

# **THE QUEENSTOWN CONSPIRACY**

This is a work of fiction.  
Any resemblance to any person living or deceased, or any event is  
unintended and coincidental.

The Queenstown Conspiracy is not intended to portray the town  
of Queenstown in a historically correct genre. Some places exist,  
some do not, those that do not, are a part of the story.

I have attempted however to portray Queenstown and its people in  
their true character, a character of an unashamed mining town  
populated by real people. Hard working, unassuming and  
unpretentious people for whom I have the utmost respect.

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and my idiosyncracies.

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I thank, and love you all.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

Leon could not believe at 48 years of age with a twenty-five year career in The Department of Foreign Affairs, he had just been sacked.

Yes, he had been divorced a few years earlier. Yes, he had developed some bad habits from the last few years of living alone, and yes, he was probably not as sharp and cunning as the baby geniuses the department had been head hunting from university campuses. He did however have 25 years of life experience and dedication to the department.

Should this not count for anything?

He had risen to the position of a minor department head. The Minister was full of praise for his contribution to Foreign Affairs over the term of his tenure, and presented poor Leon with a beautiful certificate, churned out of an office printer from a standard certificate template, just type in the recipient's name and send it to the colour printer.

Leon was hollowly impressed by his parting gift. "Oh well I suppose at least the Minister had the balls to face me," he said to Jack, a colleague, at the bar following his farewell ceremony.

"The minister genuinely likes you," said Jack, "he has agonised over your dismissal..er..sorry, retirement, for at least a week. But, the department secretary was the one who convinced The Minister

that the department needed to cutback on the so-called more experienced staff.”

Leon retorted, “that’s the biggest load of bureaucratic crap I’ve heard today. And boy haven’t I heard some, this is worse than the media releases he puts out”

Leon was feeling the cumulative effects of the shock of his departmental demise and the fifth double scotch, and his emotions were about to get the better of him. “Bastard little baby geniuses, snotty nosed little upstart honours students. They wouldn’t have an inkling of common sense and loyalty amongst them.”

“Leon”, said his ex-workmate “I don’t believe for one minute you are a spent force, with your qualifications and employment history there is sure to be something waiting for you somewhere.”

Leon, now into his sixth double scotch, had had just about enough and announced to all within a radius of fifty feet, “thank you Jack for the vote of confidence. Thank you various Ministers for providing me with a way of learning how to kiss arse. Thank you to the current Minister for allowing your department secretary...the little poofter, to allow me to find a different path, the beginning of, what’s the new vernacular? A new journey, to take me from this nest of vipers, one of which I have also become, to a world of the unknown and unwanted.”

With this outburst, and even in his current state of mind, he knew he had burnt the only bridge left. There once may have been someone decent left in a department that would find him a desk, but not now he had let his emotions had boil over.

Leon had not felt this bad since his colleague Jack had tried to console him ten years earlier after the magistrate had ended his marriage.

Leon had lived for that next ten years in a one bedroom flat on the outskirts of Canberra. His needs were simple and he had retreated into his own world of not socialising with his workmates,

or anyone else for that matter. His flat contained everything he needed for day-to-day existence.

Yes, Leon's needs were simple. He could have bought his own house but maybe he knew someday he would be sacked.

Leon wasn't even given the opportunity to save some dignity and clear out his desk. A cleaner from the department had boxed up his few personal things from the office and these were waiting for him in the corridor on the morning of his last day.

By the end of the outburst at the assembled staff and bosses at the farewell, Leon was ready for a night out. He had well and truly fitted the wobbly boot on, and had arrived at a pub nearby his flat.

The barman only vaguely recognised him. He was not a regular, but someone who infrequently visited the bottle shop when he felt like a lonely bender at home.

"Looks like you had a rough day", said the barman.

"A double scotch please", said Leon, not in any sort of mood to recount the events of the last few hours. The barman poured the drink and wandered away to serve another patron, instinctively knowing not to press the issue. Good barmen are like that. They will celebrate, or commiserate with a drinker when the time is right. They also know when to leave a patron to his, or her, own private thoughts.

The bar was scattered with a few Wednesday night regulars. A couple of guys playing pool, three or four workers on bar stools watching the greyhounds on a TV in the corner, a table with four men and two women in deep conversation, and the inevitable drunk that had been at the bar since opening, muttering to no-one in particular about the state of the world.

Leon had finished his drink and possibly due to the anonymous privacy allowed him, had mellowed somewhat from his antisocial arrival.

"Another" said the barman. "Please" replied Leon, "I may as well be all the way pissed as half way there. And by the way" he

said to the barman, “sorry about the grumpiness. And you were right I’ve had a shit of a day.”

“Darren’s the name. I haven’t seen much of you in the bar?” and extended his hand.

Leon had begun to feel some sort of comfort in the bar.

“I’m pleased to meet you Darren, I’m Leon.”

The night continued and more drinks were forthcoming.

“Darren, I don’t suppose there would be some work around the pub”. This prompted the pouring out of Leon’s life story as can only be told to a barman when copious quantities of alcohol have been consumed.

Leon had not confided in a single person about his life since he had become single ten years earlier. He found this uplifting, even though he knew through the alcohol induced haze that the barman really couldn’t care less, it was part of his job to be the shoulder to cry on.

But never the less, Leon at least found Darren to be sympathetic.

The bar closed and Leon taxied himself home.

He didn’t own a car. He didn’t need one. He didn’t own his flat. He didn’t need to.

Leon slept restlessly despite the amount of scotch he had consumed, and awoke at the usual work time with a headache that could kill a horse. His mind then fuzzily focused on the last twenty-four hours. He felt both frustrated and relieved. He didn’t have to rush to work. There was no work. He felt lost at having nowhere to go.

He showered and dressed himself in casual clothes, a strange thing for a Thursday. He walked to the shop on the corner, bought the Canberra Times and returned home to coffee and the wanted classifieds.

Thumbing through the paper as he usually did, he had a quick look at the main news, and then to the back page to see if the

Canberra Raiders would be likely to win on Saturday. He then put the paper down, put his head in his hands and wept. Leon had not wept since he was fourteen years old and his first girlfriend had dropped him. He had not even wept at the end of his marriage.

Leon had done two things in the last twenty-four hours, he had confided in someone.

And, he had wept.

He was puzzled at what was happening to him and immediately started to sift through his thoughts. He was forty-eight years old and now unemployed. He sensed he had to do something, anything, not to go down the path of the drunk in the pub. This could have been a distinct possibility, and he knew it.

He then started to take stock. His bank account was not in the millions, but then again he was not entirely poor. Leon had twenty-five years of redundancy entitlements, he had not taken holidays for years and he was not frivolous.

After a quick assessment of his wealth, Leon reckoned a holiday would probably be the antidote to his current troubles. He once again picked up the newspaper and this time, started in the middle. The travel section, a section he had never taken any notice of before. He looked at various types of holidays from Pacific cruises to bus trips around Europe.

In the shopping centre near to where he lived was a travel agent, and he went there and collected brochures and ideas from the sales girl.

“Are you looking for a holiday, or an adventure?” said the girl. Leon replied “I’m damned if I know”,replied Leon.

“I reckon you’re the adventurous sort of person,” she said, “why not rent a camper van and explore somewhere like Tasmania for a few weeks, there are some beautiful spots down there”.

This sowed a thought in Leon’s mind. He had never been outside of New South Wales and the idea of travelling with your own hotel room attached appealed to him. Tasmania? Although it

had not been a destination that he had originally thought of, it raised his curiosity. He had heard it was a nice place, with plenty to see and tiny out of the way villages to visit.

Leon started searching web sites to get some ideas as to where to go and a proposed route. He looked at an old map he had of Australia and his eyes followed south to Tasmania.

He thought of wilderness and peace.

Although he had not owned a car for many years, Leon still had a licence and as part of his departmental duties, had to drive one of the department's vehicles from time to time. Driving was not an issue. He then asked himself the question, would it be better to hire a camper or buy one?

Leon spent the next week thinking over his options of vehicle and adventure.

He also thought long and hard about the circumstances surrounding his dismissal, and his thoughts rewound back to his marriage and its demise. A major reason for this demise was children, or more specifically, the lack of them. Leon had always wanted kids but his ex wife could not fit motherhood into her plans. She was a high-ranking Airforce officer, attached to the Defence Department in Canberra. She was ambitious with political aspirations.

Eventually Leon and his wish for family life were passed over.

Leon had loved her dearly in the thirteen years they were together but had not noticed her withdrawal from their bed until it was too late. Her ambitions had led her to another.

Leon had withdrawn himself from love. He had been deeply hurt, and from then on, mistrusting of those of the opposite sex. Leon had been celibate ever since.

"Hello Darren, I'll have a scotch and dry please". Leon had not been back to the pub since his meeting with the barman on the night of his dismissal and felt a bit embarrassed at his last visit and its outcome.

“It is Leon isn’t it,” said the barman. “Yes it is.’

As he poured the drink the barman asked if Leon had found a new job yet. The bar was as empty as the last time with the same people doing the same things. Leon replied he had not yet been looking for a job and related his plans for a holiday to Darren.

“I think I will take you’re advice Darren, Tasmania looks like a place I would be happy to look at.”

“Bloody great idea” said the barman.

He was reminiscing about his former part of the world.

“I wish I could afford to do that, but I’m going to be broke from now until my two year old is out of university”.

“Never had a kid myself Darren, not from not wanting one mind you, just circumstances I guess.”

They continued the conversation and Leon expanded on his idea of going to Tasmania, and during the course of the conversation, Darren told Leon he had originally come from there, and said to Leon if he was to go there to make sure he visited the west coast. Darren said it was cold, uninviting and rugged, but it had character and solitude. He figured Leon didn’t need cities and tourist traps.

How right he was.

Leon then gave himself a time frame as to when he would leave on his adventure. It would take, he figured, a month to organise the trip. The time frame was however extinguished two days later when he spotted a second hand camper van at a nearby car dealer.

It was a converted Toyota Coaster bus that had seen duty in a previous life as a small country town school bus. It had been since fitted out with bunks, a shower and toilet and an adequate kitchen. The motor had recently been rebuilt and it looked perfect for what Leon had in mind.

“Twenty five thousand” said the dealer, a short stocky ex motor racing champion, now turned amateur pilot of pensioned off Mig

fighter jets. Leon had done his homework however and knew the vehicle was only worth twenty thousand. "I'll give you eighteen", said Leon. "No way" said the dealer. After ten minutes of haggling Leon got the Toyota for nineteen thousand dollars, cash folding stuff, filled it with fuel, drove to his flat, then elatedly walked to the real estate agent and paid one months' rent. He then walked back to his flat, packed his clothes and headed south feeling a sense of pure freedom.

Leon had started what was to prove his greatest adventure.

As it turned out, the Toyota was a good buy. It drove well and was easy to handle and was surprisingly economical on fuel.

Leon drove through Yass and on to Gundagai. He spent his first night in the bus camped on the side of the road just north of Wangaratta. His new travelling home was comfortable and also had a good stereo. Leon of course had no CDs and could only tune into local radio until his next stop for lunch at Seymour where he found a record shop with a good selection of music. He had not listened to too much music lately and really didn't know or like anything current. He did however find six CDs of music from days when he liked music a lot.

His next destination was Melbourne where he had to negotiate the city traffic and find the dock where the Spirit of Tasmania would swallow the Toyota along with hundreds of other vehicles headed south for the island of Tasmania. He got lost many times between Coburg and Station Pier, but did manage to arrive there in time to get himself and his camper on board.

The Tasmanian ferry left just on dusk for the overnight passage to Devonport. Leon amused himself looking around the ship. He had never been on a ship before. In fact, the only time he had been on water before was when his department social club booked a night on a pleasure cruise on Lake Burley Griffin, for the annual Christmas party and piss up.

Leon was leaning on the port rail of the ship as it passed between Point Lonsdale and Point Nepean and into Bass Strait, one of the most infamous stretches of water in the world. And one that has claimed many a sailor. Port Phillip Bay was a millpond, compared to the open ocean and Leon, after the ship had entered the strait, was feeling decidedly unwell.

He was not the only one though, and soon a collection of other landlubbers had gathered at the port rail to leave a trail of burley from the dinner of seafood the ship was famous for.

He looked warily at the lifeboats hanging from their davits.

Leon was sure glad to see Devonport, and calm water. The sunrise was magnificent as the ship sailed into the Mersey River.

He retrieved the Toyota from the bowels of the ship and headed off through East Devonport where he found a little fish and chip shop not far out of town towards Latrobe. He settled down to a hearty breakfast of the best fish and chips he had ever eaten. Not at all like the greasy twice cooked rubbery filets and soggy chips he was used to from the Belconnen shops.

Leon's plan was that he had no plan. He would simply drive in whichever direction took his fancy and camp wherever he liked the scenery. He was not used to this. He liked to have everything well planned. Years of public service indoctrination had educated him that way.

Leon felt free for the first time in his life.