Hawxwell.

‘Yeah. Well their theories are only the theories I gave them. I thought we had the bastard,’ said Glante. ‘Everyone thought we had him. But he’s doing three in The Lake for bugger all.’

‘I know,’ said Hawxwell.

‘Assaulted a bouncer at a strip joint. Tried to strangle him. Like this I suppose. But the bouncer was too good for him. Not like the girls.’

Hawxwell nodded. He was bored. He’d heard it all before from the frustrated old detective.

‘We got him for that at least,’ added Glante. ‘Three in The Lake.’

‘But now?’

Glante shrugged. ‘I’ll get the bastard. I’ll get him,’ he said. ‘If it’s the last thing I do.’

He stepped carefully across to the young woman against the wall and looked down at her unmoving form.

‘Okay, girl,’ he said quietly. ‘I know where you’re heading. I’ll be seeing you later.’ And then he turned away, back to the working scientist and said: ‘I’m outa here, mate. I’ll see you later.’

‘Later, Aunty,’ said Hawxwell. ‘Oh, and by the way,’ he added. Glante waited.

‘Happy new year,’ said Hawxwell.

‘Whoopee-shit-dee-do,’ said a nauseous Glante as the smiling young scientist, so happy in his macabre work, returned smilingly to his hands-and-knees position beside the grey-faced, blue-lipped, bruised and crooked body on the alley floor. And so say all of us, added Glante to himself. Now, meet the press, Glante. Meet the bloody press but keep it low-key. Soon all the world, his mother and brother and mutt will know about name unknown, female, aged mid-thirties, evidently the sixth miserable victim of the notorious Welly Alley Strangler.

And as he began to move out of the scene, to trudge reluctantly back to the street and the impatiently waiting members of the press, he thought he heard – he definitely *did* hear – the unmistakable sound of gas escaping suddenly and violently from a human anus. Surely not? He looked back and down at Hawxwell, gave him a quizzical look, but Hawxwell, who was looking up at him, merely shook his head slowly and slightly in silent denial and shifted his eyes sideways and meaningfully to the female figure lying so crookedly against the alley wall. Both men grinned conspiratorially, irreverently, as they resumed their respective duties.

Meanwhile, of all the people affected or about to be affected by the grisly scene in that nameless downtown alley, and the chain of five identical murders which had preceded it in a serial fashion, only Big Ben Pye was awake at that early hour on that new year’s day. All the others – including Simple Simon, Tatts McIndoe, Eric The Limp, Paul-Frank Ratanui and his wife Faith, Ponytail O’Gorman and the Widow Partridge – were asleep and thus blissfully unaware of the meeting just ending between the young forensic scientist Rembrandt Hawxwell and the grossly

hung-over Detective Inspector Tim Glante of Wellington
Central CIB.

Chapter 4

Perhaps it was the sight and sound of eleven naked men (some carrying a towel) – wet, soapy and shampooey – their genitals flopping about freely and immodestly, running shamelessly, in fear and panic, from the doorless shower block; perhaps it was sound of hot water gushing noisily into twelve empty shower cubicles; or the clouds of hot steam billowing softly and damply into the changing room and beyond. It may have been the sharp cries of a single person’s pain echoing around and emanating from the now empty white-tiled shower block. Or it may have been simply a response to that much under-rated, under-valued and under-used sense number six. Whatever the reason it was enough to cause C and C prison officer Paul-Frank Ratanui to abandon his morning routine peregrination around the west wing of Te Whareherehere – his assigned precinct for the first week of the new year of which this was the Monday – to investigate.

‘Jeez, Fay, knew something was wrong,’ he said to his wife Faith who had run all the way home when the police called her at the bank in Bay Road where she worked. He’d been given a tranquilizer by Doctor Wilkins and driven home by the police but he was still nervous and shaken – trembling slightly – as he sat in the kitchen with Faith. ‘Had a thingie, a gut feeling, you know. Found him in the blimmin shower room.’

‘Who, sweetie?’ asked Faith sympathetically. ‘Who’d you find?’

‘Ponytail. Just lying there. Stabbed. In the side. Bleeding. Squealing.’

‘Oh,’ said Faith, unimpressed. ‘Who’s Ponytail?’

‘Ponytail,’ said Paul-Frank somewhat impatiently as if Faith the bank-teller should have a mental catalogue of all the inmates of Te Whareherehere who were her husband’s charges. ‘Ponytail Patsy. Patsy O’Gorman. Ponytail Patsy O’Gorman.’

‘But who *is* he? And what happened to him?’

‘Name’s Patsy O’Gorman. Call him Ponytail because of his blimmin ponytail, obviously, grey, although he’s mostly bald on top. Ponytail at the back. Just this harmless little con-man, love. Jeez, Fay, he’s over sixty, about as little as you, and he wouldn’t hurt a blimmin flea if it bit him on the cock.’

‘So what happened?’

‘No one else there. They’d all bugged off, nuddy like I said. Didn’t want to be involved did they. And there was Ponytail lying on his back on the floor, naked and hairy, with a stab wound in his side, down low, down here—’ Paul-Frank pressed the fingers of his right hand into his right side below the ribs ‘—or was it the other side? No, that’s right, the right side. Anyway, the blood was all running into the water and spreading all over the tiled floor. His wet towel was floating in the bloody water on the floor beside him. There was all this cloudy reddy-brown water everywhere on the white tiles. And the place was full of steam because all the hot showers were still running. They must have dragged him out of the shower and done it.’

‘Who?’

‘Don’t know, love. That’s the thing of it. No one knows. At least no one’s blimmin saying. Doubt they ever will.’

‘Doesn’t he – the Ponytail man – doesn’t he know who did it?’

‘Reckons he doesn’t but I reckon he does. Too scared to say probably.’

‘Oh, Pauly,’ said Faith again. ‘Was he okay?’

‘Left a blimmin dagger thing behind on the floor and it started floating away towards the drain. I had to get it.’

‘It floated?’

‘Made of a clear plastic ruler. Must have pinched it from the computer room or the library or something. Sharpened to a point. All jagged. Was floating in all the bloody red water.’

‘But, Pauly. Stabbed. Was he alright?’

‘No,’ said Paul-Frank. ‘Not really. Was squealing blimmin bobsie-die like a stuck pig, all dopey and confused. Must have banged his head on the concrete floor when he went down. Don’t think that helped.’

‘Oh dear,’ said Faith.

She stood up, went around the kitchen table to her husband’s side, and rested her arm on his shoulder. Standing up she was only as tall as he was sitting down. Indeed, Paul-Frank Ratanui was a truly big man. Not only was he very tall – taller than even the tallest of his colleagues, and they were all necessarily tall – but he was broad, without being fat, and heavily muscled in his limbs as well as his neck, shoulders, back and chest. And his head was inordinately large, shaved and shiny. But while he was big, immensely strong, physically impressive and intimidating, his natural nature was kind and gentle. Indeed he was a tender and loving husband – Faith called him her gentle giant – a generous and helpful friend, kind to animals, children and the aged, indeed to any person or thing disadvantaged, weak or otherwise vulnerable including old criminals assigned to his care for the duration of their sentences.

Faith, on the other hand, was the opposite of her husband in every way. While he was tall, strong, brown, hairless, and strikingly handsome, she was short, frail, transparently white, with thick and wavy brown hair, and – it must be said – physiognomically plain. And while Paul-Frank was kind and

gentle, Faith, evidently so tiny and delicate with plain looks, was clever, independent, quick-witted, astute and assertive; a not ungenerous woman but certainly robustly healthy with a steely will and a complete intolerance of fools. Indeed, Paul-Frank – so peculiarly innocent and naïve despite his great size and strength and somewhat hazardous occupation – depended on her to provide the intellect and common street-wisdom which he knew he lacked. It was a perfect partnership ideally equipped – with both the physical and intellectual resources – to wrestle with whatever challenges and setbacks life presented.

But for the moment both husband and wife were preoccupied with the stabbing of Ponytail O’Gorman whilst in the custody and care of Prison Officer Paul-Frank Ratanui.

Paul-Frank looked around at his wife standing at his shoulder.

‘Spewed all over him, love,’ he said with an embarrassed look; then he turned away and looked at the floor. ‘Me. There and then. All my puffed wheat. Vegemite toast. My coffee. Everything. All floating in the water. He was naked and bleeding and looking up at me pathetically, whining, begging for help, poor little bastard, and I had to go and spew all over him and in the water.’

‘Oh, my big softie,’ said Faith, stroking the big and shiny head of her gentle but traumatized man in his blue and black C and C uniform with the purple logo. ‘And it tastes so horrible doesn’t it,’ she added.

Paul-Frank turned and looked at his wife again with a puzzled expression. ‘What does?’ he asked.

‘Sick. Vomit. Chuck. It leaves a horrible taste. Can you still taste it?’

‘Don’t care about that,’ said Paul-Frank dismissively. ‘Care that I done it all over poor little Ponytail.’

‘But who would do that to him?’ asked Faith naively. ‘I mean a stabbing? In prison? And why?’

Paul-Frank shrugged his broad and bulky shoulders. ‘It’s The Lake isn’t it,’ he said as if that explained everything. ‘No one knows who did it and probably never will. They called in the cops but they won’t find anything. Never do. Doubt they even blimmin care for that matter. That’s what it’s like there. You know that. Anyway Ponytail gets picked on all the time. Especially since Big Ben arrived. Him and his gang in there are ruthless bastards.’

‘Who’s Big Ben?’

‘Big Ben Pye,’ said Paul-Frank. ‘A real evil bastard. In for assault last year. But he’s got his own men in there and he’s running the place already.’

‘Why does he pick on your Ponytail person?’

‘Ponytail? Cause he’s a toady little greasy smart-arse,’ said Paul-Frank. ‘Can’t help it but he asks for it if you ask me.’

‘Oh, it’s horrible,’ said Faith.

‘Big Ben can’t stand him for some reason.’

‘Poor thing,’ said Faith. ‘Can’t you do anything, love?’

‘I usually look out for him,’ said Paul-Frank sadly. ‘But today--’

‘So how is he? You still haven’t told me.’

‘Don’t know,’ said Paul-Frank. ‘He was okay when I left. Alive. Suppose he’ll be in the infirmary by now. Getting looked after by Watson and Crick.’

‘Who’s Watson and Crick?’ asked Faith.

‘Nurses in the infirmary. Crick’s alright – nice – but Watson’s a bit of a bitch.’

‘Will they look after him?’

‘Crick will. But he’ll probably have to go to hospital,’ said Paul-Frank. He turned in his chair. ‘Come here, girl,’ he said.

Faith turned and sat on his lap as if she were a little girl.

‘Just a harmless little bloke, love,’ he said.

‘Not one of your violent crims?’

‘Nah. Not a bit of it. Cunning but. Greasy and real cunning. Born liar.’

‘How come?’ Faith was intrigued by the sound of this Ponytail person.

‘Runt of the litter I suppose,’ said Paul-Frank. ‘Ngati Porou I think. Ran away from home. Missed school. Lived rough. Moved to Wellington don’t know when. Handsome but. Then, anyway. Turned to conning old ladies. Swindled some of them out of a few thousand dollars they could easily afford. Doing it for years.’

But Faith was still fascinated by Ponytail’s name. ‘But an East Coast Maori called, what did you say his real name was again?’

‘Patsy O’Gorman?’

‘Patsy O’Gorman. Really?’

‘Patrick I suppose,’ said Paul-Frank. ‘Don’t know. Everyone just calls him Ponytail. He’s always been just Ponytail.’

‘Weird,’ said Faith. ‘It’s a weird place you work.’

‘Telling me? Anyway, most people think Ponytail’s okay. Like him alright. Except Big Ben of course. Even his ladies, you know. One of them, his last victim – the Widow Partridge – visits him every blimmin week. Twice sometimes. She’s an official.’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah. He reckons she wants to marry him when he gets out.’

‘But he’s a crook, Pauly. How could she? She’s only his official.’

‘It’s bullshit,’ said Paul-Frank. ‘But that’s what he’s like. Full of it. Overflowing all over the place. Anyway, whatever, she won’t like it when she hears about this.’

‘She must be very strange woman,’ said Faith. ‘How old is she?’

Paul-Frank shrugged. ‘Don’t know really,’ he said. ‘Sixty-ish? About the same as him I suppose. Bit older maybe? Don’t know exactly. Pretty rich. Visits The Lake for a hobby I think.’

Faith shook her head in wonderment at the strange people her husband had to mix with at work.

‘Nice enough bloke, Fay, is Ponytail,’ said Paul-Frank. ‘Had a tough life. Done his time now. Only has a few weeks to go. Getting old. And the Widow Partridge will make sure he goes straight. That’s what he says anyway.’

Faith was still on his lap so Paul-Frank laid his heavy head on her breast.

‘Oh Jeez, Fay,’ he said suddenly, lifting his head and looking at Faith in despair. ‘He’s only got a few weeks to go and he got stabbed in my wing, on my watch, and then I had to blimmin spew all over him.’

‘Oh, Pauly,’ said Faith sympathetically. ‘You’ve got to get out of there.’

‘Know,’ said Paul-Frank giving Faith an affectionate squeeze.

‘Ouch, Pauly,’ she winced. ‘You forget your own strength.’

‘Sorry, love,’ said Paul-Frank ‘Anyway, hate that job now. Better get out as soon as I blimmin can, eh.’

‘I think you should,’ said Faith.

And so he did.

Chapter 5

The human resources committee of judges and magistrates of the Department of Courts and Corrections, Wellington, was sympathetic to Prison Officer Paul-Frank Ratanui's request for a transfer. Indeed, the committee members – especially the principal judge of the number one permanent criminal court, The Honourable Justice Dame Alexis Prohm, OBE, and the other lady justices of the first and second permanent criminal courts – rather liked the idea of such a big, strong and handsome young fellow working for them, protecting them from the potentially rampantly maniacal criminals they had to deal with every working day. And so a transfer to the court security division was approved and Paul-Frank was appointed to portal and prisoner duty at the number one permanent criminal court on the Court Road. It was there he reported for duty having served a statutory fortnight's notice at Te Whareherehere where, on his last day, he turned in his baton and helmet – no weapon or protective headwear was required at his new post – and exchanged his steel-capped boots for uniform shoes, of a size so big they had to be especially imported from Germany, that were light, pliable, supportive and especially comfortable.

'How's Ponytail, nurse?' he asked Nurse Watson at his farewell afternoon-tea shout. He was holding a chunky standard-issue C and C tea cup in his large hand.

'If you mean Mr O'Gorman,' said the small, neat, fussy and unpleasant Nurse Watson who was heavily burdened with a large superiority complex, 'he was transferred to hospital. Late last night as a matter of fact.'

'Oh, god,' said Paul-Frank. 'Why?'

‘Nothing too bad if it’s any of your business which it’s not as you’re leaving us,’ said the nurse. ‘But he needed hospital care. And he was delirious.’

‘Delirious?’ asked a puzzled Paul-Frank. ‘What does that mean?’

‘It means he was hallucinating,’ said Nurse Watson condescendingly. ‘Confused and rambling like the silly little crooked idiot he is at the best of times.’

‘Don’t mean what does delirious mean,’ said an annoyed Paul-Frank; he had never liked Nurse Watson. ‘I mean what does it mean about his condition? His health and welfare?’

‘Could be the medication he’s on. Fever. Fighting infection. I’m not sure. But it’s definitely not good news, Mr Ratanui,’ said Nurse Watson with a cruel smile. ‘I must say, not good news at all.’

‘Is he going to die?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh god, no,’ said Paul-Frank despairingly .

‘Eventually,’ added the nurse patronizingly. ‘As we all must. That is our destiny. But not yet. I don’t think so. Doctor Wilkins doesn’t think so either.’

‘Oh, thank god,’ said a relieved Paul-Frank.

‘But you never know,’ added Nurse Watson quickly, with a slow shake of her knowing medical head. ‘You never know when it comes to stabbings and haemorrhaging and fever and funny little old and unhealthy Maori men like scruffy Mr O’Gorman. No offence mind.’

‘Oh, god,’ said Paul-Frank again. ‘Does the Widow Partridge know what happened? About this? About him going to hospital?’

‘Mrs Partridge – a very respectable lady I must say – was there with him last night,’ said Nurse Watson. ‘I didn’t approve of

course but doctor said it was alright. She is after all his official visitor. And she was very grateful.'

'Did he know she was there? Was he *compos mentis* enough?'

'The patient was alert enough under the circumstances,' said Nurse Watson. 'Mrs Partridge was at his bedside all the time if you must know. Even as Doctor Wilkins made the decision to transfer him to hospital.'

'Oh, my god,' said Paul-Frank yet again. He tipped back his large head to drain the tea cup before adding: 'Poor old Ponytail.'

'The good lady even went with Mr O'Gorman in the ambulance,' said Nurse Watson. 'I didn't agree with it but Doctor—'

'Hope he's alright,' interrupted Paul-Frank. 'He's really pretty harmless you know.'

Nurse Watson shook her head slowly. 'He's a criminal, Mr Ratanui,' she said. 'A hardened criminal. Always was. Always will be. It's in his DNA.'

Later Paul-Frank was taken aside by Nurse Crick, a much kinder nurse than her colleague; her kindness showed in her face where all inner traits, good and bad, eventually find expression.

'Don't worry about Ponytail,' she said quietly. 'Watson's just trying to scare you.'

'So what do *you* think,' asked Paul-Frank.

'Frankly, Mr Ratanui, to tell you the truth, I personally think Ponytail was putting it all on to get out of here and into hospital.'

'What? Why?'

'I really don't know,' said Nurse Crick mysteriously. 'Can you think of a reason?'

'No. Of course not,' said Paul-Frank. 'Unless it's to get away from whoever stabbed him. That could be it. Big Ben maybe. So you think he'll be okay?'

‘The stab wound really wasn’t that bad you know,’ said the kindly nurse with a knowing and reassuring smile. ‘Superficial really. A lot of drama for nothing. Worthy of an Oscar if you know what I mean. I think he’ll be fine. Really. Just fine.’

‘Nice old bloke you know,’ said Paul-Frank. ‘Pretty harmless really.’

‘I know,’ said Nurse Crick gently. ‘I know.’

Chapter 6

The first week of Paul-Frank Ratanui's court career passed quickly and uneventfully; quickly because everything was new and there was so much to learn and understand; especially uneventfully compared with any given week at the event-filled Te Whareherehere where he would have experienced more stress-inducing tension and unrest in half-an-hour than he had experienced in a full week of routine duty at the number one permanent criminal court.

'What a week, Max,' he said to Max Bridlington, his white-haired senior partner in the court. 'Tried to understand what was going on, eh, but Jeez, today, never understood a blimmin thing.'

It was late on Friday afternoon – the last day of that first week – and Paul-Frank and his partner were sharing a jug of cold beer in the warm garden bar of *The Scales of Justice*. And although Paul-Frank was enjoying both the beer and the company his bulk didn't properly fit into the small, narrow and terribly-fashionable garden furniture chair which seemed to be *de rigueur*. As there was no choice he had to perch awkwardly on the chair's edge while Max, who was long but not nearly as broad, was able to sit back comfortably for the duration.

'Fraud and financial trials, business and corporate affairs, they're always like that,' said the experienced Max who had been working at the court for fifteen years before which, like Paul-Frank, he had been a prison officer at Te Whareherehere. 'I don't understand them either so you're not alone, mate. Tenny-rate they don't come along very often.'

'Good,' said Paul-Frank. 'Don't like mysteries.'

‘Interestingly,’ said Max, leaning forward over the small but *très à la mode* table that stood between them and upon which stood their jug of beer and their glasses, ‘if we can’t understand what’s going on, what they’re all talking about, then neither can the jury. Which is the point. It means one of the barristers is trying to confuse them.’

‘They do that?’

‘Of course they do,’ said Max leaning back in his chair. ‘The judge will often pull them up, especially if the other chap objects. Or lady chap. There’s lady barristers now all over the place. Lady judges too as you can see this week. Anyway, you must have seen her do that this week.’

‘Do what?’

‘Tell off the defence barrister for trying to confuse the jury.’

‘Did,’ said Paul-Frank. ‘Know what you mean.’

‘But they’ll try it if they can,’ added Max.

‘Wow,’ said Paul-Frank. ‘So much to learn.’

‘Believe me, my friend, barristers – any barrister – if they want, can explain things so simply that a monkey could understand. But if they want they can make you believe that black is white, up is down, bad is good, stripes are dots, that a mouse is an elephant and the moon’s a balloon.’

‘So they’re liars?’

‘Absolute liars sometimes,’ said Max. He shared the remaining beer between their glasses and stood up with the empty jug. ‘Tenny-rate, I’ll get another jug.’

Paul-Frank was glad Max had offered. He wasn’t sure he could easily get his broad behind out of his narrow chair and if he did that he could squeeze it back in again. When Max returned he topped up their glasses casually, sat down easily.

‘Murders are the most understandable, Pauly,’ he continued as if he’d never been away. ‘Horrible as they are you can usually understand what’s going on. Simple evidence.’

‘Really?’ Paul-Frank was intrigued.

They both drank their beer. Paul-Frank was enjoying this conversation and was pleased – flattered – that the older and wiser man was evidently enjoying his company.

‘Oh, yes,’ said Max. ‘I’ve learned a lot about murder and murderers over the years.’

‘Like what?’

‘I reckon that there’s only three kinds of murderers.’

‘Really?’

‘Oh, yes,’ said Max again. ‘There’s the nice, intelligent, well-educated middle-class and up murderers, men *and* women, it doesn’t matter – real rich sometimes – who basically are happy to serve time as the price for getting rid of someone they hate, usually an unfaithful spouse. The eternal triangle you know.’

Paul-Frank was fascinated which encouraged Max to continue.

‘They do little if anything to hide their crime and often hand themselves in. If they don’t they soon get caught anyway and when they do, and in court, they only put up a flimsy defence. Or no defence. I’ve seen it many times. Those kind have no criminal history and will *never* offend again. You must have known them in The Lake? Model prisoners they are.’

Paul-Frank nodded. He knew the type well. But he said nothing; he was listening carefully.

Max took a long draught of his beer and so Paul-Frank followed.

‘Then there are the violent misfits,’ continued Max, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. ‘Career criminals. Real baddies. Dumb losers. Usually men. Low IQ. For some reason they think

they're clever but they're basically stupid and so always get caught. They usually have a violent history and will always – *always* – offend again.'

'Know the type for sure,' said Paul-Frank. 'Wonder why *they* do it?'

'Usually it's revenge for some imagined slight or insult or something like that,' said Max. 'They're in a gang or something. Often it's drug related. Or territorial. Something anyone normal would consider trivial but it's important to them in their twisted view of the world.'

Paul-Frank grimaced. He *definitely* knew that type.

'Most of them are mad as hatters, you know,' said Max. 'Complete psychos. You've must have seen them in The Lake.'

'Know them well,' said Paul-Frank. 'Know the type. Never liked them. So touchy.'

They each took another drink.

'What about the third type?' asked Paul-Frank.

'Eh?'

'You said there were three kinds of murderers,' said Paul-Frank.

'Oh yeah. Well, they're rare. Specially in this country,' replied the older man. 'But there's one of them on the loose right now, right here in Wellington,' he added grimly.

'Eh?'

'The psychopathic serial killer, Pauly,' said Max.

'You mean the Welly Alley Strangler?'

'That's the one,' said Max. 'The Welly Alley Strangler. What a name, eh.'

'Do you know something about him?' asked Paul-Frank. 'The Welly Alley Strangler?'

‘Not really,’ said Max Bridlington. ‘Nothing in particular. But he seems typical of the type.’

‘Does he?’

‘Oh, yes,’ said Max. ‘They plan their killings meticulously. Have a signature style but leave no tangible evidence. Take great pride in their cleverness, not getting caught. And they pay close attention to news stories about their deeds. It seems they love the idea of fooling the police.’

‘Seems to have the blimmin police fooled for sure,’ said Paul-Frank.

Max nodded thoughtfully. ‘They thought they had him you know,’ he said.

‘Who? The police?’

‘That’s what I heard,’ said Max. ‘Rumour was that they had him locked up for something trivial and just needed the time to prove he really was the Strangler.’

‘Wonder,’ wondered Paul-Frank. ‘Wonder if he was in The Lake. Might have known him without knowing it.’

‘You very well might have,’ said Max.

‘But what happened?’

‘Well, there was that new year’s eve murder wasn’t there,’ said Max. ‘That poor mysterious unidentified girl.’

‘Been in all the papers and TV and everything,’ said Paul-Frank. ‘Faith said they don’t know who she is.’

‘No. No ID. Nothing at all,’ said Max, ‘Apparently there is an official photo of her face taken by the police but it’s so horrible they decided not to release it. That’s what I heard.’

Paul-Frank grimaced at the thought.

‘They’ve released an Identikit drawing,’ said Max. ‘Been in the paper and on telly. No help apparently.’

Paul-Frank nodded. Faith had said the same thing.

‘All the hallmarks of the Welly Alley Strangler though,’ said Max. ‘Which means he’s still out there somewhere so they have to do a re-think. Start all over again.’

‘Wonder who it is,’ said Paul-Frank wonderingly.

‘Rumour has it they *really* know who it is this time,’ said Max who seemed to know what he was talking about. ‘But they can’t find him. He’s disappeared.’

They both took the last of the beer and ruminated inwardly.

‘But they’ll get him eventually,’ said Max at last.

‘Reckon?’

‘Most serial killers get caught eventually,’ said Max. ‘They start skiting about how clever they are. Let something slip. Somehow. To someone. Can’t help it. Pride and that. Just a matter of time really.’

Paul-Frank nodded.

‘I suppose Aunty knows that,’ said Max. ‘Just has to wait.’

‘Who’s Aunty?’

‘He’s the OC on the case,’ said Max. ‘Officer in charge. Grumpy old CIB bloke but he’s alright. Been around forever. You’ll see him in court one day. Or in the canteen. Comes in here sometimes too. Likes his beer but he’s a wine drinker really.’

‘Funny name,’ said Paul-Frank.

‘Nickname,’ said Max. ‘Detective Inspector Tim Glante. Aunty rhymes with Glante see.’

‘What a job.’

‘He’s already got six poor girls on his hands,’ said Max. ‘Six. Imagine it.’

‘Prozzies and addies,’ said Paul-Frank. ‘Faith read it in the paper.’

‘Not the last one,’ said Max. ‘Not an addict. Prostitute probably they reckon.’

‘Weird that no one recognizes her,’ said Paul-Frank. ‘Knows who she is. She must have had clients and that.’

‘They probably wouldn’t talk,’ said Max.

‘Wouldn’t want to get involved I suppose,’ said Paul-Frank.

‘Sad, isn’t it,’ said Max. ‘Doesn’t matter what they were, no one deserves to die like that.’

‘No,’ said Paul-Frank, shaking his head slowly.

‘Tenny-rate I’m sure we’ll hear all about it in detail before long.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, when he’s caught – he *will* get caught – the trial will be in our court for sure,’ said Max. ‘Not looking forward to that given what I’ve heard already.’

‘Like what?’

‘Nothing official, Pauly,’ said Max quietly. ‘And it’s not in the papers or anything. But they reckon he must be a big over-sized giant of a bloke – bit like you I suppose – who chooses small young women, holds them up against a wall by the neck with one hand, strangles them to death as they struggle, and then lets them fall to the ground.’

‘Jesus Christ,’ said a shocked Paul-Frank. He’d never heard such detail and Faith told him everything she read in the paper.

‘And always at night down a dark alley.’

‘Like the last one,’ said Paul-Frank remembering.

‘Disgusting, isn’t it,’ said Max. ‘Who could do something like that?’

Paul-Frank shook his head again. ‘Horrible,’ he said.

They finished their beer. Paul-Frank felt vaguely troubled, uneasy, about what he had heard about the Welly Alley Strangler. He felt as though it had spoiled what had been an enjoyable first week. He decided it was time to go home to Faith.

‘Better go, e hoa,’ he said.

‘Me too,’ said Max. ‘But I enjoyed the beer, my friend. And the talk. We’ll do it again, eh. Next Friday night?’

‘Yeah,’ said Paul-Frank as he stood up; the small chair came with him and he had to reach back awkwardly to pry it free from his behind.

They stood together outside *The Scales of Justice* on the busy Court Road. It was a warm and beautiful evening.

‘You lasted longer than me,’ said Max.

‘Where?’

‘In The Lake,’ said Max. ‘What happened in the end?’

‘Found an old con stabbed in the showers. Blood everywhere.’

‘Was that unusual?’

‘Unusual to be that bad. A stabbing,’ said Paul-Frank. ‘Harmless old joker too. Didn’t deserve anything like that.’

‘What was he in for?’

‘Diddled some rich old biddies out of some money. Not much really,’ said Paul-Frank.

‘Sounds like you liked him.’

‘Didn’t *like* him exactly,’ said Paul-Frank. ‘But didn’t mind him either. Little and old and blimmin harmless. Got picked on so I used to look out for him.’

‘But you couldn’t stop him from being knifed?’

‘No. And he looked so awful lying naked on the floor with a blood oozing out of his side. Blood everywhere. Made me sick. Spewed all over him. Jeez, didn’t like that, Max. That I spewed all over him.’

Max Bridlington shrugged as if to ask so what?

‘Was the last straw, that’s all. Last blimmin straw as far as I was concerned. So. Got a transfer. And here I am.’

‘Tenny-rate, who did it?’

‘What?’

‘Stabbed your little mate? The one you vomited all over.’

‘No idea,’ said Paul-Frank. ‘Police came in but they never found out. Not officially anyway.’

‘What about the knife?’

‘Sharpened plastic ruler.’

‘Yeah? No dabs?’

‘No. Only his from pulling it out,’ said Paul-Frank although he had wondered about that. He thought the stabber must have held the plastic dagger with a towel because apart from the towels that some of them carried they were naked and certainly none was wearing gloves.

‘No cameras?’

‘Not in the showers,’ said Paul-Frank. ‘Caught everything going in and coming out but not in the shower block itself.’

‘CCTV everywhere at court,’ said Max. ‘Everywhere these days. But none in The Lake when I was there. Not invented I don’t think. They could get away with murder. Not literally but you know what I mean. What was his name again? Your little mate?’

‘No mate exactly,’ said Paul-Frank. ‘His real name’s Patrick O’Gorman – Patsy – but everyone calls him Ponytail. Ponytail O’Gorman. Cause of his—’

‘Ponytail,’ interrupted Max.

‘Yeah,’ said Paul-Frank. ‘He got moved to hospital when I left but he’ll be alright. Tough scrawny little bugger really. Could be back inside by now but he’ll be out soon.’

‘Back to his old tricks? Old cons can’t stop.’

‘Dunno,’ said Paul-Frank with a slight shrug. ‘There was one lady – one of his victims – he said she wanted to marry him. According to him anyway. So maybe–’

‘I doubt it, my friend,’ said Max. ‘I don’t know your mate but they don’t you know. Turn over new leaves. My guess is you’ll be seeing him in court or somewhere before long.’

‘Hope not,’ said Paul-Frank. And he meant it. ‘He really is such a harmless and likable old bugger but I really don’t want to see him again. Don’t think I will. Hope I’m right.’

But as it turned out he couldn’t have been wronger.

This is the end of the preview file of *Six Murders?* Thank you for your interest and support. For complete buying information go to www.bolton.co.nz. For any questions, comments or feedback don’t hesitate to email me at robert@bolton.co.nz. Thank you.