

Inka moonlighting

Inka in Aotearoa-New Zealand - Volume 2

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It is December 2017 and Inka Makkonen has not been back to the University of South Auckland since the middle of the year. She only taught for one semester since arriving as the new Professor of Gender Studies at the beginning of the year. Late in the semester she suffered a serious assault leading to her face being scarred. Subsequently she was recruited into the SIS, the New Zealand Security Intelligence Services. The Chancellor of the University had arranged for her to have a semester's secondment to the Victoria University of Wellington on a research project. She had plastic surgery in Wellington, more than was strictly needed to deal with the scar. She also went through various training modules for the SIS at their headquarters in Pipitea Street. She is on hand to attend a farewell afternoon tea for a colleague in the School of Arts, McDuff, but has arrived a bit late.

"Thank you everyone for your kind words. And thank you for your thoughtful presents. I will particularly treasure this volume of "The Diary of a Nobody" ...

Laughter. No such volume is amongst the presents. Inka surveys the scene. While the occasion is dubbed 'an afternoon tea' and some staff have brought their own mugs for tea and coffee, there is also wine on offer to wash down the savouries, pastries, and fruit slices from a platter. Inka has accepted a glass of white wine.

I wonder why he is retiring so early. Surely he can't be older than late 50's. Maybe he has another job to go to. He is trying to be amusing but it sounds a little forced. Ah, good. He has finished and the formalities are complete. There is Aroha. I shall go over to speak to her. I wonder how she is doing now she is no longer Acting Dean of Arts.

"Hello, Aroha. I didn't expect to see McDuff go so soon."

"Life is full of surprises. The new Dean is just over there. Let me introduce you to him."

"Andrew, this is Inka Makkonen, Professor of Gender Studies."

"I am very pleased to meet you. You have been away this semester, haven't you?"

"Yes, I have been down at the Victoria University of Wellington, but am back now."

"Excellent. We must get together sometime and have a chat about the future direction of Gender Studies. I am just getting to know my way around the school, getting my feet under the table, you know."

Someone else wants to speak with the Dean so Aroha shepherds me away and we find a quiet corner.

“Tell me about the Dean! I haven’t really been paying attention.”

“I think you know his name is Andrew McCray. He is English, as you can probably tell, and has come from the University of Nottingham. His original background is in classics, not the most relevant kaupapa for here and now, but he has been mostly involved in administration of late. He does have some research interests in the history of the Pacific.”

“Is he good to work with?”

“Early days. I’m probably not the best one to ask.”

“Did you apply?”

“Yes, but not with high hopes. I have to run. Let’s catch up soon.”

There is a small group around McDuff. For some reason a young man I didn’t recognize, with an English accent, is holding forth about the ambiguity of language,

“If you say ‘hose’, then some will think of the hosiery section of a department store, you know, panty hose, or possibly men’s socks. The minds of others will be in a hardware store, thinking of watering gardens or possibly even putting out fires. But round the corner there will be hoes, with an ‘e’, amongst the garden implements.

A kiwi young male, not impressed by this lecture, pointed out with mock seriousness that it could refer to the plural of ‘ho’ abbreviation of ‘whore’.

They all seem to look at me. Do they expect the Professor of Gender Studies to make a fuss about this?

“Oh that explains me being called a ‘ho(e)’. I thought it must be the female equivalent of a rake.”

That seems to shut down the conversation and so I have a moment with McDuff.

“I didn’t expect you to disappear so soon.”

“Oh well. Time to move on.”

“Are you moving away?”

“No. Still in the same place.”

“Give me your phone number. I owe you a drink.”

People are drifting away and I need to get back home. So I say goodbye. Home is the rented house in walking distance from the University that I share with Aroha’s son, Mikaere. I remained the official tenant when I was in Wellington and Mikaere, who had been my housemate, stayed on. When he first arrived, the plan was for him to stay with me while he studied for a ten week IT course, though he changed that to a beauty technician course. Even though he became disillusioned with that choice of career he found himself readily employable. He then proceeded to start a diploma in accounting through UNITEC, which I learned is a polytechnic, a more vocationally oriented form of tertiary institution than a university. It was a one year course but Mikaere decided to study part time while working and complete it over two years. He has already completed the first semester.

Mikaere was working when I arrived back from Wellington earlier in the day so I am going to see him for the first time in several months. Here is the house. It’s rather dreary look is very familiar and surprisingly comforting. I let myself in even though I realise I am now entering what has been Mikaere’s territory. And here he is!

“Oh Inka, welcome home! I’ve missed you.” We hug. “And meet my friend, Alessandro.” Mikaere has a look of pride mixed with anxiety, so clearly this is the new partner I had heard about. “Alessandro, get Inka a drink while I am busy in the kitchen.”

Alessandro is a little shorter and slighter than Mikaere and is very elegant with an erect bearing. He is wearing a tailored burgundy velvet jacket that has a kind of retro look referencing some period I don’t precisely remember. He is relaxed and charming and offers me a glass of Sauvignon Blanc.

“Were you born in New Zealand?” I ask.

“No, in Italy, in Napoli, but my family moved to New Zealand when I was 7. My parents are chefs and run a small restaurant in Epsom. The family has a short holiday in Italy every few years.”

“Do you speak Italian?”

“Yes, well enough. My accent is better than my vocabulary.”

We chat for a while and he takes an interest in my homeland, Finland, whether out of politeness or genuinely I am not quite sure. Mikaere calls us in for dinner. We chat in an amiable fashion and then Mikaere suddenly stares at me. “You look different, Inka darling.” I think Alessandro’s influence may have modified his speech patterns and hence the ‘darling’.

I have my answer prepared. “Yes, while I was having my scar fixed I allowed a couple of trainee

plastic surgeons to practice on other parts of my face. They have adjusted my cheek bones and changed the apparent shape of my eyes.” This is not a very credible explanation for rather complex surgery but it is the explanation that has been agreed. I am explaining this more fully to Mikaere than I would to others for he clearly has noticed some specific changes and he knows it isn’t the effect of makeup.

“Mikaere practiced his make-up skills on me,” I say to Alessandro in a light-hearted but confidential tone, “so he knows my face better than most around here.” I take it Mikaere has told Alessandro something about the events that left me with a scar, for he makes no effort to offer any explanation now. I wonder what he did say. Perhaps: two thugs broke in here and tried to intimidate me. I hope Mikaere acknowledged that he was part of the rescue party?

After dinner, Mikaere says he is going to stay the night at Alessandro’s. That is thoughtful even though unnecessary. Now they have left, I relax and unwind. It is good to be back in the old house. Tomorrow, I will make an early start for the University as I am looking forward to catching up with everyone.

It is the morning after my return. I had intended to rise early but was tired and felt lazy. Maria calls, saying we should catch up for a chat but she can't talk now. It was Maria who recruited me into the SIS. My former lover back in the US shares the name 'Maria'. Well, Kiwi Maria was also my lover for a while, kind of.

Why call if you can't talk? Oh, I know. We can't talk on this line. I must find the phone that Maria gave me earlier in the year when we first met. Here it is. Yes, two missed calls.

"Hi, this is Inka."

"Yes. Thank you for calling back. As you will have guessed, this is business more than pleasure."

"Always a pleasure to talk to you, though, Maria."

"Thank you. Now there is a new staff member at your university we want you to surveil, Suu Maung. She is from Myanmar and is in accounting. And there is a staff member at the University of Auckland who is of interest too, Peter Eldon Merrick III, who is a plasma physicist, whatever that is."

"Now let me guess. American?"

"I knew we were right about your analytic powers," Maria replies, laughing. "We will brief you further later on but you may as well be aware of those names right away. We should have talked to you about them while you were still in Wellington but time ran away on us. I will be up in Auckland around Christmas time and we can talk further then."

"Good. I had better see if I can develop my academic contacts at the University of Auckland. I should be doing that anyway for my career."

"Remember, you have two careers, now! Must go. Looking forward to seeing you in a couple of weeks."

Time to have a shower and then swiftly into my muesli and yoghurt.

My office at the university welcomes me with its familiarity. An academic visitor had been hanging out here for about ten weeks but has been gone for a while and has left little or no trace. Time to work through the emails that I wasn't able to get to on my phone over the last day or two. This is tedious but, good, it is morning tea time already. Both my immediate office neighbours, Marion and Carolyn, come with me, which is unusual. They must want to welcome me back. As we walk over to the tea room I mention that of course we won't see McDuff there,

usually a permanent fixture. He made it very clear yesterday that it was his last day. “You know why he’s leaving, don’t you?” Marion asked.

“No, I wondered about that.”

“I heard that he had sex with a student and a complaint was made.”

“I am assuming the student was female. Did she make the complaint? ”

“Yes, a young woman. But I don’t know who made the complaint. It didn’t sound like it was her, as I heard it anyway. Do you know, Carolyn?”

“No. I only know what you told me,” Carolyn replied.

“I am kind of surprised about McDuff,” I venture.

I think I will definitely contact him.

The tea room is reasonably full. Aroha comes in to pick up a cup of tea as we are about to leave and I walk back with her to her office. I ask her what she knows about McDuff. She doesn’t know any more than Marion, though she did emphasise how quickly it all had happened. The complaint was made only a couple of weeks ago.

“Do you think it was properly handled?” I ask.

“I didn’t have anything to do with it but it does seem very rushed. I certainly wouldn’t want to meddle with something the Dean was handling. At various times, I have offered to help him transition into the role but he has gone his own way largely and developed his own approach, which is fine, of course.”

“Yesterday I told McDuff we should catch up,” I say. “I had better carry through on that.”

“I hope you do, “ Aroha replies. “I wouldn’t want to contact him myself but it is natural for you, having been away.”

Back in my office, I text McDuff suggesting we meet midday on Saturday. He replies immediately, agreeing. Now I should look up the Burmese woman in Accounting. What was her name again? Here she is on the departmental website. Dr. Suu Maung with a Bachelor of Economics from the Yangon University of Economics, Master of Accounting from Universiti Malaya, PhD in Accounting from Stanford University. Well qualified! I wonder how I can meet her. What is happening in the world of Accounting at the University of South Auckland? There is a regular seminar series and, would you believe it, the seminar next week is a panel discussion

on growing female participation in the Accounting profession with panel members including Suu Maung as well as female members of two local Accountancy firms. I am free at that time. Good. Put it in my calendar.

It is time to recall what I learned in the single accountancy course I included in my undergraduate degree at the University of Helsinki. Actually I learned very little, for my motive at the time was to disrupt the hegemony of the capitalist system as practiced through control of the world's financial institutions. It turned out that the teacher was a quirky individual who had majored in Sociology and moved into Accounting in order to find employment. He found he preferred teaching to actually being an accountant. I got the impression that he would have been very happy to talk politics but felt constrained by the focus of the vast majority of students. If I learned anything it was that there isn't just one way of drawing up accounts and how you did that depended on your interests and purposes, though heavily constrained by government regulation as well as conventions and practices. I felt part way through the course that enrolling was a mistake and served no useful purpose but in the end I passed with an adequate grade.

I doubt I'll be able to do much about Peter Eldon Merrick III anytime soon but I may as well look him up. First of all, look up Plasma Physics. The wisdom of Wikipedia tells me plasma is one of the four fundamental states of matter. OK, so what are the other three? Well there are liquids and solids and then of course there are gases. Plasma is the fourth. Got it. But what is it? Something to do with atoms and molecules losing their electrons which then float free. It conducts electricity. Well with all those electrons floating around it is not surprising, I suppose. It is used in plasma TVs. Of course; I never thought of that. Apart from dark matter and dark energy (let's not go over to the dark side just at the moment) it is the most abundant form of energy in the universe. Well, you live and learn.

What are Merrick's qualifications? AB Chicago, PhD Princeton. Where did he go? Ah, post-doc University of Uppsala. There's a connection. Sweden is right next to Finland and my mother is Swedish. Then Assistant Professor, University of California, San Diego, later becoming Associate Professor, presumably with tenure. The next move is to the University of Auckland as Full Professor. Those are the basic facts.

A thought occurs to me. Are my internet searches being monitored by hostile powers? I must ask Maria about it when I see her.

McDuff and I meet at the pub where he bought me a drink after my ordeal earlier in the year. I make it plain that I am buying. I ask him if he would like a rusty nail, the cocktail we supped last time, or something else. He says he would prefer Scotch, so I ask at the bar for the most expensive single malt they have, seeing that they don't have all that much, and order a Whisky Sour for myself. While we are waiting for the drinks to be brought over, we start to talk in an inconsequential fashion but then I tell him that Aroha has told me, very briefly, what prompted his resignation.

"We don't have to talk about it, unless you want to," I say, cautiously.

I am in difficult territory here but I don't want to prejudge and I feel some sympathy for him. I am used to living dangerously and I am unconventional amongst the unconventional. We pause as the drinks arrive.

"I don't know," he replies. "It is a sad and sorry tale."

"Did the student make a formal complaint?"

"Not the student in question, no. Her boyfriend or ex-boyfriend did."

"Really? And did the young woman support his complaint?"

"I don't know exactly. She wrote something that confirmed the basic facts, I suppose."

"Didn't they provide you with her statement?"

"No. When I received a copy of the formal complaint I made an appointment with the Dean and offered my resignation and it all went rather quickly from there. After all, I was guilty."

"What did the Dean say?"

"Oh, something about it being a messy business and maybe my resigning was for the best if that was my decision. He said it could be classified as early retirement and he would make sure that I was entitled to a retirement gratuity. He was, in a way, rather nice about it but seemed keen to wrap it up as quickly as possible."

"Did you get any independent advice?"

"No. I felt too embarrassed to go to the Union. Do you think I should have?"

“Yes. Was someone from Human Resources there when you met the Dean?”

“I think so. A young man I had never seen before who didn’t say anything and just took notes.”

“I do think the process was rushed. Aroha would have handled it differently, I am sure. But that is water under the bridge, I suppose. How do you feel now?”

“I feel guilty but also bitter. I think I may have been set up. But Matilda seemed so genuine at the time.”

“Matilda?? And was the boyfriend called ‘Jason’?”

“Yes I think that was his name. Do you know them?”

“They were both in my graduate class in the first semester, and I seemed to have unintentionally helped them get together. I don’t think Matilda was setting you up. Perhaps she was trying to get away from Jason in some way. What happened? I don’t mean physical details,” I add hurriedly.

“She was in my ‘Relations between the sexes in modern film’ graduate course, which, as you know, is cross-listed with the Gender Studies Programme. It was just before the final essay was due and she emailed me to ask if she could look in and discuss some questions she had. I was at home looking at my computer and replied saying I wasn’t in the office and invited her to say what was on her mind by email or by phone. She asked if she could drop by my house and I agreed. I shouldn’t have done that should I?”

“No you shouldn’t. But go on.”

“Well, she arrived in a long coat, which she took off immediately. She was wearing a short sleeveless dress, figure hugging you might say.”

“Black?” I ask, with an ironic grin.

“No, kind of red, maroon, I think.”

“And so she seduced you?”

“Well, yes. But I didn’t put up much of a fight. It was all over as soon as she took off her coat. We were having simple, sweet sex in the bedroom within about half an hour.”

“Protected, I hope.”

“Yes, she had a condom.”

“SHE had a condom. I take it none of these details were discussed in your meeting with the Dean.

“No, but I was still guilty.”

“Yes, you were. Not wanting to lecture you, but the teacher pupil relationship is a power relationship. And, however proactive Matilda was, you needed to be the responsible one. You made a big mistake.”

McDuff is silent and morose.

“But power relations are complex,” I add, to soften the judgement. “The teacher-pupil relationship is one dimension of the overall circumstance. Beauty is power. Money is power. Masculinity in our society is power. Social standing is power. Certain age differences and the different level of experience that may go with them can affect power. Suppose the teacher is a young inexperienced woman and the pupil is a rich, influential male film star who is a little older and is confident and experienced. It is clear where the power imbalance is there.”

“Hardly my situation.”

“Yes. Indeed. Sorry. But my point is that circumstances can be very diverse.”

My mind moves to another thought. I wonder how Matilda feels about it all, now. She might be feeling very guilty and probably resents Jason’s actions, finding the whole business intensely embarrassing and stressful. I will try to meet up with her, I think.

“Did she complete the course?”

“Yes. I had already marked her essay and given her an A when the complaint came in. A colleague was assigned to blind second mark it and came up with an A+ and her mark was raised.”

“Oh well, that is good.” I mean it was good she completed her course but I am also thinking it was a good sign the grade was raised rather than lowered. Even so, assigning a grade after sex is well out of bounds. We carry on chatting about his financial situation and other matters for a little while and then I leave, but not before giving McDuff a supportive hug. I could be criticised for that!

Back at home, I ponder what I have learned. I don’t believe for one moment that Matilda set him up. She behaved badly assuming what McDuff said is true, which I tend to believe, and McDuff

behaved badly too. Jason was the immediate cause of the crisis but he was almost certainly acting out of extreme jealousy. He was a man in love. It was just a mess. But stuff happens in life, as I know from experience.

I will contact Matilda. I have her university email address and let's see if I have her phone number from the time she and Jason were here for lunch early in the year. Yes, here it is. A text message is probably best. I'll keep it short.

"Hi, Matilda. R U still around? Can we meet to catch up? Inka"

It is Sunday morning. I can hear Mikaere moving around the house. He was back on Saturday afternoon. Alessandro is not around as he usually helps at his parents' restaurant on weekends, Mikaere tells me. Look at phone. Ah! Matilda has finally responded to the text I sent yesterday.

"Up in Whangarei at parents house. Maybe back in Auckland next weekend."

What should I read into this? Well she probably went to her parents' house for some support or comfort. She must be upset. I wonder if she told them what happened. Normally she would never miss an apostrophe, probably not even in a text message. That she thinks she will be back in a week is a little bit positive. I should respond. I won't say I have spoken to McDuff. I could phone her but I would prefer to talk to her face to face. A brief text is the thing.

"OK. Let me know when U R back."

I think she will do so.

I get up for a shower and Mikaere calls through from the kitchen that he will make me an omelette for breakfast when I am ready. That will be nice. I like being fussed over by a gay male. By the time I am showered and dressed he has all the ingredients at the ready and before I know it I am sitting down to a kind of Mediterranean style omelette with onion, red capsicum and spinach. He sits with me in the kitchen over a cup of coffee.

"You will make some lucky man a wonderful husband one day," I say.

Mikaere blushes. "I hope so," he says.

"You and Alessandro seem very good together," I venture.

"Yes, he is wonderful and I really think he loves me."

"And so he should," I respond, with mock crossness.

"Alessandro is a wonderful chef. I am learning so much from him."

"Well I thought you were a pretty good cook beforehand," I respond.

"Thank you but there is so much to learn."

I feel idle and amuse myself by checking on American political news on my laptop. The Trump presidency had been pursuing its extraordinary path over the course of the year. The enquiries

of Special Counsel Robert Mueller into Russian interference in the 2016 election have been largely proceeding behind closed doors. But the arrest of Trump supporters, Paul Manafort, Rick Gates and George Papadopolous occurred last month and continues to be a focus of comment and speculation. Legal processes go so slowly. Trump is still mad at Jeff Sessions, the Attorney General, who recused himself prior to Mueller's appointment. Recent news concerns Trump supporting the Republican Senate candidate, Roy Moore, who was facing accusation of sex with underage girls. No surprises there! A big win for Trump was the passing of massive tax cuts.

I am so glad I am not living in the USA at the moment. And New Zealand has just elected a 37 year old woman, Jacinda Ardern, as Prime Minister! When I was down in Wellington, the politics were all around me. I found out how their version of proportional representation works, which is different from the Finnish system. It was no great surprise to me that the leader of the largest party in Parliament didn't get to form a government. Unfortunately it hinged on the support of the leader of the New Zealand First Party, Winston Peters. I don't like the sound of 'New Zealand First'. It sounds a bit too much like 'America First'.

I don't have a busy week coming up. I should be able to get on with my latest research project on paths to political leadership for women in the USA, Finland and New Zealand. There's nothing like being current! But I have such a lot to learn about New Zealand politics. Fortunately it is easy to get access to politicians in New Zealand and women Members of Parliament have been very helpful.

I wonder if I should make an appointment with the Dean. When I met him at McDuff's farewell he mentioned discussing the future of Gender Studies with me. Was he just trying to express a general interest or did he really have something he wanted to talk to me about? If the latter, that could be ominous. But probably the best assumption is that he is neither a particular enthusiast of Gender Studies nor a particular opponent and probably wants to learn what is going on in various parts of the Faculty. I shall make a short appointment with him and try to help him understand how the subject works at this institution and share some of my thoughts without being too demanding.

For my 'other job' on Wednesday afternoon I shall go to the panel discussion on women in accountancy including one of my targets, Suu Maung. I could then use that meeting to establish a connection with her. I didn't check when she arrived at the University. Let's see. Oh she arrived in mid 2016, only about six months before I did. We could bond as newly arrived foreign women. Perhaps she feels more foreign than I do. Even so, I could emphasise my Finnishness and downplay my American experience.

I am feeling lazy and a bit sleepy but, oh dear, my phone rings. It is Jason.

"Good afternoon, Professor Makkonen I don't know if you remember, I was a student in your

graduate class in the first semester.”

“Hello, Jason. Of course I remember you. What can I do for you?”

“Can I come and see you? There’s a matter I want to talk over with you.”

“I shall be at my office tomorrow.”

“I really want to come and see you today. Can I come over to your house?”

My own retrospective advice to McDuff rings in my ears, not that the situations are comparable.

“I am sorry, Jason, but that is not convenient. We could talk over the phone for a little while, though. I have an idea of what you may wish to talk about.”

“Do you know about Matilda and McDuff?”

“Yes I did hear something about that. And I think you made a formal complaint.”

“Yes I did and I was perfectly within my rights to do so.”

“You were within your rights, yes.”

“But you think I was wrong to make the complaint, do you?”

“I didn’t say that and anyway I don’t know all the circumstances. I just know that sometimes it is best not to exercise your rights.”

“I just have no idea what Matilda thought she was doing. Have you talked to her?”

“No. I understand she is out of town.”

“Really? I haven’t been able to get in touch with her but I am sure I caught sight of her in the Mall yesterday.”

“Oh, well. I could be wrong. I strongly advise you not to attempt to see her if she doesn’t want you to. It seems to me that the situation is a bit of a mess but what you all need to do is to try and process what has happened and think calmly about what is best to do now.”

There is silence at Jason’s end of the phone. I don’t know who I think I am dishing out this kind of advice. It doesn’t match my own behaviour at all. But maybe it is wisdom gleaned from my own mistakes.

I carry on, “Now Jason, I expect you are feeling lots of things right now and I would be happy to talk to you next week. I shall be in my office much of the time but you could call ahead if you want to make sure.”

Jason eventually finds some words to say. There is emotion in his voice. “ Yes I will come and see you. Thank you.”

After that call I need a drink. I wonder if there is any alcohol in the house.

It is Monday morning. I get into the office at 9.30 am and find Jason waiting for me.

“Oh, Good morning, Jason. Have you been waiting long? You should have texted me.”

“Only about 10 minutes, I just couldn’t wait.”

“Very well. Come in and take a seat!”

I settle myself into my office chair behind my desk and wait for him to speak. When he doesn’t, I ask, slightly lamely, “Are you feeling unhappy?”

“Yeah, nah. More angry, really.”

“With whom?”

“McDuff Matilda and myself.”

In spite of wanting to see me as soon as possible, now he is with me he can’t seem to speak. He is clearly in the grip of emotion, though, and his identification of the third object of his anger suggests some level of self-awareness. I am going to have to take the lead even though I don’t really want to be part of this conversation.

“Look, you can share your thoughts and feelings. You don’t have to justify yourself to me. I don’t want to judge anyone.”

I pause. “Well, from what I know, both McDuff and Matilda acted badly, and what you did was unfortunate in its effects too. You may not have thought through what the likely consequences would be.”

Jason hesitated. “I didn’t think they would sack him. I thought they wouldn’t take my complaint seriously.”

“I understand he resigned.”

“Oh! It was all very quick.”

“It certainly was,” I agreed.

“Matilda only went with McDuff to get at me, you know. She made a point of telling me about it.”

“That may well be so and presumably she was unhappy with your relationship. But you don’t have to tell me about that,” I add cautiously.

But he isn’t able to unburden himself. Probably he doesn’t really understand either Matilda’s feelings or his own. The conversation dribbles on for a bit with me urging him to take a deep breath and try to achieve some balance. Eventually, I bring the conversation to a close by suggesting he come and see me again next week. I am relieved when he walks out the door even though I will pay for that with a further meeting.

I find it hard to get into my research or at least into the writing. But I do see an email confirmation of a meeting for Tuesday with Nikki Kaye, a young woman who had been Minister of Education in the previous National Government. Up until now I had mainly spoken to women MPs in the Labour Party and the Green Party. I gather some more information about Nikki. I had already learned that she is politically moderate in a party that is centre-right, for she supports environmental causes and was instrumental in reinstating a gay pride event. I see she took leave from Parliament last year on account of breast cancer.

It is Tuesday morning. I run into my office neighbour, Carolyn and tell her I am going to meet Nikki Kaye later in the day. I ask her what she thinks of Nikki.

“Oh Nikki,” she says. “Yeah, she’s alright I s’pose. When she was up against Jacinda Ardern in Auckland Central, the press called it ‘the battle of the babes’.”

“Thanks, I didn’t know that. Well, that tells us something about how the public look at women politicians, right there. Who won the battle?”

“Nikki did. Though Jacinda won the war,” she added with a laugh.

I shall make sure that rivalry is covered in the interview.

I find my way to Nikki Kaye’s electorate office in Ponsonby, in good time for our appointment, so I have a look around the area which is more upmarket than Papatoetoe. The area is still low rise, retaining something of a suburban feel, even though close to the city centre. There is certainly no shortage of cafés and restaurants.

I have some questions carefully prepared but I like to move flexibly in interviews, to make space for what my interviewee might want to share with me. Above all, I don’t want to seem to interrogate or adopt a hostile tone. I could mention Carolyn’s piece of information in a light way, to prompt comments about Jacinda Ardern. I have yet to secure an interview with Jacinda, though I understand from her office that one will be scheduled. I love the accessibility of New Zealand politicians, similar to Finnish ones.

Nikki is welcoming. As she is no longer a Minister she has a little more time but I don't want to use up too much of it.

"You know this morning I learned a new thing about you. When you and Jacinda Ardern were contesting the Auckland Central Electorate the press described it as 'the battle of the babes'." I say this with a slight laugh.

"It would be nice to be taken a bit more seriously but that's certainly not the worst way I have been talked about," she says with a smile that turns to a grimace. "Women in politics and their challenges will be very familiar to you coming from Finland."

My name is clearly a good clue to my origins and I like the comparison with Finland. I won't dwell too much on that, though, as I want to be the one asking the questions.

"Yes, there have been a number of prominent women MPs in Finland, last century and this. But New Zealand now has its third female Prime Minister while Finland has had only two."

The interview proceeds in a lively and useful way. I ask her if she thinks that things are harder for women MPs in her party, the National Party, than in other parties, Labour or Green. She emphasises that the first female Prime Minister in New Zealand was from the National Party. But she is frank about some of the challenges. She brings up her breast cancer. It seems to have given her a particular perspective on her life and politics.

We move lightly on to Jacinda Ardern. Nikki is gracious and complimentary about Jacinda though emphasises, what I really already knew, that the circumstances under which she became Prime Minister, at age 37, were quite extraordinary. Nikki acknowledges Andrew Little, Jacinda's predecessor as leader of the Labour Party, for standing down when he and the Party were low in the polls and supporting his deputy, Jacinda, for the leadership, so she could turn things around. Nikki emphasises that Jacinda still required a coalition with Winston Peters' New Zealand First Party to form a government, as I already knew.

I work steadily through my more generic 'women in politics' questions and I wrap up the interview before too long, so as not to squander either her time or mine. I find a café where I can sit over a coffee and add to my notes while the meeting is fresh before summoning an Uber to take me back to South Auckland.

It is Wednesday afternoon. I find my way to the venue for the 'Women in Accountancy Panel Discussion'. It is a room in the main building I haven't seen before, a smallish lecture theatre with slightly raked seating. As I go in, there is a small group of women talking down the front. It is clear from her features and clothing which is Suu Maung. She is short and slight and is wearing an elegant long skirt with a blue pattern and a tight white blouse with three quarter length sleeves. She has long dark hair pinned to clear her face. The chair goes to the lectern and brings the meeting to order. The attendance seems a bit thin. There are a number of young women there, some in jeans and some more formally dressed. There are a couple of middle-aged men, Accountancy lecturers I assume. I know no-one in the room.

The chair introduces one of the speakers from a local firm of accountants whose name is composed of the names of three principals, very likely all men. Clothed in a grey pin-stripe business suit, she describes her entry into the profession and talks about the need for persistence and self-confidence in what is largely a male dominated enterprise. She goes in some detail into the varying characteristics of the different branches of Accountancy. She emphasises how, once you have established yourself in a particular niche, you can achieve respect on the basis of the quality of your work.

The second speaker is a little older and also talks about herself to some extent but adopts a lighter, cheerier tone encouraging the young women present to join the growing number of women in the profession. Suu Maung, bringing up the rear, speaks more quietly than the other two, though she articulates her words clearly. She has less to say about the profession in New Zealand, naturally enough, but contributes some useful international statistics.

We move into the discussion phase. There aren't too many questions and comments but there is a very pointed question from one young woman about whether young female accountants are subject to sexual harassment, intimidation or assault by older, male colleagues. She mentions the 'me too' movement. It is interesting to see the three speakers dance around that topic. They each say, in their different styles, that they have not personally suffered harassment in an extreme form without denying the potential. I feel sympathetic for them. Although I had not intended to contribute, I feel I can help. I say that this is an important issue that concerns many professions and spheres of society in many parts of the world. I am able to reference accusations against the Hollywood mogul, Harvey Weinstein, that are in the news.

"This is a meeting to encourage the growth of women in the profession of accounting. Our speakers cannot provide a cast iron guarantee against harassment but it is still important to encourage women to take their place in the profession. It is up to all women, however junior in their firm, not to put up with that kind of behaviour and speak out. The tide is turning so that those who speak out are likely to be supported."

I fear I may be changing the tone of the meeting, but the speakers seem pleased and reiterate what I have said in softer ways. The questioner seems satisfied too. I am pleased I am here and can bring in a gender studies perspective, even if it is a pretty straightforward one. The meeting closes and I move to the front of the room and introduce myself to Suu Maung. She makes sure I meet the other speakers and the chair.

"I hope I didn't disturb the arc of the meeting by what I said."

"No, not at all," the first of the speakers says. "That was very helpful. There are 'me too' issues in many businesses and professions but not especially in accounting." The others nod in agreement.

I realise that Suu needs to help look after the other speakers so I suggest to her that we meet later in the week and that I will email her. I think that seems natural. I really want to talk to her one to one.

I return to my office only to find Jason waiting for me. I am not particularly pleased to see him but I am struck by a certain link between the 'me too' issues that had been raised in the panel discussion and the curious dynamics of the Jason, Matilda, McDuff triangle. If McDuff had invited Matilda to his house to discuss an essay he was going to mark and then encouraged sex, well that, morally, would be an open and shut case and regrettably not a rare one. Even as it was, there is plenty of blame to go around but, knowing the participants, I can see their failings with some sympathy.

I usher Jason into my office. This time he is more articulate.

"I am sorry I didn't know what to say last time I came to see you. I was in such a knot about it all and still am. I don't have anyone else I can talk to about it."

"That's alright. I don't know how much I can help but I can listen and share my thoughts."

"You know I regret making the complaint against McDuff even though he was an idiot."

"He certainly was. I can understand you regretting taking that action and maybe feeling bad about it. Even so, you reacted to the situation rather than initiating it. Try and look at what you did as if from the outside. You felt betrayed, the situation was all wrong and you responded to it. Accept responsibility for your role in the whole business but then move on."

"Have you seen Matilda?" Jason asks.

"No."

“I am sure she is in town. I caught sight of her again.”

“I expect I will see her in the next few days. But I don’t want to be a mediator between the two of you,” I add, to lower expectations

Jason agrees and, shortly afterwards, leaves. Maybe he will come and see me again about this but I don’t feel as bad about that as I did last time.

It is Friday afternoon and I am meeting Suu Maung at the cafeteria for a cup of coffee. They make pretty good coffee here and I know it won't be crowded at this time of day. I see her and wave her over. I order a flat white, a typical Kiwi choice, and she has a short black. I study her as our coffees are being made. She is more quietly dressed today, again in a long skirt, grey this time, and a loose, pale blue shirt. We have a corner table, out of the way, and we start chatting. My task is simply to get to know her and win her trust but I am genuinely curious about her. She has great poise and is quietly elegant.

"Were you happy with the panel discussion on Wednesday?" I ask.

"It wasn't my idea but they needed a woman from the department and I agreed to do it. I have already learned that as a woman in accounting I will be expected to do more than my fair share of committee and other service roles. It is also good for students to see other women from the profession."

"It shouldn't be necessary in the twenty-first century to prove to students that women can work in Accounting," I suggest.

"I agree," she replies. "But some of my students don't seem to have a proper professional focus and may need that explained."

"What do you think of the question about sexual harassment?"

"You were right," she replies. "It's a serious problem in many areas but it shouldn't discourage women from joining the Accountancy profession. I don't remember the questioner from any Accountancy courses. Do you know her from gender studies?"

"No, I didn't recognise her but she could be one of ours. I didn't teach in the second semester."

"Do you have a background in Accounting?"

"Almost none. I am interested in women breaking into different areas of professional and public life. Right now I am engaged in a comparative study of women in politics in Finland, the USA, and New Zealand. I happened to see the notice of your panel discussion and I was curious."

We talk about our countries of origin, about our different experiences in the USA and also our impressions of Auckland and, in particular, of the University of South Auckland. Suu seems to find the institution even quirkier than I do. She says she doesn't think she will stay very long but is happy enough for the moment.

We seem to be getting along well for our first proper meeting. I have my own motivation for making a connection but she also seems keen to connect. I explain my living arrangement with Mikaere. Suu lives alone in a one bedroom apartment in a small modern apartment block. She talks in a vague way of making me some Burmese food at some time. I confess that I am no cook. We part, vowing to keep in touch. As I leave I get a call from Matilda. She wants to see me now. I say I am just returning to my office. She says she doesn't want to come to campus and can she meet me at my house. I hesitate but I do agree and say I can be home at 5 pm. I am spending far too much time and energy on all of this but I can't stop now.

As I get home I happen to look at my 'special' phone used for communicating with Maria. There is a missed call so I call back immediately. She says she is coming up to Auckland next week, on Wednesday. I tell her I have just been having coffee with Suu Maung. She seems slightly surprised but pleased ... I think. She says she wants me to meet Merrick, as soon as I can. She tells me she will let me know where she is staying and we should meet up on Wednesday evening, if possible. There is a knock on the door and I say I have to go. We were basically finished anyway.

Matilda is a little early. Her face looks drawn. I think she has lost weight even though she was always very slim. Her jeans hang loosely about her. She somehow manages a smile, though it appears forced. I ask her to sit in the living room and offer her a glass of wine, which she accepts. I need to rummage to find anything to nibble on, eventually finding some raw almonds. Matilda takes a slurp of wine and sets upon the almonds. She clearly has not been looking after herself. I fear this could be a rerun of Jason's first meeting with me, with lots of emotion and few words, so I try to be empathetic.

"I do know the basic facts about what happened and I think I have some idea what you must be feeling. You can share with me anything you want to. I am not going to judge you."

"Oh Inka, I feel so guilty and stupid and worthless and ridiculous."

Clearly this won't go the same way as Jason's meeting after all.

"I don't know what I thought I was doing, seducing McDuff like that. I felt so frustrated and trapped with Jason and it seemed to make sense at the time."

Matilda then bursts into tears. After a moment's hesitation I go over to her and give her a big hug. She calms down after a little while and I return to my seat. I try to bring the conversation onto a more practical level.

"Did you complete all your courses for the year?"

"Yes, I was very lucky. By the time it all blew up I had just completed all my assessments. I

wouldn't have been able to do anything after that."

"Good," I say. "Now, let's think about what practical things you need to do. I am guessing it's all over between you and Jason?"

"Oh yes. I wanted out before and I don't think I can ever forgive him for making that complaint even though I was the truly guilty one."

"OK. You will have to speak to him eventually, and it would be good not to leave it too long. What about McDuff? Do you think you are up to talking to him?"

Matilda hesitates. "I doubt he ever wants to see me again."

"I wouldn't assume that," I respond.

This swings Matilda to the opposite end of the spectrum. "Maybe I should move in with him and look after him, if he would have me."

"I really think you should take a deep breath and think carefully about your next moves. You might decide to offer him an apology, not that he wasn't responsible for his own actions. He could have just said, 'No'."

Matilda seems to take that advice on board. I am hungry and Matilda must be too.

"I think I should take you out for an Indian meal. Having some food in you will help you think straight."

Chapter 8

It is Wednesday afternoon, the day Maria is coming up from Wellington. I was able to arrange an appointment to meet Professor Merrick at 2 pm. My cover was that I am investigating women in various professions cross-nationally including between the USA and Aotearoa-New Zealand. I made a point of including 'Aotearoa' in the name of the country in order to live up to an image of a Gender Studies Professor. Oh, I am not pretending to be a Professor of Gender Studies, or am I? I do occasionally succumb to imposter syndrome. Anyway, maybe now I am really a SIS operative and the academic role is my cover.

I take the train from Papatoetoe into Central Auckland, about half an hour. You have to walk up a fairly steep hill to reach the University of Auckland and the weather is warm but it is good exercise. I make my way through the campus to the far end where the modern science buildings are located. I thought I had plenty of time before my appointment but in fact I find my way to Merrick's office just in time for our appointment. I knock on the door. There is no answer. I knock again and there is total silence within. No talking, no sound of typing. I wait for a few minutes, thinking he might return to his office any moment. Or perhaps he is taking a nap. I knock a third time and out of frustration I try the door. The desk is directly opposite the door and sitting in the chair slumped right over the desk is a man, presumably Professor Peter Eldon Merrick III.

A chill comes over me and I am transfixed for what seems like an age. I pull myself together and approach him to see if he has a pulse. I press my fingers to his neck and can't find one but possibly I am not in quite the right spot. He feels warm but he doesn't appear to be breathing. He is face down on the desk so it is not easy to be absolutely certain. I get out my phone and dial the emergency number, 111. Just as it is ringing someone appears at the open door and gives a short high pitched scream. It is Suu Maung. I give her a wave of acknowledgement and ask the emergency operator for an Ambulance.

"There is a man here slumped over his desk. I can't find a pulse. I need an ambulance quickly. I am at the University of Auckland, Science Building 301, Symonds Street. My name? Inka Makkonen. M, A, double K, O, N, E, N. Yes, I will see if someone will guide you to the room. Yes, they can call me back on this number."

I turn to Suu Maung. "Do you know where the nearest administrator's office is?"

Suu has composed herself and replies, "I think there was one down this way and to the right."

We reach a faculty administrator's office with an open door, bearing the name 'Mary Tyler' and there is a competent looking woman typing on a keyboard. I burst in.

“Professor Merrick is slumped over his desk. I have called for an ambulance. They may need help getting to the room.”

Mary just asks what address I gave, which I tell her. She is on the phone immediately to someone who can lead the paramedics to the right office. During that phone call, Suu Maung touches me on the arm.

“I am very sorry but I really need to leave you now. Will you be alright?”

“Yes, I’ll be fine. Don’t worry. We’ll be in touch.”

Mary asks me to go with her to Merrick’s room. While she seems very calm, I think she needs the support. We quickly reach the room. In our haste, Suu Maung and I had left the door open and the body, for in my heart of hearts I assume he is dead, is in full view. The corridor is empty, though, and I assume no-one else saw him.

Mary shocks me by saying, “That’s not Professor Merrick! I don’t recognise this man at all.”

“Oh! I had an appointment with Professor Merrick but I had never met him before.”

In fact, I had seen a photo of him on the website but didn’t study it carefully, and the sight of a slightly balding man with sandy coloured hair, face down didn’t contain anything to shake my natural assumption that the man in Merrick’s office was indeed Marrick.

Mary seems a little relieved as well as puzzled. She makes no attempt to check for vital signs. I half think we should be attempting vigorous resuscitation but I don’t say anything as I am not proficient at that and, anyway, I think it is futile.

“As this is someone you haven’t seen before, I think I should phone the police too unless you would prefer to,” I say, having my own reasons for thinking that this is likely to be a suspicious death.

“Oh, the police? Yes, I suppose so. No. You go ahead, but you can give me as the university contact. Mary Tyler, extension 8752.”

I carefully close the door this time and we walk back to Mary’s office.

“Let me find the number for Auckland Central Police Station for you,” she offers, and quickly finds it.

I walk into the corridor to make my call and I hear Mary also calling someone, very likely her supervisor. Before I make the call I quickly return to Merrick’s office and take some

photographs of the scene from various angles in case that will be helpful. I then call the police station but it seems to take me a while to explain to the police switchboard operator the nature of the situation. He eventually puts me through to Detective Sergeant Smithers, to whom I repeat my explanation, including Mary's name and extension number. He is economical with his words but to the point. He is clearly pondering whether the death is suspicious. It only then strikes me that of course I have met Smithers before in the investigation of Sammy Becker-Lau's murder. He makes no acknowledgement of that, though, and sticks to the matter at hand.

"Have the ambulance paramedics arrived?"

"No. I only called for an ambulance a few minutes ago."

"Has anyone touched anything?"

"I tried to find a pulse, unsuccessfully."

"Don't touch anything more. I will call you back in a few minutes."

He does eventually call me back and says he would need to speak with me in person. I agree, saying I can stay at the University for the time being. He asks me, or Mary, to let him know when the paramedics arrive using the number he is phoning from. My guess is he wants to first see if the man is truly dead. I take the opportunity to phone Maria. She says she has just landed at Auckland Airport. Thinking in terms of the security of the line, I choose my words carefully.

"Look, something really strange has come up. At the University of Auckland I have just found someone slumped over his desk."

"Dead?"

"I am pretty sure he is. I hope to see you later but I don't know how long I will be caught up in it all. We are just waiting for the ambulance and probably the police."

There is a meaningful silence at the end of the phone. It is not often you take Maria by surprise but this is such a moment. She just says,

"OK, text me to say where you will be and I will catch up with you when I can."

She is being similarly cautious over the phone.

The paramedics show up with a trolley, or a gurney, as Americans say, and spend some time in Merrick's office. I give Smithers a call, which he doesn't answer but a couple of minutes later he

arrives. He obviously has developed an interest in the matter. He goes into Merrick's room and spends some time there. Eventually the paramedics emerge with the trolley with the dead body, for that is what it now clearly is, completely covered.

"Dead?" I ask.

Smithers just nods. He says he would like me to accompany him to the Police Station after he has had a few words with Mary, which seems to take about ten minutes.

Chapter 9

Smithers drives me in his unmarked car the short distance to Auckland Central Police Station, which is a 70s tower block. He takes me to an interview room and introduces me to a young detective constable, Cheryl something, who sits in on the interview, which is recorded. Smithers does all the questioning and Cheryl just looks at me carefully. He quickly acknowledges that we have met before when he used to be based at the Counties-Manukau station and was investigating the murder of Sammy Becker-Lau. But, without dwelling on that, he proceeds to ask a series of methodical questions. Why was I there? How did I find the body? Did I test for signs of life? Was I surprised it was not Merrick? Why did I think the death, as it turned out to be, was suspicious? They seem to be suspicious of me but I like the structure the questions give to the interview. I don't have to try to think what to include.

When Smithers asks about how the body appeared I remember I had taken some photographs. He says he did too but mine could be useful. I open my phone and find the photos. He asks if they can download them and I just hand over my phone. Cheryl takes it away after Smithers notes her departure for the recording. I think, should I be handing over my unlocked phone like that? I am a very trusting secret agent! Well, it's only my personal phone. Smithers carries on in his methodical manner and after a little while Cheryl returns and says I have a phone call from someone called 'Maria', who is very insistent on speaking to me.

"Do you mind if I take this quickly?"

"OK, if it is important."

"Hello, Maria. Sorry I didn't let you know where I'll be." "Who was that?" Maria asks.

"That was a detective constable who was downloading some photos I took of the body"

"Are you at Auckland Central Police Station?"

"Yes I am. I am being interviewed now."

"I can be there in about 15 minutes."

"Good. See you soon."

Smithers and Cheryl are looking at me strangely.

"Who is Maria and how does she know anything about a body?" Smithers asks.

“She is a friend who has just flown in from Wellington. I was going to meet her. She phoned me before you arrived and I explained that I might be delayed and briefly why.”

“We need to be discreet at the beginning of an investigation. She won’t contact the press, will she?”

“Oh no, she is perfectly discreet,” I say, thinking how impressively careful she is in everything she says and does. “You can meet her. She will be here in a quarter of an hour.”

Smithers and Cheryl glance at each other. Smithers pauses for a moment and then says deliberately, “Yes. we would like that.”

The questioning then takes a new tack. “Were you upset when you saw the body? You suggested you were pretty sure he was dead from the beginning.”

“I was probably more surprised than upset. It is never pleasant to see a corpse but I have been in worse situations.”

Smithers briefly explains to Cheryl how I had been caught up in the aftermath of Sammy’s death and had been assaulted. “You seem to attract suspicious deaths!” He says that lightly but I feel they are sizing me up.

They carry on the interview in a less directed way, asking about my background and the nature of the research that led me to set up the meeting with Professor Merrick. Cheryl is now asking most of the questions. She has a softer style but, in a way, is probably more searching. I think I bluffed my way through her question about my research topic even though in reality it was a pretty thin pretext.

I am grateful when a young, uniformed constable knocks on the door and says someone needs to see Smithers immediately. Cheryl suspends the interview, turning off the recording. Then she carries on chatting with me and asks about Finland. I also talk about my time in America. She asks about gender studies. Perhaps I can recruit her as a part-time student.

Eventually Smithers returns and says he has been speaking with Maria who has put him in the picture. Cheryl gives him a look as if to say, “I hope you put me in the picture.” He says I am free to go with Maria and they will contact me if they need anything more.

Maria books a cab, which arrives promptly, and takes us to her hotel which is the Grand Chancellor. We go up to her room. We sit on the bed for a moment and Maria gives me a careful and considerate hug. It brings home how much I am under stress even though I think I have been handling it pretty well.

“We have lots to talk about but for now we need to have some dinner. I know a very nice seafood restaurant a short walk from here,” Maria says.

Maria takes the opportunity to show me where some of the competitors for the America’s Cup yacht races were based in 2003.

The dinner is very pleasant. Maria talks cautiously even though we are probably not going to be overheard.

“I told your interviewer who I am and said you are trustworthy. He is going to update me about new developments. Are you busy tomorrow? It would be good to chat some more.”

“I am seeing someone late morning and also have a meeting in the afternoon,” I reply.

“Can you stay over tonight?” she asks with a flirtatious smile.

“Sure,” I reply after what I hope is not too significant a pause. I hadn’t expected that and wasn’t sure whether this is mostly business or mostly pleasure. We continue to chat idly and I feel myself starting to relax. We walk back to the hotel in a companionable manner.

When we get back to the room Maria carefully takes my head in her hands and kisses me softly on the lips. We lie on the bed in each other’s arms and talk over the events of the day while her hands stroke me lightly. It suddenly occurs to me to mention that Suu Maung was there at the university when I found the body.

Maria freezes and says, “Was she really? Sorry but I need to call this in.” She gets up and moves away from the bed. She calls someone immediately, within my earshot but pulling away into a professional bubble.

Maria has arrived at Auckland Airport's Domestic Terminal and is in the baggage reclaim area. The carousel has just started when her phone rings and it is Inka.

"Hello Inka. What's up? Can't we meet up as we arranged?"

She tells me she has found someone slumped over his desk at the University of Auckland, probably dead. I suppose it is Merrick. That is highly unexpected. Inka is being somewhat discreet over an open line and I need to be similarly terse. She says she will text me when she knows where she will be and finishes the call. Ah, I have just missed my bag. I need to wait until the carousel comes round again. No real hurry as I don't know where I am going. I'll have a coffee before I catch a cab.

That coffee was good. No word from Inka. I may as well take a cab to my hotel and we can connect up later. What has she got herself into? That woman does seem to attract trouble. She is potentially a very good agent but she is inexperienced. I kind of want to be with her when she is interviewed but really she should be able to handle that by herself. This cab is free. "Hotel Grand Chancellor please."

The trip is taking a while so I think I will phone Inka to see what is happening. The phone is answered immediately but not by Inka; it is another woman's voice.

"May I speak to Inka please?"

"Can I get her to call you back?"

"I really need to speak to her immediately."

"Oh, very well. I'll see what I can do."

I then get put on to Inka and she confirms she is being interviewed at Auckland Central Police Station. I tell her I'll be with her shortly. I'll identify myself to the police and, if necessary, even indicate that Inka is working for us.

I speak to the cabbie. "Sorry, but there's a change of destination. Auckland Central Police Station, please."

I arrive at the Police station. I need to show my SIS identification and be firm that I need to speak to Smithers immediately. He has an impressively dead-pan demeanour. He gives the appearance of neither being annoyed at being dragged out of an interview nor particularly curious about why I am here. I tell him that I had been assigned to Inka Makkonen in connection

with Sammy Becker-Lau's murder, a point that may have been known to him but probably not front of mind. I explain we have an interest in the current death on the assumption that it was Eldon Merrick and so need to be kept in touch.

Smithers says, "It wasn't Professor Merrick who died but someone else who was in his office. We have yet to establish the identity of the deceased and the cause of death. We have been trying to get in touch with Professor Merrick, unsuccessfully so far. We will keep you apprised. Can I consider you the SIS representative for this matter?"

While pondering the mystery death, I respond by saying, "I may well be given that role. I will check with Wellington and they will contact you directly."

"Very well. Does Inka Makkonen work for you?"

That is an insightful question.

"Let's say she has been helpful to us earlier in the year. You need not suspect her."

Smithers seems to accept that without further question and probably takes it as an unofficial 'yes'.

We take a cab to my hotel and go up to my room. How should I handle this? We were lovers for a while after her ordeal earlier in the year but we had only been meeting on a professional basis over the last few months while she was in Wellington. I had got back together with my former partner and Inka should really be off limits. Inka doesn't seem uncomfortable or anxious about me but she does seem a little tense, which is understandable after the events of the day. I give her a hug, which she relaxes into. I need to keep close to her while we work through what has happened. But first we need some food. I know a good restaurant we can walk to near the waterfront and I can route us via the viaduct basin, home of the America's Cup Regatta in 2003.

While at dinner I suggest Inka stays over with me in my hotel room. She seems a little surprised but agrees readily. I do look forward to spending the night with her but I certainly have a practical motive. I want to keep her close as more information comes in about the death tomorrow. She has an appointment in the afternoon but it will be very convenient to have her close in the morning.

Back at the hotel room I kiss her carefully and deliberately. She relaxes in my arms on the bed and starts to give me little cat licks on my neck, as she does. We do keep talking, though, and then, out of nowhere, she tells me that Suu Maung was there at the university when she discovered the body. Well that is a surprise. Without really intending to, I break the bedroom mood immediately and report that information to Wellington on my work phone using code phrases and a pseudonym.

When I finish I look across to Inka. I feel she is a bit miffed but uncomplaining. She may feel she should have mentioned that earlier, though that omission is totally understandable in the circumstances. I don't want to apologise exactly. I know, I'll leap on her. She accepts that form of apology totally. Time for business in the morning.

It is morning, not yet 6 am. Inka is lying naked next to me, still asleep. She is such a special person, sometimes so soft and sometimes so passionate. And then she is so intelligent. I don't have to hide my thinking and she can be so quick. As an SIS operative, she still does not have the experience or all the right instincts as yet. But she is bold and resourceful. I hope we get some answers from Smithers this morning while Inka is still with me. I'll call him a bit later, if he hasn't contacted me.

I can easily get by on five hours sleep most nights but Inka probably needs more sleep. I'll try not to disturb her.

I must have dozed off; it is nearly a quarter to 7. I'll get up and have a shower. Ink stirs. "Good morning, beautiful," she says and turns over and goes back to sleep.

It is just after 8 o'clock. Inka is showered and dressed and so we go down to the restaurant for some breakfast. Inka has a good appetite. She seems perfectly relaxed and comfortable with me even though last night's sleep-over and sex came about unexpectedly. She is not a romantic. I think last night was just what she needed after a surprising and stressful day. Or am I flattering myself? Anyway, it is convenient that she is with me this morning.

With breakfast over, I suggest we go for a walk. It is a pleasant day, warm with intermittent cloud and a light breeze. But my motive is to talk over the little we know about Suu Maung and Merrick. Walking about in a random way escapes any remote possibility of surveillance and suits my preference for talking about these things in an informal and relaxed way. Teasingly, I tell Inka I have things to talk over with her and that if we pretend to be lovers I can whisper in her ear. She bursts out laughing, and puts her arm around me. She is about half a head taller than me and grasps me firmly with her left hand just under my left breast.

"I can pretend that," she says with a gorgeous smile. For a moment, I see her how she must have been when she was twenty. I go with the spirit of it and lean my head into her neck. This posture is inconsistent with my requirement to talk to her as her superior officer but it will do and, well, is very pleasant.

I need to cover some ground carefully with Inka, as our intelligence data is tentative and incomplete.

"When I asked you to take an interest in Suu Maung and Eldon Merrick it was because we suspected that they were both foreign agents. We have repeatedly asked US intelligence about Merrick and eventually they confirmed that he was a former agent but offered nothing more, so he is a bit of a puzzle. Suu Maung is also an unknown quantity. Various red flags have been raised about the authenticity of her origins and credentials but we have yet to identify which

intelligence service she works for, if any. It is possible she is working for China but we have no confirmation of that hypothesis. When you told me she was at the scene of the death, that was extremely surprising, as we weren't aware of any connection between them. Tell me again how she behaved following the discovery of the body."

Inka pauses a moment to think. "I think she behaved very naturally. She made a little involuntary noise when she saw the body slumped over the desk. I think she was genuinely surprised."

I butt in, "But was she surprised at the body or at your presence in the room?"

"Now you ask, I can't be sure," Inka replies. "Do you think she may be responsible for the death?"

"It's a possibility. I wouldn't want to rule it out at this stage. In fact, for all we know the death could have been a result of natural causes. That's not my bet, though, given that two persons of interest were involved."

"But why would Suu return to the scene of the crime if she were responsible?" Inka asks.

"Good question, but maybe she needed to check he was really dead. This is all very speculative. I think you said she helped you initially."

"Yes, she took us to a nearby administrator. She was helpful. But she did say she had to leave soon afterwards. I didn't think anything of it at the time."

"If her life story has been falsified, as we believe, then she wouldn't want to attract the attention of the police even if she had nothing to do with the death," I respond.

We carry on talking over some more details until my phone rings. It is Smithers.

"Just a quick call to say we have located the professor. I am tied up most of the morning but if you can call in about twelveish we could talk it over and maybe go and talk to him together if you want and if you are available."

I quickly agree. I want to ask if he has any more information, such as about the identity of the deceased and the cause of death but he is keeping it brief and I can ask him later. I think he is being cooperative and is just being discreet. Also he is clearly busy. I pass on the very little I have learned to Inka and mention meeting him late morning. She says that she should be getting back to work but wants me to contact her when I know more.

To be honest, I am relieved she has decided to leave. It feels a bit as if I am being disloyal to Inka but the truth is that I would like to interact with Smithers by myself and, in an interview with

Merrick, Inka, who had already made herself known to him, would have to be excluded.

We walk some more and then stop for another coffee before Inka catches her train to South Auckland.

I arrive at the Auckland Central Police Station around noon and ask if Smithers is available. As I am waiting, I wonder if I am going to be able to get down to Papatoetoe to see Inka this evening to update her about whatever I am going to learn this afternoon. I hope there will be something substantial to pass on.

Smithers emerges, having come straight from a meeting. I ask him if he has time now to update me, wanting to keep him onside.

He says, "Look, I have another meeting in half an hour but I need to get something to eat in the cafeteria so, if you'd like to join me, I can quickly let you know where we've got to."

I like him. He is direct. He doesn't waste time apologising and is clearly going to be helpful without making a fuss about it. The cafeteria looks very government department style but I find a box of rolled sushi and some mineral water while he has a sandwich, some rhubarb crumble, and a cup of tea. I ask if Wellington has confirmed my role in the case and he says they said I was to be the liaison person for now. I just say, "Good," while thinking they could have been less tentative.

Smithers lays out the information systematically. "It took us a little while to find Merrick as he was having a hip replacement operation yesterday. It had been scheduled for two months time but, following a fall, it needed to be done urgently and he didn't get to inform the university. We found this out from his wife, who lives in Minneapolis. He understandably made it a priority to contact her."

"Is he in a fit state to see us today?" I ask.

"Yes, we spoke to him on the phone this morning and he is perfectly happy to talk to us for half an hour this afternoon, around 3 pm ideally. I want to speak to him in person and I am impressed that he is willing and made no objection."

"What about the deceased?"

"His name is Federico Bruno and he has an American drivers license and credit cards as well as a faculty card from the University of Wisconsin - Madison. We presume he is an academic colleague of Merrick but that is the kind of thing we would like to talk to him about."

"Cause of death?"

"Ah. On the face of it, it was heart failure but we are keeping an open mind."

As we continue with our lunch, Smithers Invites me to join him interviewing Merrick and lays out how he wants to play it.

“He might be puzzled why the police are involved but can be told that the matter was referred to us initially because the deceased was not known at the University, which indeed is true. This will lead on to questioning about who he is and why he was in the office.”

“I would like to take the lead in the questioning,” Smithers says. “I will introduce you as someone seconded to assist me. I would like you to take handwritten notes, in large part for appearance’s sake so you can observe his reactions discreetly. You may wish to ask a question from time to time, to which I will acquiesce with an indulgent smile. You may look as if you are checking details for your notes. Are you comfortable with this way of proceeding?”

“Yes indeed. That is perfect. You are being most helpful.”

Smithers certainly thinks things through, perhaps over-thinks, but I realise he is well able to play a part. As I have finished my lunch and I suspect Smithers will need a moment to think about his next meeting, I tell him I will return at two-thirty. As I pick up my tray, he opens a folder he is carrying and I can see amongst the printed documents some hand-written notes in the most ugly and illegible scrawl. It’s just as well I’ll be the notetaker!

As I leave, I ask abruptly, and a little rudely, “Have you ever acted on the stage?”

He deploys his deadpan expression and simply replies, “No. I am not Prince Hamlet nor was meant to be.”

Maybe not an actor but certainly a person with literary knowledge. I know the phrase but, for the moment, can’t place it. I think he and I could make a good team.

I return, as promised, about two-thirty. Smithers is a little late and we are running late for our appointment. In the car, I ask him if he strongly suspects foul play.

He pauses and then says, “Your interest in Merrick prompts my interest in the death.”

He is not merely being cooperative; he is on board with this investigation. We make good time to the hospital and find the ward easily enough. Merrick is in a room with two beds but the other is not occupied. There is a chair either side of the bed, which helps me be a discreet observer.

Merrick seems comfortable enough, though is connected to monitors and has a drip going in through a cannula on the back of his left hand. The back of the bed is raised. He turns off the TV as we come into the room. Smithers turns on the charm and makes it seem as if Merrick is doing us a great favour by helping us out.

Merrick confirms what we suspected about Federico Bruno, that he is a professional colleague and in fact a co-author of a number of papers. He had been attending a conference in Melbourne and was paying a short private visit. He wasn't an official visitor at the University of Auckland, which explains why the administrator, Mary Tyler, had no knowledge of him. When Merrick had the fall he was put on an urgent list for the operation and a place became available at very short notice through a cancellation. He suggested that Bruno might like to use his university office while he was in hospital as being more pleasant than the messy area he had at home. He totally forgot to inform Mary Tyler or anyone at the University.

Smithers tells him that Professor Makkonen found the body. "Two 'k's," he says as an aside to me. Oh, does he play a part well?

"Yes, the gender studies lady," Merrick responded. "I totally forgot about her."

Smithers speaks of contacting next of kin and Merrick says he phoned Bruno's wife as soon as he heard. Smithers gets her contact details and asks if there is anyone else who could formally identify the body. Apparently there is another physicist at the University who could do that. Merrick says what a shock it is and how upset Bruno's wife was when he phoned her. Smithers asks if he was aware of Bruno having a heart condition. He replies that he wasn't aware of one.

Smithers keeps the interview fairly short and wraps up by thanking him profusely and saying we would be in touch if we needed anything more. Returning in the car to the police station he asks me what I think.

"He seems pretty plausible to me, but these people can be pretty good actors," I add cheekily.

"Oh indeed they can," he replies with emphasis but a blank expression.

"I thought he wasn't as upset as I expected, at least to begin with." I add.

"That's what I thought too," Smithers replies. "Maybe he is relieved it wasn't him."

"Mistaken identity?"

"Possibly."

It is the evening and Smithers is at home in a flat in St. Mary's Bay pondering the 'body in the University' case. He has finished his microwaved Indian meal and is nursing a single malt.

I am intrigued by this case. It's a shame I'm so busy with the current meth investigation that I can only give it half an eye. I could delegate it to Cheryl I suppose but I have plenty for her to do following the meth distribution network and, anyway, I want to take the lead on this myself. Liaising with Maria is a plus, which is surprising as SIS interactions can be awkward. Of course, she's attractive and if I were 10 years younger ... No, cancel that thought but it is true she is comfortable to work with. She displayed confidence in the way she insisted on speaking to Inka and then in interrupting the interview. That was the right thing to do. It would have been a waste of effort for us to treat Inka as a suspect, in our minds at least, when she is totally in the clear. But Maria didn't try to impress or override me. She just laid out what she needed to. More would have been nice but she cut to the chase.

Inka Makkonen is a very different character, unguarded at moments and, for that reason, believable in a general way. I assume she is an SIS agent or is being recruited or perhaps she is a consultant. In any event, she was clearly in Merrick's room for a purpose and not the one she told us about. I expect the SIS will share information in due course but in the meantime the ball is in our court to identify the body and locate Merrick. I have already got the team onto that. We should get a cause of death in the morning. It could turn out to be natural causes but I don't believe given Merrick is an SIS person of inter

I wonder what Maria's connection with Inka Makkonen really is: an element of the personal I reckon but I could be wrong. The combination of the professional and the personal can be difficult. Well Maria is in town and I will talk to her tomorrow, hopefully with some news. We'll see how it goes.

It is Thursday morning and Smithers is at work early. Details of the meth investigation are only slowly falling into place. Mid morning, Cheryl comes to see him with some news.

"Chief, we've got some progress on the 'body at the University' case. The cause of death, tentatively, is heart failure. There could be more to come. His name is Federico Bruno and here is a copy of the main cards in his wallet. And we know where Merrick is, in the Southern Cross Hospital in Brightside. He had a hip replacement yesterday and so wasn't easy to contact. He can be interviewed at 3 pm if we wish. I expect you would like to talk to him. Would you like me sitting in on the interview?"

"Confirm the interview for 3, but I think I would like to offer our SIS friend the opportunity to sit in on it so won't need you."

“You don’t mean Inka Makkonen, do you?”

“No, her friend, Maria, who came to pick her up. She is still in town.”

“Very good, sir, I’ll set up the interview with Merrick,” responded Cheryl with possibly just a flicker of a smile.

Smithers gives Maria a quick call and suggests she come in at midday, if she is free. He wants to talk over the information so far, as well as inviting her to join him in the interview.

I am kept busy most of the morning with the meth investigation, which is inching ahead. There is a meeting at 1 o’clock with the top brass where I will have to report progress. I am not looking forward to that. Maria is waiting for me when I appear at ten past twelve. I need some lunch and suggest she joins me in the cafeteria. She is happy to do that and asks the obvious questions when we sit down. She is very happy to join the interview. I know exactly how I want to play the interview, keeping her in the background but observing. I don’t pussyfoot around and just lay it out. I’m doing her a favour really, allowing her to keep a low profile, but some don’t like to be told.

Maria is very happy with the plan, keeps on topic and doesn’t feel the need to chitchat. She also seems to know that I could do with ten minutes to get my head into the right space for my next meeting and takes her leave promptly. But as she leaves she asks,

“Have you ever acted on the stage?”

Where did that come from? That’s left field for someone so focused. I have never been asked that before. The usual question is,

“Do you play poker?”

I am told I have a poker face. Never mind. Focus on the next meeting.

The meeting with my superiors goes as well as could be expected, that is, not very well but I box on. It is a pleasant change to see Maria again and drive to the hospital even though we are slightly pushed for time.

I find Merrick puzzling. It seems to me that if he had something to hide he wouldn’t agree to an interview in hospital a day after an operation under general anaesthetic. But there is something going on here. He is calm, in fact too calm. I put my questions to him in a friendly way and he responds in a cooperative manner. We aren’t learning all that much from him, though we are confirming his connection with Frederico Bruno and rounding out the picture of why he was there in the office.

Maria comments afterwards that he seemed, initially at least, not very upset about the death of his friend and colleague. That was what I thought too. Someone you know well dies in your office when you are in hospital. That would trigger some significant emotion in most people surely, even on the assumption that the death was by natural causes. Perhaps yesterday's anaesthetic and the ongoing pain medication explain the surprising calm. There is nothing to follow up at the moment. We await a more detailed report from the autopsy.