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JARAD HENRY

**BLOOD
SUNSET**

ARENA
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For the detectives. Nobody sees what you see.

1

TO GET WHAT YOU WANT, you need to know what you want. My mother first told me this when I was a young boy. Think hard about what you want, she said, for knowing what you want is more difficult than actually getting it.

It wasn't until a few weeks before my fortieth birthday that I fully understood what she'd meant. I was sitting in an unmarked squad car, tired and hungry and thinking about bed, when a call came over the dispatch that would change the direction of my life forever. Of course, I didn't know that then. If I had, I wouldn't have been nearly so blasé about answering the call.

'VKC to any unit in the vicinity of Luna Park.'

I stifled a yawn, clicked the transmit button and replied with my call sign: 'St Kilda 511.'

'You've got a deceased male, possible drug overdose. Location is at the rear of Café Vit, adjacent to Luna Park. The café owner found the body and is waiting for police. What's your status?'

I groaned. Fatal drug overdoses were always dispatched to detectives in the divisional Criminal Investigation Units. Usually

they were straightforward and you were done with them within a couple of hours, but sometimes – especially late at night – you could be stuck forever waiting for the undertakers. I was scheduled to knock off at 7 a.m., and I wasn't interested in overtime that the boss wasn't interested in paying for.

I wished my partner, Cassie Withers, was with me. She'd received a call from the hospital saying her father was crook again and for the past half-hour I'd been filling in the night's running sheet. It was something Cassie normally did and it showed in my handwriting.

'What's your status, 511?'

I clicked the mike. 'Still one up, but I'll handle it. Have the undertakers been dispatched?'

It was a stupid question, more a protest than anything. The dispatcher never called the undertakers unless they were requested to by the investigating officer; in this case, me.

There was a period of silence while the dispatcher thought of a polite answer.

'We'll wait for your instruction, detective,' she said eventually. 'Fine. ETA two minutes.'

Warm coffee sloshed in the foam cup between my legs as I pulled away from the kerb. Fitzroy Street, the main thoroughfare through St Kilda, was calmer than it had been all night. The pubs and restaurants lining the strip were now closed. Only a few nightclubs and convenience stores were still open.

Tall palm trees were silhouetted against the glow of streetlights as I coasted along the Esplanade towards Luna Park. With the window half-down, even in the pre-dawn I could tell tomorrow would be another hot one.

Soon I was at the Acland Street junction where the only signs of life were a row of taxis idling outside the strip clubs and a group of leftover disco-heads munching burgers and fries at McDonald's. Scanning the side of Café Vit, I spotted a loading bay at the northern end of an empty car park. I parked and activated the covert blue and red lights on the dashboard, then

gathered my clipboard and daybook, opened the boot and took a torch and a handful of gloves from a dispenser. Almost as an afterthought, I slid my digital camera into my pocket, then walked towards the loading bay. A chubby man in a white shirt stepped out from a doorway at the rear of the café and hurried over, his stumpy legs moving quickly beneath a round belly, like a penguin. Another overweight restaurant owner, I mused. All that food can't go to waste.

'Morning, sir,' I said. 'I'm Detective Sergeant Rubens McCauley. You called the police?'

'Yes, yes, thank God,' the man said, wiping a hand across his meaty face. 'I have dead body in back. Come see.'

A European accent; Dutch or possibly German I thought. We walked to the rear of the café and I noted the loading bay was fenced in at the sides but there was no gate, meaning a person could easily access it. I stopped the man from going any further.

'Where's the body, sir?'

'He is in back, against bin.'

'Just wait here, please. What's your name?'

'I am Karl. Karl Vitazul.'

He held out his hand for me to shake but I was busy opening my daybook. It wasn't the place for handshakes anyway.

'Would you mind spelling that for me, please, sir?' I asked.

He did and I wrote it down. 'Thank you. Do you know the person?'

'I recognise him, but I do not know him.'

'You recognise him? Is he a customer?'

Vitazul frowned, shook his head. 'No, but he visit the park often.'

I stared over at the O'Donnell Gardens, a patch of parkland that backed onto the rear of the café. Black, still mounds lay beneath the palm trees. On warm February nights the homeless didn't need the shelters.

'Is he a vagrant?'

Vitazul shrugged.

Deciding not to ask any more questions at this stage, I waited as a police divisional van pulled up next to my car. Our combined flashing lights made the loading bay look like a Vegas show. I watched as Kim Pendlebury stepped out of the van. We'd worked several cases together over the years, including one where her partner had been executed during an underworld war. Kim was a tough cop and a competent investigator, but the case had taken its toll and she'd subsequently transferred out of the detective bureau back into uniform.

'Okay, Mr Vitazul,' I said, 'here's my card. We may need to talk in a minute. For now, this is Sergeant Kim Pendlebury. She's going to ask you some more questions.'

As Kim took Vitazul away, I snapped on a pair of rubber gloves and followed Kim's partner, a younger cop named Mark Finetti, towards the loading bay. Finetti was another story. We'd butted heads on more than a few occasions, mostly because he'd once had a fling with my partner, Cassie, and couldn't get over her promotion to the detective unit, but we'd come to an unspoken understanding since my return to work and now managed to get along. He was a cocky, arrogant bastard, and about as subtle as a flying brick, but there was a place for blokes like him in the job. In joints like St Kilda, you needed the brawn as much as the brain sometimes.

'Another druggie croaks himself on my shift, third since Christmas,' Finetti said, sweeping the torch beam back and forth. 'Why do I always get the shit work?'

'Probably do it because they know you're on duty,' I joked. 'All that muscle you got terrifies them, makes them more nervous than a turkey at Christmas time.'

'Yeah, righto.'

'I'm serious. Soon as word gets out Big Bad Finetti's on the prowl, they all whack up whatever they've got.'

We stepped through the gates to the smell of stale alcohol and food scraps. I used my torch to navigate alongside a rubbish bin so as not to dirty my shirt.

‘Got one a while back in his car,’ Finetti said. ‘Last year. Prick didn’t even make it a hundred metres down the street after he scored. Carked it right outside the rehab on Grey Street. Reckon they add that to the road toll?’

‘Nah, just the Finetti toll.’ I poked him in the back as we squeezed between a row of boxes and crates stacked waist high. ‘Still order your uniforms a size too small, show off those pecs?’

‘Piss off. Haven’t seen you in the weights room lately, McCauley. What’s up, getting too old? Got a hernia? Or wait, maybe you just wanna go when nobody’s –’

Finetti stopped mid-speech and an uncomfortable silence ensued. It had been a month since my return to work and everyone was pretty used to me being back. It didn’t help that I showed no obvious signs of physical injury from the shooting. I half-expected Finetti to apologise but was glad he didn’t.

We stopped at a small pile of glass on the ground, which looked like it was from a light bulb. I shone my torch beam at the roof and, sure enough, a globe had been smashed.

‘Finetti, get your pen out.’

‘Already have. Let me guess, you want me to ask Vitazul about the globe?’

‘Just make a note about it. We’ll ask him later.’

A row of wheelie bins abutted the rear wall and a set of stairs rose to the back door. I saw the feet first, two runners illuminated in the torch beam. As I approached, I tucked my tie inside my shirt so it wouldn’t drape over the body, a trick I’d learnt several years back when I’d ruined a new tie at a crime scene, almost doing the same to the evidence. That sorted, I rolled my sleeves up and ran the torch beam from the feet to the head, realising with a start that the deceased was a teenage boy, maybe fourteen or fifteen. I’d expected him to be older, but I kept that to myself and proceeded to assess the scene. The boy was slumped against one of the bins. A belt was wrapped around his left bicep, a syringe protruded from the crook of his arm and a trickle of dried blood ran down to his wrist. His head sagged,

eyes closed, mouth loose and drooping. Strands of brown hair hung from beneath a red baseball cap.

Finetti checked his pulse and said, 'Nada! Cold as leftovers, too. Probably checked out sometime last night.'

I squatted beside Finetti and peered under the boy's cap. The pale face jolted me with the memory of my best mate from high school, Tommy Jackson, who'd gone the same way. The similarity in build and facial structure were remarkable. At the age of eighteen, Jacko had left our childhood town of Benalla and moved to Melbourne, after which I'd never seen him again.

I stepped back from the body and breathed out long and low. It had been almost twenty years since Jacko's death and I didn't want to think about it now.

'What's the matter?' Finetti asked. 'You know him?'

'No.'

'Then what?'

'Never mind.'

He gave me a questioning look, then said, 'Mate, if you want to sit this one out, that's no biggie. Maybe you should take the statement and let Kim work the body?'

I rolled my left shoulder and tried to loosen muscles and ligaments that gripped my joints like an octopus. A familiar metallic taste washed around my mouth.

'Want me to get Kim?' he prodded.

'I said *never mind*.'

Finetti rested the clipboard on his knee. 'Don't get defensive, Rubes. I'm just saying I understand. You've only been back on deck a month and this is your first stiff.'

'Since I've been back,' I corrected. 'Not my first.'

Finetti raised his palms. 'All right, fine. What now?'

'Tell me what you see.'

'Expensive runners, for a start. Seiko watch, probably stolen. New jeans and T-shirt too. Ditto for that.' Finetti lifted the boy's T-shirt and patted the front pockets of his jeans. 'Feels like a wallet in here. Let me get it out, see who he is.'

‘Careful,’ I said. ‘Watch for needles. Better double up.’

He pulled on a second pair of gloves and gingerly removed a canvas wallet, handing it to me. The contents, or lack of, reflected the boy’s adolescence. No driver’s licence. No credit cards. Only a debit card.

‘Dallas James Boyd,’ I read out. ‘There’s a Medicare card in here too. Same name.’

‘A Medicare card of his own?’ Finetti repeated. ‘Clearly didn’t live with his parents.’

I emptied the remaining contents, counted out a few dollars in coins, unfolded a piece of paper and held it under the torch beam. It was a receipt from the 7-Eleven on Fitzroy Street.

‘Looks like he bought a twenty-dollar mobile phone recharge card,’ I said. ‘Dated yesterday, er, last night, 10 p.m. Make a note to confirm it matches his mobile phone.’

I also found a business card behind the debit card for a youth worker named Will Novak. I knew Novak, he ran a hostel up on Carlisle Street and had been in St Kilda for as long as I could remember. The kid must have been a client.

I handed the wallet back to Finetti, who placed it in an evidence bag before checking the other pocket.

‘Beer bottle lid,’ he said, turning it in his hands. ‘Amstel, boutique beer, not the sort you’d expect a teenage junkie to drink.’

I shrugged, unsure what to make of it, if anything, and told Finetti to document the item and bag it. Next I studied the boy’s arm and the belt around his bicep, dictating my observations and taking photographs.

‘Deceased doesn’t appear to have any recent track marks. There’s a leather belt around his arm, makeshift tourniquet. Needle is a Terumo brand, normally associated with injecting drug use. It appears new.’

Shining the torch around the base of the body, I found a wrapper for the syringe alongside a spoon and cigarette lighter. I asked Finetti to chart the location of each item in his notes

then shone the torch around the area. Squatting down again, I checked inside the boy's mouth and looked under his T-shirt but still couldn't find what I was looking for.

'Where's the lid?' I said.

'Lid?'

I pointed to the wrapper next to the body. 'This syringe is brand new, so where's the orange lid?'

Finetti swept his torch from side to side, but couldn't find it either. 'Could be anywhere, maybe it's under the body. Let's take a look.'

He set his torch down and gripped the boy under his armpits, ready to hoist him up, but I put a hand on his wrist before he had the chance.

'Gentle, mate. He's a kid.'

'So what, he's dead.'

'Just preserve the scene. Evidence, remember?'

Finetti stared at me a long moment. Even in the dim light I could see what he was thinking.

'Sometimes things are just what they seem, McCauley. This is just a pissy overdose, that's it. An *accident*. We had one last week, two the week before, this is no different. Junkies at large, mate.'

'Yep, righto. Lift him and I'll have a look.'

Without much effort, Finetti propped the boy up and I shone my torch on the ground beneath his body, but still no lid.

'So where is it then?' I said when Finetti put the boy down.

'Shit, I don't know. Could be under one of these bins, could've fallen into a crack or down a drain.' He shone his torch on the boy's face. 'He could've swallowed it for all you know. Either way, who gives a shit?'

Maybe Finetti was right. The kid could have put the lid in his mouth while whacking up and accidentally swallowed it as the effects of the heroin took hold.

'Look, man, no offence,' Finetti continued. 'Don't make an issue out of this. I know you're keen to get back in the groove,

but you don't need to prove anything to me. You don't need to prove anything to anyone.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Three little words,' he said, holding up three fingers. 'Nil suspicious circumstances. All you gotta do is write that on the inquest sheet and we're done.'

I stared down at the dead kid and tried not to think about my old mate Jacko or the pain in my shoulder. Instead I got on with the task of photographing the body from several different angles.

'I don't know,' I said after a while. 'Maybe we need to get the techs down here. Work the scene properly. Then they can write it up as NSC.'

'Get your hand off it, Rubes. What are they gonna do that we can't – come in here and take some pictures? You're already taking pictures.' Finetti got down low next to the body, poked his tongue out and made a face to the camera. 'Quick, get a photo of me and the dead kid, maybe we'll hang it in the female locker room. Reckon Cassie and Kim'd like that?'

I rolled my eyes and told him to get up.

'I just think he's a bit young, that's all. They're normally older.'

'Oh, turn it up. They're all shitheads. Matter of fact, I'll bet my next two rest days that this kid's record is longer than my dick.'

'That wouldn't be hard.'

'Gets pretty hard when your missus comes around, tell you that much.'

We both laughed.

'So what's it gonna be?' Finetti prodded. 'You write this up as NSC, we'll get the undertakers down here and be home before eight. If you wanna muck about with the whole stage show, we're looking at lunchtime. An hour's unpaid overtime is better than five. Come on, man. I know you love your beauty sleep.'

Feeling suddenly deflated, I laced my hands behind my head and looked up at the sky. A haze of pink and purple spread from

the east as dawn approached. On the other side of the fence I heard the first tram of the day rattle by.

‘Okay,’ I said. ‘NSC it is. I’ll get Kim to finish up in here and call the body snatchers. Then we can all knock off.’

‘You’re the man, Rubes,’ said Finetti, a cheeky grin on his face. ‘What d’ya say about having brekkie at Greasy Joe’s? I’m so hungry I could eat a shit sandwich.’

‘Don’t start drooling, mate. We need to keep the body clean. And don’t go stealing anything out of the kid’s pockets either. I know what you’re like.’

Finetti’s rebuttal echoed through the loading bay as I headed back to the car park.

‘Let me guess,’ said Kim, who had cordoned off the entrance with crime scene tape. ‘Dispatch got it wrong? The guy didn’t OD. He drowned or got hit by a truck?’

‘Nope. Think he came out the back door of the restaurant looking for the toilet, slipped on the back step and landed on a syringe.’

‘For real?’ she said, stowing the roll of tape in a tackle box.

‘Nah, they got it right. Accidental overdose.’

‘Nil suspicious?’

‘Yeah, think so.’

‘Nice one, we can get home on time,’ she said, checking her watch.

I was silent, unsure.

‘What’s the matter? You all right?’ she said, looking up and reading my face.

‘Yeah, I’m fine.’

‘You don’t look fine.’

‘He’s just a kid, that’s all. Probably from one of the hostels. What’s Vitazul’s story?’

‘Ah, pretty standard, really. Says he came to work early to clean up after the previous night. He was taking out the rubbish and found the body. Seems pretty freaked out.’

‘Did he touch anything?’

‘Nope. Said he didn’t want to.’ She glanced over her shoulder. ‘Said he was too scared.’

Following her gaze, I saw Vitazul slumped against a palm tree, staring up at the scenic railway. Within a few hours the park would be filled with kids, tourists and thrill seekers. How ironic that so many children came here to play, I thought. So many idyllic memories forged in a suburb that for others symbolised only pain and sorrow. But that was St Kilda, the home of extremes. Children played in Luna Park while paedophiles preyed on runaways in the surrounding gardens. The homeless begged for change in streets lined with luxury cars and trendy nightclubs. Drug addicts bought and sold their wares less than a stone’s throw from tourists in chic restaurants. Cheap hostels provided accommodation to ex-felons and prostitutes alongside homes priced in the millions. And every morning large machines ploughed the beach, removing broken bottles and syringes hiding in the sand like urban landmines. The coexistence of danger and pleasure, risk and excitement. That’s the St Kilda I knew.

‘Why did Vitazul call the police?’ I asked Kim. ‘Why not an ambulance?’

‘I asked him that. He just looked at me and said, “Young lady, the boy is grey like the ghost. He is dead, so I call police.”’

‘Believe him?’ I asked.

‘S’pose. Why, what’s going on in there?’

‘Never mind. Just go in and assist Finetti. I’ll finish up with Vitazul and call the undertakers. It’s going to be another hot one today so I want the body out of there before it starts to reek.’

When Kim was gone, I leant against a lamp post and rubbed my shoulder, welcoming the distraction of physical discomfort and pain. It was better than thinking about my old mate from Benalla or wondering what had happened to the kid in the loading bay. And it helped block out my doubts about there being nil suspicious circumstances.