

By the time Detective Sergeant Priyanka Pal pulled up to the scene, rent-a-crowd had already arrived. Neighbours in pyjamas and wrapped up in dressing gowns ably camouflaged their nosiness as having purpose. They were ‘doing the hedges’, ‘walking the dog’, and ‘just popped out for the newspaper’, one was pretending to water his roses with the hose turned off. Meaningful looks swapped between them like notes passed by naughty schoolchildren. Melbourne’s inner north. She should have stopped for coffee.

Throwing her car in park, she unbuckled and took perverse pleasure in kicking the door open, startling one of the many sticky-beaks standing on the pavement. She gave him a stern look. He ducked his head and like a turtle into its shell, tucked behind a drooping scarecrow. A good start.

Cosy workers’ cottages with stained glass windows and pretty floral gardens dominated the street. Punctuating it were the occasional solid brick homes surrounded by citrus trees and wide stretches of cement driveway – poured by newly arrived Greek immigrants decades ago to remove the hassle of kikuyu grass and spiky summer bindis.

There was the morning warble of a nearby magpie and, in the flowering gum Priyanka stood beneath, she could hear the peeping chirrups of rainbow lorikeets bobbing about.

How idyllic.

Shame about the corpse.

Beyond the blue police tape crossing the street and the traditional picket fence of Number 12, the forensics team had already erected a small tent in amongst the roses and lavender. Perfect. With any luck their swift action meant they’d dodged tacky videos on social media. As far as she could tell, the crowd of nosey parkers were all locals. They’d beaten the press then. Even better. Local uniforms were taking the on-lookers’ details and sending them home.

The tent entrance flapped as a small, pointy-faced woman with a tight blonde braid emerged. No blue slippers so forensics must be done inside. She clocked Priyanka almost immediately and struck out down the garden path towards her, eyes bright. Everything about Christina was sharp and taut, like a black line drawing on white paper. Priyanka meanwhile was wearing a blazer at least one size too big. She’d updated her wardrobe since having the baby, but she’d learned early on to never wear clothes she liked to potentially grisly crime scenes. You never get the smell out. Christina reached her just as Priyanka ducked beneath the tape.

“You are not going to believe this,” she murmured, ushering Priyanka through the quaint garden gate. “This is like nothing else.” Christina loved to build tension. In the seven

months they'd been working together it had been a sticking point for Priyanka. She was doing her best to discourage it.

Priyanka was the kind of person who fast-forwarded the suspenseful parts of films. Suspense made her uncomfortable. Get to the point. Time wasting was not appreciated. Not with films and not with human cadavers. Especially on no caffeine at, she checked her watch, 0650 on a Sunday morning.

"Details?" she asked pointedly.

Christina wrinkled her nose, "Dog walker called it in, John something-or-other, we've got his info. House is owner-occupied, Amy and Tom Tittcomb, two kids, twelve and seven. Claim they know nothing about it. She's been crying pretty much non-stop since I got here, reckons she's been personally targeted. She's a bit annoying, so I'd believe it. Left her inside with hubby to calm down. Neighbours seem unsympathetic."

"And our victim?"

Christina bizarrely shook her head, eyes wide, lips pressed tight together. She pushed aside one of the tent flaps for Priyanka, "Just take a look."

Alright, so Christina's tension building had her intrigued. Priyanka nodded to forensics who were poking about the flower beds before stepping across the crisply edged lawn onto the CSI stepping plates, lain like a macabre yellow brick road into the tent. Ducking inside she almost immediately grimaced. A faint acrid tang mixed with the scent of lavender hung in the air. And small house flies buzzed over the sticky, congealed blood. It didn't matter how many scenes she visited, she never got used to it. The things that people do to one another.

This one had a certain theatricality to it, with him draped over the scarecrow like that. The scarecrow was, ironically for the occasion, dressed as a ye olde police officer. It's meticulously stitched blind button eyes and absence of mouth were an undisturbed mask to whatever horrors it might have witnessed last night. Pity they couldn't ask it what happened. A spider had already begun spinning a fresh web between the fabric of the police costume and the victim's clumped, bloody hair. Morning dew had made the victim's leather shoes slick, as if they'd been polished for the occasion, and perky evidence flags marked where they'd dragged in the dirt. There was no blood on the ground. Killed somewhere else then. Great. No crime scene.

She heard Christina follow her into the tent. It was a bit cramped with the two of them, the corpse, and the scarecrow.

"Forgive me Father for I have sinned," whispered Christina.

For goodness' sake. This was worse than Christina's usual nonsense. Priyanka shot her a look, "Some sense and professionalism please."

Christina pointed at the body, like it explained anything about her ridiculous comment, "Look!"

"I'm looking. Black pants and a white shirt do not a priest make."

"His face! Look at his face!"

Priyanka sucked on her teeth to hold in what she felt like saying and instead, careful not to touch anything, leaned in to look at the victim more closely. She flicked the light of her phone on to see better. She inspected him clinically. Killed by multiple blows to the back of the head by the looks of it. A nasty hit at the base of his skull and the bone was gruesomely concaved at his temple. Messy business. Poorly executed (pardon the pun). She could hear her mother's appalled voice in her head, 'no jokes Pinku! A man is dead'. Sorry Ma, it's better than throwing up.

Priyanka catalogued the victim. Male, white, early 50s, average height and build, suit pants and dress shirt – expensive, dark hair with greying temples, a chin that looked like it meant business and... her breath hissed in between her teeth. She knew who this was.