

*The babysitter had never seen Ruby Devine dressed so glamorously. 'A friend of mine made it,' Ruby said. 'He's one of the best designers in Perth.' She kissed the girl on the cheek. 'Come in – Rebecca's upstairs watching TV. She won't bother you, she's got school tomorrow.'*

*Ruby led the babysitter through to the kitchen, where she'd laid out a meal for her. 'Just heat it up when you're ready. And there's a Bogart film on tonight. I'll wait by the car. I won't be late.'*

*The babysitter was already in her bikini when the doorbell rang. She put on her jacket and jeans and went to answer it. Ruby was searching through her silver mesh handbag as she entered.*

*'I took the wrong keys,' she said, nervous now.*

*A man in a trilby was waiting by Ruby's Dodge Phoenix, staring out over the river. Ruby turned her away from the door before heading upstairs. When she came back down she gave the girl another kiss on the cheek.*

*Now the babysitter could have the run of the big house. Now she could swim in the heated pool. The place was like nothing she'd ever seen. She heard the car start with a growl as she locked the door behind her.*

Tuesday, 25 November 1975. Six months since Ruby Devine had been shot four times in the head with a sawn-off .22. But that wasn't the beginning of Swann's troubles. They'd started a few weeks before, when his teenage daughter ran away from home. He'd been looking for Louise in the small towns of the Great Southern when news arrived that the queen of vice had been murdered.

The story was all over the airwaves. Ruby Devine killed in her Dodge Phoenix on a fairway of the South Perth golf club. Left there on display. No effort made to hide her body. Even the ABC was calling it a gangland hit, the pundits yapping about the city's loss of innocence. At petrol stations on the long drive back to Perth Swann was asked by pump attendants and truck drivers if he'd heard the news. None of them knew he was a policeman. If they had they mightn't have asked.

Before the news was days old the rumour was that Ruby Devine had been murdered by police. Swann heard it voiced in cynical asides all over the city.

‘They’ll never find who did it,’ a newspaper seller with prison tats on his forearms said. ‘Bastards know how to show no bruises.’

‘They’ll find someone, mate,’ the man behind Swann chipped in. ‘Just won’t be the one that did it.’

The newspaper seller turned out to be right, because six months later the investigation had gone nowhere. The CIB had no leads. Nothing at all.

But what did they expect, Swann had asked, when the same people who’d killed Ruby Devine were leading the investigation?

The church bells were ringing over the Supreme Court Gardens. An hour late now. Swann waited at his table in the packed courtroom. Fans whirred overhead. The chatter was amplified in the chamber of polished floors and panelled walls. The only remaining seat was the leather chair where the royal commissioner would take his place.

Swann’s suit was neatly pressed, his hair combed, his shoes polished and his tie straight. He leaned into the table and drummed his fingers to stop them shaking. The memory of his daughter felt like touching a live wire. The court was crowded with journalists and members of the public, but he didn’t want to look. Many were there to support him but some had the rapt look of voyeurs.

Swann had spoken out against the so-called purple circle of corrupt police, who profited from organised crime in the state, and the word on the streets was that he was a marked man. An assassin might already be in the room, waiting for his chance.

The day he’d driven back to Perth after hearing of Ruby Devine’s murder, he’d gone straight to the crime scene. The seventh fairway had been cordoned off from the narrow road that ran parallel to the Kwinana Freeway, thick with commuters ogling in the rain. There were no detectives present but he showed his badge to the two uniformed constables, who let him under the tape and into the tent built over Ruby’s Dodge. They walked him through the day’s events, pointing out by torchlight the blood spatters on the inside roof of the car, the fact that a single cartridge had been located on the front passenger floorpan, just beneath the seat.

Judging by the sprays of blood across the car’s interior, Ruby’s killer had shot her once from the passenger side, then calmly got out, walked around to the driver’s side and shot her three more times before departing. There was no word yet on the time of death.

Swann left the golf course and drove to Central in East Perth, to the CIB offices. Because he'd been away from the city for some seven years, a couple of the younger detectives on the night desk didn't recognise him and he needed to explain himself before Casey would emerge.

Right away, Swann's suspicions were aroused. Detective Inspector Donald Casey, head of the Consorting Squad, who had no reason to be wary of Swann's interest in the murder, was blunt and hardheaded in response to his questions, more evasive than he needed to be. The two of them had served as detectives in Kalgoorlie some ten years before, and both had known Ruby Devine well. But that didn't seem to matter to Casey, who told Swann straight out, in front of the other detectives, to piss off and mind his own business.

It was five minutes past ten when the Right Honourable Justice Partridge entered the courtroom. He was a short man with a straight back and a poker face. He stood at his bench and raised his gavel, regarding the room with clever blue eyes. Partridge was a Victorian and a retiree, but beyond that Swann knew nothing about the elderly man beating his gavel on the bench.

'By command of the Governor, I hereby open the Royal Commission into Matters Surrounding the Administration of the Law Relating to Prostitution, in this state of Western Australia, in this month of November, in this year of our Lord nineteen hundred and seventy-five.'

Partridge nodded to the Counsel Assisting beneath him. QC Adrian Wallace pushed out his chest and placed a hand behind his back, silks glimmering in the light. He cleared his throat and nodded at Swann, whose hands had stopped shaking. He was ready.

'I request that to begin the proceedings Superintendent Keith Barlow appear before the commission.'

There were groans of frustration in the gallery. Most disappointed were the journalists in the front row, pencils at the ready. Swann too slumped. This wasn't a promising start.

Barlow passed close and smiled as he came to the stand in full uniform, presenting his formal dress cap in both hands. The badge on his cap shone and his sleeve buttons were polished. His hair was oiled and parted down the middle. His green eyes sparkled like fish scales as he took the oath.

QC Wallace waited until the bible had been returned to its place beside the stenographer. 'Superintendent Barlow, could you please describe your current rank in the West Australian police service?'

‘I have recently been appointed Superintendent of Central Perth Police Station, uniformed branch.’

Wallace nodded. ‘Thank you, Superintendent. My next question goes to the reason we are here, specifically the allegations raised by your colleague, Superintendent Frank Swann. These are of course familiar to anybody who reads the papers or watches the television or listens to the radio. What do you, as a fellow superintendent of the uniformed branch, make of Superintendent Swann’s assertions that there exists a core of corrupt police in the West Australian service, and that these unnamed persons are somehow responsible for Mrs Devine’s tragic death?’

‘Well, I will say from the outset that these allegations are entirely false. In my current role I have thoroughly examined . . .’

Swann watched Barlow as he crafted his response. The man was known in the service as the smiling assassin, someone who collected dirt and informed on his colleagues to those higher up, ingratiating himself and improving his chances of promotion.

‘Of course, it’s the first law of policing that before motive can be established the quality of the information needs to be determined. In this matter, given the recent history of Superintendent Swann’s, shall we say, problems . . .’

Swann looked to Partridge in the hope he might intervene, and was surprised to find that the judge bore unmistakable signs of pain. His forehead was troubled, the same colour as his wig, and his eyes were locked in a hard focus on Wallace.

‘Superintendent Barlow, would you please explain for us the reason Superintendent Swann came to insinuate himself into the Ruby Devine murder investigation, given that his position at the time was . . .’ The QC glanced at his notes. ‘Superintendent of Albany Police Station, a small shire of twenty thousand souls some five hundred kilometres from Perth?’

Swann watched the lines around Partridge’s eyes harden at the question, although he allowed it. Barlow, on the other hand, was eager to continue. He stiffened his back and placed both hands at his sides.

‘Mr Wallace, I wasn’t aware of Superintendent Swann’s interest in the murder of Ruby Devine until I received an angry call from one of the investigating officers of the CIB, Detective Inspector Donald Casey. Superintendent Swann had had a long association with the deceased, although I’m not privy to the exact *nature* of their relationship . . .’ Barlow

let the insinuation hang for a moment. ‘Except to say that Superintendent Swann was once himself detective in charge of Vice.’

It took only the briefest glance at the judge for Barlow to see that he was laying it on too thick. He took a deep breath, composed himself. ‘Needless to say, I was immediately concerned. Superintendent Swann was at the time on special leave due to the disappearance of his daughter. It was assumed he was recuperating rather than concerning himself with an unrelated murder investigation.’

Wallace nodded patiently as Barlow paused to sip from a glass of water.

‘I was even more alarmed to hear that Superintendent Swann was involving himself because of a rumour that his daughter had been seen in the company of Mrs Devine some time before her death. Detective Inspector Casey gave me assurances that this rumour was precisely that, a baseless piece of gossip.’

Barlow’s voice became louder as he worked the rich vein of anger that plagued him as an administrator. He was twenty years older than Swann but had only just been made superintendent, and he wasn’t going to waste this opportunity to make his loyalties clear.

‘I ordered Superintendent Swann to desist from his inquiries and return to his official duties, but he point-blank refused. It was at this time that I requested he make himself available for a psychiatric examination.’

Swann saw that the judge’s eyes had begun watering in the sharp morning light. He glanced around the courtroom but nobody else seemed to have noticed. All eyes were fixed on Barlow.

‘. . . repairing the relationship between the uniformed branch and the CIB . . .’

Partridge seemed to be barely holding it together. His bright hunter’s eyes caught Swann’s gaze and held it. He cleared his throat and tapped the microphone with a bony finger. ‘Thank you, Superintendent Barlow.’ His voice was surprisingly loud. ‘Your statement has been recorded. We will now adjourn until —’

There was another groan from the crowd as Partridge gathered himself out of his chair, reached for the gavel and struck it once, twice, before retreating to his chambers in a swish of red silk.

Swann reclined by the pool and waited for Marion to phone. He had been living in the hotel for a month and his wife generally called at five-thirty, but it didn't look like she was going to ring today.

It had been a long afternoon watching the fix come in. Ever since the commission's terms of reference had been announced he'd been expecting to wear it, but he hadn't expected the purple circle to be so obvious. Their aim was to convince the judge that he was unstable, unreliable or of bad character, and that his testimony was worthless. Witness after witness, each of them from the upper echelons of the force, had gone straight for his weak point – the rumour that he'd had a nervous breakdown following the disappearance of Louise, the revelation of his affair with a younger colleague, and his separation from his wife.

At this rate it was going to be a very brief royal commission.

He whirled the slurry of cracked ice around in his glass, took another mouthful of whiskey and dry. It was also clear they'd be taking advantage of the fact that the commissioner was an outsider. While to the public the appointment of a judge from over east looked like an attempt at impartiality, Swann knew better.

The Counsel Assisting, the po-faced Adrian Wallace, was familiar to Swann. He was known around town as a bad drunk and a frequenter of gambling clubs, but there were rumours too. As an ambitious young public prosecutor a decade ago he'd presided over a rapid increase in convictions for major crimes, which had led to his promotion to Crown Law's Chief Prosecutor. The rumours tied him to the equally illustrious careers of several CIB detectives, in court cases where the evidence was scant, to say the least, manufactured with a nudge and a wink when verbals had failed to work. Swann had heard that with the help of Wallace the purple circle could stitch up anyone they wanted.

Wallace's appointment as Counsel to the royal commission told Swann what to expect over the coming days.

He topped up his drink from the bottle of Jameson beside his sun-bleached recliner. The dry ginger had run out but he was beyond that now. He stood and looked at his wristwatch, fished around in his pocket for a ten-cent coin. The shifts at Central changed at five, but he always gave Terry time to snoop around. Six o'clock was the hour they'd arranged, every night that Terry wasn't out on patrol.

Swann felt like a fool calling from a public phone, but the rumour was they'd put a team onto him. That meant his phone was probably bugged.

He'd had a Telecom mate check the line in his hotel room, and while the test showed a wireless signal emitting from the phone, there was no warrant for surveillance on record. But that meant nothing. Casey's detectives didn't bother with warrants.

Swann dropped the coin into the slot and dialled. His fingers were clammy with sweat. He let the phone ring three times then hung up. He retrieved the coin, wiped his fingers on his trousers and counted down a minute on his wristwatch. He had to be careful about using the line in his hotel room, but he also had to be careful of appearing paranoid, now that he knew their plan of attack.

That they were going to paint him as an unreliable witness explained the death threats, and the two break-ins of his room – it had been trashed, and documents stolen. It also explained the barrage of phone calls, hung up as soon as he answered, the damage done to his EK station wagon parked in the lot, the pistol shots fired in the street late at night. Swann knew that the more he complained, the more he would look like the delusional fool they wanted him to be.

But he wasn't going to fall for any of that. The harassment of suspects was an old game. He'd played it himself. You bullied and put the fear in them, slowly drove them crazy. You followed them around and tipped out their garbage bins, broke into their houses to let them know you could frame them, but in such a way that couldn't be proved.

Swann redialled. Terry answered on the third ring, as Swann knew he would. He imagined him in the small windowless tearoom in Traffic, with the cluttered noticeboard and the worn lino floor and the dirty coffee mugs in the chipped enamel sink, smoking a cigarette and holding the door closed with his boot. That guys like Terry Accardi still looked out for Swann was what kept him going. Terry was one of a number of neighbourhood kids Swann had encouraged to join the force, every one of them a certain type – brawlers with brains.

Swann could see their potential because he'd been the same.

'There's nothing on the radio about the royal commission,' Terry said. He had the clipped voice of a copper already, a measure of how well he was fitting in, taking on the mannerisms of his older peers. Terry was twenty-two now, had done three of the five years he needed to get down in uniform before he could apply to become a detective. Then would come his real test of character.

‘There won’t be. It’s looking like a whitewash. Any progress on the ballistics?’

‘I heard another vanload of rifles have come in, but no matches yet.’

‘Any new rumours?’

‘Oh yeah. Word’s out that now the commission’s on, anybody caught talking to you is for it. Posting out in the sticks for starters, if it’s verbal. Dismissal if it’s evidentiary.’

Swann couldn’t help smiling. The pleasure young Terry took in the way he pronounced ‘evidentiary’.

‘Said to come from up top, Barlow and the others. Nothing on paper, of course.’

‘How’s the rumour being treated?’

There was a moment of awkward silence before Terry answered. ‘They don’t know you like I do.’

‘Yeah, well, keep out of it, but listen.’

‘No worries. Nobody knows we’re mates.’

Terry hadn’t needed to say it to make it clear. There were plenty of good cops, honest cops, both in uniform and the CIB, but there was also the code, something drummed into every recruit from day one, the defining difference between the cop and the crim. To Terry’s peers it looked as though Swann was going against the code, big-noting himself by turning on his own, weakening them all by bringing on the royal commission. What Swann hoped Terry understood was that he had little choice.

‘How long are you on nightshift?’ he asked Terry.

‘Another couple of weeks, then I’m not sure. I’m going to try and get up there tonight, if they’re called out. They’ve got to get sloppy some time.’

The first whispers of police involvement in Ruby Devine’s murder had surfaced with the news of her execution, then hardened into belief after word got out about her tax debt and threats to name names. The secrecy that cloaked the investigation only reinforced the rumours of CIB involvement, but officially the gossip was blamed on Swann’s inquiries – an excuse, he knew, for the way he’d been nobbled.

Immediately after he started asking questions the counterrumours appeared – he'd had a nervous breakdown, he'd had an affair with a younger colleague, Marion had kicked him out . . .

Only one of these stories was true.

'I checked the missing persons register for yesterday,' Terry was saying. 'Nothing there.'

'Stats from the dayshift?' Swann asked.

'A rape in East Vic Park. Two skinheads bashed a bog kid down in Rockingham, used a star-picket – brain trauma. Pack of bogs attacked some skinheads in Hay Street, one broken arm and a fractured skull. Plenty of domestics. A stabbing at the blacks' camp in Coolbellup. Some old Slav killed and ate his son's carrier pigeons in Spearwood, charges dropped. The usual.'

'Thanks, Terry. Tomorrow.'

Swann hung up and walked past the pool, noticing for the first time the old barbeque in its murky depths. Punctured mattresses and broken bottles and a single blowfish down there too, the blowie darting about its filthy aquarium, looking up at him with angry black eyes.

He lit a cigarette and checked his watch. At six-thirty he had a meeting with Reggie Mansell, and the state of Reggie's nerves meant he wouldn't wait if Swann was late. Reggie always feared the worst, which was probably the only reason he was still alive. He'd taken to carrying his passport and enough cash to last him a month in Bali, Hong Kong or Kuala Lumpur.

Swann knew this because Reggie had urged him to do the same, should things deteriorate.

But it was too late for that.