

**MICHAEL
DUFFY**

THE TOWER


ALLEN & UNWIN

First published in 2009

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Cataloguing-in-Publication details are available
from the National Library of Australia
www.librariesaustralia.nla.gov.au

ISBN 978 1 74175 813 9

Set in 12/15 pt Granjon by Midland Typesetters, Australia
Printed and bound in Australia by Griffin Press

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For Max Suich,
who brought me back to crime*

The woman was falling close to the building, down the face of the enormous, unfinished skyscraper. She fell in silence, turning slowly, through the mist and light rain.

The police car far below was creeping up the inside lane next to The Tower. It was moving tentatively because it was night, and because of the rain. The woman landed on top of the vehicle with a loud crash, the force of the impact partially crushing the roof.

It took the two uniformed officers a while to get out of the car. When they did, one of them was sick in the gutter. His partner took a few steps backwards, her eyes fixed on the dead woman on the roof. She had obviously fallen from a very long way up.

SUNDAY

One

Are you there yet?’
‘Almost.’

He slipped under the blue and white tape and approached the constable with the clipboard. ‘Senior Constable Nicholas Troy,’ he said. ‘Homicide.’ He thrust his ID at the man, then continued talking into his mobile.

‘I’ll cancel tomorrow night?’

‘Go by yourself,’ he said. ‘Get Aleisha to babysit.’

‘You just want her at home by yourself.’

‘Ha ha. We already bought the present. You should go.’

‘Maybe.’

He reached the place and stopped. They’d already set up lights and you could see every detail. He’d been twelve years in the job, four in Homicide. But this was something new.

‘I’ve got to go to work now,’ he said, and disconnected.

In front of him was a police patrol car with a woman lying face down on its roof. There was something strange about the body, which seemed to have been compressed to some state between three dimensions and two. Crime scene officers and police were walking around the car, unusually quiet. Troy could see that they too were

marvelling at the odds of the woman striking a moving car, let alone one of theirs.

And then there was the building.

The place was called The Tower and it was still a construction site. The project was massive in every way. When it had been conceived it was to be the tallest building in the world, although it had been overtaken by a skyscraper in Dubai recently. Occupying an entire city block, its progress through conception, planning and construction had been dogged by controversy. Colourful characters, a bankruptcy, allegations of corruption: the story of the place had grown as big as the structure.

He turned back to the body embedded in the car roof. The woman had long black hair and her skull had partially disintegrated. Blood covered the top of the car and some of the windows, especially the windscreen. The most disturbing aspect was the woman's limbs, which had snapped and hung over the sides of the roof at disturbing angles. A young security guard was standing next to Troy, staring. Suddenly he clasped a hand to his mouth and ran away.

Troy looked some more. The woman was wearing a very short black dress and it had ridden up so that her buttocks were visible. Her knickers were minimal and lacy, and for a moment Troy thought of Anna. The thought came to him and for a moment he couldn't do anything about it. He hadn't seen his wife in anything like that since before their son had been born eighteen months ago. He turned to a uniformed sergeant and asked, 'Shoes?'

No shoes had been found. No bag either. Nothing had come off the body, and the only jewellery the victim was wearing was a large bracelet on her left wrist. Troy moved around and examined the silver band set with glittering stones—fake, presumably. Anna liked jewellery, but he suspected she'd turn her nose up at something as gaudy as this.

He blinked and looked away, and saw McIver standing nearby. The sergeant hadn't shaved and was wearing a leather jacket over a black T-shirt and jeans. Troy wondered if he'd been drinking. The on-call team wasn't supposed to drink, but the sergeant did things his own way.

‘You got here quickly,’ Troy said.

‘I was in The Rocks. Enjoying myself.’

They shook hands; the Homicide Squad handled murders all over the state, and McIver had been in Moree for the past few months.

‘Anna’s well?’ the sergeant asked. ‘And Matt?’

Troy nodded. McIver’s third wife had left him last year, and as far as he knew there was no one else in his life to ask about. There were no children. He was wondering what to say when he heard a voice from behind.

‘Filthy McIver.’

A guy in a suit had appeared. He was about fifty, and had a moustache, quite a good effort. You didn’t see many of those anymore.

‘Do I know you?’ McIver said. The two men stared at each other and Troy watched patiently: the newcomer bloated and red-faced, McIver a bit younger, lean and tense. Finally McIver relented and said to Troy, ‘Detective Sergeant Bruce Little, City Central.’

They shook hands.

Troy asked if they had a name for the victim, and Little said there was no identification on her. ‘No room for any,’ he said softly, looking at the half-naked body on the roof of the car. An inspector from City Central, Gina Harmer, was inside the building, he told them, organising a search. She was the local officer in charge of the scene.

Uniformed police had been arriving, pausing to look at the body before going into the building. Now crime scene officers began to erect a screen around the car, and one of them bumped into an onlooker.

‘Let’s clear the area,’ McIver said loudly. ‘I don’t want anyone here who’s not supposed to be here.’

The other people standing around ignored him.

‘Some of the blokes want to have a look,’ Little said. ‘Anything to do with The Tower, big deal around here.’

‘And when I say not anyone,’ McIver said slowly, raising his voice, ‘I mean no one.’

‘Crime scene’s not here,’ Little protested. ‘Up there.’

He gestured with his thumb.

McIver stared at him for so long without saying anything that Little looked at Troy for help. When none was offered, he turned to go.

‘Are you and I going to have an argument?’ McIver yelled.

People were paying attention now. Troy took a step towards him and stopped, unsure of what to do. It was always hard to know how pissed the sarge was when he’d been drinking. Right now he was swaying slightly, but Troy knew this mightn’t mean much.

Little kept walking.

Here we go, Troy thought. Here we go.

But after a moment McIver seemed to forget Little.

‘Anyone else here yet?’ he asked Troy. ‘What about Vella?’

Troy shook his head. Don Vella, the inspector in charge of the team, lived in Mount Annan, nearly an hour south-west of Sydney’s CBD; he’d be some time yet.

McIver walked around to the other side of the car, keeping his big hands in his pockets, as he always did at a crime scene. Usually he was the most restless of men, and Troy guessed this was his way of restraining his imagination, forcing himself to do nothing except observe. McIver looked at the car and then raised his eyes to the top of the building. ‘What are the chances?’ Troy followed his gaze up; the skyscraper disappeared into the unseasonal mist after maybe ten storeys. It was clad in glass and stone as far as he could see, but he knew the upper section was still just a steel and concrete skeleton. Since the windows didn’t open, the woman must have fallen from somewhere up there.

He wandered over to where Little was lighting a cigarette.

‘You ever been up there?’

Little nodded. ‘They show us around every few months, in case we get called in.’

‘How could she have come off? I thought they had some sort of steel screen around all the floors where the walls haven’t been finished.’

‘Landing platforms, one on each floor until it’s done. They stick out so the crane can unload stuff. Wall around them maybe so high.’ He held a hand level with his waist. Then, ‘Ought to do something about McIver. He’s not in a fit state.’

‘What?’ said Troy, who’d been wondering if there were any platforms above the spot where the woman had landed.

Little’s gaze shifted as McIver joined them.

‘So what are we doing here?’ Mac said. It was a reasonable question. Homicide dealt with murders, and there was no evidence this woman had been pushed. He yawned, but Troy knew he was not as bored as he seemed. If he really thought it was a suicide he would have left by now. Something in the situation had caught his attention.

Little took the cigarette out of his mouth. ‘The problem is how she could have got in, just someone wanted to kill herself. This place has good security. Our super says it’s likely she’s brought in with a van.’

For some reason this seemed to annoy McIver. ‘Ron’s a bit of a thinker, is he?’ He looked at Troy: ‘Ron Siegert.’

‘Point is,’ said Little, ‘makes it less likely she killed herself, if she was here doing something with other people. People like privacy to kill themselves. Maybe here on business.’ He stabbed in the direction of the building with his cigarette. ‘Maybe a prozzie, brought in for the guys working here tonight.’

Little sounded excited. Troy wondered how he’d made it to sergeant. But there were so many ways.

‘And if she *was* killed,’ Little continued, ‘we were here within minutes. Could have blocked off the escape route of whoever done it. Only two ways out.’ He pointed to the uniforms standing outside the pedestrian entrance to the building, and the one for vehicles just up the road. ‘The killer might still be around.’

Troy looked at the lower storeys of The Tower. Like all construction sites in the city, it was surrounded by a high temporary wall. He pulled out a piece of gum and slowly unwrapped it.

‘How many storeys is it?’ he asked Little.

‘One-twenty. But it’s stepped in away from the road at forty on this side, so she must have come off there or lower.’ The three men stared up into the dark. ‘The glass goes up about twenty levels. So far.’

Troy grunted, thinking about the manpower they’d need to search a building this size.

Little's radio crackled and he turned away and had a brief conversation.

'Harmer says she'll be out soon,' he said, turning back. 'She's just sent up two search groups.'

McIver said, 'So where's the great man?'

'The super?'

'Himself.'

'Back at the station. That New Zealand game at the Football Stadium was called off because of the weather. He managed to get the uniforms before they were sent home.'

McIver walked away from them, back to the car, where he had a word with the crime scene officers. Troy was about to follow when Little said, 'Siegert calls The Tower a red ball, something he picked up in the States. Anything happens here is a media event, means it could get political. For him.'

'I remember there were some base jumpers,' Troy said, looking at Little's cigarette. He'd never smoked himself, but sometimes wished he had, to help fill in the time. A cop spent a lot of his life waiting around. Gum was all right but it wasn't the same.

Little nodded. 'Six guys got up to level forty and jumped off. Landed in Hyde Park. They got someone to film them and sold the footage around the world. That's when they brought in Siegert. The old super was put out to pasture.'

'Hardly his fault,' Troy said.

Security for The Tower was in the hands of a private company. He had seen a few of the guards wandering around in their dark grey uniforms.

'These days, never know whose fault anything is,' Little said, vaguely but with feeling.

McIver was coming back from the car, looking around. Looking bored.

'Keep an eye on these turnips,' he said to Troy, indicating the crime scene officers with a tilt of his chin.

'Where are you going?'

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‘See Harmer,’ McIver said, and walked off in the direction of the entrance to the building site. After pausing to allow several uniformed officers to precede him, he disappeared inside.

Troy saw a GMO he recognised further up Norfolk Street, at the barrier. The medical officer gave his name to the uniform with the clipboard and approached the detectives. They spoke for a while and then Little went behind the screens with him. Troy stood by himself, feeling the cold move up through his shoes. He thought about calling Anna but she might still be putting Matt to bed. Their son had asthma, which seemed to mean a lot of work, what with the medication and cleaning the house. Much of this fell on Anna’s shoulders, and he felt a bit guilty because he was often away on jobs. She didn’t complain, but once the boy was asleep at night, she liked to have half an hour or so to herself. It was her way of coping. He looked at his watch and decided to give it more time.

Two

This list of countries,' she said, 'what's it for?'

Sean Randall paused naked in the doorway, his half-erection not sure which way to go. Kristin was sitting on the side of the bed, bent over his wallet. God, she was white. Randall was Irish and he'd seen a lot of pale women, but not white like this, about as white as a person could be.

'You shouldn't go through my stuff,' he said.

There'd been a girl once, Moira he thought her name was, who'd help herself to a line if he left the room for even a minute. Nose on her like a vacuum cleaner, good healthy appetite. But he couldn't recall anyone going through his wallet before.

'I know,' she said, looking at him bold-eyed. Taking things between them to a new level. 'But I like to know about the men I spend time with.' Looking around the bedroom: 'It's not like you leave many clues.'

It was only a rented place. Nice big colour photo of the Taipei 101 tower on the cream wall. Stacks of *Wired* and *Fast Company* on the beige carpet. Big television in the corner, connected to the small digital video camera on its slender tripod. All their clothes scattered around, phones and shit on the bedside table.

‘What’s that rock?’ she said, pointing to a chunk the size of a baby’s head lying on the floor.

Randall smiled. They all asked that. ‘Jack Taylor, my boss, went to Italy to select the marble for The Tower’s lobby. You go to this huge quarry and look at all these huge lumps of the stuff, make your choice. When it turned up here six months later it was different—they’d substituted some flawed stuff for what Jack had picked. So he asked me to go over and sort it out.’

It was a good story. He’d flown over, selected some good stuff, huge rocks as high as he was, and signed his name on them with a big marker pen, then taken photographs of each rock. Attention to detail. Finally, just as he was leaving, he’d given the quarry sales manager an envelope. First-class return tickets for two to the Gold Coast, a week’s accommodation at the Palazzo Versace.

‘We got the right marble,’ he said, and saw she was impressed, despite herself. This was good.

He felt his erection stiffening and came into the room and sat down, running his hand down her back as the give of the mattress pushed their thighs together.

‘Come here,’ he said.

Kristin turned and kissed him. Her lips were thin and her breasts small. In many ways she was not especially feminine, although her arse was big enough. But she was very determined, about everything, and he was enjoying that. His last girlfriend, if you could call her that, had tended to get emotional about things. Randall liked variety.

‘So why are thirty-eight of the countries marked?’

He took her hand and put it on his thigh, feeling the small piece of paper drop between his legs. ‘They’re the ones I’ve been to. I want to visit every country on earth one day.’

She frowned in concentration and he waited patiently, working on her spine with his nails.

Eventually she shivered and said, ‘I’ve been to thirty-two. How old are you?’

‘Thirty-four.’

‘Well, I’m only twenty-eight.’

They kissed for a while but then she stopped. ‘You never told me you’d been to Iceland. Who do you know there?’

She was from Iceland, worked for the United Nations or some related NGO—she’d told him the first time they’d met but he hadn’t taken much notice. He recalled her saying her organisation helped women who’d been trafficked for sex, and guessed she must be a player to get sent to Sydney, a far more pleasant posting than most places with trafficking problems. Randall liked players.

‘I was flying from New York to Frankfurt one time and we had to land, some engine thing,’ he said, licking her ear. ‘Only an hour, we didn’t even get off the plane.’

‘So you’re cheating,’ she said.

‘That’s right.’

She put her arms around him and pushed him down on the bed, each of them a little excited now.

After a bit, she said, ‘Is the camera on?’

‘I thought you didn’t like it.’

‘I want it now. But don’t get up.’

‘It’s okay,’ he said, reaching out while she sat up, running her fingernails down his chest. He felt around on the bedside table, careful not to knock the open wrapper of coke, eventually locating what he was looking for. It had been difficult to find a camera with a remote control, and he’d wondered what other people used it for.

‘Let’s make a movie,’ she said, coming down at him with her tongue out, her backside wiggling at the camera.

This, he thought, is going to be good.

But then the phone rang.