

KATE McCAFFREY

***DOUBLE
LIVES***

echo

CHAPTER 1

THE IDEA

The truth is in the detail. Within the nuance of the story, the cadence of the voice, the tilt of the head, the flutter of an eyelash. People are anthologies of stories, mosaics made up of minor events, small truths that constitute who we are, what we believe in, the way we live.

Why do I shake my head every time I'm offered a flute of champagne? Because, I'll laughingly tell my friends, I haven't touched champagne since the night I graduated from my Bachelor's degree and I drank so much I vomited out the back of my boyfriend's 1974 Ford Falcon. Of course, I believed I'd opened the door, but then I sheepishly acknowledge that I hadn't. And that admission, that self-awareness, that embarrassing truth, gives the story its required believability.

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Before all of this began, I liked to think that I was a crusader for truth. It was a chalice brimming with indisputable goodness, the finding and the revelation of which would act as some form of emancipation from the other greatest defining feature of people: their secret.

Journalists are often regarded as creatures of prey. Great winged birds with curved beaks, who pick apart and rip through the meaty flesh of other people's lives. As a breed, we are viewed as toxic to privacy and secrecy. With our counterpart parasites, the photographers, we splash the front pages of magazines and newspapers with dark secrets that are often trussed up with pithy puns: a picture of Donald Trump's hair blowing in the wind captioned, 'There's gonna be hell toupee'; or President Bill Clinton's acquittal at his impeachment trial, 'Close, but no cigar'. These front pages give us what we creatures crave: money, success, greater opportunities. We march on, leaving a trail of carcasses in our wake.

I always held a higher moral ground – I'm not a print journalist, I write copy for radio shows. It is a widely held view in the industry that we are less exploitative, less tabloid and certainly more respectable. Our medium allows us to interview and record, and without the accompanying imagery – we all know a picture paints a thousand words – we can avoid the sensationalism that television and print are accused of.

Radio stations exist by genre. Christian radio punctuates

sermons and theological debate with up-beat tunes from Hillsong; the sports station relies on the commentators and laborious analysis of statistics on the field, on the track and in the pool – it's all about PBs and WRs. The alternative stations have it easier than most, unearthing new musical talent; trendy, hip doctors discussing physics and atoms; phone-in debates over the rights of cyclists on the roads. Alternative stations love on-air calls, interviews with politicians, online polls – we're always inviting text messages and comments on our website. Stations like Radio Western in Perth, where I work, offer listeners the opportunity to assist with the construction of the media we create and deliver. We allow consumers of media to be the producers of media.

I was looking for my big break, something that might resuscitate my sputtering career. Five years away from home, living and working in Melbourne, had given me experience in a small basement studio (listening audience of about two hundred – mostly friends and relatives), then a university-based station dealing with current and on-point issues, to my biggest gig ever: the presenter for the 2 a.m. to 5 a.m. time slot. You'd be surprised how many people are awake at that time.

Now, back in Perth, I was angling for drive time – a spot highly coveted by presenters. There's no greater captive audience, hemmed in by traffic for the ride home between

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5 and 6 p.m. It's the jewel in the crown, the feather in the cap, or whatever accessory you'd like to pair with a head covering. Drive time was a radio journalist's nirvana.

Our competition – another alternative and millennial-loving station – had recently begun to use drive time for a cold-case exposé. Frankly, I found it a little too formulaic and highly unsatisfactory – after sifting through evidence and rehashing interviews, it still left listeners wondering whodunit. Apparently, the majority of the population disagreed with me and 44.3's ratings soared. They had well and truly hit it out of the park, scored a goal, made a touchdown – or whatever other sporting cliché you'd prefer. They were smashing us.

A council of war was called and we sat in the conference room for hour after hour, trying to be creative and innovative. How could we take it up to 44.3? Steal their listeners and crash their ratings? I did say radio journalists are only marginally more ethical than print ones. As the innovative concepts – or 'ridiculous, unsustainable tripe' (that was our producer Charlie's opinion) – were bandied about, it got me thinking.

It's 1917. Sydney is only 129 years old. King George V is the monarch and the prime minister is Billy Hughes, best known for two things – the first, leading Australia into the First World War and the second, for being the only prime minister

to have served in politics for fifty years. The Town Hall is an ornate High Victorian Second Empire styled building that reflects the affluence and eager confidence of a booming city's population. The Town Hall's clock tower is the tallest structure in the city. The streets are wide on the official side of Sydney and lined with horses and buggies, businessmen in fedora hats and three-piece suits, women in high-necked, long-sleeved, ankle-grazing dresses – remnants of Queen Victoria's puritanical reign. The western side, meanwhile, reflects the convict days: the winding, haphazard roads, the rugged and rudimentary architecture, the work houses, the chimney sweeps and the labourers.

On the outskirts of this city, the charred remains of a woman are found. The victim is unidentifiable: her facial features destroyed, the large cracks in her skull evidence of her brutal and painful death. The case is unsolved. She is buried as a Jane Doe.

Harry Crawford is a short and stocky man who works odd jobs as a labourer, a meat worker and a bartender. Back in 1912, he was working as the driver for a doctor when he met the recently widowed Annie Birkett and her thirteen-year-old son, Harry Birkett. Crawford is persistent in his wooing of Annie, and she is receptive to his attentions; they marry in 1913. But the marriage is tumultuous. Crawford is a big drinker, and by 1917 the couple are often heard arguing. Neighbours report

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Crawford has a temper and often smashes up the furniture in the house. In October of 1917 the couple go on a picnic to Lane Cove River. Annie never returns, and Crawford never reports her as missing to the police. Crawford tells her son Harry that Annie has left him for another man.

It isn't until 1920 that young Harry Birkett tells his aunt that on the day of his mother's disappearance, Crawford had taken Harry to the Gap, where they stood on the edge throwing stones. Harry, who never believed Crawford liked him, found his behaviour more unpleasant than usual. One night, about a week later, Crawford took Harry to an isolated area in scrubland and made him dig a hole, then they returned home. Suspicious, his aunt reports Crawford to the police. When the police search his house, where he lives with his current wife, Lizzie Allison, they discover a small bag. Crawford tells the police to open it, but not to allow his wife to see the contents. He says that in the bag is an artificial device that he has been using, which his wife doesn't know about. The police ask him if Annie knew about the device. To which Harry responds, 'Not until the latter part of our marriage.' The police arrest Harry on suspicion of Annie's disappearance.

The 1917 Jane Doe's remains are exhumed, and a gem found with her charred remains is identified by Annie's sister as belonging to Annie, and the false teeth are identified by the dentist as Annie Birkett's.

At the police station Crawford is charged with murder. They take his mug shot and fingerprint him, but before they can send him down, he states, 'I should be put in a women's ward.'

It was at this point that Harry's past, that of a woman, Eugenia Falleni, was revealed. Originally born in Italy, he had migrated to New Zealand as a child with his parents. Eugenia had dressed as a man from a young age, finding work on ships. At the age of nineteen he ran away to Australia; when he arrived in Sydney, he was pregnant, having been brutally raped by the ship's captain, who had discovered that Eugenia was transgender. He gave his daughter to a young Italian couple and set about creating his true identity, that of Harry Crawford, proceeding to live nearly all of his adult life as a man – until young Harry Birkett's revelation to his aunt.

As you can imagine, the press at the time went wild about what they called a 'he-she murderer'. To boot, in a society just liberated from the conservatism of Queen Victoria's reign, the 'instrument of pleasure' was actually submitted into evidence against Crawford at trial. Crawford was convicted of murder and sentenced to death. This was later commuted to life imprisonment. He was incarcerated for the rest of his life as a woman.

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The story of Eugenia Falleni/Harry Crawford posed many questions for my investigative mind. Why did Harry murder Annie? Was it, as many speculated, that Annie had discovered Harry's past? By all accounts, Harry was a proficient lover; not only had he been married twice, but he also had female lovers on the side. If this was the case, did Harry kill Annie because of the attitudes towards homosexuality in those days? The notion of being transgender and the issues of sexuality raised by that weren't even a point of discussion at the time. Homosexuality alone would have ended in a prison sentence – what would have been the punishment for living transgender? Did Harry kill Annie because he was a violent and aggressive man? Because the society he lived in endorsed violence against women? Was it an accident? Had Annie, as Crawford always maintained, slipped and hit her head, dying instantly – after which he panicked, doused her in kerosene and set her body on fire?

It fascinated me, it perplexed me. I wanted to know the truth – but I was never going to get it from a case that was more than a hundred years old. There were no witnesses I could talk to, only dusty old transcripts that held one singular version of the truth, recorded in a moment in time.

I needed something modern, contemporary. I needed a case where the people were alive, the opinions current, the facts still able to be touched and examined. I wanted something that

could make my listeners question what was at the heart of every person, their own identity.

I spent days poring over newspapers online, looking for that one story, the one with all the necessary ingredients. Murder, lies, deception, a dash of religion for good measure. Recently, I'd noticed that gender identity was getting more and more space in newspapers and magazines. The debate was being waged in schools and businesses. The terms transgender and non-binary are so familiar to us. But how accepting are we?

And then I found it. The Jonah Scott case.

At our weekly meeting I pitch my idea to Charlie and the team. 'Channel 44.3 are keeping their audience with intrigue, that we know, but there's nothing satisfying about it,' I say. 'A one-off pre-recording of a case that hasn't been solved and probably never will be. We want to find a case and turn it inside out. Look for the flaws, the mistakes, find the inconsistencies, seek the truth.'

'I'm not sure that's innovative.' Charlie looks bored. 'The ABC is following that formula with their documentaries.' Charlie is a bit of a mentor to me. As a high-school student I'd done some work experience with her, when she had run a small community station. We were friends on Facebook, and when I returned to Perth, Charlie offered me a job immediately. When I was desperate, when it felt like everything had imploded, she threw me a life-line. Her opinion means everything to me.

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‘My point exactly,’ I say, getting excited. ‘And it’s working in that medium. Their ratings are monster, but I’ve got a twist. What say we make it up as we go along? Say, I do all the research over the next three months, get all the facts, create Episode One and then see what listener input we get? Like, we could actually get evidence from listeners that was never presented at the time. We could invite our listeners to help us discover the truth. I could then put together the next week’s episode depending on where the first takes me.’

Charlie has straightened in her chair; she looks interested now. Her eyebrows have reached their apex. My colleagues are all leaning forward, there is a sudden charge in the air. ‘So, when you start, you have no idea where you’re going to end up?’ she says. ‘It could be risky.’

‘Refreshing,’ I say firmly. ‘Imagine it, Charlie, presenting a show – an investigation, with no preconceived notion of the truth. Just a quest for the absolute. All I need is an assistant.’ Charlie gives me that knowing look and then turns to our intern, Sarah.

‘Do you want to be the lackey and general dogsbody?’ she asks.

‘Anything,’ Sarah says. I can see she’s hoping this will be her opportunity to make her mark in radio, as much as I hope it will be mine.

CHAPTER 2

I AM JONAH

‘Hi, I’m Amy Rhinehart and I’m the presenter of *Strange Crime*, a live broadcast and podcast on Radio Western every Wednesday at 5 p.m. Season One is called *Double Lives* and examines the Jonah Scott murder of Casey Williams.

‘Let me take you back to a summer night in mid-January. A girl’s body is found floating in an isolated river in the state’s remote south west. The Jane Doe, a victim of a savage stabbing attack, is unidentifiable. A manhunt begins, which leads detectives into a world of teenage sexuality, drug rings and religious cults, resulting in the conviction of then-nineteen-year-old Jonah Scott. The victim: his girlfriend Casey Williams. The outcome: Jonah’s immediate confession

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and compliance with investigators. His plea: guilty. The sentence: life imprisonment.

‘Sounds pretty straightforward, right? Boy kills girl, admits it, goes to prison. Probably the kind of case most detectives dream of. But what if, I don’t know, something just doesn’t add up? Something feels decidedly odd? Why go to such lengths – which we’ll look at later – to cover up a crime, only to be totally compliant when the police show up? Why murder at all?’

‘I invite you all to tune in, every Wednesday, as I delve into the many parts of this case that don’t add up. Oh, and listeners, we’re doing this in real time. Each week we’re producing one episode – this series isn’t a pre-recording. We’re going to see where this starts out and where we end up. So, I ask you to join me for the ride. Just a word of warning: listeners are advised that this podcast contains graphic and disturbing material.’

‘We begin Episode One, “I am Jonah”, with part of the recording from our initial meeting with Jonah, back in March this year. My assistant Sarah and I travel to the maximum security prison about an hour out of the city. The drive is long. We pass through a razor-wire fence and pull up outside the main gate house. There are signs warning visitors about the consequences of bringing drugs in. We’ve been given special permission to bring in a recording device – but no photography is allowed. We sign in at the security check point. I have to

admit I'm feeling nervous. Casuarina houses the state's worst and most violent criminals. Remember David Birnie? The serial killer who abducted, raped and tortured four girls in a killing spree with his wife, back in the 1980s? Yep, he used to live here, until his suicide in 2005. There is a tense atmosphere, I glance at the other visitors quickly, trying not to make eye contact as we sit in the waiting room.'

I press the button for the audio.

Guard: Rhinehart and Sutton for Scott. [Sound of gates opening, footsteps]

Amy [whispers]: We are now inside one of Australia's highest-security prisons. We're being shown into a non-contact room. It's divided by a glass panel. Jonah is tall, he has dark hair and a kind of gentle-looking face. His eyes are large and brown, he smiles at us with straight white teeth and gestures with one hand. He doesn't look at all like a murderer, and I'll explain what I mean by that in a bit.

Jonah: Hi.

Amy: Hey, I'm Amy and this is Sarah, we'd like to thank you for agreeing to participate in this series with us.

Jonah: Thank you for asking me.

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Amy: We're curious, and I'm sure our listeners will be too, as to why you've agreed to be a part of our podcast.

Jonah: I'm confident in my relationship with God. But Casey wasn't, and now she's in hell. I was deceived and lied to. But it doesn't make what I did right. I took her life and I forced her into hell, because of who she was. I have a lot of time to think about that night. A night I wish I could go back to and do again, do again so differently. But God has a plan for me and this is it. He knows what He wants me to learn, to understand, inside these four walls, day after day. I pray to Him for forgiveness. I pray for redemption. But most of the time I pray for Casey. I pray that He can forgive her.

Amy: You've already been in prison two years. How has that changed you? How do you see yourself?

Jonah: I got sentenced to life imprisonment, with a non-parole period of twenty-three years. I'm twenty-one now, I was nineteen then, I could be forty-two when I'm released. I was a kid when I came in. I'd made a huge mistake. I was terrified. Who knows what the world will be like when I'm out? What technology will have done to us as people? How we'll live and love? I can't ever comprehend being outside these razor-wire fences, being free. And I know I don't

deserve it. I gave up my right to freedom when I took Casey's life. But I really wish she hadn't lied to me.

Amy: What would you like our listeners to know about you?

Jonah: I've been portrayed as a brutal and violent killer, and I'm not that. I'm actually a good person. I'm loving and kind. I loved Casey. She had soft lips and gentle hands. I believe that in her heart she was good, too. I wish I could tell her that. When the cops arrested me, I knew I had to do the right thing. I had done something so bad, nothing was going to make that right. But my father said to me, 'Son, do the right thing now.' And that's what I did. I confessed and I pleaded guilty. No trial with jurors, just my admission and my punishment. But I know I'm yet to face my punishment, that remains between me and Him.

I pull my headphones back on. 'Before we plunge into the details of the case, I wanted you to hear the voice of the cold-blooded killer who stabbed Casey forty-seven times. Jonah then used a weapon to crush part of her skull, which would have rendered her dead instantaneously. He dragged her body to a wooded area near a secluded part of the river, where he tied a cement block to a rope. He pushed her body into the river – where it sank, and stayed for nearly three months.'

I pause. The violence of Casey's death is still so shocking

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that I need to regain my composure. I look at my producer – she nods and indicates I have five minutes before the advertisement slot. ‘Casey’s body was discovered by a couple of hikers, and that led to the manhunt for Jonah. What makes this case the subject of this podcast is that there is something vital missing. Having gone to great lengths to dispose of her body and the murder weapons, Jonah confessed the crime instantly to the police. Not only that, but Jonah also pleaded guilty to the charge of murder, forfeiting his right to trial by jury.

‘Now, stay with me here. On the recording you hear me say he doesn’t look like a murderer. I know, right? What does a murderer even look like? The pictures I have of Jonah, before prison, show a young, gangly-looking boy – you know, your typical school photo, all teeth and long hair. The Jonah I met, the one you heard, is already a man. He is heavier set, muscly, I guess, his jaw is firmer. There is a hardness to his face.

‘But that voice, you all heard it too, it’s the soft and redemptive voice of someone seeking penitence. Jonah said he’s a good person – loving and kind – and therein lies our conundrum. What on earth possesses a good person to stab someone forty-seven times and then bash their head in with a hammer? After the advertisement we’ll be back to start picking this case apart.’

My producer is giving me a signal. I lift my headphones as I throw to the ads.

‘Good start,’ Charlie says, bringing me a glass of water. ‘The text line is going mad. Listener numbers are spiking. When’s the big reveal?’

‘Next up.’ I look at the monitor. I’ve got the hikers’ discovery and the interview from the coroner cued to go. I go back on air.

‘Thanks for staying with me. It was mid-January when two hikers, on their honeymoon, explored the forest down near the town of Nannup, some three-and-a-half hours from Perth. Please listen to this re-enactment.’ I hit the button and the voice-over actress talks over haunting piano music.

Dusk was falling and the mist swirled gently across the river. In the reeds, insects and reptiles rustled for shelter. Birds flew en masse, circling and calling above the horizon as the damp air began to set in. The light, through the dense trees, changed momentarily to gold as the sun descended. The two hikers stopped and shifted their backpacks.

‘It’s getting dark.’ Louis looked at his watch. ‘We should probably get back before we lose all light.’

‘I’ve got a torch.’ Charlotte reached around into her pack. ‘Here.’ She flicked it on and cast it around the grove. Suddenly she shivered. ‘You might be right, though. It’s getting dark really quick, I don’t want to be stuck out here tonight.’

They turned and followed the riverbank back the way they’d

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come, Charlotte's torchlight bouncing off the trees and reeds in front of them. A loud flapping noise across the surface of the river made her swing the torch nervously across it.

'It suddenly feels really creepy out here,' she said.

'Wait.' Louis held his hand up. 'Go back. What was that?'

'What?' Charlotte cast the torchlight across the river's blackness.

'That.' Louis grabbed her hand and steadied it on the shape in the water.

'A rock?' Charlotte said.

'No.' Louis took the torch, stepping closer. 'I don't think so. I think ...'

'Oh God –' Charlotte put her hand to her mouth. The light reflected the black water like an oil spill that pooled around the white and green mass floating on the surface of the water, revealing the faded pink singlet and the long brown hair that spread out like tendrils reaching, seeking, searching. 'It's a girl.'

'The couple called the local police, which led to the assembly of a Task Force, with detectives coming down from Perth. The small grove was lit up with high-powered lights as the police and detectives searched for clues, photographing and mapping any evidence they found.' I read from my monitor and glance at the clock. I have ten minutes left and I haven't played the coroner's report. I have to get it into the first episode.

‘The body was dragged from the water, in a state of advanced decomposition. Now, listen to my interview with the current state coroner, Alistair Shaw.’

Amy: Welcome Alistair Shaw, thanks for being on the show. Can you tell our listeners what the role of the state coroner is?

Alistair: Sure. When a person dies from non-natural causes, it’s my job to establish the manner in which the death arose, the cause of the death and the identity of the person.

Amy: What was the scene you were facing that day in January?

Alistair: Initially we had a young woman in her late teens to early twenties – age was difficult to ascertain at that point due to the extensive decomposition and insect activity.

Amy: Oh, yuck.

Alistair: Sorry, it is yuck, particularly bodies retrieved from water, which makes the identification of the person that much harder. It was clear at the scene of discovery that the person had been stabbed several times, and there was evidence of severe head trauma. In fact, it was one of the most confronting bodies I’ve ever had to examine in my entire career.

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Amy: What else was noted initially?

Alistair: There was a long yellow rope tied securely around her waist. We ascertained that it had been attached to something heavy. Divers later retrieved a large cement building block from the bed of the river.

Amy: It was used to weigh her down?

Alistair: Yes. Given the time of year and the relatively warm currents, it would only have been a matter of days before a body thrown into the river surfaced again. Instead, because the body was tethered to the river floor, it, in fact, took three months from the killing to the discovery.

Amy: What was learnt at the autopsy?

Alistair: Once we had the body in the morgue, we conducted a complete autopsy. We discovered the forty-seven stab wounds had sliced or penetrated nearly every vital organ, there was evidence of mass haemorrhaging. Cause of death was the three blows to the skull, made by a claw hammer. The identity of the victim was difficult to determine.

Amy: Why was that?

Alistair: Firstly, we had no Missing Persons report that matched our victim's initial profile, and then at the autopsy

it was revealed we'd been looking for the wrong missing person.

Amy: What do you mean by that?

Alistair: Before the autopsy, the police were searching for a record of a young woman between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five, approximately 170 centimetres tall, about fifty-eight kilos, long brown hair, pale blue eyes. Whereas in fact they should have been looking for a young male, or a transgender woman, of that description.

Amy: Can you explain, please?

Alistair: Yes, our autopsy revealed that our victim was in fact a transgender woman. She had had breast augmentation and showed signs of hormone therapy, as well as retaining her penis.

I look at Charlie, she's giving me the thumbs-up. The text line has lit up. We've got our hook.

'Next Wednesday, I invite you to sit down and listen as we ask, "Who was Casey Williams?" Thanks for joining me. Ciao.'

I press the button for the next track and sit back in my chair. I wave at Josie Manners through the glass window as she slides into her seat for the six to eight time slot.

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‘That was massive,’ Charlie says, putting her arm around me. ‘You nailed it.’

‘Thanks.’ I look over at Sarah, who is watching the text line.

She looks up. ‘You should read this stuff. Josie’s following it up on her show now. You completely floored them with the gender revelation. Some people are getting quite snaky, saying it was a cheap trick.’

‘Good.’ I start thinking. ‘We can make that work for us, too. Challenge some of those preconceptions. We’ll write that into next week’s episode. I want to be really sensitive with this one. We need to think about Casey’s family.’