

Murder by the Book

by Fin J Ross

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THE END. An author's most satisfying two words. I'm amazed that I've thrashed out the final 15,000 words of my novel in five days. But that was the purpose of the exercise. A week at a secluded writer's retreat with no distractions apart from evening socialising with the five other temporary residents. It's done, with two days to spare.

If it weren't bucketing rain, as it has been for three days, I'd venture outside; wander through the bush, pretend I'm at one with the great outdoors. Nup. Instead, I'll head downstairs to the library and engross myself in another author's work until dinner.

"Library" is a generous description; more a bedroom with bookshelves lining two walls. I cross the sitting room and open the library door, bang my face straight into it when it doesn't swing in as I expect. Something's jamming it. The opening is just big enough to get my head around and peer in. The left-hand bookcase has fallen face-down; its contents strewn across the floor. How the hell? Everyone's in their room, aren't they?

Poltergeist maybe. No way we'll get this door open. Ah oh. Now I see feet. Someone's under there, prone, the soles of two shoes sticking out. Men's I'm guessing. Lindsay or Jim? Holy hell.

I trot back through the sitting room and run up the stairs, calling out, 'Hey everyone. Help. There's a body in the library. Squashed.'

Doors fly open and Susanna, Genevieve, Robyn and Lindsay appear in the hallway.

No Jim. 'Quick.' I beckon them downstairs. 'It must be Jim.'

I rush down ahead of them. 'Can't get in from this side. Can someone go out and try to get in through the French doors?' Lindsay volunteers and heads off through the kitchen. The others take turns to peer through the narrow opening. They call Jim's name but there's no response.

'Better call an ambulance,' Genevieve says. She punches 000 into her phone and gives the operator the low-down.

'Darn,' she says, covering the phone, 'ambulance and police won't get through because the road is cut; creek's flooded over the bridge.'

'Oh, my goodness,' Susanna says shrilly. 'What are we going to do? What if he's dead? Nobody's going to come. We're—'

'Calm down, Susanna. Do not despair, Susanna,' Robyn says in her usual lyrical fashion.

'I'm in,' Lindsay calls.

'I'm going round. You lot stay here.'

'Who put you in charge?' Genevieve asks.

I'm already at the kitchen door. I hot-foot it around the veranda. Lindsay's inside the library, arms akimbo.

'I discern that he has forgone this mortal world.'

Jesus Lindsay, quit with the literary shit. 'I take that to mean he's dead.' I step into the room, suspecting Lindsay is right. Jim's right arm and Trump-haired head protrude from under the bookcase.

'Help me lift it,' Lindsay says.

'Wait a minute,' I say, pulling my phone from my pocket. 'Let me take some pictures first. Police and Coroner will need to see what happened.' I click a few pictures from the limited angles.

'Okay, I'll try to get round the other side.' That involves scrambling over the mountain of books thrown from the bookcase's top shelves. I grab the moulding along the top shelf and tell Lindsay to lift. Not as easy as I'd thought, with a sea of books and a body to negotiate, but with much exertion we right the bookcase.

'Don't touch anything,' I instruct. 'I'll take more pictures.'

Lindsay is squatting, checking Jim's pulse. He shakes his head.

I imagine that a loaded bookcase could squash the life out of someone, but something is odd here. How could this have happened? Did Jim accidentally pull it over? How? I study the now empty shelves. Slim fingermarks in the dust there on the far edge of the third shelf. Curious, given Jim's hands are like ham hocks.

Genevieve pokes her head around the door; she still can't open it because of the books piled in front.

'They're asking whether he's breathing.'

'No. He's dead. Can't the police get through?'

'They say no. Might be a couple of days.'

'Shit. What are we going to do with him?'

'Hang on. I'll ask.' She disappears. I catch vague snatches of her end of the conversation.

'Okay, they're saying that if it appears to be an accident, we should move him somewhere cool and lay him out in the same position.'

'The cool room,' I suggest. 'But we've got to get all these books off him first.' Most of them have flung open in the fall. Lindsay's already placing some back on the shelf. I do likewise from my end. Shakespeare, Austen, Brontë – all the classics and many by contemporary Australian authors.

We've finally unearthed the body. I take a couple more pictures. 'Okay, you lot. You can come in now.'

Susanna looks ashen. 'I've never seen a dead body. He looks like he's just asleep.'

Robyn has her hand over her mouth. 'Oh deary me, we think he's dead, an awful thing, it should be said.'

'Honestly Robyn, poetry at a time like this?' I can't help admonishing her. 'C'mon, let's get him out to the cool room.'

Lindsay opens the other side of the French door and we all bend and grab Jim's still-limp body and carry him through, like pallbearers. As we reach the outhouse, Lindsay momentarily lets go of Jim's shoulder to open the door. Without his support, Jim starts to roll and we can't stop the fall. He drops on his back at our feet. That's when I see it. The purple bruise on his throat. How did that happen?

'Hang on. Look at that. There's an injury on his neck that doesn't fit. Looks like his windpipe has been crushed.' I take a close-up picture of his throat.

'How would you know?' Genevieve says. 'Unless you're a doctor, or a forensics expert.'

'I do research a lot about injuries and crime.'

'Just because you write crime, doesn't make you Miss Marple.'

'Well you tell me how he has an injury there, when he was face down.' Genevieve snorts.

We pick up Jim again and lay him face down inside on the concrete floor. We're all freezing out here so I suggest that we go inside and try to figure out what happened. We sit on the couches by the fire, with tea or coffee in hands. I study my co-retreaters in turn. We're an eclectic bunch. Nothing in common except our urges to inflict our thoughts on innocent readers.

Lindsay, a dour 40-something-mid-life-crisis-wannabee-author writing some serious introspective literary work with too many adjectives; the sort of book that would put me to sleep.

Susanna, the ditzzy machine-gun-mouthed mother-of-four lost in a fantasy world of possums, Potaro's and fairies.

Genevieve, the spectacled headmistress-like spinster, who writes romance like someone who's never had any.

Robyn, wafer-thin, innocence personified; a lookalike Pam Ayres, whose rhyming speech would have driven John Wesley to drink.

'Let's try to work out what happened,' I say. 'First, does anyone know whether Jim went back to his room after lunch?'

Everyone shrugs.

'I think I was the last one to go up, so I presume he was already in his room,' Susanna says.

'Okay, has anyone been down here since lunchtime?'

Genevieve shakes her head.

'I came down for some tea about three,' Robyn says, unable to resist a rhyme.

'Did you see Jim? And was the library door open or closed?'

'I saw him not, the door was shut.'

'I had not been down until I heard you call, so caught up in my philosophising,' says Lindsay.

'What about you, Jacqui?' Genevieve says accusingly. 'What were you doing down here?'

'I've finished my manuscript and came down to find something to read.' Susanna giggles. 'This reminds me of one of those murder mystery parties I went to a few years ago. It was—'

'Only, this is no game, Susanna.' I don't say, however, that it reminds me of an Agatha Christie denouement.

'It appears simple to me,' Lindsay says. 'He too came down for a book, perhaps stepped on a shelf to reach one high up, and the bookcase toppled on him.'

'Doesn't work for me Lindsay. If it had happened that way, his body would have been lengthwise, not crosswise under the bookcase and he'd have been face-up.'

'Yes, you're right.'

'I gather the outside door was unlocked, Lindsay.'

'It was.'

'Has anyone been out through there today?' More head-shaking.

'Nobody sneaked out for a ciggy, or fresh air? I locked that door last night.'

I eye them all carefully for tell-tale signs that someone's hiding something. Genevieve, I note, is staring at the floor; the others look innocent enough.

I pause my self-appointed interrogation to ponder. Someone else must have been in the library with him. Someone whose only way out, once the bookcase had toppled, was through the French door. Nobody else has been here today, which means someone is lying. I study the photographs. That's it! The last one I took before we moved his body. The one showing the open book beneath Jim's shoulder.

'Hang on.' I fly off the couch and into the library. It's still there on the floor. Face-down, unlike all the others were. A hardcover edition of *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*. Was Jim planning to read it? Doesn't seem his style. Or – is it a murder weapon? The spine is slightly dented. I leave it in situ. Forensics might need to examine it.

'Okay,' I say, as I re-enter the sitting room, 'did someone have a bone to pick with Jim?'

Four resounding 'noes'.

'Why?' Lindsay asks. 'You're not suggesting this wasn't an accident, surely.'

'I suspect he was dead, or dying, before the bookcase fell on him. Which means—'

'Huh,' Genevieve sucks in a breath. 'You think one of us killed him?'

'We're the only ones here. So, one of us must know something.'

looks doubtful. 'What about Mrs J? Maybe she was here today.'

'Would you come out in this rain if you didn't have to, Robyn? She'll be here with dinner soon, so we'll ask her.'

Susanna sips her coffee. 'Can't say I liked him much. Freaky looking, you know, reminded me of Gollum. Sounded like him too, when he called me *my precious*.'

'He did?'

'Creeped me out, but not like I'd want to kill him.'

'What about you, Genevieve?' I ask.

'I had nothing against him, though his anecdotes bored me witless. He didn't speak like a writer.'

Lindsay nods. 'I agree he had not a mastery of the language. I cannot fathom how he was deemed worthy of a fellowship here.'

'Not a reason to kill someone though,' I say. 'Did anyone know Jim before we arrived on Monday?'

Again, four 'noes'.

The kitchen door clicks. Mrs J arriving from next door with our dinners. I head into the kitchen and pull the trolley through the door, as she shakes off her umbrella outside.

'Horrible, out there,' she says. 'Wish this rain would let up. We're cut off, you know.'

'Yes, we know. We've had a drama here. I should have rung to let you know we only need five dinners.'

'Why? Has someone left?'

'No. Someone died.'

Her look of unfeigned shock indicates it's news to her. 'Oh, goodness. Who?'

'Jim.'

'What was it? Heart attack? Accident?'

'Bookcase fell on him. We're still trying to figure out how. Have you been over here earlier today?'

'No. Once a day's enough in this weather.'

'Why don't you join us for dinner? Eat his meal to save wasting it.'

‘All right. Why not? Oh, where is he? Not sure I’m up for dining with a corpse in the house.’

‘Out in the coolroom. I’ll set the table.’

I collect the cutlery canteen and the tray of wine glasses and head into the dining room. The others are still sitting by the fire, speculating about how Jim died.

We sit to steaming-hot pumpkin soup, crusty bread and a choice of red or white wine. For the first time this week, our discussion isn’t centred on writing. I get the impression nobody is ruing Jim’s demise, but then he was a virtual stranger to us all. Or was he?

I think of the lunchtime conversation as we’d sat here in the same seats volunteering information about our lives and our writing interests, while eating Mrs J’s home-cooked quiche. Genevieve’s blather about writing non-sexual romance, Lindsay’s sermonising about his academic pursuits, Susanna’s incessant mummy-knows-best talk, Jim’s admission that he’d been a prison guard. Where did he say? Somewhere in Victoria. Relevant? Probably not. Me, divulging some of the creative ways I’ve killed off characters. And Robyn, talking in rhymes until she suddenly disappeared; left the table halfway through her quiche.

‘I wonder,’ says Susanna, ‘whether he has family. Would the police notify them? Surely—’

Genevieve cuts her off. ‘I’m sure they will, though all I could tell them was his name and that he came from Melbourne.’

‘He didn’t mention anything about his family, at least not that I heard,’ I say.

Genevieve dabs her mouth with a serviette. ‘I got the impression he lived alone. Remember? He mentioned something last night about how Mrs J’s meals were a welcome change from TV dinners.’

‘My kids’d live on microwave macaroni if I let them.’ Susanna says.

Genevieve grunts. ‘Not much nutrition in that. You’d never find me eating a TV dinner.’

Susanna giggles. ‘Bet you would if you had children.’

Genevieve glowers at her. ‘If I’d had children, young lady, they’d have had meat and three vegetables every night.’

‘Good for you.’

Mrs J clears the soup bowls and heads to the kitchen. She returns momentarily with the main courses. ‘Hope you all like lasagne. Home-cooked of course.’

‘Does anyone know what Jim was writing?’ I ask.

‘Autobiography, or memoir, I think,’ Genevieve says.

‘He mentioned at lunch that he was a prison guard. Did he tell any of you where?’

‘Told me yesterday,’ Genevieve says. ‘Fairlea Women’s Prison.’

‘Well that could make for interesting reading. Maybe we should check out his room and his laptop. See what he’s written.’

Robyn stares at her lasagne. Excuses herself and heads upstairs, hand over her mouth.

‘Is she okay?’ Susanna asks.

Mrs J looks crestfallen. ‘Maybe she didn’t like the lasagne.’

I recall her sudden lunchtime disappearance. ‘Maybe she’s not well. She disappeared at lunch too,’

‘Looks anorexic to me,’ Genevieve says. ‘Maybe bulimic.’

I finish the last few mouthfuls of lasagne. ‘I’ll go check on her.’ I head upstairs. The sounds of dry retching emanate from the communal bathroom. I knock on the door. ‘Are you okay Robyn?’

‘I’ll be okay. Please go away.’

I figure that while I’m up here, I’ll check out Jim’s room and grab his laptop so we can check it later. I open his door and am taken aback by the sight. Bed unmade, side table littered with chocolate wrappers and empty beer cans, jocks hanging on the wardrobe handle, desk awash with papers and junk. A pile of near-ineligible notes look scribbled by a madman. I leaf through them. Random, decidedly unflattering descriptions. Jill wants it big time. Finally scored Rob’s sweet little fanny. Worth the wait. John’s a mongrel prick. Doesn’t even know what he doesn’t know.

Who are these people? Characters, or family? I gather them up and unplug his laptop, then head into my room to grab mine.

‘Wait till you see this stuff,’ I say when I reach the bottom of the stairs. ‘Oh, I’ll leave it for later. Tiramisu beckons.’

I’m tempted to lick the plate. Best tiramisu ever. We farewell Mrs J and adjourn to the sitting room, resuming our earlier seats – aside from the one left vacant by Robyn each with a page of Jim’s notes in hand.

‘He’s a nutter. Was a nutter,’ Susanna says. ‘Listen to this one. Kath’s a fat-arse, smelly turd-murdering bitch.’

‘And this,’ Lindsay says. ‘No, it’s beneath me to read it aloud.’

‘Show me.’ Genevieve snatches it. ‘Caw. You’re right.’

I’m all ears. ‘What does it say?’

‘Ahem. Cunnylingus in the laundry. Best place for a dirty girl.’

‘Sicko. Do you reckon this is real, or ideas for his book?’

‘I can’t help wondering whether these women were prisoners under his charge,’ I say.

‘God forbid,’ Genevieve says.

I open his laptop and click through the log-in page, thankful there’s no password protection. I open his file manager; click My Documents. Open a Word document entitled “On Guard”. Look at the word count: 9540. Within the required word count to have applied for a fellowship. The opening line: “Being a prison guard was in my blood; passed to me through Dad’s bedtime stories about his days supervising Jika Jika’s wicked, hardened criminals.”

Too eloquent, I reckon, to have come from Jim’s hand. Doubt he’d know what a semicolon was for. I open his email account,

scroll through the dozens of messages in his inbox. Aha. One, dated three weeks ago from Hilltop Writers Retreat:

Dear Mr Haley, further to earlier correspondence, we advise of a cancellation for the week starting June 7. Although we cannot offer accommodation as a "Fellow" since your excerpt was not deemed of literary merit, this placement is open should you desire to pay to attend. Please advise as soon as possible, or the offer will be passed to the next in line.

'Very interesting,' I say. 'Jim wasn't here as a Fellow. He paid to be here.'

'How do you know?' Lindsay asks.

'Reading his emails. Hang on, I'll look for his reply.' I open his Sent emails. Here it is:

Dear blah, blah...June 7 suits perfectly. Will transfer payment today...

I return to his inbox. Several from someone named Margaret McCoy. I open the most recent email:

Jim, given that you have failed to pay my invoice for the first four chapters, I hereby advise that I will not write any more for you...

'Holy shit. He had a ghost writer. That explains it.'

'A ghost writer?' Susanna giggles. She obviously doesn't know the term.

'Someone else has been writing his story for him,' I explain.

'Oh, haha, I thought you meant—'

'That means,' Genevieve interrupts, 'that he's plagiarised it to submit for a fellowship.'

'Sure seems like it. Hang on.' I scroll to Margaret's previous email – a demand for payment. The previous one, dated February 9, has an attachment, entitled "On Guard". Sure enough, it has the same opening line.

'Yep. Here's her email with it attached.'

'Well, the more I learn about Jim, the less I mourn him,' Genevieve says.

'Hear, hear,' Lindsay says.

Genevieve sets her wineglass down and stands. 'Call of nature.' She heads for the stairs.

'Can you check on Robyn? She was up there throwing up.'

'Will do, Jacqui.'

What other secrets do you have, Mr Haley? I click on Jim's photo file and immediately wish I hadn't. God. Dozens and dozens of porn pics – some, magazine-style, some amateurish. They're the worst. Young mostly unconscious-looking women in gruesome poses; many blurry except for their genitalia. Some half-clad in what looks like orange prison garb. I'm so appalled, I don't realise I'm almost suffocating myself with my hand.

'What's the matter, Jacqui?'

I barely hear Susanna's words. I shut the laptop's lid. 'Trust me, Susanna. You don't want to know. Suffice it to say, Jim is no loss to humanity.' Wait till the cops see this.

'She's in bed,' Genevieve announces from the foot of the stairs. 'Wants to be left alone.'

'Thereby be my cue,' Richard says, as he stands. 'To die, to sleep; to sleep, perchance to dream; ay, there's the rub, for in this sleep of death what dreams may come...'

Susanna pulls a face. 'Huh?'

'Shakespeare, Susanna,' I say.

'Hamlet, to be precise,' Richard adds. 'I bid you fine ladies adieu.'

'I'm off to bed as well,' says Genevieve, 'though maybe with less drama.'

Susanna slugs her last mouthful of wine. 'Well, you're all boring. I might as well go too.'

Though now, sitting here deserted, I'm not tired enough for bed. And though I've written some gruesome scenes in my time – shitty things my fictitious characters have done to others – nothing prepared me for Jim's confronting images. Truth really is meaner than fiction. But I feel no closer to figuring out who murdered him. If, in fact, it wasn't an accident. None of them look like they'd have it in them. Certainly, none of them have me fearing for my own life. Lindsay might bore you to death, too long with Susanna would annoy you to death, Genevieve could feasibly

talk you to death and Robyn – wouldn't, couldn't hurt a butterfly, unless she rhymed it to death. And I'm sane enough to know that I'm no Jekyll and Hyde.

I still reckon one of them was in there with him though. Who? I head for the library and switch on the light. Aside from Sherlock Holmes still there on the floor and a wet patch on the carpet where Jim evidently peed himself, nothing else seems out of place. I inspect the far side of the bookcase and pull off a short strand of black wool caught on the back edge. Not Lindsay's methinks, since he's been in a beige jumper all day. I shut my eyes to picture the women's attire. From memory, all were wearing black jumpers.

Something's scratching at the door behind me. I turn to see Tigger, Hilltop's resident house cat, bedraggled and desperate to get inside. I leave him there and trot into the laundry to fetch a towel.

'No, you're not coming in like that,' I tell him, as I try to fend him off and get through the door. I place the towel over his back, give him a good rub and pick him up. A metre further down the veranda, which is thankfully dry this side, I see a patch of icky-looking stuff.

'Oh, poor Tigger. Did you barf? What have you been eating?' I wrap him tight, head back inside and lock the door. I carry him into the kitchen and dry him off on the bench, enjoying his head butts under my chin.

‘Ooh, you make me miss my Barney. Want to come to bed with me?’

Pretty sure I’ve solved this little mystery in true Sherlockian or Marple-style. Or should that be Jacqui Bishop style? But I hate to think of the outcome. An hour of reading Jim’s horrid notes and inspecting his laptop, forcing myself to look more carefully at his pictures, before I’d sneaked out to the coolroom, rendered me sleepless until 3am. But now, in the cold light of morning, most of the pieces have fallen into place. A plausible scenario, anyway, though one I can’t actually believe.

I push Tigger aside, fling off the quilt, step into my slippers, don my dressing gown and head for the shower. Thankfully, it’s vacant. I hear the murmur of voices downstairs, which means the others have beaten me to breakfast. I shower quickly, dress and head down, tempted by the smell of croissants.

‘Morning, all,’ I say to Lindsay, Genevieve and Susanna who are already at the table, chatting away over their cereal. ‘Where’s Robyn?’

‘Hasn’t come down yet. Obviously sleeping in, like you,’ Genevieve says.

‘Yes, well I was awake half the night.’ I pour some Cornflakes into a bowl and sit.

‘Yeah, me too,’ Susanna says.

I’m halfway through a toasty croissant when Robyn appears, looking pale and bleary-eyed; her hair loose and crinkly, rather than plaited as usual. I offer to pour her a coffee. She nods and sits beside Genevieve. Fiddles with a loose thread on her jumper cuff.

I try to engage her in conversation.

‘Who’s Justin, Robyn? Is he your partner?’

She looks at me quizzically. ‘Huh?’

‘I just noticed the tattoo on your wrist.’

‘Oh. No, that’s stupid. Wish I’d never had it done. You know, Justin Bieber.’

‘Oh. Well, we all do silly things when we’re young. Some we no doubt live to regret.’

Genevieve changes the subject. ‘I don’t think I’ll be able to get my head into writing today, what with yesterday’s goings-on.’

‘Me neither,’ Susanna says.

Now, how to broach the subject? ‘I gleaned some useful information from Jim’s computer last night.’ Everyone stares at me.

Genevieve raises her eyebrows. ‘You mean apart from him being a smutty-mouthed plagiarist?’

‘Yes. Worse. His photo file, in particular, was enough to churn my stomach. Trashy porn pictures but, more worryingly, a bunch of pics that I suspect he took, of some unfortunate girls.’

‘Shit,’ Susanna says, hand on mouth.

‘Oh dear,’ says Genevieve.

'I thought him to be of low morals,' Lindsay says.

Robyn makes no comment, nor eye contact.

'Now, I'm sorry to put you on the spot Robyn but we need to know what happened in the library yesterday.'

Everyone gasps and stares at her. Robyn sucks in a deep breath, turns pale as a ghost and looks set to run away. She sobs and buries her face in her hands.

'You knew Jim before, didn't you?' I say it gently, not accusingly. She nods vaguely.

'His name's not Jim Haley. It's James Holborn.'

'He was your prison guard, wasn't he?'

'Mmm.'

'Okay. None of our business why you were in prison, but I think what he did to you is naturally relevant here. Didn't you realise who he was when we all arrived here?'

She shakes her head. 'He looked so different. Like he had no hair or beard then. How did you know?'

'It was the twice that you disappeared from the table yesterday, both times when we'd mentioned prison. But several other things too. Do you want to tell us what happened yesterday, or will I have a go?'

Genevieve claps her hands. 'Oh, let's hear your version first Jacqui. See whether you're as good a sleuth as you think.'

'Okay. Here goes. First, I suspect Jim has been stalking you for a while. Second, it was no coincidence that he happened to be

here this week. Third, I suspect that once he realised you knew who he was, he had to do something about it.' Robyn is nodding. 'So, I believe you came down to the library and he followed you. You already had the Sherlock Holmes book in your hand when he entered. He threatened you and, in your defence, you thwacked him in the throat with the book. He fell and somehow you had the strength to pull the bookcase over onto him. Am I right?'

'Pretty much.'

'Then you could only get out through the outside door, which you couldn't then lock. You vomited on the veranda, collected yourself, and went back to your room.'

'That's about right. I'm not sure he was stalking me though. Maybe he saw my name when they announced the list of Fellows. I prayed when I left Fairlea – I was only there for three months 12 years ago for a stupid thing I did – that I'd never see him again. He made it hell. Forever bailing me up. I always managed to get away,' her voice cracks, '...until the time I didn't.'

Genevieve pats Robyn's arm. 'Oh, you poor darling.'

'Shit,' Susanna blurts, 'I reckon I'd have wanted to kill him too.'

'And me,' I say.

Lindsay stares at me, his brows furrowed. 'I am intrigued at how you put all this together, Jacqui.'

'Before I went to bed last night, I checked out the library again because I couldn't figure out why the Sherlock Holmes book was

open, face down, under Jim's body. Then I found this bit of black wool,' I hold it up, 'hooked on the bookcase. I'd already noticed fingerprints on a shelf. Tigger was at the door, and I blamed him for the vomit. I went back to my room and read all Jim's notes again because one had stuck in my head. For Robyn's sake, I won't read it out, but it referred to someone he named Rob. Then, when I looked through his pictures, I found one which looked a whole lot like Robyn, though younger. The plaits and tattoo gave you away Robyn, and you were wearing prison garb. I found a recent selfie of Jim, bald and beardless, so I ducked out to the cool room. Sure enough, that horrible hair of his is a toupee.'

'I must say, I am impressed Jacqui,' Lindsay says. 'I doubt I could have reasoned so methodically.' I laugh. 'You don't write, or probably read, crime fiction either.'

'Not my realm of interest, I confess.'

'Now, I guess we have to decide, collectively, what we're going to tell the police when they eventually get here. I'm sure Robyn doesn't need the ordeal of being questioned, possibly charged.'

Robyn sobs. 'And no way I'm going back to jail either.'

Lindsay looks sympathetic. 'I should say it was death by misadventure. What do you all think?'

'Huh?' Susanna says.

Genevieve nods. 'A terrible accident.'

'I know how to make it look more convincing.' I dash upstairs to Jim's room and grab the two porn magazines from beside his bed, holding them by the edges so I don't leave fingerprints. Back downstairs, I ask Lindsay to follow me into the library.

'Can you lift me up? I'll make it look like they were on top, you know, leave a mark in the dust.' I then toss them at the opposite shelf and leave them as they fall.

'Okay, you're stronger than me. Can you stomp on that second-bottom shelf and bust it?'

'Happy to.'

'Now, to get our stories straight.'

'Yes, Miss Marple.'

I whisper to Lindsay, 'I do believe this little crime, has cured her of her need to rhyme.'

He smiles. 'An observation methinks quite sublime.'

Fin J Ross

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She is the co-author, with her sister, of the true crime anthologies, *Killer in the Family* and *Murder in the Family* (not their family).

Fin's latest book is the historical novel *Billings Better Bookstore and Brasserie*. Set in Melbourne in the 19th Century, it's the story of young Fidelia Knight whose thirst for knowledge changes the lives of everyone she meets.

Fin has won multiple category prizes in the annual Scarlet Stiletto Awards for crime and mystery short stories.