

## Chapter One: Morning Tea

I entered the station on a Tuesday morning at my customary time of ten o'clock and said *g'day* to the few officers and constables at their desks.

Footscray Station was small—an open room held a half-dozen of us, with nothing between us and the front door but a small desk manned by a sleepy sergeant called Kips. Three smaller rooms in the back completed the facilities. One served as the office of Peacock, the station commander, but it was seldom occupied, as Peacock was never short of reasons to be at Russell Street, in the bustle of downtown, briefing his superiors. A second room was used for interrogations, and the third, featuring a door of steel bars, was reserved for guests.

I had just sat down at my desk with my tea when Sergeant Dashforth burst through the front door. Putting her helmet under her arm, she charged up to my desk with her usual vigour. “Inspector McNabb, good morning!”

“Good morning, Sergeant.” I lifted my cup and put my foot on my desk to give an indication of what, in my view, made the morning *good*, but Dashforth was undeterred.

“It’s a murder, sir!” She said it as she always did—as if we’d never before been presented with a case of murder.

“Indeed, a murder? Well, go on. There are no ghastly details that will spoil my tea, I trust?”

“They might, sir.” Dashforth paused for a moment, unsure how to avoid ruining my tea. “It’s a young woman, found on the pavement in front of her flat. Pushed off the balcony of her own rooms.”

This disclosure brought a barely audible *crikey* from a nearby desk, which was occupied by Constable Puddington. I looked over to see whether he had anything else to

offer, but he kept his eyes on the papers before him.

For my part, I could only sigh. The previous day had been wholly occupied with running about the scene of a murder—inspecting the body, searching the grounds, interviewing neighbours, and such chores. There hadn't been a moment to sit at one's desk and just think. And here was another dead body that required my attention.

Sergeant Dashforth continued. "It was called in by a passer-by soon after the fact. I got there by eight and had a look around, then came back as soon as Scroggins and Rowbottom arrived. They're protecting the scene now." Dashforth was bouncing on her toes, clearly anxious to get back to the site of the crime.

"Splendid," I said, although I was feeling far from splendid about the start of my day. "I suppose we should get ourselves to the scene, then?"

Dashforth must have noticed my failure to jump up and grab my hat, as she said, "I could share a few more particulars before we go, if you like."

"If you insist, Sergeant. And in that case, I'll finish my tea. Please continue."

"There are some remarkable aspects to the case."

"Oh?"

"Most remarkable, sir, is the identity of the deceased."

"Go on."

Dashforth continued almost apologetically. "The victim is Miss Rockmelon, Inspector."

My cup was nearly to my lips, but this bit of news brought it quickly back to its saucer, with a few drops lost. Rockmelon, though a false name, was a very familiar one, having been conceived by none other than myself just the day before. My acquaintance with the young lady whose protection the name was intended to provide was similarly

brief, dating back fewer than twenty-four hours.

I jumped to my feet, but spoke softly, not wanting to engage the entire station.

“Good god, Dashforth—are you certain?”

“Absolutely, sir. I saw her myself.”

The news of Miss Rockmelon’s death was distressing in the extreme. She was a young woman who lived alone in a flat across the street from the scene of the previous day’s brutal murder. As far as we could ascertain, she was the sole witness to the killing, and was therefore under the implicit protection of Victoria Police. That Miss Rockmelon did not survive a single day under that protection was tremendously disturbing. It was a blot on the reputation of the police, and in particular, it looked very poorly on me, in whose charge the murder case had been put.

Speaking as much to myself as to Dashforth, I said, “We should have brought her in—given her some proper protection.”

“It might look that way now, sir, but it’s incredible that anyone could have learned of her identity. And she did insist she was quite safe in her own flat.”

“Yes,” I said, “but the expert on such matters was me, not Miss Rockmelon, and it appears that my judgement was flawed. Fatally flawed.”

Dashforth put her eyes to the floor and said nothing, as indeed, there was no refuting what I had said.

The previous day, the danger to Miss Rockmelon had appeared small. She herself, though verging on the hysterical as a result of what she had witnessed, assured me that the killer had not seen her. She described herself standing on her balcony in the early morning and seeing a disturbance in the french windows of a flat on the second storey of the building opposite. The drawn drapes were momentarily parted, exposing the face of

an elderly lady whom we would learn to be Mrs. Fernsby. The unfortunate woman was blindfolded. She raised her arms, which were revealed to be bound together, and clawed at the window and drapes. She then fell to her knees, dragging the drapes down with her, at which point a man fell upon her from behind. In the brief struggle that ensued, Mrs. Fernsby's blindfold was partially removed. Miss Rockmelon described a dramatic pause in which the man and his victim stared at each other, their faces inches apart. Realising that his identity had been revealed, the man took little time to correct the lapse, using a knife and producing considerable gore, all in full view of Miss Rockmelon.

In my interview with Miss Rockmelon, I pressed her as to whether the killer might have seen her. She answered that the fiend *did* look out the window before quickly dragging his victim out of view, but his gaze went only down to the street, not to the upper storeys of the buildings opposite. Although I knew better than to rely entirely on Rockmelon's memory, I believed her implicitly, as it was not in the nature of people to look up when in danger. This was a phenomenon readily explained by Mr. Darwin's theory—to wit, that during the many generations of man's development, our more formidable foes were not birds, but rather land-bound creatures such as tigers, bears, and of course, other men.

Upon hearing of Miss Rockmelon's death, my faith in Mr. Darwin as a scientist was somewhat shaken (as was my faith in myself as a detective), but an alternative explanation occurred to me, and it was even more unsettling. If Miss Rockmelon was, in fact, unseen by Mrs. Fernsby's killer, her subsequent elimination could only have come about due to the knowledge of another actor. The only other people aware that she had witnessed the crime were, as far as I knew, officers of the law. I kept this disturbing thought to myself for the time being, naturally.

Dashforth, afraid of losing me entirely to my thoughts, said, “Best we can do now is nab the culprit, I suppose.”

The sergeant was right, and driving directly to the scene of Miss Rockmelon’s murder was the proper thing to do. But I wanted to think through the implications of her death, and I couldn’t bear doing so in the motorcar with Dashforth, whose driving habits were quite untamed.

The sergeant said, “Shall we get to the scene while the trail is hot, Inspector? There might have been a witness. I didn’t have a chance this morning to interview the neighbours, but somebody might have been up and about at that hour.”

An eyewitness was doubtful—I couldn’t imagine the killer making the same mistake twice, but I didn’t say so. I sat back down behind my desk.

Dashforth was fidgeting, clearly eager to get back to the scene of the crime and *nab the culprit while the trail was hot*, but seeing me sit down, she generously asked, “Sir, I made a few other observations, if you would care to hear them?”

“By all means, Sergeant.” There was an empty chair in front of my desk, but I knew Dashforth was too agitated to accept it, so I didn’t bother offering it.

“One or two other things about Miss Rockmelon are pertinent, I think,” said the sergeant.

“Go on.”

“She was blindfolded, sir.”

“*Blindfolded*, you say?” I must have shouted it, as Dashforth fairly jumped, and it elicited a low whistle from Puddington’s desk. I turned to him, but he pretended to be absorbed in his work. Puddington was a young constable who favoured the paperwork of the office to the street. He was fortunate to work under a sergeant who preferred

outdoor work, and whose efforts on the beat were productive enough to keep Puddington occupied in paper.

“Yes,” said Dashforth, “just like Mrs. Fernsby. The killer used one of Rockmelon’s own scarves for the purpose, it appears. I’m afraid he was quite thorough in not leaving traces.”

This new bit of information succeeded in distracting me for the moment from the broader ramifications of Rockmelon’s death. I took a sip of tea and asked Dashforth, “Miss Rockmelon’s building rose five storeys, I believe?”

“That’s right; she lived on the fourth.”

“And you’re sure she was pushed from her own apartment?”

“Yes, it’s quite evident. The precise location is apparent, as the wooden railing of her balcony collapsed at the point she was pushed over.”

I leaned forward. “Collapsed, you say?”

“Yes, Inspector. The top rail broke clean through, even under her modest weight. It must have been in some neglect.”

“No signs of entry?”

“No, sir—the door was locked. But you’ll remember that the balconies attached to the various units are close together—they practically adjoin each other. One of the neighbours’ balconies could have provided the means of entry. They warrant a closer inspection, I think.”

“Very well,” I said. I was familiar with Miss Rockmelon’s apartments, having spent much of the previous day interviewing her and examining the view of Mrs. Fernsby’s murder from the balcony. “And the doors to Rockmelon’s balcony—they were open?”

“Yes, sir.”

With these new facts in hand, I indulged myself in further musings, but now I focused on the mechanics of Rockmelon’s death instead of its disturbing significations.

Dashforth, seeing any hope for action on my part diminishing yet further, said in some desperation, “Shall I bring the car out front?”

“In a moment, Sergeant. First, please describe what you observed of Miss Rockmelon’s apartments.”

“There was no sign of robbery or other disturbance, sir.”

“I see. And what about your more general observations? Based on our interview yesterday and your inspection of her flat today, how would you describe Miss Rockmelon?”

“I don’t know, Inspector. Yesterday we treated her as a witness, not a victim, of course, and my inspection of her rooms this morning was only cursory.”

“Certainly. But you observed no characteristics of any interest?”

“Perhaps only of the most general sort. I was impressed with her being an outgoing, active woman, as would be expected given her age and situation.”

“Yes, I thought the same. And her flat?”

Dashforth thought for a moment. “Nothing remarkable. It was clean and quite fancily done up, although perhaps a bit old-fashioned for a young person—what with its dark furnishings, and her preference for candles over electric lamps.”

“Yes, it was handsomely furnished,” I said. “She was clearly a social creature, and gave some attention to the appearance of her apartments, as well as to herself.” I thought for a moment, recalling my impressions of Miss Rockmelon, which were still vivid. Turning back to Dashforth, I continued, “We encountered her yesterday in her

morning dress, a kimono—a silk kimono. It was striking, don't you think?"

"Perhaps, sir. I do remember it being colourful."

"Remarkably colourful, yes—it was a riot of greens of various shades, depicting all manner of tropical vegetation. There were palms of various sorts, banana trees, breadfruit trees, and taro plants, if I recall correctly." At that point I was showing off, but it was my habit to take every opportunity to impress upon the sergeant the importance of close observation. I concluded, "Her outfit was uncommonly attractive, I must say."

Dashforth stared at me blankly, no doubt wondering why I was going on about Miss Rockmelon's attractiveness while she lay dead in the street.

"What I'm trying to get at, Sergeant, is simply that Miss Rockmelon cared very much about her looks—she dressed to be seen."

"Yes, sir, but how does that—"

"It tells us something about her social habits. And the understanding of habits—those of both the criminal and the victim—is fundamental to police work, don't you agree?"

"Yes, of course," responded the sergeant, an uptick in her voice betraying her waning patience. "But surely in this case it was nothing but Miss Rockmelon's misfortune of being on the balcony at the wrong time yesterday morning that led to her murder today."

"Misfortune and luck might play their small parts in every crime, but it's our job to examine every *other* contributing part, is it not?"

"I suppose it is, Inspector."

Dashforth was polite enough to agree with me, but I could see in her eyes and



slumping shoulders that she believed I was wasting precious time. I added to her irritation by taking a long sip of tea before continuing. “You’ll remember that Rockmelon gave us some particulars of her social habits yesterday.”

“Did she, sir?”

“Indeed. She mentioned—without our prodding—how she had spent the previous evening, as well as her plans for last night.”

“Oh yes—she went to small parties at the homes of friends.”

“Precisely. I gathered that such gatherings were common for her, and that she sometimes played the part of hostess.”

“But Inspector, you’re not suggesting that her friends had something to do with her murder?”

“Not at all. I’m only trying to develop a fuller picture of Miss Rockmelon, the person.”

“I see,” said Dashforth. I caught her rolling her eyes in the direction of Puddington, and she couldn’t keep from saying under her breath, “Not much of a person now.”

“I see your unease, Sergeant, but let’s touch on just a few more aspects of the case, and then we can proceed forthwith to the crime scene.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I gather that music was among the amusements at these parties, as Rockmelon had her own gramophone and a sizable collection of recordings.”

Her patience near an end, Dashforth couldn’t help but laugh. “But Inspector, everybody likes music. Next, I expect you’re going to claim that the jazz you saw among her records was the source of her undoing.”

I smiled at Dashforth's growing ardour, but also felt some guilt at the pleasure of seeing her getting wound up. "I'll confess to opera being more to my liking, Sergeant, as I turn to music for relaxation, not invigoration. But if I were to remark on Miss Rockmelon's tastes in music, it would be to express some surprise at *not* seeing jazz. Wagner, Mahler, and Liszt were there, but I saw nothing of the likes of Armstrong or Bessie Smith."

"You must be quite approving of Miss Rockmelon then," said Dashforth, "and I daresay you'll endorse her choice of music this morning. A record was still spinning when I entered her flat—it was Caruso. I removed the needle myself."

I nodded, pleased with Dashforth's close observation. "Very good, Sergeant. Tell me more of what you saw this morning. How was Miss Rockmelon dressed? Other than her blindfold, that is."

Dashforth took a deep breath but indulged me. "She had on a dress or robe—it was a morning robe of some sort."

"Like the one she wore yesterday? The kimono?"

Dashforth squinted and looked at the ceiling. "It was something like that, yes, but not green. The style was different . . . or perhaps not so different, but in any case, it was not green, I'm sure. The sleeves were, well ....." Dashforth's voice trailed off, her eyes still on the ceiling.

While the sergeant struggled to recall Rockmelon's morning outfit, my mind drifted back to the possibility of duplicity within Victoria Police. If we had a mole in the force, the murder of Mrs. Fernsby might have been something other than what I had initially presumed, which was a robbery gone awry. I reasoned that a mole would not exercise their inside knowledge—and risk exposure—unless the stakes were quite high.

Certainly they wouldn't have done it for a garden variety robbery-turned-murder.

In fact, organised crime in Melbourne by that time no longer confined itself to Fitzroy and St. Kilda. It had started to assert itself on the west side of the river, attracted in part by the nearby racecourse. This is not to say that Footscray was a rough place—certainly not as dangerous as might be suggested by two murders in two days on the same street. The neighbourhood was, on the whole, a pleasant one, and Victoria Police was keen on keeping it that way. In fact, my posting at Footscray, away from the core group of detectives at Russell Street, was intended to sever the tendrils of the gangs that had started to cross the Maribyrnong. Of course, on the day of Miss Rockmelon's death, the idea that I was having any success was a very difficult proposition.

Dashforth finally arrived at a conclusion about Miss Rockmelon's morning dress. "Yes, it was rather distinct from yesterday's outfit. It was orange—a long orange robe."

"Thank you, Sergeant. Now, if you could please indulge me by describing her accoutrements."

"Sir?"

"Please describe her scarf—you said she had a scarf over her eyes. Did it match her robe?"

The sergeant tilted her head in a way that failed to conceal her annoyance.

"*Match, sir?*"

"Yes—I'm simply asking, did her robe and scarf present well together?"

Dashforth exchanged a look with Puddington before she turned back to me. "I'm afraid I'm not much of an authority on fashion, sir."

Dashforth had little need of telling me this, as I had long presumed that the uniformity of police garb was, to her, one of the chief attractions of the profession.

Nonetheless, I pressed her, as she would need to develop her observational skills in any number of areas if she had any hope of making inspector. “Have a go, Sergeant. In your opinion, were Miss Rockmelon’s robe and scarf well coordinated?”

Dashforth took a breath and again directed her attention to the ceiling. After a few moments she said, “Her robe was of a floral style, and as I said, the dominant colour was orange—orange flowers, I believe. Her scarf, in contrast, was blue.” Dashforth looked at me, clearly hoping for a hint as to whether the blue scarf and orange robe were attractively coordinated, but I offered none. She gamely continued, her eyes darting around the office. “So, I would have to say” —and here I suspect that Dashforth received a clue from Puddington— “that Miss Rockmelon’s dress and blindfold presented tolerably well together.”

I took a sip of tea, then leaned back in my chair and put my foot back up on the desk. “Excellent, Dashforth. That solves the case, rather.”

The sergeant started. “But sir, you have yet to visit the scene!”

“Yes, but your observations are sufficient to tell us the means of Miss Rockmelon’s unfortunate death. Well done.”

Dashforth shook her head. “The means of her death—yes, unquestionably, and the motive, as well, but the perpetrator remains unknown, and at large, surely!”

“To the contrary. We have work yet to capture the killer of Mrs. Fernsby, but we needn’t concern ourselves with Miss Rockmelon’s.”

“But the two are one and the same, or at least close confederates.”

“Assuredly not, Sergeant.”

Dashforth’s eyes grew wide in disbelief or annoyance, or perhaps both. “You can’t mean that Rockmelon’s murder was unconnected to the murder she witnessed! Two

murders with so many common elements, and so close together in time and place—they must be related.”

“Related, of course. Miss Rockmelon’s death arose—without a doubt—from the murder she witnessed twenty-four hours before.” I paused for no reason other than dramatic effect. “What I mean to say, Sergeant, is that Miss Rockmelon was not murdered.”

Dashforth took a step back and let her jaw hang, an effect that pleased me, I confess. Puddington, too, was taken aback, as he abandoned his pretence of ticking boxes on a form and stared at me openly.

Dashforth stammered but was unable to articulate a question, so I offered one. “Sergeant, if you were a criminal of at least middling skills and found the need to extinguish the voice of the sole person who witnessed a heinous crime of yours, would you choose a fall from a mere four storeys?”

“Well, it did the trick in this case,” Dashforth said without hesitation.

“Positively, it did, but that doesn’t answer my question.”

The Sergeant opened her mouth, but I interjected, “And please tell me why you would bother to blindfold someone whom you have resolved to kill.” Before Dashforth could respond, I added, “In Mrs. Fernsby’s case, the thief had presumably employed a blindfold to protect both himself and Mrs. Fernsby. The severity of the crime elevated from robbery to murder only when the blindfold failed to serve its purpose. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Dashforth pondered this with her eyes to the ceiling, as was her habit. The target of her gaze was directly above my desk, which was discomfiting, as it inserted in my head the notion that the ceiling was on the verge of collapse. I could barely restrain

myself from looking up.

“Yes, sir,” said Dashforth. “I see you’ve found some small holes in the most obvious explanation for Miss Rockmelon’s death, but their significance would seem to pale in comparison to the similarity of the two crimes and the obvious connection between them. I can’t conceive of an explanation for Rockmelon’s death other than murder, and surely we cannot rest until we’ve proven an alternative.” Dashforth seized her helmet from my desk to urge our departure, but I had by that time resolved to spend the rest of the day in the office.

“Then let’s find that alternative,” I said. “What do you make of the coincidental times of the two deaths?”

“I don’t find them extraordinary in the least. They support the theory that both killers were the same. As you said yourself, we must study the habits of the perpetrator and victim.”

“Indeed, but my emphasis in that instance was on studying the habits of the *victim*. Do you recall what Miss Rockmelon told us about her morning habits—her reason for being on the balcony at the time of Mrs. Fernsby’s murder?”

“Yes, she said it was her custom first thing in the morning, when the weather was fair, to stand on the balcony and witness the first stirrings of the neighbourhood.”

“Precisely,” I said.

“Ah,” said Dashforth, nodding her head. “So the killer took advantage of that custom—he knew he had a good chance of finding her on the balcony at seven o’clock, which would make his task easier.”

I shook my head. “I think not. There’s a simpler explanation.”

Dashforth put her eyes to the ceiling again, presumably following a crack that was

on the verge of rupture. It was remarkable that with the complete evaporation just a few minutes before of my extreme disquiet about the far-reaching implications of Miss Rockmelon's case—our failure to protect a witness, the emergence of organised crime in Footscray, and the possibility of a mole in the police force, a new anxiety had so promptly inserted itself into the vacuum. I was quite convinced that the ceiling above me was on the cusp of failing.

While Dashforth was occupied with the ceiling, I turned to the desk on my right. "What do you make of this, Puddington?"

The constable at first looked inclined to retreat to his paperwork, but then he straightened his back and said, "Inspector McNabb, sir, I'm afraid I'm with the sergeant. You've managed to get your poor Miss Rockmelon onto her balcony without any malfeasance, but I cannot see how you're going to get her blindfolded, over the rail, and dead on the pavement without the introduction of a cold-blooded killer."

Seeing little promise from Puddington, I turned back to Dashforth. "Keep yourself in the shoes of your supposed perpetrator for the moment. You take from Miss Rockmelon's wardrobe a scarf to serve as her blindfold. What are the chances that it matches her outfit?" "Well—

”

"And be mindful that finding something that goes well with bright orange flowers is not a trivial undertaking."

Dashforth nodded slowly, then her eyes lit up. "Of course! He didn't take the scarf from her wardrobe—she chose it herself." I nodded and let her continue. "He took it from her neck after she had put it on as a scarf."

"Certainly not!" I declared. "She wouldn't have worn a scarf with a morning robe,

and positively not in this muggy weather.” Here I received some support from Puddington, who shook his head emphatically.

“Well,” said Dashforth, “that leaves Rockmelon to blindfold herself, which I find hardly credible.”

“I must disagree. From what we’ve observed of Miss Rockmelon, I find it wholly credible. She was distraught, was she not?”

“Exceedingly—she had just witnessed the most brutal of murders. But what does that have to do with the blindfold?”

“I can’t help but think that she would seek relief from the horrendous images that must have tormented her.”

Dashforth nodded. “Certainly. With the help of laudanum perhaps?”

“For you or me, yes, but I think not for Miss Rockmelon.”

Dashforth gave me a blank look, then inspected the ceiling, which by the intensity of her gaze I feared had only minutes left before failing completely.

Puddington cleared his throat. “The music,” he said.

I turned to Puddington and nodded for him to continue.

“The sergeant said that Miss Rockmelon was listening to Caruso this morning. That, along with the blindfold and the candles—they could point to—”

“To *mesmerism!*” cried Dashforth. “Of course! It must have been an amusement of hers. She and her friends entertained themselves with hypnosis and that sort of foolery! Probably seances, too, and all such rot that’s the rage among a certain crowd.”

I nodded, but Dashforth hadn’t entirely convinced herself. “She hypnotised herself? Is that tenable?”

“I believe so,” I said. “As with any other art, mesmerism must have many forms



and variations. Full-blown hypnosis is one, but I imagine that attaining a merely relaxed state might be another. And as for self-administering the remedy, I see it no differently than how you or I might respond to a headache. We might, in the first few instances, rely on a doctor to prescribe the treatment, but once we are no longer initiates, we treat ourselves.”

Dashforth looked to Puddington, who didn't protest.

“I see,” said Dashforth, nodding slowly and turning back to me. “For her, putting on a blindfold might have been as common as putting on a hat. So this morning, as was her custom, she dressed nicely—*she dressed to be seen*, as you put it, even if her outfit was somewhat unusual in featuring a blindfold.” Dashforth placed her helmet back on my desk, as she needed both her hands for the gesticulations that accompanied her little lecture. “She opened the doors to her balcony at seven o'clock and walked out just as she did every morning. But with her eyes covered, even a slight misjudgement of distance, together with the railing being in poor condition, could have been disastrous!” Dashforth simulated the disaster with one hand breaking through an imaginary railing and arching down toward the floor.

Puddington added a sinking whistle to complete the decidedly un-policeman-like reconstruction of the unfortunate event.

I looked at my two colleagues in turn. “Alas, fatally disastrous.”

“Poor Miss Rockmelon,” said Dashforth.

“Poor Miss Rockmelon, indeed,” I said. “But it's poor Mrs. Fernsby who requires our attention now.” I threw my head back to drain the last few drops of tea from my cup, which gave me reason to inspect the patch of ceiling directly above and see that the boards were in good repair.