

Excerpt: Epi and the missing girl

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A slim, middle-aged woman with red-brown hair, sat across the desk from me. The grey was already coming through at the roots and the paint job would need a top up soon. More importantly, I could sense she would be a client with the capacity to pay my modest fees. Her clothes had a look of quality and the accent was elite private school. Her name was Barbara Featherstone.

‘It’s about Jennifer, my daughter. I want you to find her.’

I liked the directness and the fact she maintained eye-contact. I liked what she said next even more.

‘I can afford to pay your fees and will pay more if you can give this matter your exclusive attention.’

She was used to paying for a first class service and imagined I was overrun with clients. In fact I was in a temporary lull, consumer confidence was low as the witch-doctors like to put it, and it was effecting my business as well. In fact, it was so long since I had a client, I was forgetting what business I was in. Private something or other. Anyway, she had my exclusive attention.

‘I like to keep one set of fees going. My accountant prefers it that way. Why come to me? You look like the sort of woman who would go to one of the larger agencies.’

She looked down, sighed and then replied stumbling over my name as expected.

‘Mr Angela..kis, I hope I got that right. I am a very well known woman in social circles. Circles that include some very influential people. The large agencies would recognise me and I would prefer total anonymity. I found you in the yellow pages, and I liked the name, ‘Helping Hand Investigations’, in small print, out of the way suburb. No offence.’

‘None taken. I like my anonymity as well and it suits many of my clients. Large agencies would safeguard your privacy, but sure, there’s more risk with them. It’s Angelakakis by the way but I answer to anything polite. Tell me about the matter please.’

‘I don’t know where to begin?’ Again with the sigh but looking to the ceiling.

‘At the start is a good place. Keep to the chronology and it will all come out.’

I grabbed a pen and my yellow legal pad to make with the notes. At times like these I miss not having a PA, like a Della Street or a leg-man like Paul Drake. Hell, I miss not being Perry Mason working out of Los Angeles. Instead, I run a small agency in Coburg, consisting of one full-time investigator, one receptionist, and one office manager. All three happen to be me except when my party-chick second cousin, manages to make it into the office, usually

hung over, for her 'work-experience' as a receptionist. This was Monday and typically I was alone. Never hire family.

'Jenny, that's what we call her, is a very bright but emotional girl. Adolescence and school add to the pressure. She goes to Priory Vale Girls, I am sure you have heard of it. Anyway, we've been fighting lately. I lost my husband William last year, eighteen months ago to be exact. Jenny took the loss very hard.'

There was the merest hint of a wobble in the voice but her kind keeps emotions in check lest they become unseemly. My lowly kind lives and breathes emotion. We invented 'getting in touch with your feelings'. I made notes and wrote some questions to ask.

'One has to move on Mr Angela...kakis. I loved my husband and honour his memory. He was such a fine man. But I have been seeing someone recently. Someone who knew William professionally. They were involved in a project together a few years ago in Malaysia. He's a great comfort to me. Jenny has taken a dislike to him and is behaving quite irrationally. We fought and neither of us gave ground. I refused to put my life on hold to please her. Last week we had a dreadful argument. On Friday she never came home from school. I know what she is up to by escalating things like this. I want you to find her and tell me where she is.'

I had about a couple of thousand questions but needed to ask this one, guessing the answer.

'Have you gone to the police?'

'Good heavens no. I am sure she is doing this to spite me.'

'You must understand that if I find the merest hint of any foul play or suspect she is in some danger I am duty bound to report this to the police. Morality, not to mention keeping my licence, requires this. What do you intend to do when you find her?'

'I am sure we can talk about this matter instead of continuing to fight. I am sure she has calmed down by now. I know Jenny, Mr Angel..akis.'

She was stumbling over my name and the return of the emotional wobble wasn't helping.

'Just call me Epi please. How old is Jenny?'

'She's sixteen.'

'Does she have many friends, close ones?'

'Of course. Jenny is very popular.'

'What about boyfriends?'

'No one she is remotely close to now. She had boyfriends in the past but nothing serious.'

'I imagine you have exhausted some options, looking for her at her friends' places and so on. Tell me what you've done.' (*And on it goes – rewriting in process; original lost in Kinglake fire, 2009*).