

*Of Roses  
Rapture  
Lost*

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## PRESENTLY

“**D**ID I EVER TELL YOU ABOUT MY first case?” Jayne McCardle, formerly detective sergeant of Fulbarton’s Police force, noted the sparkle in Baylem’s eyes. Until two months ago he had been her boss – a detective inspector no less – and things may have stayed the same had the seismic events of July not forced them to wake up and realise what really mattered.

Life was too short, and it took a near-death experience to hammer home that fact.

Leaving the constabulary and the small English town behind them, they started a relationship and set their sights on travelling the world, starting in Canada and working their way south down through the States. Currently they were in Hawaii, sitting in a quiet bar overlooking a sandy beach and a calm sea. Palm trees were in abundance and a clear blue sky was making way for dusk. Moments earlier the sun had slipped away over the edge of the world, leaving the heavens appearing red and orange.

“No, I don’t think you ever have,” replied Jayne. She leaned forward, as though eager to learn more, but in fact was just reaching for her Mai Tai, a cocktail popular on the island. The crushed ice clinked as

she raised the glass to her lips. The garnishing of pineapple and lime leaf had been discarded a couple of sips earlier. She recoiled slightly from the alcohol. Kaliko, the island native working behind the bar had been generous with the rum.

“I was fresh out of Uni and passing all the entry exams top of my class and was fast-tracked from a uniformed Bobby to detective inside a year. I found myself working within Scotland Yard for a seasoned DI who was sitting on a murder case that had stumped the whole of London’s CID for six months, and pressure was on to solve it.” Baylem took a swig from a bottle of Kona lager and laughed, “It didn’t help that the victim was the wife of multi-millionaire businessman Michael O’Connell, brother of the Foreign Secretary. The press were having a field day.”

“Seriously? You were on that case?!”

“Well don’t sound too surprised! I was just a DC then; but the DI – Kendray was his name – handed me the file within a minute of my turning up in his office. He looked up at me with desperation in his tired eyes. ‘I have twenty-four hours to solve this otherwise I’m for the chop,’ he said. ‘What’s in it for me?’ I asked. I was a cocky little so-and-so back then; brazen and over-confident.”

“Not like now,” the woman interjected jokingly.

Baylem ignored her. “I’ll make you DS,’ he told me, ‘and give you a grand of my own money.’”

“A thousand pounds?”

“A lot of money now, but a king’s ransom back then; but that’s not all Jayne. He also said I could have one of his daughters; he had three, and none of them were bad looking. He showed me a family photograph in a frame!”

“No!”

“He did, as I’m living and breathing. He was that desperate and dead serious.”

“What did you say to that?” she asked.

“I didn’t say anything,” Baylem replied. “I was gobsmacked. I shook Kendray’s hand and left, taking the file with me.”



## BACK THEN

**B**AYLEM TOOK THE FILE TO AN EMPTY office and sat down behind a desk, opening it out. Inside was a stack of papers; photographs; witness statements; forensic and pathology reports; investigation notes – more than a hundred individual sheets of paper.

“Guess I’d better get started,” he muttered dejectedly to himself.

The detective constable started by reading the investigation notes and then looking at each of the photographs. Images of Victoria O’Connell stared lifelessly up at him. She was fully dressed and lay atop a freshly made king-sized bed. The way she laid indicated she had first sat at the bed’s end and then fallen back.

There were no signs of a struggle, and the woman appeared to have no injuries; she could easily have just been taking an afternoon nap.

Moving through the pictures, Baylem saw the victim and every inch of the room from a multitude of angles, and studied them.

Closing his eyes, Baylem imagined the scene.

The room was large, so large that it made the king-sized bed appear small. There was a cream-coloured sofa and two armchairs. A fitted wardrobe concealed behind a wall of mirrors. Bedside tables to either side of the bed supporting matching Coco table lamps, designed in a clear cut glass pineapple shape on a solid mahogany base, complete with a white linen tapered drum shades.

A coffee table was set ahead of the sofa and chairs, and placed on top of it was a bouquet of lavender roses in a box, still within its presentation packaging, the box lid set to one side. There were seven roses in total. A sender's card was tucked into the gift wrapping, on it was written in red: *If only you could love me...*

Baylem imagined moving around the room. He looked at the dead woman and studied her face – silently attractive – her skin, so smooth and sickly-white; her eyes, aqua-blue, were open wide, constantly staring.

He turned away, glancing at the walls; there were paintings that looked reminiscent of Van Gogh and Rembrandt, most likely original, and portraits of the O'Connells, black and white photographs blown-up to poster size in gilded gold frames.

Baylem opened his eyes and returned his attention to the stack of papers, seeking out the autopsy report and specifically the pathologist's opinion as to how Mrs. Victoria O'Connell died. The pathologist was Dr Floyd Hamilton. They had never been acquainted but would eventually become close.

Cause of Death: Undetermined. The decedent suffered from an anomalous coronary artery, aortic dissection, and acute myocardial infarction. This combination is uncommon, almost to the point of non-existence.

Baylem interpreted this the same way DI Kennedy had. She had died an unnatural death. Unnatural deaths were usually the result of

third party involvement. Third party involvement more frequently resulted in a charge for murder, or if one was lucky, manslaughter.

The pathologist noted that Mrs. O'Connell had likely died two days before she was discovered, and gave a crude time of death around late morning or lunchtime.

Baylem put the report aside and flicked through the witness statements. There were six in total, made up of the usual suspects in a murder enquiry.

A little known fact: just over 80% of all victims know, or are related to their killer.

So it came as no surprise to Baylem to find the husband on the top of the pile, but DI Kendray had dismissed him early in the investigation as he was out of the country on business at the time (having lunch in New York with a famous American destined one day to be President of the United States). His alibi was solid gold.

Next statement was the housekeeper, Apolonia Szpakowski, a Polish immigrant who had arrived in the UK with her husband in 2004. It was her who had found Mrs. O'Connell dead, and it was her who had dialled 999 to call for an ambulance. Apolonia was on a family day out at Gulliver's Theme Park in Milton Keynes, and a copy of a ride photograph taken whilst she was on a rollercoaster showed the time and date digitally stamped in the corner of it, proving she was nowhere in the vicinity at the time of death.

The third and fourth statements belonged to the O'Connell's children, Jeremy and Alexandra, aged seventeen and twelve respectively. They stated they had breakfast with their mother two days before she was found dead, and that she drove them to their aunt's house around midmorning, where they stayed until receiving the terrible news.

Statement five was given by a man in his early thirties.

Jacob Gwilliams worked for the O'Connells as a gardener-cum-handyman. He had been in the grounds of the grand home on the day the woman had died, but he claimed that he hadn't seen her at all, which (he said), wasn't unusual. He got on with his work unsupervised and only ever spoke to Mrs. O'Connell if she came out into the garden and he happened to be working there at the time. Mostly (he said), his dealings were with Mr. O'Connell.

Reading the statement carefully, Baylem learned that Gwilliams had been doing repairs on the summer house and was (for the most part), putting up a new roof (photographs were included showing fresh repairs to a felt roof, weakly corroborating his story).

"That leaves number six," uttered Baylem under his breath. Statement six appeared just as innocuous as the five before it. "Isabelle Duncan, aged twenty-six," he said aloud, then skim-read further silently.

Isabelle was personal assistant to Michael O'Connell and lived on site, taking up residence within an annexed building, and spending a lot of her time within an office situated on the ground floor of the O'Connells' grand home. Isabelle admitted being in the house at the time of the woman's death. She rarely left the property, saying that she needed to be on hand for any of Michael's business needs or personal whims (?). Although he was in New York a lot, she would manage his affairs from London. The time difference was only 5 hours, and Skype allowed for daily face-to-face interaction. When asked about Mrs. O'Connell, she stated that she hadn't seen her for several days, saying they kept themselves to themselves.

Baylem wrote the six names down on a piece of paper:

Michael O'Connell  
Apolonia Szpakowski

Jeremy and Alexandra O'Connell  
Jacob Gwilliams  
Isabelle Duncan

“Which one of you played a part in Victoria O'Connell's death?”

Puzzled, the detective constable picked up the photographs and spent between ten and twenty seconds staring at each one again, studying every millimetre, looking for any clues that had yet to be yielded. After thirty minutes, he got up from his chair and made his way back to DI Kendray's office. He knocked on the door and, once summoned, entered.

“Sir, the box of roses... what happened to it?”

“In evidence, I'd guess.”

Fifteen minutes later, sitting back in the office which he'd made his own, he opened up a big brown movers carton, inside which were the roses (now dead and dried out) within their presentation box. The lid which he had seen set aside within the photograph was now in its designed place. The constable gently prised the lid free and examined the contents.

The dead roses looked unambiguous enough, and the box wasn't very interesting. But something, slightly hidden from immediate view, grabbed his attention.

In the corner was a small hole, as though made with a sharp point, concealed on the outside with a 'made in USA' product origin sticker. Baylem could tell that the hole had been made from the outside, evidenced by the burr of cardboard fibres sticking inward. The gift card had been tucked inside for safekeeping, and the policeman plucked it out to inspect.

If only you could love me...

The handwriting appeared to have a feminine flourish, and the card was plain without any florist's advertising blurb.



## PRESENTLY

### NOW

“**W**HEN I SAW THE BOUQUET OF SEVEN roses, I knew exactly who had murdered Mrs. O’Connell,” said Baylem. He finished his beer and waved for Kaliko to bring him and Jayne another drink.

“From that list of six suspects?”

“Two, actually Jayne.”

“Two?”

“Mr. O’Connell was in America at the time of his wife’s death; the house keeper Apolonia Szpakowski was in Milton Keynes in some theme park; the O’Connells’ kids were at their aunt’s house. I interviewed them all, and each had rock-solid alibis.

“However, the gardener – Jacob Gwilliams – and the personal assistant – Isabelle Duncan – had no alibis at all, and this alone took them to the top of my suspect’s list.”

“So Jacob Gwilliams did it?”

Baylem shook his head. “No.”

“Then that leaves Isabelle Duncan...”

“Again, you are wrong.”

Jayne looked confused and then a little miffed.

Baylem smiled. “They were both the only true suspects in Mrs. O’Connell’s death, however neither of them did it. You see, the key to solving this case was the cause of death itself. I spoke with the pathologist who explained that an ‘anomalous coronary artery, aortic dissection, and acute myocardial infarction’, almost never happens on its own, and is often the result of cyanide poisoning.”

“Cyanide?”

Baylem nodded. “If cyanide is inhaled, death can occur within a matter of seconds; usually immediate loss of consciousness, followed by cardiac arrest. It’s very difficult to diagnose as cyanide leaves little or no trace behind.”

Jayne nodded understanding but still looked perplexed. “How?” she asked.

“Well, the ‘how’ and the ‘why’ were a little harder to fathom, but quickly solved with a little digging around.”

Kaliko arrived at the table holding a round tray with a bottle of beer and another Mai Kai. He placed the drinks in front of the two former detectives.

Baylem thanked him and took a deep pull from his drink, quenching a sudden thirst, before continuing. “It turned out Michael O’Connell was having an affair with his PA.

“Isabelle Duncan’s statement hinted closeness with the businessman. She admitted needing to be on hand for any of his ‘business needs or whims’, the ‘whims’ being more personal than would be expected in her position.”

“Hmm, I see,” Jayne uttered in disapproval. “So, am I to take it you now had added Michael O’Connell to the suspect list?”

Baylem shook his head. “No. His alibi was concrete.”

Jayne smiled and shook her head. “Okay... if it wasn’t him, and it wasn’t the gardener or the personal assistant, and we’ve disregarded the housekeeper and the two children, who actually does that leave?” She had done the math and couldn’t see that it could be anyone else.

Baylem laughed and nodded smugly. “I know! But I’ve failed to mention one other tiny piece of information, something which didn’t emerge until I interviewed everybody for a second time.”

“Go on.”

“Mrs. O’Connell had an unhealthy infatuation with Isabelle Duncan. She’d mentioned to her sister that she had found someone she was besotted with – even loved; but this love was unrequited. The O’Connell’s had an open relationship, and it was well known to all that knew her that she liked both men and women (there had been past female dalliances before her marriage). Her sister didn’t know who it was, but Mr. O’Connell was able to answer that question without hesitation. Isabelle Duncan.

“When I asked Isabelle directly, she admitted that the older woman had approached her on more than one occasion, trying it on. In the end, she did her best to avoid her, and was successful for the most part. She had been telling the truth in her statement, that it had been several days since she had seen Mrs. O’Connell last. What she failed to say was that encounter had ended badly, with the PA telling her she was “a sad and lonely old hag” and that Michael was only with her for his money. Mrs. O’Connell had slapped her hard across the face and told her that she would regret saying that.”

Jayne shook her head. “I still can’t see who could have killed Mrs. O’Connell.” She sipped her cocktail and hoped Baylem would put her

out of her misery soon. “You said you knew who did it when you saw the flowers? Is it obvious? Is it something I’m missing?”

Baylem felt clever. “Perhaps,” he said, “perhaps not. It’s the number of flowers, and the colour of them that is significant. The quantity of seven roses is symbolic, and means ‘infatuation.’ Usually, someone would send seven roses to a person to highlight their desire or crush.”

“Really? Did you ever think about sending seven roses to me?”

“Err, maybe,” Baylem replied coyly, if not a little nervously.

Sparing him further discomfort, Jayne asked a further question. “What’s the deal with the colour then?”

“Like the number of roses, the colour also has meaning,” he was recomposed. “Purple roses indicate love on first sight, and lavender ones are commonly given to same sex partners, especially on Valentine’s Day. I believe the sender was a woman – the intended recipient also – and she was drawing attention to this.

“The sender’s card stated: *If only you could love me...* just emphasises that the person they were intended does not likely feel the same way.”

“So who would send Mrs. O’Connell them?”

“I don’t believe *anyone* did send them to her; I believe *she* was going to send them to Isabelle Duncan.”

“Okay, perhaps. But what has that got to do with her death?”

Baylem cleared his throat. “When closed, the presentation box used for the flowers was airtight. I believe Mrs. O’Connell injected the box with a deadly concentration of hydrogen cyanide, with the intent of murdering the woman who had spurned her. Except she decided not to go ahead with it; using it on herself instead.”

“Okay. A good story, but how does she get hold of hydrogen cyanide, it’s not something you can go to the local shopping centre to

buy, and why would she not go through with her original plan to bump off Isabelle Duncan?”

“Two valid points, and easily answered. The first, you may recall me stating that Michael O’Connell was a businessman...”

Jayne nodded in agreement.

“Well, I didn’t elaborate on what business he was involved. Pharmaceuticals! In fact, both he and Mrs. O’Connell are majority shareholders in a company that manufactures chemicals, one of which is—”

“—hydrogen cyanide!” Jayne finished for him.

“Bingo! Used commercially for producing plastics, dyes and pesticides. Because of her position, it wouldn’t have been too difficult to get her hands on a sample.”

“But what made her decide to open the box?”

“Well, that did have me stumped for a spell. At first, I considered she had done it by accident; but the way the scene appeared, and how the lid had been carefully placed down on the coffee table, told me the whole act was deliberate and precise. She was also able to calmly lie down – had it been an accident she most likely would have fallen to the floor in a panicked heap.

“When I told Mr. O’Connell that I believed his wife had died at her own hand, he blamed himself for her death.”

“Oh,” exclaimed Jayne.

“He said he had spoken to her on the phone that morning, and told her that he was divorcing her. His wife had laughed at him, so he told her that he was leaving her for his PA, and that she was having his baby. He said his wife hung up on him, and that was the last time he, or anyone else for that matter, spoke with her.”

“She killed herself because her husband was leaving her?”

“No,” said Baylem softly. “She killed herself because she realised she couldn’t go through with killing Isabelle Duncan, not now knowing that she was pregnant with her husband’s baby. Whether she thought it through, or just reacted impulsively to remove the lid off the presentation box, no one will ever know.”

“A present day Greek tragedy,” asserted Jayne sadly.

“Made more unfortunate by Michael O’Connell’s admission that he had totally lied to his wife; Isabelle Duncan was not, and never had been, pregnant. Had he not thought to embellish his reason for divorce, in all likelihood I would have been investigating the death of a different woman.”

“You solved the case! And did you get your promotion, £1000 and the pick of one of DI Kendray’s daughters?” Jayne asked mischievously.

Baylem smiled, his eyes twinkling. “I was happy to settle for two out of three of his offers, ta very much... cheers!” He picked up his bottle of Kona lager and clinked it against Jayne’s glass. He had a sip of lager. “Besides,” he added cheekily, “it turned out he didn’t have a grand in his bank account to give me...” and started to laugh.

