



The
POPEYE
Murder



A Rebecca Keith
Mystery

— { **Sandra** } —
Winter-Dewhirst

The Head

Rebecca



Rebecca wondered if she was looking at an elaborate hoax. She wasn't.

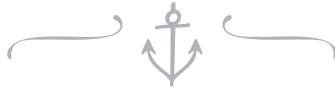
Along with a dozen other journalists and food-industry celebrities, she had just witnessed the unveiling of the baked head of one of Adelaide's most celebrated chefs. The head of Leong Chew sat on a pewter platter. The cloche had just been removed, revealing Leong Chew, clearly not at his best.

Leong's head had been shaved, except for his signature plait still attached to the back of his head and wrapped artistically around his severed neck.

His waxed moustache glistened. His entire head was glazed. Leong's poached eyes stood open and appeared to take in everyone on the small ferryboat, ironically called *Popeye*. Nestled around Leong Chew's head lay roasted kipfler potatoes, parsnips, carrots, and miniature apples. Rebecca thought the apples were most probably crab apples.

In that brief look at Leong, an image that Rebecca knew would be imprinted forever in her mind, she noticed that over each of Leong's ears were sprigs of holly. Rebecca thought the holly was an unusual flourish given it wasn't Christmas – but then again, whom was she kidding? The entire scene was an unusual flourish.

Days Earlier



The Australian Food Festival was Nick Pecorino's baby.

He'd chosen Adelaide to be the venue for an adventurous week of thinking about, discussing, and eating South Australian-sourced food and drinking fine South Australian wine.

It was a biennial event and had only been held twice before. The next festival was due in November, less than five months away. The festival was a mecca for Australian foodies. The first two festivals had been successful, attracting chefs and food writers – not only from Australia but also from around the world.

Nick had received enormous encouragement and financial help from the South Australian government. The media had covered the last event generously. Adelaide's only daily newspaper, the *Advertiser*, was a major sponsor, giving extensive coverage both before and during the festival. It was this year's coverage of the festival that Nick Pecorino wanted to discuss with the *Advertiser's* food and wine editor, Rebecca Keith.

Rebecca stood in front of the mirror. She had showered and was drying her hair. Up until a few months ago, Rebecca's blond hair had been cropped close to her head in a smart, modern style. Rodney had liked it short.

Wattle House



What was on the agenda today? Rebecca loved making lists. She had a long list of to-do lists. Shopping lists, work priority lists, weekly menu lists, professional and personal goals lists. Rebecca didn't feel in control until she had gotten whatever was going on in her head onto a list. She even gave lists to other people. She used to give her ex-boyfriend Rodney lists.

Rodney normally had screwed the list up in front of her and defiantly said, 'I'll remember.' Much to Rebecca's satisfaction, he never did.

Rebecca started making a list for that day. Go into town and buy a low-cut, long black or possibly red dress, preferably with sequins or beads. She had a long black chiffon dress, but the neckline was conservative, showing nothing of her rather large assets. It wouldn't do on this occasion. Her thirty-seventh birthday resolution had been to take more risks and pursue some adventures – this included her wardrobe.

Next on the list was work. She planned to arrive at noon and work through to about four. *After all*, thought Rebecca, *tonight would be work*. By four-thirty, she planned to be soaking in the bath. By six she would be dressed in a smart, casual outfit, with her overnight bag packed and her new dress and jacket in a suit bag, waiting for the taxi driver to honk his horn.

And it pretty much panned out that way. Rebecca was a good organiser. She was never late.

The taxi pulled into the gravel driveway of the Piccadilly mansion just before six thirty. Drinks were not until seven o'clock, so Rebecca had plenty of time to unpack and change.

The drive up into the hills had been rather eerie. The fog had started appearing at the Crafers turnoff, and with only a half moon, the night was dim. Visibility was down to a few metres, and the gum trees along the side of the road had been only visible in the headlights for a few seconds at a time. At one point the driver had had to break hard to avoid hitting a koala crossing the road, and at any moment Rebecca had expected a kangaroo to come through the windscreen.

Driving up the gravel driveway was made somewhat easier by the fact that the gum trees had been festooned with fairy lights twinkling softly through the haze of the fog.

The taxi had stopped in front of the entrance steps to the large old bluestone villa. The fairy lights had been extended to the sweeping verandahs of Wattle House.

Rebecca was welcomed into the large entrance hall by Nick Pecorino and the woman who owned the property, introduced as Ruth. A roaring fire was ablaze in the entry hall fireplace, and Rebecca momentarily paused with her back to it, soaking up its warmth.

'How did you find your trip up?' asked Nick.

'Oh, it was good,' said Rebecca. 'No dramas.' She turned to Ruth. 'The house is beautiful. How old is it?'

'It was built in 1868, the home of Angus Fyfe, an early pioneer in this district. He had the bluestone brought over from Wistow,' replied Ruth.

While engaged in small talk with Nick and Ruth, Rebecca looked around the hall. It was panelled in the valuable and now scarce Tasmanian Huon pine. Large double sets of matching doors led off from both sides of the hallway.

Ruth led Rebecca to a large bedroom, with high walls painted in bone with high-gloss white skirting boards and woodwork. It was sparsely furnished with a canopied red-cedar bed dominating the room. The pillowcases and sheets were expensive natural linen. The natural colour of linen and the lightly coloured walls made the room look fresh and modern rather than old and stuffy.

White bath towels lay on the bed, tied with a glossy yellow satin ribbon. French doors led onto the verandah, and as the curtains weren't drawn, Rebecca could see the twinkling fairy lights on the verandah posts and wrought iron filigree framing the black, misty night.

Pointing to the antique dressing table, Ruth said, 'I have some Penfolds tawny port in the decanter. It's a 1985 vintage. And the Haigh's chocolates are from their dark chocolate range. Would you prefer milk chocolate?'

'Oh, no. Dark is fine. In fact, great. Thanks.'

Through an adjacent door lay the en suite bathroom, tiled in translucent white marble with a frameless shower and a large, deep bath.

'The room is gorgeous,' said Rebecca.

Ruth smiled. 'Guests are gathering at seven o'clock in the drawing room off the main entrance hall. I'll leave you to freshen up and change.'

Rebecca drew the curtains. They were of various shades of green and featured a colony of red- and blue-crested birds.

Rebecca recognised the William Morris design. She laid her red dress out on the bed.

Twenty minutes later, all eyes turned to Rebecca when she entered the drawing room. She looked magnificent. Her glittering red dress flowed to the floor, with the exception of a slight kink at the front that showed off her shapely ankles. Her black strappy shoes added four centimetres on to her already stately frame.

But everyone's focus was more centred, aimed straight at her rather ample breasts spilling out of her dress. Rebecca had decided to wear a push-up bra to further accentuate her already shapely twelve-C bust. The curves of her creamy alabaster bosoms were jellylike, with a fake diamond the size of a bantam's egg sitting in the middle of her cleavage. Her curled blond hair and flaming-red lipstick magnificently complimented the red dress.

To keep warm, Rebecca wore a beaded black bolero jacket with long sleeves finished in a triangle over her hands. She stood in the doorway momentarily, basking in being the object of everyone's gaze. The ice was broken by Jonathan Riddle's pronouncement, 'My God, your tits are huge! I wish I had them!'

Jonathan promptly lifted a glass of champagne off the sideboard and placed it into Rebecca's hand.

'Thank you, Jonathan. I can see you've already had a few glasses yourself. It looks like it is going to be a big night.'

'Don't be embarrassed, Rebecca. As they say, if you've got it, flaunt it,' said Jonathan.

'We'll, you've certainly got it, darling,' said Dorothy Plant as she took a sip of her own champagne. Dorothy was dressed in a demure wine-coloured dress with a high, frilled neckline. She resembled Queen Victoria.

They were all in the room, with the exception of Leong Chew, who was just finalising instructions to his sous chefs.

Rebecca nodded to Francois Bacone, who had just caught her eye and raised his glass. Francois was in conversation with Nick Pecorino, so Rebecca didn't make moves to join them but sidled up to Jonathan, who was always good for gossip.

A storm had started. The rain and hail were making such a din on the tin roof that Rebecca had to raise her voice to be heard. She understood from Ruth that it had been raining heavily on and off all day. Ruth had explained that if it rained much more, the ford that Rebecca and the others had crossed about a kilometre down the road would rise to such a height that even if they wanted to go home tonight, they wouldn't be able to.

Just as Rebecca finished her third glass of champagne, she heard a doorbell. She thought, *We're all here, so who in the hell would that be out on a night like this?*

'Did you hear that, Jonathan?'

'What?'

'I thought I heard the doorbell.'

'I didn't hear anything.'

'Well, I heard something. Excuse me while I go check. It doesn't look like anyone else is going to make a move,' said Rebecca.

She made her way out into the entrance hall, closing the double doors behind her to keep the warmth in, and went to the front door herself. She opened the door, and standing there, shaking off what appeared to be a large garbage bag, was Detective Chief Inspector Gary Jarvie, a colleague of her former boyfriend Rodney.

Gary stared. Rebecca noticed he was looking straight at her breasts.

Gary finally stuttered, 'You look beautiful, Rebecca.'

'What the hell are you doing here?'

Gary appeared nervous and spluttered, 'I live in a cottage just down the road. A branch of a gum tree has just fallen on the roof, and the rain is pouring in. I can't get the State Emergency Services crew in just yet, as the ford is up. I can't get out, either, so here I am. I thought Wattle House might have a vacancy for the night?'

Gary looked handsome, dressed in old blue jeans, muddy RM Williams boots, and a big olive-green woolly jumper (that Rebecca thought would be incredibly warm to cuddle up to) over the crisp collar of what looked to be that day's business shirt. Rebecca noticed that Gary's dark-brown wavy hair was a little long at the back, but not unattractively so.

They stood staring at each other until Gary eventually said, 'It's cold out here, Rebecca. Do you think I could come in?'

'Oh, yeah, sure.' Rebecca stepped back to allow him to brush past her. As he did so, she could smell a mixture of damp wool and body odour. Gary went straight to the fire in the entrance hall and squatted down in front of it, rubbing his hands together over the flames. He then proceeded to take off his boots, leaving him in stocking feet. Rebecca noticed his left big toe stuck out of a hole in the woolly sock.

'So what's the big occasion? Here with your boyfriend?' he asked, Rebecca thought, rather too nonchalantly.

'No,' said Rebecca, 'it's a dinner for the Australian Food Festival.'

She was about to explain when Jonathan made a dramatic entrance, exclaiming, 'Well, who do we have here, darling? Has Ulysses come to save us from the storm?'

‘This is Gary Jarvie, Jonathan. He’s a policeman.’ Rebecca decided to be more precise. ‘Detective Chief Inspector Gary Jarvie.’

At that point, Gary broke in and said rather apologetically, ‘Actually, I have a place just down the road. But a branch of a gum tree has fallen on the roof, and I’m waiting for the state emergency guys to arrive. They’re held up in the floods.’

‘Well, well,’ Jonathan drawled. ‘Won’t you join us for dinner? Leong always orders extra.’

‘Oh, I don’t want to impose. I’m not exactly dressed for a formal dinner.’

‘Don’t be silly. You look gorgeous to me, and I’m sure everyone will be enchanted.’

Rebecca rolled her eyes.

As Jonathan walked away, he yelled, ‘Ruth! Set a new place at the table. We have another guest. And make sure you put him next to me!’

There was an awkward few moments of silence between Rebecca and Gary until Rebecca said, ‘Well, come on then. You better join us in the drawing room and be introduced to everyone.’

Gary followed her into the room, flashing what Rebecca thought was a beautiful smile to everyone. They all looked up, clearly stunned, until Rebecca told the story. Upon hearing about his cottage, they made suitable concerned mutterings, with Dorothy charging across to take Gary by the arm. She escorted him to the fireplace, asking what he would like to drink.

‘You must tell me all about your little cottage in the woods,’ Rebecca heard Dorothy ask.

Gary looked up at Rebecca, who had strolled to the other side

of the room with a topped-up glass of bubbly. He smiled, and she returned the smile rather curtly before turning away to talk to Francois.