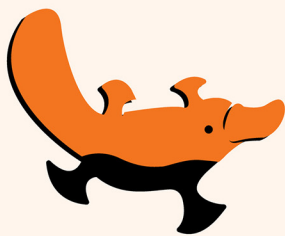


**Cass Tuplin**

(UNLICENSED INVESTIGATOR)

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**Death**  
AT THE  
**Belvedere**



**SUE WILLIAMS**

'A wonderful new series in the comedy crime genre.' Australian

A mostly normal Friday evening in the Rusty Bore Takeaway: four regulars; no new virus apocalypse; two grey nomads in search of the highway. Then an impressive sunset, accompanied by one of Best Street's finer dog-howl symphonies.

I scrubbed down my grill to a dull gleam and considered closing early. I had a date, a very overdue one, with Leo—and hopefully this time it'd be an actual *date* date instead of an argument. But before that, I needed a shower—there's nothing quite like womaning a rotisserie of barbeque chickens for building up a sweat.

My shop bell rang. I glanced up, thinking it would just be Vern with another update on his *Sunset Over the Silos* series. Vern's General Store and my shop constitute the CBD of Rusty Bore. Along with a row of galvanised steel silos much photographed...at least by Vern.

But it was a woman. Tall and slim with short, dark,

spiky hair. Oversized sunglasses. She was wearing a pinstriped black trouser suit; white shirt blazing under the jacket. Long elegant legs, made even longer by soaring red heels.

*'Helen?'* I just about dropped my Jex.

My sister left this joint when we were in our teens to go to uni and never once looked back. Of the many places she's lived since—Luxembourg, Colombia, the Cayman Islands—none have featured much in the way of red-orange dust.

*'Hey Cass.'* Helen closed the door and scurried over to my counter in a clack of stilettos.

I patted my hair, smoothed down my floral apron and cranked up a welcome smile. Tried to pretend I wasn't feeling like a sweaty frump.

I'll admit I sometimes toy with the idea that my life could still turn out to have a touch of Helen-glamour—travel the world, learn a language, spend my evenings learning to salsa on a sun-kissed Latin American balcony...

Just a few tweaks, though. No need to detail the full glory of Helen's CV but suffice to say my version wouldn't involve ten months in a Colombian jail.

Still, all that was in the past: the extremely distant past. Helen's on the straight and narrow these days, I reassured myself. Course she is.

*'Listen, bit of a problem, need your help.'* Helen glanced over her shoulder.

Problem? I got a grip on the counter, then myself.

Relax, Cass. This won't be anything crimey. Helen's focused on her Wellness coaching biz these days—kale breakfast smoothies and dawn yoga sessions on her

YouTube channel. And men, of course. Along with their usual fiascos.

This'd just be one of Helen's post-fella debriefings. She's always been a person men like to look at. Came as no surprise to me when she took out the El Buen Pastor prison beauty pageant.

Helen tugged off her sunglasses, a tremor in her hand. She dragged a fingertip over my counter and inspected it, before plopping her sunnies onto the glass.

I tried not to bristle. There's zero grime in this take-away: wall to wall stainless steel; fresh blue and white tiles. I tried—not entirely successfully—some focused breathing. My sister's devoted a lifetime to honing her talent for unsettling me.

'Why exactly are you here, Helen?'

Helen ran a hand over her spiky hair. The gold watch Dad gave her years ago flapped on her narrow wrist. I peered at her: had she got thinner? Helen got into the clean eating thing during her prison spell. *Turning my life around one meal at a time*, Cass. She got off the booze and cocaine, even stopped smoking. Helen prefers to view her time in El Buen Pastor as essentially a stretch in rehab.

'Is everything...OK?' I said, an uneasy feeling in my stomach.

'Depends what you mean by OK.' Her eyes went a little too shiny.

Oh God, had one of my neighbours died? Was that why Helen had suddenly turned up? After all, none of the 147 residents brings the average age of Rusty Bore down much under seventy-eight.

'Not Ernie?' My voice sounded strangled. Don't cry, I told myself, blinking fast. I'd called Ernie just this

morning and he'd been quite cheery—well, as cheery as a grumpy eighty-nine-year-old nursing-home resident normally sounds.

‘Ernie?’ said Helen. ‘What about him?’

I breathed out. ‘So he’s alive?’

‘Jesus, he’ll never die. What’s got into you? Frankly, I could do with a bit more support, given the circumstances.’

‘What circumstances?’

‘You know,’ she paused. ‘Ben.’

I allowed myself to exhale. This *was* just about a bloke.

Which one was Ben? The lawyer she’d lifestyle-coached by way of a tryst on his meeting-room table? It was on the fortieth floor of one of those glassed-in towers in Melbourne—gorgeous view of sparkling city lights, she said.

Or...that other fella, the one who nicked off with Helen’s twenty-three-year-old PA. There was a body-builder in that story but I couldn’t remember if it was the PA or the Ben. Hard to keep track of Helen’s Bens.

‘Ben Lanigan,’ she said. ‘I’m sure I told you about him.’

‘I don’t think so.’ Somehow the name Lanigan was familiar, though. Which in my experience isn’t always a good thing.

‘Lovely guy. A few years younger than me. So anyway...’ Helen’s voice cracked. She looked so forlorn that I couldn’t help myself. I trotted around the counter and wrapped her up in a big hug. Helen was all bones in that Italian-weave suit, with a waft of stale cigarette smoke and old alcohol.

‘This calls for the full comfort. Double bacon cheeseburger; extra chips?’

She nodded and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. Helen’s always been fond of my double bacon

cheeseburger, and really, there was no need for anyone to focus on Wellness or Clean Eating until she was feeling more upbeat. In any case, all my ingredients are very, very clean.

I got back in behind my counter and fired up the grill. Set out a generous quantity of bacon, a freshly made beef patty and some onions on the sizzling steel. Then filled a basket with artisanal hand-cut chips and lowered it into the hot oil.

While I cooked, Helen slumped into one of my stackable chairs.

‘We’ll get some food in you, then you can get the full bust-up briefing off your chest. Talking about it will do you good.’ Helen would be fine—she’s weathered plenty of relationship catastrophes, like all of us.

‘What do you mean, bust-up?’ she said.

I put her burger and chips on the table in front of her. Plonked myself in the chair opposite, next to the Kool Mints dispenser. The light from the shop window fell in a pale square on the Audi out the front—smooth silver lines. No dust or rust for Helen. Another whiff of nicotine. Had she started smoking again?

‘Listen, Cass.’ She paused. ‘Ben’s...dead.’

‘Pardon?’

Her eyes teared up. ‘Yeah...and there’s a small problem.’ She paused. ‘You have to promise me you won’t tell anyone.’

The last time Helen said that was on a reverse-charge call from airport security in Bogota. I started to get a bad feeling.

She picked at a chip. Put it down half-eaten, then grabbed her handbag. She slid out a cigarette packet

emblazoned with a giant picture of a gangrenous foot, flipped it open and put a ciggie in her mouth. She fumbled in her bag again. ‘Got a light?’

‘Sorry.’ I snatched the cigarette from her and took the pack with the other hand. ‘Health and safety.’

Helen scowled. ‘Fuck’s sake, Cassandra Ariadne freakin’ Fussbudget.’

There was no need to throw my catastrophic name around. Helen’s grieving, I told myself—she didn’t mean to be annoying. She never does. I sat, holding her fags, my arm stretched out beyond her reach. You’d think we were seven and nine, not an entire forty years older.

‘He’s dead? What’s going on, Helen?’

She pulled out one of those tiny one-person wine bottles from her bag, Freixenet on the label. Unscrewed the cap and took a swig.

‘Ben came off the rooftop terrace of his apartment. Third floor.’ An unseeing kind of expression in her eyes. ‘Five days ago.’

‘You mean he fell?’

No response.

‘Not suicide?’ Still nothing. ‘Shit, was he...pushed?’

She stared at the table.

I cleared my throat; considered how best to say this. There wasn’t a best way. ‘Helen. Did you kill him?’

She put down the little bottle with a dull clunk. ‘I can’t believe you’d ask that.’ A fissure in her voice. ‘I know I fucked up in the past, but...*really?*’

An awkward pause. ‘What happened?’

She took another sip. ‘I don’t know. The police are investigating. But there’s no way Ben jumped. He was happy, totally happy.’ She breathed in, then out, her nostrils

widening. ‘OK, he was a bit stressed...but he was fine.’

‘And you’d known him...how long?’

‘Long enough to know he didn’t fucken *kill* himself.’  
The full Helen death-glare. ‘We were...OK, I may have said this about one or two other blokes before...’ her voice cracked, ‘but Ben and me; we were the real deal. Really.’

She was right: she had said this before, quite a few times before. And it was usually followed up with unasked-for advice about my own love-life.

*Promise me you won’t move in with him, Cass. I mean, seriously, Leo Stone? Just think of who you could have if you made an effort: if you lost a kilo or two; got a good haircut. Just telling you the unvarnished truth, babe. You’ll thank me later.*

I know, hilarious. One: there’s nothing wrong with my appearance. And two: Leo’s the love of my life. There are one or two issues in that we’ve gone long-distance yet again thanks to his bloody job, but we’re working on it. Albeit slowly—it’s not easy when you’re both used to living on your own.

Helen reached into her bag, took out another piccolo and cracked it open, fizzing wine across the table. She grabbed a serviette and wiped it up, then twisted the serviette between her hands.

‘Here’s the thing.’ She untwisted the serviette. ‘There’s a blurred image of a woman on the CCTV outside Ben’s building, from the night he died. A tall woman with a nice figure in a blue coat.’

‘Oh.’ I suddenly realised why the name Lanigan was familiar. ‘The cops are looking for her. The mystery woman in the blue raincoat, they said on Channel 9.’

‘That wasn’t just some fucken *raincoat*.’



Helen slammed a hand on the table and the bad feeling in my stomach suddenly got worse.

‘Versace, Cass. The most gorgeous shade of lapis blue, virgin wool and cashmere, and I had to burn it. Got it in Rome, that coat, and I paid full price,’ she spat. ‘Have you ever tried to burn a quality woollen garment? Not fucken easy.’

A short silence.

‘What were you doing there?’ I said.

‘Nothing.’

‘Well, you have to come forward. Tell the cops it’s you on the CCTV—and that you didn’t have anything to do with his death. Obviously.’ I tried to push down the anxiety. Helen’s done dodgy stuff in the past, but that was just money: inventive tax schemes, a bit too inventive. But she wouldn’t kill someone. Would she?

A savage wipe across her eyes. ‘You have to believe me, Cass.’

‘Of course I believe you.’ I aimed for a soothing tone and just about got there; patted her arm. ‘What happened, exactly?’

‘I arrived for dinner as planned, and Ben opens the door. He’s got his phone against his ear and he frowns, then slams the door in my face, which...’ She waved her mascara-smudged hand. ‘Not a great start to an intimate evening.’

‘And then...?’

Helen started picking at the label on her bottle. ‘A long wait in his freezing hallway while he does his whisper-fest on the other side of the door and then, finally, he lets me in. Well, he didn’t bother explaining, or apologising for his appalling behaviour, so the night went downhill from

there.’ She drew a breath. ‘OK, I might have raised my voice, but that’s all. Ben was one hundred per cent alive when I left. Alive enough to give me the finger when I told him where he could shove his burnt fucken goji berries.’ Her eyes filled with tears. ‘I so hate that that’s the last thing I said to him.’

I watched her twist a silver ring around her little finger while I weighed up the pros and cons of believing her.

‘OK,’ I said finally. ‘Let’s phone Dean. He’ll smooth the way for you.’

Constable Dean Tuplin: my eldest. Currently in Paradise. I don’t mean he’s dead, of course. He’s alive and well and running the cop shop in the township of Paradise, nestled in the hills north-east of Melbourne. A green and pleasant place—community veggie patch in the main street, two bakeries, an actual newsagent. Dean hates it. Still, he’s bound to be happy someday. Surely.

‘Jesus no, not fucken Dean.’ She paused. ‘I mean, Dean’s terrific, it’s just...’

Maybe she had a point. Dean would probably focus less on helping and more on handcuffing. ‘Well, you have to speak to someone with the police.’

‘I will, course I will. But there’s a small, really easy but urgent job we need to do first.’

‘We.’

‘Well, you. You have to go and get something for me from Ben’s place.’

‘Sorry?’

‘It’s a book...After our row, I left in a hurry and forgot it.’

‘What am I—a crime-scene librarian? No way.’

‘Please? I need that book for a meeting. In Malaysia.’

And I can't go and get it myself, not with that CCTV image everywhere. All you need to do is slip in there and grab it. I've even got the key. Too easy.'

You have to love people who end their totally impossible requests like that.

'Read my lips, Helen: no.' Even for Helen, this was surreal. 'A man has died—one who cared enough about you to try and cook you a goji berry, whatever that is... Look, you need to prioritise. Forget your meeting. And definitely forget about me stealing a book.'

'It's not stealing: I bought that book fair and square.' Helen folded her arms. 'I *knew* you'd be like this.'

'Congratulations—you were right.' I stood up. 'Thanks for stopping by. You've probably got a lot of things to do. Like *go talk to the police*.'

Her eyes went shiny again. I hate it when people cry. They seem to believe their tears can manoeuvre me into doing things. Correctly, I'm sorry to say.

'Sit down, Cass. Please?'

Since when did Helen say please? I sat, against my better judgment.

'It's for Giles. Remember him? I told you about him, I'm sure.'

I shook my head.

'He's my oldest, loveliest client. And it's his favourite-ever book. A first edition.' She picked up a serviette and dabbed at her eyes. 'Giles is dying.'

'We're all dying, Helen. Just some of us sooner than others.'

I didn't feel good saying that but, frankly, I'd done a lot for Helen: loans, never repaid; lies in response to people's *what's your lovely sister up to these days?* And

I'd lost count of how many times I'd sat through Ernie's interminable, 'Ask my advice, you should follow Helen's example. The girl's never once set a foot wrong. You know she's got three hundred thousand followers on flaming Instagram?'

'You said you were a Wellness consultant,' I pointed out. 'Not running some international book-dealing racket.'

'Don't be a smart-arse. Giles is one of the few people that stuck by me through...' Helen did some rapid blinking. 'The book's the least I can do.'

'There's no way I'm breaking into a crime scene.' I folded my arms.

'It's not a crime scene—the cops are long gone.' She nibbled a chip. 'Mmm—I've always loved your chips. Do you realise how much that book is worth?'

'How much?' I couldn't help myself.

'Ten thousand dollars.'

'For a book? You can download them for free all over the internet.' I'd never do that myself, of course—I'm a foundation member of Rusty Bore's bookmobile.

'I'll pay you forty per cent. Four thousand bucks: cash.'

'Sixty. I could get arrested.' What was I saying? I wasn't doing this.

'Fifty. You won't get caught—you're too good. Mastermind private eye.'

I put her fags on the table; tried telling myself not to care. I'm no mastermind, and no detective, not officially. Although most of Rusty Bore seems to disagree.

'I'm busy, Helen. I run a takeaway.' I waved an arm. 'Hundreds of sad, hungry people need me.' It sounded unconvincing, even to me.

'Please, Cass?' She grabbed my forearm in that pincer

grip she used to use when she wanted a go on my Fonzie action doll's thumbs-up lever.

'No.'

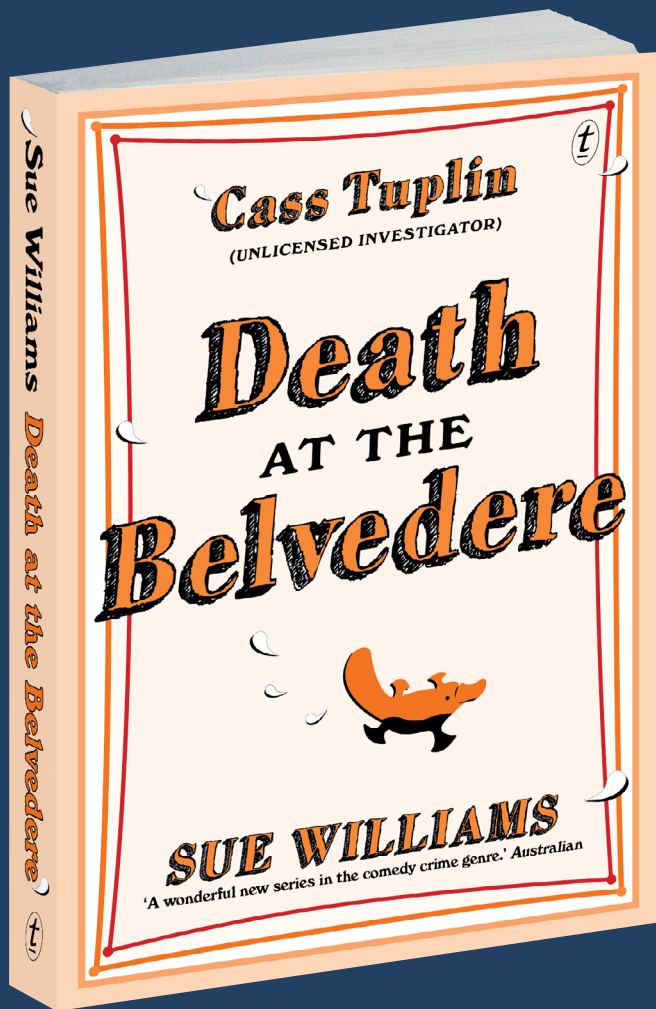
She let go of my arm. 'OK. Well. I'll just have to...' A waver in her voice

'Have to what?'

'He's just...an old Colombian contact. Probably best if you don't know.'

The shop felt cold and suddenly I could see a whole array of arguments against letting Helen go off and hire someone terrifying.

I sighed. 'All right, what's the name of this book?'



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