

All for Elvira

by

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The taxi driver made a death-defying lunge into the Toowong roundabout traffic, gave the finger in response to an outraged blast from a silver BMW denied its lordly right of precedence, then swerved off through the gates of death itself — Toowong Cemetery.

Brian, in the back seat, didn't notice. His thoughts were on the coming encounter. He grimaced, though, when the driver skidded the car to a stop by the office, keyed down the window and called to a man just emerging from the door, "Ay mate, where's the plantin'?"

The man jerked his thumb. "Fourteenth Avenue. Reverse back and take the left fork, curve right past the workshop and it's the next intersection on the left."

The driver followed the directions, then jerked to a stop at the intersection. "'Ere you are, mate."

Brian paid him off, then stepped out. Brisbane's humid summer air, so noticeable after his stay in the dry heat of Mount Isa, struck him like a hot wet towel. He clasped his briefcase under his arm, extended the handle of his pull-along suitcase and walked up towards the back row of mourners, feeling slightly ridiculous as the case's wheels clattered noisily on the uneven bitumen. The interruption seemed to irritate a sandy-haired man in the front rank, who swung around and gave him a hard look.

Brian had only seen the funeral notice in the paper as his plane banked in towards Eagle Farm that morning. The formal words had sent his mind haring off down the track of a long suppressed obsession. He hadn't had time to make the service, but fortunately the notice had mentioned a graveside service at Toowong.

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust..."

The minister's voice rose clearly in the late-morning air. The sound drew a sardonic "ark, ark" response from a flock of crows, clustered like vultures in a curiously-twisted pine tree, down-slope from the waiting hole in the ground.

"...in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection."

Brian could imagine nothing worse. With an eternity in front of him, he was sure he'd be bored out of his incorporeal brain long before the first millennium had elapsed. He jerked his thoughts away from that idle speculation, back to the reason why he'd come to this known stranger's funeral. His eyes fastened on a small, black-clad figure, standing stiffly in the front rank.

A subtle space separated her from her brother, as if to show the world she was capable of standing alone. Her black dress sent his mind rolling back all those years to his twenty-first birthday party.

His best friend, Peter, had been between girlfriends at the time. He had rung Brian the day before the party to ask if he could bring The Pest along as his plus-one. Brian was fond of Pete's kid sister. He found her cute and amusing, despite her nickname.

She'd been a constant irritation whenever he'd visited the Scotts' house; mocking their mature male airs, playing practical jokes, eavesdropping on their conversations and rubbishing their girlfriends.

"Elvira." He whispered to himself. So aptly named, with her delicate elfin features, black gamine hair and sapphire-blue eyes, huge like those of a Siamese cat in her small face.

He'd stared when she and Peter arrived at his party. She looked startlingly different without the usual sloppy T-shirt and board shorts. That night she'd seemed far more mature than her mere thirteen years, in a sophisticated little black dress and wearing make-up for the first time. She reminded him of the young Audrey Hepburn; coltish, fragile and ... bewitching.

His perception of her had changed in an instant.

Afterwards, he'd caught her regally accepting a glass of champagne from the hired waiter. Brian firmly set it back on the tray, and whisked her away in a dance. After two twirls, he knew the glass hadn't been her first.

"You're sloshed, you naughty brat."

"Ish that sho? I'll have you know, mishter high-and-mighty, I've only had three—"

She sagged, giggling helplessly. He danced her out into the hall, away from prying eyes, and swung her up in his arms. She hung there, light and helpless as a rag doll.

"I think you'd better lie down for a while, Pest—"

"Don' call me that. It'sh *Elvira*. I'm bein' a lady t'night."

He chuckled. "Hullo? No *lady* lets herself get drunk."

Brian carried her up the stairs, shouldered open the door of his room and laid her gently on the bed. She looked up at him, smiling foolishly, slack-lipped.

"Just close your eyes for a bit. I'll tell everyone you've got a headache."

She muttered something, then suddenly her arms came up, twined around his neck and pulled him down. She planted a sloppy, inexpert kiss in the general vicinity of his mouth.

"Y'r a rock, Brian, even if y'r shtuffy," she mumbled. "I'll alwaysh love you besht. Don' you forget that."

Peter's job took him to Sydney soon after, leaving Brian with no excuse to visit the Scotts. They'd rightly regard him as a cradle-snatcher, if he came around to see Elvira, as he wished so fervently to do.

He waited impatiently for her to grow up.

Brian came back to the present. Lost in his memories, he hadn't noticed the coffin being lowered. Elvira moved slowly towards the grave. She stooped gracefully, bending her knees together to one side, slipped the ribbon off the sheaf she carried, and scattered the flowers into the grave. The sandy-haired man stepped forward and took Elvira's elbow as she straightened.

She turned to resume her place, shrugging off the supporting hand, and a shock ran through him at the first sight of her face. Calm, composed, it had hardly changed since he last saw it ... when?

He was thirty-six now. That made her twenty-eight. Ten years ago, then; when she was eighteen, *decently* old enough for him, as a respectable up-and-coming young lawyer, to visit and treat as something more than a child...

She turned to the front again. Eyes downcast, she hadn't noticed his presence.

Brian smiled without mirth. His integrity hadn't paid off. Someone her own age, and therefore free to come courting, had got there before him: the man they were burying today.

No, Elvira. I didn't forget. What a pity you did.

The ranks broke up, shuffling and coughing to release tension. A new pattern emerged, focused on the grieving widow. Brian shuffled forward with the rest.

"Brian!" Peter's voice was welcoming. Elvira looked up, frowning slightly, as if trying to remember something, then her face blossomed into a smile.

"Brian Pettigrew! Why, I haven't seen you in ... it must be *ages!*" The crowd parted between them. He felt the butterfly-touch of her cheek against his, the feather-light feel of her body in his arms for an all-too-brief instant.

"You'll come back to the house afterwards, won't you? Please say yes." He mumbled assent, bemused, as of old, by the stunning vitality contained in that small body, scarcely noticing the aggressive stare of the sandy-haired man at her side. The pressure of the queue behind forced him aside as others came to bathe in the glow of Elvira's presence, to play their role in the bitter-sweet tragedy presented by the picture of the beautiful, delicate young widow.

Elvira's house was a restored timber Queenslander in nearby Paddington. A broad veranda ran all around and extended almost to the front fence, which ended in a vine-covered arch to allow access for a car to park on the road-level veranda. The land fell away steeply from the road; the original high stumps underneath the house had been replaced by spanning steel beams, and a lower story built in.

Brian, a glass of wine in his hand, stood out on the patio beyond the glass wall of the lower level among tree-ferns, figs, staghorns and potted plants: a cool damp oasis in the drought-stressed city. The sandy-haired man had frustrated all Brian's attempts to talk to Elvira so he re-joined Peter, who'd given him a lift from the cemetery.

“Elvira’s bearing up well,” he said.

Peter cleared his throat and glanced around. “Well, just between you and me, I don’t think the marriage was all that rosy lately. Maybe that’s why Eric hit the bottle.”

“Sorry to hear that,” Brian took another swallow of his drink to smooth the lie. The outlines of the fantasy that had flashed into his mind when he saw the funeral notice hardened.

“How did it happen? Eric’s death, I mean.”

“Car crash. Been on the cards for a long time, the way he used to drive. And that old MG of his didn’t have a roll bar. Thank God Elvira always had more sense than to get in it with him. She always insisted they take the BMW when they went out together.”

“Who’s the blond guy monopolizing her, Pete?”

“Terry Morton, Eric’s partner in the ad agency. Think he might fancy her.” Peter grimaced. “Somehow I don’t think she’ll be a widow for long. Elvira’s never had any trouble attracting the blokes.”

“Hm. How’s she fixed up otherwise?”

“You mean money? Can’t say, really. We’ve lost touch a bit since I moved to Sydney. She should get something out of the business, I guess, and she’s got that second-hand clothing shop just down the road; *Pre-loved Passions*, or whatever she calls it.” Peter drank off his beer and glanced at Brian speculatively.

“Look, Brian, I’ve got to go back home tomorrow. Work commitments I can’t get out of. I wonder, for old times’ sake, if you would, er—”

“Be around if she needs me?” Brian interrupted. “I’d be glad to.”

He left soon after, with only a brief word to Elvira. He’d go and see her later, he thought, when Terry Morton wasn’t around to get in the way. As the taxi negotiated the Valley traffic onto Kingsford Smith Drive he shook his head over the denseness of his old friend Pete, who’d never noticed Brian’s obsessive interest in his kid sister.

The taxi swung out of the heavy traffic, and climbed the hill into the quiet, leafy streets of Hamilton. Brian paid off the driver, glanced at the expensive view of the river far below, then hauled his suitcase up the garden path and onto the broad, cool veranda. As he reached for his key, the door opened.

“Where on earth have you been?” Carol cried. “The plane got in hours ago.”

Brian found he had to think for a moment. He’d almost forgotten he had a wife, after ten days in Mount Isa on an intricate case, then his preoccupation with Elvira.

“Sorry, dear. On the plane I just happened to see a funeral notice in the paper, and had to rush to make it. No time to phone you.” Not that this had even crossed his mind.

“Oh? Whose?”

“No one you know. Brother-in-law of an old school friend.”

Belatedly, he stooped to kiss her pixie face, then grabbed the handle of his case and brushed past. Her blue cats-eyes followed him speculatively.

“The change-room is just down there, ma’am.” Once the customer had gone, Elvira turned back to Brian, who’d taken to bringing a lunch for them to share on every other day, as she couldn’t leave the shop.

“Yes, I’m okay. Eric had mortgage protection insurance, so the house is safe. The BMW is only half paid off; I’ll sell it and get something smaller. I don’t make a fortune out of this place, but it helps.”

“What about the share in Eric’s business?”

“The accountants are still sorting that out.”

“Hm. Well, if you need any help, don’t hesitate to ask. Once you called me your rock, do you remember?”

Elvira frowned. “Did I?”

“Morton’s just stringing you along, if you ask me. I don’t trust him,” Brian said to her, two days later.

Elvira sighed, watching him pace up and down in front of her shop counter. He was far too big for the space, and he was making her nervous. The single customer, who’d barely started to look through the racks, picked up the angry vibes and left.

“It takes time, Brian,” she said sharply, finding herself defending Terry, even though she’d been losing patience with him herself. “He wasn’t *expecting* Eric to die. Things were bound to be in a mess.”

He stopped pacing at last, folded his arms and grunted. “I don’t suppose he could have been,” he said doubtfully, answering only the first part of her comment.

“Peter said something about your marriage being a bit rocky.”

Elvira nodded. They were sitting on either side of the counter eating Thai take-away.

“Was there someone else?” Brian continued.

Mouth full, Elvira shook her head, then swallowed and said, “It just sort of...died. Eric was so immature in many ways, but we were still friends. Sometimes friendship lasts better than love.” She wiped her fingers on a tissue. “What’s your marriage like, Brian?”

He grimaced. “Dying. And we’re not really good friends any more, I’m afraid.” He paused, then plunged on, “I envied Eric, you know, although I never met him. Do you remember what you said the night of my twenty-first?”

“No-o, I don’t think so.”

“When you called me your rock. You said you’d always love me best.”

A hunted look flashed across her face.

“I was a *child*, Brian. You can’t expect to hold me to that.”

Brian sighed. “I don’t want to hold you to anything. I’m just reminding you.”

“And I was drunk.”

“Maybe so. But you know the old saying...”

“Which one?”

“*In vino veritas*. And if you need a rock to lean on, I’ll be here.”

“Hullo — Carol?”

The house was in darkness. Brian went through to the lounge-room. “Oh, there you are. What’s for dinner?”

“That’s up to you. I’ve had mine.”

Carol was watching TV, the colors flickering across her face, although Brian felt sure her attention was elsewhere. The sound was turned down to an inaudible murmur under the whisper of the air-conditioning. A glass and a bottle of his best Grange, two-thirds empty, sat on the coffee-table beside the remains of a take-away pizza for one.

Brian turned on the overhead light, turned off the TV, and sat in the lounge chair opposite. Her brilliant cats-eyes were shadowed, he saw.

“Okay,” he said patiently. “What’s the matter?”

She spoke to the blank TV. “I found out today why you married me.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Carol went on as if he hadn’t spoken. “I visited *Pre-loved Passions*. A friend who lives in Paddington asked me what you’d bought for me there, seeing you go there so often. She didn’t realize that, for you, the passion was the proprietor, not the clothes.” She looked up at him then, a twisted smile on her face.

“You want to know why I married *you*, Brian?”

“Tell me.”

“For your money. You can have a divorce, but that little bitch is only going to get half of what she expects.”

“You’ll get what you deserve, Carol.”

“The resemblance is remarkable,” she mused. “We could almost be twins. Tell me, just as a matter of interest: what’s Elvira got that I haven’t?”

Brian stood up suddenly. The chair rolled back on its castors and thumped into the wall.

“Vitality,” he said brutally.

“What is it, Elvira?” Brian asked. “Something’s bothering you.”

He felt nervous and irritable. Carol had demanded he move out that morning, and he had just spent an hour sitting in his car down the road, waiting for Terry Morton to leave Elvira's house. She was unusually subdued as they sat on the back veranda, sipping coffee.

"I've just had a visit from Terry. He says there's some trouble with the books. It seems Eric might have been ripping off the company in some way. The accountant can't tell, without him to answer questions..." Her voice trailed off.

"So what does that mean?" Brian asked savagely. "Is Morton now trying to rip *you* off, for what Eric has *allegedly* done?"

"Oh, no! Terry wouldn't do that. He's ... he's very ... fond of me."

Brian seethed for a long moment. "Is he, now? I suppose he'd like to marry you, too. That way, he'd get you, *and* the company. Has it ever occurred to you he might be trying to pressure you into it?"

She tried to laugh it off. "Brian, that's ridiculous! You've been dealing with criminals too much—"

"And you're too trusting for your own good. Look. I think you need some expert advice. Do you remember my cousin Sam?" Elvira's eyes widened suddenly, but Brian, in full flight, didn't notice. "No, you probably wouldn't. He was a year or two younger than you — an obnoxious little grommet back then. Well, now he's a hot-shot accountant. How about I call him, and—"

"I don't think that's necessary, Brian—"

"Think about it, anyway."

"All right. I will."

Terry Morton was in a foul mood as he drove up Bermuda Street. He'd had a lousy day, forced to come down to Coolangatta to deal with a difficult client.

Nothing had gone right for the last three weeks. Not since he'd spun that tale to Elvira about Eric stealing from the company. It had been a mistake, he could see that now. He should have been patient, given her more time to realize what was best for her. And she would have, if it wasn't for Brian bloody Pettigrew.

At least it seemed she hadn't taken Brian's advice about getting another accountant to check the books. He'd have to have it out with Pettigrew. Warn him off, somehow. But when he'd phoned, his secretary had said he was busy. He'd rung his home, but his wife had snarled that he didn't live there anymore. And then today he'd called his office again, to be told Pettigrew was down at the Gold Coast office for the next few days.

He had charmed the phone number out of the secretary; not that it had done him any good, as all he got was the answering machine. Pettigrew was apparently screening his calls, and didn't want to talk to him.

On impulse, he had looked up the address on his phone and decided to confront Pettigrew, if he had the chance, while seeing his bastard of a client: a task he'd been putting off for some weeks.

He took a right into Hooker Boulevard, then a left onto the Gold Coast Highway and up to Pettigrew's office.

It was after six. The office was above a shop, closed at this hour. Few people were about. He waited until no one was in sight, then ducked across the footpath into the covered stairway at the side of the building. He didn't stop to wonder at his being so surreptitious about it.

All the office doors were open, to catch the evening breeze coming in off the sea. Terry cat-footed across the carpet. He paused in the final doorway and saw Brian, in the brightly lit office, reading a brief. After a moment, he raised his head and looked at Terry over his half-glasses.

He didn't show any surprise at his being there, and that threw Terry. He had not expected Brian to just take off his glasses and lean back, gazing at him like a spider regarding a fly that had blundered into its web. It forced him to make the first move.

"I want you to stop bothering Elvira, Pettigrew." To his irritation, his voice came out high and nervous.

Brian's expression didn't change. "Get lost, Morton," he said softly, putting his glasses slowly on the desk. "I'll tell you this just once: don't cross me."

"Who do you think you are? You bloody—"

Before Terry could react, Brian stood up suddenly.

"That's it. You've had your chance. You're trespassing, Morton." He padded forward around the side of the wide desk, flexing his shoulders and smiling dangerously. "Get out while you still can."

Terry suddenly noticed how big he was.

He couldn't believe it. It seemed Brian was actually threatening to attack him. Terry relished verbal confrontation, but physical conflict terrified him. He threw a desperate glance around for some weapon, saw a silver paper-knife on the desk, snatched it up.

Brian's smile broadened. "Thank you. That'll stand up as assault with a deadly weapon, blunt though it is. I'm going to take you apart, Morton."

Jab at the eyes, isn't that what they say? Terry thought frantically. When they blink and stop, you can get past them and away—

Brian didn't stop. Terry felt a jar down his arm, then his knuckles touched Brian's eyebrow, quite gently, and a faint grating vibrated down the knife. He snatched his hand away. Brian gave a little grunt, as if surprised, then collapsed to the floor like a dropped marionette.

Terry stared down, shaking in reaction. Brian lay in a crumpled heap. One eye was closed, the other horribly open, the lid pushed up by the knife that had slid in under it to tear through the soft tissue of the brain, all the way to the top of the skull.

Brian was dead.

The eye seemed to be winking at him. Terry suppressed a hysterical giggle. He took a few deep breaths, and tried to suppress his panic and think. What had he touched? Nothing but the knife — and the smooth silver surface would retain excellent fingerprints.

He'd better wipe it. But had he touched the blade? And would it retain prints? Best to take it with him and be sure. He crouched, seized the handle and tugged. It didn't move. He tugged harder. Brian's head bounced slackly on the floor, but the knife held fast.

Terry steeled himself, pressed down on Brian's forehead with his left hand, and pulled hard. The knife came out with an obscene slurping sound. The eyeball popped out with it, twitched, then settled itself outside the lids, held by silken strands of muscle and nerve, glaring up at him in baleful roundness.

Terry gave a horrified cry, and fell over backwards to land painfully on his coccyx.

He froze. What if someone else was in the building? For several long minutes he didn't dare move, straining to detect the slightest sound above the distant traffic murmur. Nothing. Finally he stood, snatched a handful of tissues from a box on the desk, wrapped the knife and put it in his inner coat pocket.

He took more tissues to wrap around his hand as he switched off the light, walked carefully to the door, closed it and went down the stair-well.

He waited until the footpath was deserted, then darted across to his car.

By the time he got to Yatala, Terry finally began to unwind. It would be all right. Everything was going his way, just as it had when Eric had started getting suspicious about his financial dealings.

Loosening the MG's brake-fluid line had been a long shot, a throw of the dice that had come up jackpot. The idea had come to him when Eric had griped about how Elvira would never drive with him in that car. The police hadn't even bothered to check the wreck, once they got the blood alcohol reading from the autopsy.

This time, he had conquered his fear and taken the physical way. And that had worked, too.

He just couldn't go wrong.

It was a very ornate coffin, made of the finest rosewood, with a shining brass rail all around the edge of the lid to keep the floral tributes in place. The posts supporting the rail rose above it in little spikes like church steeples.

The grieving widow was putting on an excellent show, Terry thought cynically. Perhaps to scotch the rumors that Brian's death had forestalled their divorce, saving her the trouble of a property split. That fact made her the prime suspect, of course.

He hadn't intended to come to the funeral, to stand beside the grave of his second victim, as he had with his first. A constant nightmare had broken his sleep of late. He saw himself in prison, serving a life sentence for murder, and being sodomized by his

cellmate: a huge, hairy, sadistic psychopath. Above them floated Brian's disembodied eye, swollen to the size of a football, glaring down in satisfaction at his degradation.

But when Elvira had let slip that she'd be attending, he'd offered to escort her. He just had to observe her reactions, to see how much Brian had meant to her. To see if he'd have to wait for yet another decent interval, while she got over her bereavement, before he could make his move.

Barrister murdered: Police baffled, the papers had said. They'd speculated on whether Brian was the victim of an underworld hit, analyzing his recent work as prosecutor in several sensational cases involving organized crime. There was nothing to connect him to the murder, Terry thought, even though the knife was still in his desk drawer at home. He had thought he'd just keep it, until he noticed the inscription: *Many happy anniversaries, Brian. Love, Carol.*

He still hadn't come up with a sufficiently safe method of disposal. Perhaps he'd just drop it in the river from the back of the CityCat, late at night, when no one happened to be looking his way.

At his side, Elvira was dabbing her eyes prettily with a little lace handkerchief. In deference to her semi-secret status as the Other Woman they were standing apart, beside Eric's grave. Ironic, he thought. Two of Elvira's late lovers, both his victims, will be lying head to toe.

"Poor Brian!" she sobbed. "Who could have done it to him? He was so *caring*. Why would anyone want to kill a man like that?"

"Why indeed," he murmured. And then, because he had to know, added, "Were you so fond of him, then?"

Elvira glanced over her shoulder, as if expecting someone, as she had done once or twice before. She crumpled the handkerchief in her hand, and stood straighter. "He was a good friend," she said evasively, "but I was a little ... well, *wary* of him."

"Really? Why?"

"He was so ... *obsessive*. Once, when I was a silly kid, I told him I loved him. He sort of tried to hold me to it. And he treated me as if I was still a child, advising me to take steps I had already taken, for instance." She laughed lightly.

"It's a bit frightening, really, to be the object of an obsession. And he never seemed to consider how *I* might feel about it."

Her eyes flashed a glance to him then looked back to the coffin, now sinking slowly into the grave.

Terry felt a twinge of disquiet. Was that a subtle warning that *he* hadn't consulted her feelings either? He thought back over all that had been said, and unsaid, between them. He hadn't let his own obsession show too obviously, had he? He never would, now. Tentatively, he took her hand. She didn't react, but didn't withdraw, either.

A sense of joy burgeoned within him. All the risks had been worthwhile. He'd won! He'd drive her home, console her. Remind her of that night they'd spent together last year when Eric had been away. There were no impediments, now. Eric was gone, Brian

was gone; they'd go to bed together, and afterwards, he'd ask her to marry him. He'd have it all. Elvira, and the business. Suddenly, he heard someone come panting up behind them. They both turned.

Terry felt a frightful sense of déjà vu, as his world imploded.

It couldn't be! Brian stood there, straightening his tie, exactly as he had at that other funeral when Terry had first seen him. He gave Terry a hard look, as well he might, as he got his breath back. Terry felt his brain teetering on the brink of madness.

"Darling, you were able to get away after all!" Elvira cried joyfully.

Gracefully, she slipped her arm from his, slick as quicksilver, gone from him, gone to Brian, lost ... irrevocably lost. Horrified, Terry backed slowly away.

"Terry, this is Sam Pettigrew, Brian's cousin. He's an accountant, he's been checking over the company's books for me."

Terry's vision cleared. Of course, this wasn't Brian. Brian was in that box in the ground. It was a family resemblance, nothing more. His shattered nerves had supplied the rest. This man was younger, slimmer, much more relaxed than Brian had ever been. As his panic eased, the import of Elvira's words penetrated. That hard look Brian's cousin had given him. If he'd been checking the books...

Sam's gaze at Terry now transferred down to Elvira, and his expression changed.

Terry recognized that expression. He had seen it often: on Eric's face, and on Brian's face. Even, God help him, on his own face when he glanced in the bedroom mirror, that one night he'd spent with her. The besotted look of all the men who'd loved Elvira. But this time, there was something different.

Elvira, nestling close, mirrored that expression as she gazed up into Sam's eyes. She had never had it for Eric. Or for Brian, he was sure. Not for him, either, not even in the moment she'd cried out in her climax under him.

Suddenly, Terry felt laughter bubbling up in his throat. Eric, Brian — it had all been for nothing! The laughter erupted. He couldn't stop it. People turned, scandalized at the sacrilege.

The crowd parted for him as he backed away, his laughter rising to hysteria.

He didn't hear the shouted warning.

Then everyone disappeared as his world tilted crazily, narrowing down to a patch of sky in an elongated rectangle, growing rapidly smaller.

Then he hit the coffin lid, and the back of his head slammed down on one of the little spikes.

There was one blinding flash of pain, then he saw and thought and felt nothing more.