

Victoria, 1967

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It was the middle of the night calls he dreaded most, the ones that had him lurching from his bed muddle-headed and nauseas. This time Senior Sergeant Lloyd Cole scrambled to his feet doing his best to push away the possibility that their son or daughter might have been hurt in an accident, or worse, be laid out dead in a Melbourne hospital.

However quiet he tried to be, he couldn't help but disturb his wife, Nancy. He found the telephone in the passageway and grabbed the receiver, his heart pounding. Behind him Nancy was already pulling her quilted dressing gown tightly around her, hovering as she swayed with sleep. Her husband seemed to have his ear pressed against the telephone for aeons before he spoke into it.

'Alright, I'm on my way,' he said.

'What is it?' she asked groggily.

'The goods train,' he said as he fumbled his way into clothes. 'Another car that thought it could beat it across the Harper's Corner intersection.'

'Is it bad?'

'It looks like it. I'll have to go out.'

'It's been raining, watch you don't slip off the road, too,' she cautioned.

Her words surprised him. This last six months they'd been faltering, her drinking flaring from time to time so he never knew what to expect when he walked into the house at the end of the day.

'I'll be alright. Thanks,' he answered.

He finished dressing, swaddling himself against the cold July air. Even with the choke fully out, his car took longer than usual to start. He knew Harper's Corner well. It was a remote intersection he'd been called to on more occasions than he cared to remember, including several times when there had been altercations between vehicles and the night train. The worst accident he'd seen had occurred there. In broad daylight, five teenagers in a battered old Ford had been obliterated by a new passenger train careering through it at full speed.

But at night here, away from town lights and with fine, misty rain darkening the paddocks around him, it wasn't hard to see how a careless driver might be caught out. Murky, threatening: the perilously muddy roadsides, the rusted barbed-wire fences, the low, smoking dams and shadowy houses set back from the road. A reach down to find something better on the radio, or a packet of cigarettes slipping to the floor might be all the distraction it took.

Cole drove on. A faint glow of vehicle headlights and the train's powerful light in the distance beckoned him to Harper's Corner.

He parked his car fifty yards from the junction of road and railway line, noting the light drizzle falling through his headlights before he turned them off. The fire brigade truck sat squarely on the intersection, like an X marking the place of contact. The train had come to a stop further along the track.

Cole took a torch from his coat pocket and shone it either side of the track as he made

his way to the wreck. It began to rain heavily and he pulled his coat collar up against it. Torchlight picked out glittering glass and shards of sharp metal strewn over the bluestone rubble. Ahead, men crouched silently around the track and the freight trucks. Several other men stood where the wrecked car had finally come to rest. In charging through the intersection the locomotive had lifted the car and crumpled, dragged and swallowed it before spitting out its remains over the side of the elevated track. Cole imagined the train's locked brakes squealing to a halt in showers of sparks as the wreck came to a halt almost a hundred yards from the point of impact.

But even before he reached the wreck, he knew that no one inside it could have survived. And as if to intensify the misery, rain began slanting in harder.

Garry Chambers, captain of the local fire brigade, saw him approaching.

'No hope?' Cole asked.

In the dim and rain and with water already dripping from his helmet, Chambers looked more miner than fire brigade chief as

he scrutinised the wreck, a car mashed into half its original size and even less of its shape.

‘None,’ he answered. ‘They would have been dead in a second. We’re trying to get them out. Or what’s left of them.’

‘Any idea who we’re looking at?’ Cole said, having to speak louder over the noise of the rain as he caught something vaguely human inside the wreck.

‘Someone thought maybe Harry Colston and his wife, from the look of the car, but we can’t be sure.’

‘Harry? Really?’

‘Yes. I’ve sent your Ben Whittaker back for a flatbed truck and some help from the railway station. Somehow we’ll have to haul this mess back to town.’

Cole had run into Harry Colston numerous times at the Shepparton harness racing, Colston often with a wad of money in his hand and none too careful about who he flashed it in front of.

Two of the brigade’s volunteers began attacking a ruptured car door with crowbars, taking turns at launching themselves at the door’s hinges.

Cole shone his torch around the wreck, found a numberplate and hunching over recorded it with a stubby pencil in the pocket notebook he always carried.

‘I’ll do a search on this,’ he told Chambers. ‘It should tell us for certain if it is the Colstons’ car. What about the train driver?’

Where's he?'

'Up there,' Chambers pointed. 'He's pretty shaken up by it all. I told him to stay in the cabin. Incredible, too, that every truck stayed on the track, or at least that's how it looks. Who knows about damage to the track? We'll need the railways to check it in the morning.'

'You know the train driver?'

'No. He'd be a Melbourne bloke, I suppose.'

'I'll go and have a word,' Cole said and he walked through the dismal rain to the front of the train, the locomotive's headlight still illuminating the track ahead.

Cole swung himself up onto the engine's step and opened the cabin door. The train driver was every bit as dazed as Chambers had said. His shivering and trembling had nothing to do with the cold. He slumped with head in hands, his close-cropped hair almost blue in the dim.

'You alright?' Cole asked.

'You never get used to it,' the driver said, raising his head to stare straight ahead through the cabin window. 'You see it coming. The car, the motorbike, or the horse float that's never going to clear the track in time. It's like slow-motion. And all the time you know. You pull the brake hard and brace yourself. Wait for it to happen.' He turned to Cole. 'That's the worst part of it. When you know there's nothing you can do.'

‘It’s not your fault,’ Cole told him. ‘Everyone thinks they can beat the train. Are you up to telling me what happened?’

The driver nodded and Cole jotted down his particulars first.

‘When did you first see the car coming? Did it have its lights on? Take your time.’

The driver stared down at his lap, thought.

‘I’m not sure, not exactly,’ he said. ‘I think I must have been almost on it by the time I noticed.’

‘The car’s headlights?’

He shook his head, answered ambiguously, ‘Maybe.’

‘Think about it. Were its lights on?’

‘Yeah. Yeah, I’m sure they were. In the dark, it’s the lights you usually notice, not the car.’

‘Did you sound your horn?’

‘I always do. Every level crossing I come to I send a warning, first when I’m a couple of hundred yards away, and then once again when I’m closer. I can’t see why they didn’t hear it.’

‘And then?’

‘I pulled on the brake. I’d seen the car out of the corner of my eye. You know what I mean? Then I would have shut my eyes, bracing for it. You can’t help it.’

‘It wouldn’t be a good feeling,’ Cole agreed. ‘Was there anything you noticed about the car before it hit? Who was inside, anything like that?’

‘Nothing,’ the driver said. ‘When you know you’re going to hit someone you don’t want to be looking for a face. Only I thought the train’s nose would have hit the car. That’s why I braced like I did. Only it didn’t. It must have hit further down the train and got dragged under the trucks.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘I’m not sure. But I guess it meant the car was going slower than I thought, that it took longer to get to me.’

‘If you had to guess, how fast do you reckon they were going?’

The driver shrugged, ‘It still happens so quick, but the feeling I have now is that they weren’t trying to race me. It was more like they never saw me at all, just ran straight into me like they were out on a Sunday drive.’

‘With your horn blaring and that great headlight on?’

‘You’d be surprised. People get lost in their own little world. They might be on the grog, or arguing, have the radio on loud, or fall asleep. There are all sorts of reasons, and some of them you can never figure out.’

‘You don’t think the conditions, the rain, had anything to do with it?’

‘Nothing at all. They weren’t trying to stop.’

Cole saw the strain on his face. The engine driver’s life wouldn’t be all beer and skittles, he thought. Crashes like this one, crashes where they saw the accident coming from a long way

off, carnage when someone deliberately drove into the train. All those things would leave their mark.

‘We’ll leave it there for the time being,’ Cole said. ‘I’ll find someone to get you home.’

The devastated driver nodded again before slumping over.

Cole stepped down from the cabin and felt the rain once more. In the short time he’d been talking to the train driver an ambulance had appeared, its crew told to wait for the bodies to be retrieved so they could ferry the dead to the undertaker in town.

Garry Chambers walked up to Cole.

‘Sarge, one of the blokes, he’s pretty sure it’s Harry and Dianne Colston.’

‘They live up on Doherty’s Road, don’t they? That new house? What’s it called, Hilltop?’

‘That’s it. Hilltop.’

‘Alright then,’ Cole decided. ‘I’d better get out there.’

Chambers hesitated before saying, ‘The Colstons, Lloyd. They’ve got a kid. A toddler. It’s a bloody mess all round.’

‘You’re not wrong there. I guess I’ll be breaking the bad news to someone close to them, or a babysitter, until I can find out who is next of kin,’ Cole said. ‘My lucky night isn’t it? But can you get someone to sort the train driver out too please, Garry?’

Chambers said he would as he glanced back at the wreck, rain dripping off his helmet.

Cole's heart sank for the bearer of bad news he would have to be. He trudged slowly along the track back to his car, not even worrying about trying to stay dry now. He raised his hand in farewell to the brigade members still working on the car, raised it again to another man checking for damage to a truck's bogie. As Cole left them behind and crossed back past the intersection where the collision had occurred, two things nagged at him: what the train driver had said about the car's slow speed, and what the Colstons were doing out here in the middle of the night, on the opposite side of the town from where they lived.