

Guy Fawkes Night

Victoria, 1968

Chapter 1

IT WAS HALF PAST ONE, the dead of night, when Senior Sergeant Lloyd Cole finally slipped into bed beside his sleeping wife, Nancy. The football club's end of season cabaret had lived up to its reputation of being the town's rowdiest night of the year. Men dressed up as women. Stomping music so loud and unrelenting you had to shout to be heard. Flashing lights and glittering decorations spinning from the ceiling. Raucous laughter and heckling. The constant shrieking and drunken escapades. The band inciting even more of it.

His ears were still ringing.

Mitchell's football team had fallen just short of winning the premiership this year, narrowly defeated in the grand final when the consensus was they should have won the cup. Those closest to the club were still smarting. But that was sport, Cole reckoned. Win some, lose more regularly. All the same, he'd been relieved when the last revellers had been ejected from the Sandpiper reception centre to drive away to wherever they were planning to continue the party. Which then freed him to leave, too.

The cabaret had been good fun with little trouble, the only exceptions being the usual hijinks threatening to spill over into punch-ups outside. But they hadn't come to that and Cole thought the cabaret's theme of *Carnivale* had made the night a lively affair. Some had gone to astonishing lengths making elaborate costumes and Venetian masks while others tried passing off the Italian idea by going no further than draping cords of garlic or tomatoes about their necks, the night ending badly for those wearing the tomatoes. When the slippery parquet floor wasn't choked with dancers, young women in short dresses paraded up and down as men ogled them

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from behind raised glasses of beer. Older men knocked their heads together reliving past glories. A steady stream of couples entered and left the hall to snuggle up in cars or to take a breather from the crush of people and shaking amplifiers inside.

As Cole thought about it part of him wished he was still young, while the larger part was grateful he wasn't. There would be plenty nursing sore heads in the morning. But it made him think of his own children too, Alan and Vicky. When there were precious few outlets in the country for youngsters to let off steam he thought his kids were better off in Melbourne, however much he and Nance missed them.

He was still thinking about them as he drifted off to sleep.



HE DIDN'T KNOW HOW LONG he'd been out when a thunderclap woke him. He hauled himself up and stared at the dark, befuddled. He listened but heard nothing. Perhaps a storm was coming, or perhaps I dreamt it he thought as he shut his eyes again and slumped back into his pillow.

He'd almost returned to sleep when the town's fire siren began blaring. When his stirring woke Nancy, he mumbled, 'I better get out and take a look.'

Nancy switched on the bedside lamp. 'Do you want me to get up too, Lloyd?'

'It'll be fine. Probably a false alarm,' he told her. 'You go back to sleep.'

He hurried into shirt and trousers, still stuffing his shirt into his pants as he fossicked about for socks and shoes in the dark. He turned on the bathroom light and splashed water over his face.

As the siren kept sounding Cole jumped into his car and headed toward the shopping strip, behind it the red fire truck and four men hosing water over a premises well alight, the Sandpiper. He was shocked to see it. When he pulled up a safe distance away he caught an acrid whiff of burning fuel amongst the smoke. Three cars raced up, Cole using them to block off the street. As he glanced up he noticed a smudgy sky, not a star visible, rain forecast in the coming days.

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‘Can you get someone around the back of the place?’ Cole yelled at the firemen. ‘Get at it from both sides?’

Barry Chambers, the fire brigade captain, shouted back, ‘We’ve only got the one truck, Lloyd. We’ve called for more but they better get here soon or it’ll be all over red rover!’

Flames were already crawling over the roofline. Cole ran down the side of the hall where someone was using the building’s snake-thin hose to spray it, doing nothing. Before long the walls would be alight too, and every part of the building ready to collapse. He ordered the man away.

He’d been inside the Sandpiper only hours ago and turned his mind to what might have caused this. Then he remembered the wooden floors, the expensive parquetry labelled an extravagance when the Sandpiper had been built a handful of years ago. There would be enough timber in the building’s floor and framework alone to fuel an inferno for hours.

He felt a touch at his elbow and found Constable Ben Whittaker there.

‘Bloody hell, senior, did a bomb go off or something?’ the young policeman asked.

‘You heard it too then?’

‘You bet I did. Do you think they’ll save it?’

‘Like the little boy with the barrow, I think they’ve got the job ahead of them,’ Cole answered, his eyes fixed on Chambers and his men scurrying about. ‘Ben, make sure no one except the brigade boys go anywhere near the place. It’s not looking good.’

At least no cars were parked on the vacant block beside the Sandpiper. Those who had left their cars at the venue seemed to have left them in the street, there being more vehicles than usual along the kerbing either side of the road. But onlookers were already gathering in the street as Whittaker ordered them back.

Cole tried recalling what he’d seen last night. Everyone smoking in and outside the hall. Maybe it was the slow burn of a cigarette end in a rubbish bin. Maybe the massive drain on the power supply — all that pumping out of music and flashing multi-coloured lighting — had somehow sparked a short that smouldered a while before finally taking hold. Or a defective oven in the kitchen, or in the hot water system. Or the band packing up their gear when everyone

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had gone and doing something they shouldn't. It could have been anything, he realised. What he didn't want to think about was the possibility of arson, not when it meant having to call in the Arson Squad, but as he watched water being sprayed against the building he guessed it might come to that.

He sighed and walked over to Chambers.

'What do you think, Barry?' he asked.

'I think that unless those other trucks get here in the next five minutes we're up shit creek,' he answered as he watched his men do the best they could. 'Fire's already in the roof, which is what you don't want to see.'

'Who raised the alarm?'

'Lady across the road.'

'I heard an almighty bang from my place. Did that come from here you think?'

'I didn't hear it myself, but others heard something too.'

'Could that have been what started it, some sort of explosion?'

'I couldn't say at the moment. I'm pretty sure there'd be gas bottles inside so it could be that. But that'll be for your boys to decide, I'd say.'

'Yes, that's what I'm afraid of. That it might or might not be an accident.'

'Time will tell.'

'And we're confident no one is inside? No one doing night shift cleaning up after the cabaret?'

'We jemmied the front door open soon as we got here. There was no one inside as far as we could see. The fire was pretty bad up near the kitchen so I'd guess that's where it started. The floor was alight up there too so we couldn't get too close, especially not when it was already into the roof as well. I didn't want to put any of the boys at risk.'

'No. You volunteers aren't paid enough for that.'

'You're on the money there.' His head snapped around. 'But where in God's name are those bloody trucks?'

As Chambers waited two more brigade members arrived to add their weight to the battle. A second, larger hose and pump had been procured from a nearby business, that equipment connected to a water tank and now shooting water on the back part of the hall where

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the fire was fiercest. Neither hose was making much impression.

As Cole looked on, frustrated there was nothing he could do, he heard the great crack of a roofing beam going. He jumped back involuntarily and the fire brigade's hose was pulled around to the side of the hall to try attacking it from that direction. How much water was in their tank, he wondered? And for a hall that was basically a great rectangle, made of a lot of wood or not, he was amazed at how thick and black the smoke was. He felt its heat on his face. And then another explosion rocked the night sending everyone ducking and a sheet of roofing iron flying in the air. As he raised his head again Cole watched it clatter back onto the roof. Whatever happened now there was no way anyone was getting back inside the Sandpiper.

There was no hope of saving the building either as the fire blew harder and angrier. More roofing iron slid inside. Another beam went, then one more. Flames leapt out through the hole in the roof as if to escape into the night. Another gas bottle popped so Chambers had to pull everyone away from the rear of the hall.

The brigade's captain stood back and swore as more of the roof gave in, beams snapping like the cracking of giant animal bones. Sheet after sheet of roofing iron slid down into the building so that soon only a writhing bed of flame was visible above the walls. Then a brick wall trembled before part of it was knocked apart by a falling beam.

Just at that moment a second fire truck arrived, its crew scurrying out and unfurling its hose. Chambers didn't move an inch, only glancing sourly at his watch.

Cole, too, made mental notes.

Everyone had been pulled well back from the fire as the second crew manoeuvred into position. They all knew the building was a lost cause, their attention instead fixed on making sure the fire didn't vault to a neighbouring property.

A despondent Chambers ambled over to Cole, who said, 'Win some, lose some, Barry. You can't do much about it.'

'Not with only one truck. I keep telling everyone we can't make do with just one. Maybe now they'll listen.'

Cole didn't say it, but thought half a dozen trucks probably wouldn't have made any difference. Whatever propellant had fuelled the blaze, it had done its job because a simple fire wouldn't have

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taken hold so quickly or ferociously.

He asked, 'Who did you say called you first?'

The fire captain pointed to a house over the other side of the road. 'Old lady lives on her own. Rang the brigade number, which goes straight to me. I can't remember her name.'

'Thanks. I'll go and talk to her if she's still up, see if she knows anything.'

He left the brigade to contain the fire as best they could. In the street Ben Whittaker encouraged spectators to leave. Cole added his voice and authority to his constable's and the crowd reluctantly began dispersing.

Cole walked on to the house Chambers had indicated, at first not noticing the elderly woman seated in the corner of her veranda behind an array of pot plants on a high stand.

She startled him by calling out as he was about to knock on her door. 'Did you find him?'

'Find who?'

'The man that went inside.'

Cole introduced himself, the woman doing the same — Enid Lynch.

'You said you saw someone across the road. What time was that?' Cole continued.

'After they'd all gone home. From that noise. The football club.'

'Do you mean after the cabaret was over, Enid, or when the fire started?'

She was wizened, unsmiling and in her eighties, Cole reckoned. Tiny. Her hair was a mass of tight grey curls, her face hard-lined with her years. Her mouth was small and barely a crease when she spoke.

She answered, 'Before it started. I don't sleep well and I went outside for some air. I saw the man go in. At the side door near the back.'

'What time of night would you say this was?'

'This morning you mean. Two o'clock, two-thirty, something like that. I didn't look at my kitchen clock and my watch is too small to see when it's dark.'

Cole shifted his gaze and saw it was possible for her to see what she claimed.

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‘Did you get a good look at him? Could you describe him?’

‘Big. A tall fella.’

‘And his clothes?’

She shrugged, ‘Dark is all I can say. He had his back to me. And a hat on.’

‘You didn’t see his face then?’

‘No. I just thought it was strange. Or maybe he was locking up.’

‘And you saw this person going out again too?’

‘No, but then I wasn’t looking all the time. I was going to bed when I heard an almighty bang. I saw something starting so I rang the fire brigade.’

‘Is there anything else you can tell me? If you saw anything unusual at all.’

She thought. ‘No. Just him. Mind you, we get people playing up around that hall all the time. Nuisances. Smoking. Drinking. Fooling around.’

‘Fooling around?’

‘Fooling around. Boys and girls. I won’t say any more.’

From behind them came an almighty crash, a blast of smoke and sparks and belching flame shot out as a wall caved in completely. Someone cried out.

‘Thanks for your time, Enid,’ Cole said hurriedly. ‘I’ll be back again soon. Good night.’

He dashed back across the street where he found a fireman being attended to. A piece of masonry flung out from the collapsing wall had struck him but mercifully his injuries appeared slight. The fireman got to his feet, pulling back a sleeve to expose a gashed arm. No one else seemed hurt.

‘Did the old duck know anything?’ Whittaker asked.

‘A few things. But this doesn’t look much chop now. We’ll have to get the arson boys in and see what they think. Sorry to do this to you Ben, but if you can park your car near the hall when it’s safe and keep an eye on things until I can get someone to relieve you that’d be great. It might not be for another five or six hours though.’

‘That’s alright.’

‘And once the fireys have gone home make sure no one else pokes their nose into this. If it’s a deliberately lit then we don’t want

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the scene being messed up.’

Whittaker understood.

As it was, Cole remained until the fire had exhausted itself. What had once been the town’s reception and entertainment centre was now reduced to a pile of smoking, charred rubble, water from the brigades’ tankers still slippery over the ground and coursing down the street gutter.

As the brigade began packing up their equipment Cole walked the perimeter of the building’s wreckage. The entire building was gone bar sections of jutting wall. What remained was no more than a two yards high pile of steaming timber, brickwork, plaster, metal and roofing iron.

Cole wondered again about Enid Lynch had said about a man disappearing into the Sandpiper.