

THE  
CAMPBELL'S  
CURSE

Two murders,  
one village,  
a malevolent connection...

PHOEBE WHITFIELD

Foxes have an unfair reputation for cunning;  
they are neither more nor less cunning than  
other animals.

*Bertrand Russel*

## Prologue

27 November 1981

Long before Ted Filch decided the warm day begged a stroll to the creek, the officer's limp body had already made itself comfortable on the rocky bank, blissfully unaware of its discovery by the farmer. His fists lain by his sides, unguarded, perhaps for the first time in his twenty-four years of life. It might have been a calming sight if not for the violent rays of crimson veining into the stream of Corroboree Creek from their birthplace of officer Billy Milton's open skull.

Word made its way up dry, unpaved roads and into the local pub. In just hours, the quiet population of Taralga had convicted its killer.

"The schoolgirl, *she* killed him," they'd whisper across pub tables, lungs exchanging whiskey flavoured air. No footprint nor fibre at the scene of the crime deemed worth examining, the only evidence the village needed was the mishap love affair between the two. A naïve seventeen-year-old who mistook a wedded man's misplaced hands for love.

That very night, she saw and left the village for what every fearful eye hoped was the last time, leaving behind a weeping baby sister, and an angry, drunken father. When the dusty white van rolled past the last homestead, a tension broke and fell to a silent relief that blew through the village. She was gone.

When morning came, the people mourned Billy Milton. There was nothing left of him, only his son blossoming in the warmth of his mistress' womb in an inherent evil.

### Preliminary Examination Report

Office of NSW medical examiner

Decedent: Billy James Milton  
Age: 24  
Height: 179 cm  
Weight: 79 kg  
Sex: Male  
Home Address: 38 Hill St, Taralga, NSW  
Type of death (please tick one):

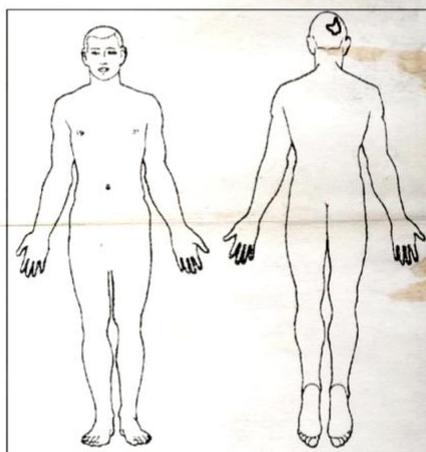
Natural  Accident  Suicidal  Homicidal  Undetermined/other

Date and time of death: 27/11/1981 - 13:00-14:30pm  
Location of body: Corroboree Creek, Taralga - off Old Showground Road

### External examination

#### Physical observations:

- Blunt force trauma to back of skull by formidable object (not found)
- Contusion approx. 7 x 5 cm
- Laceration depth approx. 1.5 cm



## Chapter One

22 November 2002

Once the radio began to sputter and choke on the last exit out of Sydney's South, I started to feel the gravity of my decision and let my regret sit in the passenger seat beside me. It was too late to turn around, I imagined the phone call.

*"Hey boss, I know I promised to get you a good story and return with a newfound success for the organisation, but I'm too spineless."*

I haven't backed out of a case yet, which is a winning streak as far as my poor income is concerned, and the state needs more than car theft and house robberies to feast on. One thing I've learned in the past few years of doing my job is that Australia loves a morbid story, and I'm willing to do anything to get one.

Now hours into the drive, I feel the sealed road finally give in to gravelly pot-holed tracks, the blistering sun falling limp in the sky. The smell of manure creeps into my vents, *"Welcome home, Jane!"* I roll down my window for some air flow and let my hand rest limply out of it. A dip in the earth comes into view. Cradled in it is the village, embraced on all sides by never-ending fields of a dehydrated green.

I reach for the fox figurine in my compartment box to hold as I drive past the first homestead off Old Showground Road, suddenly remembering every reason I left.

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### Murder of Taralga Police Officer Repeats History, Opening a Two-Decades-Old Wound

Last edited: Monday 24 November 2002 · 12:37 pm

*On Friday afternoon, disbelief struck the historic village of Taralga when the body of local police officer, Paul Milton was found dead in nearby Corroboree Creek. Goulburn authorities immediately launched an investigation.*

*This Thursday marks the 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the death of Paul's birth father, officer Billy Milton, whose demise mirrors that of his son's. The victims in both cases suffered severe head injuries, inflicted with a formidable object, which is yet to be found in either instance. It is without doubt that these cases are linked, and likely committed by the same offender. This also raises the possibility that Billy James' convicted killer, Evelyn Campbell, currently confined in Goulburn asylum, Kenmore, may be innocent.*

I draw my fingers from the computer keys and sigh frustratedly. I've spent two days in Taralga, going between my room at the inn and the bar downstairs, and the most I've seen is a blinking cursor.

Now, parked a hundred meters from the crime scene, I'm remembering my boss' advice, "*If we want good publicity, play detective.*"

From here, the most I can see is three blurry bodies, shifting in and out of a forensics tent. He can kiss good publicity goodbye.

Another person comes into view, and I sit upright. Directing the detectives about the dried creek bed is Ted Filch, the farmer. Suddenly, someone steps in front of my window. I quickly shut my computer and frown at the stranger. Dark hair on pale skin, sun hat in hand. His clothes mimic that of an 80's schoolteacher. He motions for me to roll down my window, I do.

He nods towards the scene, "Heard he's furious about it, Ted. Hated the Milton's. Always at him about hunting too early in the mornin'," he pauses. "Guess it's one thing to have them at your door every day, but to find their bodies on your property? Father *and* son..." He tuts.

"Think he might've done it?"

He scrunches his face up, "Don't think the old bastard's got it in him," he says, extending a calloused hand. "I'm Dan. Did you know Paul?"

"Jane." I shake it. He makes a sort of "*oh*" expression, realising. I quickly continue, "Just here for work."

"Right. Paul was a good man, unlike his father. Never started fights," he sighs. "Evelyn would tell me Billy could get...violent."

"You knew her?" I search for recognition in his face and curse the vagueness of my memory.

He nods, "Yeah, we were close. Have you visited her in Kenmore? She could talk for your...work," he gestures to my computer.

I raise my eyebrows, "They take visitors?"

Dan shrugs and flashes a smile, "Worth a try."

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By two o'clock, I'd finished dwelling on my paper and decided to take Dan's suggestion to see Evelyn. Leaving the inn, I sift through my bag. Keys, notepad, fox figurine. When I round the corner of the building, I nearly intrude on an argument.

"He did *nothing* when the inn suffered supply shortages. Our worst bloody drought and he's off solving his father's twenty-something-year-old murder!" A woman yells.

Delaney, the inn owner. “Better off dead. Your whole family’s cursed,” she seethes. I move to see the man in front of her, then immediately wish I hadn’t.

He raises an accusative finger at her, and drawls in response, “Don’t you say a word about *my...*” He looks behind her, at me. He blinks once. Twice. Then, instinctively tucks the bottle behind him, *nothing to see here*. “Nothing new.” I want to say.

“Jane.” he slurs. I suddenly feel sick. “You’re back?” He laughs, baring yellowed teeth. “Here to...write stories ‘bout us all? ‘Bout Paul?”

Humiliation weighs down my eyes and I shake my head at the concrete, edging towards the parking slots.

“Go home, dad.”

“Still think she’s innocent?” He barks, and it’s not until I’m in the car and his stumbling figure fades from my rear-view that I exhale.

\*

The drilling whirl of the fan rotating beside me occupies the silence between the receptionist and me. I pick up a magazine and flip through its waxy pages mindlessly, thinking about Paul. Dan described him to be a “good” man, so who would have reason to harm him? Maybe it was enough to anger a hunch-backed Ted Filch or disappoint the owner of a drought-impaired inn. Delaney mentioned he’d been trying to solve his father’s murder; did he get too close?

Between the sweat on my palms and the rawness of my bottom lip, I’m decidedly unprepared. I wonder if Evelyn will recognise me. I clutch the fox like I did the night she left. The redness of its coat – a feature of mine and hers alike.

“Jane Campbell?” A nurse steps into the waiting room. “Your sister’s ready to see you.”