

MURDER SQUAD DETECTIVES JOSEPH LIND and MARJORY HENDRICKS



# A LEGACY OF SINS PAST

A  
Crime  
Novella  
by

PETER C BYRNES

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AND  
MARJORY HENDRICKS

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## CHAPTER ONE

He stood relaxed behind his securely closed screen door, waiting expectantly for the tall stranger to explain his presence so early in the morning.

"How are you, this wonderful, fine morning? Would you be Brian Mussellton?" The Visitor asked pleasantly.

The elderly man of the house nodded his head to acknowledge the veracity of the question.

"Could be... and who might you be, and what is it that you want of me? Especially so early in the morning." He replied somewhat suspiciously.

"You formerly worked at Stellar Engineering in Darwin. NT." More a statement, not a question.

"Please identify yourself before I answer any more of your questions. If not, then you can go. Now!"

"Umm... Sorry... George Bennett." The stranger struggled with his clip-board so that he could fumbled in the inside top pocket of his business coat to extract his identification, so it seemed. "... umm... formerly of the Northern Territory Police Force. I now work for a Private Investigation Firm... Integral Intelligence Services, Mr Mussellton. An Engineering Firm in the Territory have hired my firm to locate all previous employees.... seems that there is some Super, Long Service Leave payments and Holiday Loading money owing to all the Staff who weren't paid out when the Firm went arse up."

Not bad off the top of my head, the tall man thought to himself.

His quick thinking pleased him.

"Well, Mister Bennett. Have you some form of identification...and to set the record straight, I've never been to the Territory... though I plan to get up around those parts now that I'm retired... I've hardly been out of this State. I've been in the Public Service all my life and have just recently retired... I should get to NT and other beautiful parts of this country if my plans for my retirement years work out... there must be another Brian Mussellton, as good looking as me and one lucky bastard by all accounts, one would hope with a name like that, whom you seek." This said with a smile on his face.

That was the last words that the man ever uttered. Pleasant and comical as they were!

Shock, disbelief and then pain wiped away the smile on his recently shaved countenance.

He was shot twice through the chest at point-blank range with a 9-millimetre Pistol. The force of which threw him backwards up the Hallway of his modest double fronted, double garage, brick veneer home of forty years.

The Shooter stood momentarily at the door watching the pool of blood enlarge to soak the timber flooring of the narrow entry Hall. He glanced at the neatly made holes in the insect screen as the bullets had torn through the flimsy material of the screen door.

A scream of utter anguish and terror bought him back to the present. A figure emerged from the gloom of the inside of the house to stare at the prostrate figure bleeding to death at her feet.

The tall gentleman slipped the pistol into its holster under his arm as he walked quickly from the property.

He thought absently to himself of how predictable and silly people were.

If he had asked his 'target' straight out was he Brian Mussellton who had recently retired after a life-time in the Public Service, the chap would have gone on the defensive straight away. He would not have furnished the details that he had, for the Shooter to be able to positively identify his man.

This added insurance, as the photo that he had been given of his quarry, was grainy and blurred.

Obviously taken from a great distance and in somewhat of a hurry!

Silly. That's how he viewed the general populace! Just plain bloody stupid and too trusting.

He slid into the driver's seat and started up the car as he noticed several people pointing their smart phones towards him. People still in their night attire, bought out onto their front porches and driveways by the unmistakeable sound of two shots; one straight after the other reverberating around the quiet street in the brisk morning air.

A foreign sound to many.

No matter.

He would abandon this vehicle within five minutes, only a couple of blocks from here. He'd also discard the hat, the wig, the false moustache and glasses and the business coat and tie.

'*A changed man,*' he thought to himself.

A hint of a smile on his face at his own adjudged cleverness. He had no idea who his Client was in the scheme of the world, or why it was necessary the 'target' be terminated. It didn't matter to him either way, as long as the money for services rendered was received. He had already received a 'down payment' of twenty large with another fifteen plus three for expenses due him.

He had no reason to think that the remainder would not be forthcoming.

It was then that this little worm invaded his thoughts.

He had thought it before, as he had staked out his 'target'. Getting to know his movements. His habits. The chap looked vaguely familiar, though it wouldn't click into place. He perhaps should have done a little snooping into the background of the guy just to satisfy that unease. No time for that. The Client was most insistent on a result as quickly as possible that precluded any such silliness. And besides, he normally desisted from obtaining too much background on his target. It gave substance to a face. A person.

He didn't want for that.

His journey took less than several minutes. Only several quiet suburban blocks were involved.

He drove the car slowly into the small Parking Area of a local Playing Field. Pleased that the area was around half full. No-one was loitering thankfully, with most having dropped off their precious 'little ones' at the adjacent Pre-School establishment and gone to join the girls having coffee; or a shopping 'bee' or running laps of the playing oval.

Perhaps a few might work, he thought absently to himself.

He slipped out of his coat and took off the masks of his trade, placing everything into a large plastic garbage bag which he securely tied off. He stood beside the car as he put on another casual jacket to hide his gun and holster, depositing the garbage bag into the boot as he extracted a small overnight bag. He wired up the petrol bomb, and closed the boot before walking briskly to a nondescript, small, white Hatchback.

If the thing worked correctly, it would explode into a fire ball within thirty minutes.

His immediate hope was that no-one else was around or near the car when this happened.

It would be a nasty way to die.

As though two bullets to the chest was a more humane way to go out!

He drove slowly out of the parking area and was joining the main arterial road as several Police vehicles sped past with lights ablaze and sirens careening their monotonous tune. He headed towards the south bound motorway.

His contract completed.

He'd be home the following day, all being well.

Perhaps a stint overseas until the dust settled maybe a wise move.

He'd think about it as he headed south.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

That night, all the TV News programs had the thirty second sound bite describing a home invasion gone horribly wrong in the middle of peaceful suburbia. An angry and disbelieving tone in the pert young Reporter's voice.

These horrendous acts becoming increasingly prevalent.

Young punk druggies looking for easy money!

That is what the Cops intimated.

How-ever, it was obvious to the Investigating Officers, that this was a well planned and executed assassination. An execution. The sister of the elderly chap had overheard the conversation as she went towards the front door to see if her brother needed any help. She saw him blasted through the air coming towards her up the narrow hallway.

Landing heavily.

Bleeding badly.

The reason for such a brutal homicide was anyone's guess at this early stage of the investigation.

We never made it into the Office on that morning. Instead going straight out to the Crime Scene after my partner, Grade 2, Marjory Hendricks picked me up from home in the Unmarked Police vehicle.

The entire leafy street cordoned off to all vehicular and pedestrian traffic.

A very short street with a very descriptive name.  
Short Street!

All the residents of the street appeared to be in some form of shock. There was never any crime in this leafy neighbourhood was the common mantra, as they were all interviewed. The neighbours looked out for one another. The last time something like this happened was some ten years ago when the elderly Mr. Benny Cordello walked naked down the middle of the street. In the depths of a freezing winter. Eighty-two and suffering from Dementia. He relocated into a nearby Nursing Home where he died some weeks later, reportedly from Pneumonia.

This stated repeatedly, as though this was the first stage of failure of the neighbourhood. Things were now going to rack and ruin, after this dreadful incident!

This story repeated so it seemed, by every resident interviewed by the local LAC Uniform boys before we had even made the Crime Scene.

Though the Musselltons seemed to prefer their own company, they were a law-abiding couple. Living with them was the sister of the deceased. For as long as anyone could remember. They were never any trouble. Perhaps a bit snotty. Kept to themselves. Didn't like a chat that much. But what the heck, they could lead their lives the way they sought.

We walked up to the crime scene house to be confronted by the obnoxious sarcasm of the Chief Pathologist who had completed his work and was impatiently awaiting our presence at the Crime Scene yet again.

Since taking over from Bernie Ford who had moved to Brussels, Belgium to take up a post with the UN sponsored International Criminal Court, Harold George Wilcox had won the selection ballot to fill Bernie's sizable shoes.

The opinion was that the caustic chap failed dismally.

He may have been a brilliant Forensic Anthropologist, Pathologist, and a wizard in the Autopsy Room, but his very superior manner grated on everyone who he encountered. His attitude as though he was from the Manor born, and all others were the for-ever whining hired help. They an unavoidable nuisance to allow him to exist! To carry out his favoured work for which the plebs be impressed by his expertise and technique.... apart from that, he was an absolute bore and snotty-arsed buffoon!

I felt that it wasn't too soon before I took a swing at the pompous, rotund, little man!

Well, he wasn't that little.

Just a mite short of six foot in the old scale, but the length around his girth had to equal his height. Or thereabouts!

To risk my career on such an AO was hardly worth it, but my penchant to often cut off my nose to spite my face was apparently legendary within the ranks. Especially when I had been an Undercover Cop for several years in Narcotics and Vice.

Those stories best left for my memoirs after I have retired.

Detective Grade 3 Joseph Lind at your service.

I'll never be as good a Murder Dick as my partner Marge Hendricks, but then's the breaks in this chauvinistic world of the NSW Police Force. Things are slowly changing but the appearance of grey hairs on my ear lobes will be more evident before I ever see much of a change. Let me tell you!

To clarify the matter, my Partner had at least twice as many years in the Murder Squad as I. My seniority date in the Force outdid hers by at least ten years though, which allowed me a one Grade promotion without consideration for ability or initiative. Maybe that was being a little harsh, as my entire career would have been under the microscope by those on the Interviewing Panel. Their interpretation to my responses to their probing questions would have helped some, to be fair.

Still, it was so wrong, but I was not about to knock back the 'upgrade' when it was offered to me. Marge seemed to take the implied sleight in her stride. It was I who was more upset by the obvious mistreatment of the better Murder Dick, so it seemed.

We had to enter the Crime Scene house by walking around the back and entering through a side door in the garage to gain access into the Kitchen. The entire front Porch and main entrance area was a hive of activity with 'white scrub attired' figures crawling around on all fours trying to collect as much extraneous and superfluous material as they could.

God knows what they did with it all!

To justify their existence, so it often seemed to me.

But then I'm known for my cynicism.

To me, they looked like engorged maggots squirming about endeavouring to find the host carcass. Having slipped from it, such was their size. Too engorged not to be able to hang on!

When-ever I thought of that, it bought a smile to my craggy countenance. Especially as I have been witness to the pert, naked figure of the Forensic Squad 2IC Caramine Lees on several occasions!

Some claim that I have a sick and debauched sense of humour. Slightly off and not to everyone's taste. So be it. Crass and acerbic I will remain, as it is too late to change!

Mrs. Mussellton sat glumly at the Kitchen Table.

A pile of scrunched up tissues, a white papier-mâché mountain in front of her. I doubted that we would obtain any useful information from her at this stage, such was her state. Another elderly woman fussed around her, possibly just adding to the condition of the recently made widow.

Marge broke the silence. The only noise, the constant soft sobbing of the older woman.

"Mrs. Mussellton? Detective Marjory Hendricks. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?"

"There's not that much that I can offer you, I think Detective." The 'Elderly Fusser' contended, as though Missus Mussellton was incapable of any speech!

I had no idea who the distressed woman was. Mrs. Mussellton saw our confusion, offering us coffee and some biscuits as she sat beside the other woman.

"This is my sister-in-law. Meg... Margaret Corzon. My Brian's older sister. My dearest friend. She lives here with us. Has since her Bertie died about ten years back. She needed the company and as our children had flown the coup, there wasn't much to think about or object to. We had more than enough room to accommodate her.... um.... I didn't even hear the shots. It was Meg who was going to the front door to see if Brian needed a hand... she saw his body flying down the hallway towards her. Heard the shots. It was her screams that woke me up... how do you have your coffee?"

The woman was remarkably cool and calm under the circumstances.

She seemed to read my mind.

"Some-one needs to be strong during these times... there'll be plenty of time for me to grieve. To react..."

She gave a sad smile as she placed a mug of coffee in front of each of us. Moved the biscuit plate closer to our positions.

"Brian heard a knock and went to answer the door..." She caught her breath. Wiped an errant tear from her eye with the sleeve of her blouse. "Sorry..." She murmured. She eased herself into the last remaining kitchen chair as the second-in-charge Forensic Pathologist waddled into the room. Full scrubs and booties still on. Traces of blood on the knee patches and her latex gloves.

"Joe? A word?" Caramine Lees whispered into my ear.

We moved into the front Lounge Room filled with very expensive furnishings. Several original landscape paintings hung on adjacent walls. The early morning light suffused through full height sheer curtains.

"Can you have a look at the body before 'His Excellence' goes ape-shit? He's not in a great mood this morning..."

"Worse than usual, huh?"

"Mmm....." Caramine replied, letting her gaze slip to some-one behind me.

I turned to see the unmistakeable figure of the exultant Pathologist standing in the doorway.

"Detective? I know that you have matters of higher import than this lowly figure still lying in a pool of his own blood, but we need to move the man. Can we have your release as soon as those other matters are dealt with."

With that, he gave a string of instructions to his long suffering 2IC and wheeled around to exit out through the rear of the house, chucking out of his scrubs as he disappeared.

"Anything?"

"A little. Two 10mm slugs to the chest at close range. Fired through the Security insect screen door. Casings near the front Porch. Bounced off the concrete surface into the garden area. He may have thought about retrieving them. Thought better of it as a quick getaway would be a more discretionary act, I would think. We'll run comparisons through the National Data Bank though I'm betting there'll not be a match. If he was worth his salt, which he appears to be, it will be throw-away. Recently obtained. More than likely brand new and never used in any criminal activity across the country previously. The bullets straight through the heart as though the Vic had a target bulls-eye implanted on the area of his chest. A clinical hit. Professional. The Shooter knew what he was doing. Knocked him back a fair way. I'd say dead before he hit the floor. There is some trace out on the Porch area. A set of shoe-prints in a soggy, muddy part of the grass area beside the drive-way. The guy had parked his car partially in the driveway... across the Council Footpath and verge... stepped into that area, the grassy verge, as he got in and out of his vehicle... a few neighbours got video on their Smart Phones of the vehicle and the number plate as the guy reversed out and sped up the street. We're waiting for a Tech to turn up with some recording equipment to download the videos... here he is now... I'll need to see him."

She walked out through the garage to talk to a little, mousy guy who was towing a large case that had wheels like those luggage items one sees at Airports. The case looked very heavy as he wheeled it up the driveway of the house. The Forensic Tech started waving her arms about as the guy looked up and down the street, scribbling Caramine's instructions into

a small note book. She shook his hand and as she returned to the Crime Scene house, she began slipping out of her white scrubs.

I played 'Hey Big Spender' through my brain, remembering the times that we had been together. Slipping out of our clothes to be closer to one another.

While she was outside, I ambled from window to door to shelf unit and back again. Taking in the minutia amassed by people over their life-times. Expensive furnishings. Furniture. Knick-knacks. Even the carpet on the floor had that pricey feel to it. You seemed to wade through the thick pile.

She strolled back into the room, running her fingers through her hair.

"Where was I?"

She referred to her Note Book before she continued.

"The shots bought out several people who were able to get good quality video on their phones. All hale these modern inventions. We have an 'All Car Alert' out on the vehicle. An early model Holden Commodore...that dark bluey-green colour...owned by one Ms. Madeline McCarty. Address several suburbs away...obviously stolen as those earlier model Holdens were incredible easy to break into and to start...getting back to the footprints...one left on the step up to the Porch area...a little mud and water helped to leave a recognisable print...that's about it. Can we move the body?"

"Mar? You done?"

I hadn't even looked at the body.

"Yeah...you?" She replied.

Surprise in her voice, as she knew that I had not viewed the Vic.

I just shook my head slowly.

I wandered back into the Kitchen to finish off my coffee, grab two biscuits and begin again with the two elderly women. Mar followed me. A questioning look on her face. I nodded my understanding of her apparent confusion.

For the rest of the morning we re-interviewed every person in the street.

There was little more to add that could not be viewed and confirmed by Smartphone videos and the questionable descriptions of the driver. There were more than enough variations on those descriptions to implicate a dozen guys with sordid reputations. Thank God for Smart

phones as they would show a more reliable image of the Shooter. I did not expect that to be of much use though, as the guy, if he was worth his weight in salt, would have a somewhat involved disguise with at least one item that would draw attention to itself.

That and nothing else.

This guy had done this before.

### CHAPTER THREE

"They've found the 'get-away' car. Burnt out, together with three adjacent vehicles. In a small parking area, next to a suburban Oval not far from here. About three streets away in fact. It's used by the employees of a neighbouring Pre-School Kindy...the Owner of said vehicle was a relief 'Minder'. She hadn't even realised that her car had gone missing for about thirty minutes this morning, but she sure noticed it explode into flames. She was heading towards it to go home. She only worked a couple of hours each morning. Looking after the early morning 'Drop-off Kiddies' whose parents worked."

"Mmm...lucky for her. She should buy a Lottery Ticket as if she had sat in the car before it had exploded, I think she may have been burnt to a crisp."

I could have bet my house on that outcome. It was to be expected. I'd bet my house again on no surveillance cameras in the area either. The guy had done his homework.

"Joe...what's up? You haven't been your usual chirpy, smart-arse self all morning. What's eating you? For you not to want to jab the body a couple of times sure speaks for itself. What's wrong, Dude?"

I knew that in calling me that, she was trying to get me to rise to the bait. I hated that name. Instead, I shrugged my shoulders.

"You and Jen have a fight?" Her voice softened as she asked the question.

Jennifer Stevenson and I had been seeing one another on the QT for about six months. Both enjoying each other's company enormously. We were planning a week-end away up the coast soon. My son Billy smitten with her. She was *the* blonde-haired girl in the DPP's Office. Without sounding one eyed about it, she was the best legal brains in the joint. A consummate Court performer and bloody good company, besides.

I shrugged my shoulders again.

"She... we... arr... by mutual consent, have agreed to hold the arrangement in abeyance until further notice...she's hooked up with her 'ex' again to see if it will work out...she wants kids. She says that because of my chosen field of endeavour and my unsavoury past...that's how she put it...as though the DPP has a Dossier on my early years a mile thick...I would not make that good a father or husband material. My years numbered, according to her... and I have tended to mull over the loss of Penny far too often, so it seems. She has become jealous of a bloody ghost, is how I put it to her. She didn't like that...neither I, at her insinuation."

I shrugged my shoulders again.

"You want to talk about it?"

"I just have...enough of the bullshit...we got work to do."

"Well, to my way of thinking, if you want my two-bob's worth..."

"No. Not really!"

".... you've been an excellent father to Bill through a lot of hard years. In our profession and all...if you know what I mean?"

When Marge wanted to say something, there was no stopping her.

"After Bill's mother, brutal and sudden murder when he was ten years of age, it was his grandmother, my late wife's mother, then my mother who shared the major weight of bringing up Bill. Not me. I still carried on regardless in this bloody job... it was their doing more than mine that Bill is the person he is to-day."

"Joe, that's bullshit." My partner scolded.

"That's what I believe...." I interrupted.

"Bill knew from an early age that your career path meant sacrifices by all...it is a credit to both you and Helene, before she died, that Bill pulled through that time of his mother dying... and accepting your chosen career with all its demands... which meant that he had to make some sacrifices... both you and Helene's upbringing allowed him to realise and make those choices at such a tender age and time."

"Mmm...." No matter what she said, I would never agree with her as I felt my influence over my son, who was now approaching his twenty-second birthday, was minimal. We did however, have a healthy father and son relationship. Treating each other with profound love, affection, and a deep respect.

"This is a guy..." I commenced, wanting to bury the way the conversation was going. "...who has done this before. I'd say that this is not his first hit... A professional hit? Yes.... but no. I don't think so? Not so!? Sloppy around the edges. The thing is, no-one worth his salt in the profession would double tap a victim. There's no need for it... and not using a silencer? They are hard to get hold of, but possible. What? *He* wanted to wake up the entire sleepy neighbourhood? This is a lowly paid Public Servant of close on fifty years of loyal service shot to death! What sordid double life was he involved in to warrant such a shortening of his retirement years? Gambling. Prostitution. What other side-line would get this guy noticed by the seedier side of town?"

"I wouldn't have said a lowly paid position, judging by the quality of the furnishings and furniture inside the house. Every room shouted out expensive!"

"Yeah... I noticed that too... maybe not so lowly paid.... we need to follow that up. He had only retired some weeks prior to his death.... new Kitchen no more than one, maybe two years old. A rear extension that looked relatively new and the Bathroom and Ensuite also looked new... follow the money trail... maybe his position allowed some hanky-panky... under-hand payments perhaps. Maybe that is why he was clipped. He given a 'brown paper bag' to do something, to turn a blind eye or to approve something... which he failed to do. He didn't keep his side of the bargain, perhaps."

"If so, that's a drastic form of retribution or seeking justice from a long serving Public Servant!"

"Or as innocent as the Sister investing some of her wealth in the premises, perhaps...."

"Mmm..."

It didn't sit well with me. The entire situation.

Regardless of the motive, which we would need to discover, as that was the only way that we would possibly solve this homicide, there was very little evidence at the crime scene that was of any use to the investigation.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

We drove the couple of blocks around to a scene straight out of a Hollywood Blockbuster.

A row of cars sat on the hubs of their wheels. No tyres just the steel bands from inside each radial tyre still around the wheel hub. Steel sheeted skeletons with every ignitable piece

burnt from them. Including the duco! They were manoeuvring the crime vehicle to allow it to be towed up onto a Police Flat-top truck to remove it to the Forensic Laboratory in town.

There would be absolute zero trace to recover, but the exercise had to be undertaken on the off-chance something akin to that golden nugget was discovered.

"Detectives...the smell of burnt out vehicle shells does not go well on this fine afternoon. How are we both? Good news for once, we have a witness, would you believe..."  
The LAC Sergeant in charge of the area muttered good naturedly.

"She was sitting in her car over in the corner." He pointed to a spot still in shade.

"She drops off her little four-year old to Pre-School across the road there then does ten laps of the oval pushing her six-month-old in a pram before settling into the front passenger seat of her vehicle to breast feed her baby. She saw just about everything. Scared the beejus out of her, but the bubs didn't miss a gulp."

He gave a belly laugh. He referred to a small note book.

"A Missus Rose Renshaw. Lives a couple of kilometres away. 10 Sea Breeze Close, Bustard Point Beach. She says she'll stay home until you see her...OK?"

We stood in the Parking Lot for some minutes watching the loading of the burnt-out shells transported away. Kicked at some fine ash; the residue of the inferno. Informed by the Crime Scene guy that the 'burn out' had commenced within the boot of the Commodore. A slow drip petrol bomb. A candle flickering, waiting for the air to petrol vapour proportion to reach a critical stage. It was a lucky thing that no-one was about or near said vehicle.

A terrible way to die if they had of been.

We interviewed every Owner of every vehicle in the area. Most were the Kindy Teachers and Minders with a sprinkling of residents who used the Oval every day for some form of exercise or just to get out into the sunshine.

I wondered why near neighbours to the Sporting Field would drive their vehicles to the car park and then proceed to walk, jog or run five to ten laps around the Field before hopping in their car to drive five hundred yards to their place of residence.

It just didn't compute to me.

There was little additional information learnt that was relevant or helpful to the investigation.

We computed the GPS with the address expecting to be directed to Bustard Point up around Darwin. Or North Queensland! It took us under ten minutes to make our destination. A pity really, as I was looking forward to a three-week detour!

My enthusiasm for work at a low ebb.

"Missus Renshaw? Rose Renshaw?"

She straightened from her crouched position half in, half out of the car parked in her front driveway.

"You're the Police..." Not a question. She stood, pushing a lock of hair from her forehead. A pert twenty-something with smooth skin, large, tired eyes, and a trim figure. "Umm... look... I've got to pick up my Clare... from Pre-school... I'll let you in to the house. Make yourselves at home. A cup of coffee. I should be no more than say half an hour... no?"

"Look, we'll come back in say forty-five minutes. Quarter to four, if that suits?" Mar countered.

"Yeah. Fine." She was somewhat flustered. A little embarrassed as she realised the stupidity of her offer. "Yeah. That's fine." She repeated. "I shouldn't be that long."

We parked out the front of her residence at the kerbside as she turned into her driveway at exactly three forty-five.

She sprang from her car apologising profusely for her tardiness. Explaining that she had to stop at the Shops to pick up some more Nappies and milk.

"Missus Renshaw, it's OK. No worries." Mar soothed. "Let me help you with the baby capsule."

We settled onto tall stools at a kitchen bench. The place was spotless as though we had walked into an Exhibition Project home. The only difference was the cheapness of the knick-knacks and the countless photographs of a happy young couple, Wedding photos, babies, and obviously proud grandparents with their first grand-kids. She pushed two mugs of coffee across the bench-top to us as she gave simple instructions to her four-year old daughter on how to take off her paint smeared clothes.

Without missing a beat, she immediately began to describe what she had seen that morning.

"I'd dropped Clare off just before eight-thirty. Did ten laps of the Oval pushing Damien in his pram, so I guess it was around nine, maybe a bit before by the time I'd settled into my car to breast feed him. Madeline McCarty is the relief Teacher at the Kindy. She starts at around six...I think on three mornings a week to be there when the working Mums drop off

their kids before they head towards town. She has this battered old Commodore. I noticed it come slowly into the Parking Area and turn into the parking bay where she always parks. We all seem to have our own parking spot that everyone respects. I thought that was a little strange as the guy driving it wasn't her partner. You could see. The bloke sat there for a bit. Took off his hat. What looked like a wig..."

"Did he have glasses on? Thick black frame?" Mar interrupted. I was making shorthand notes into my Case Note Book.

"No... no. He had sunglasses on. He got out of the car as he took his tie and coat off. He had one of those leather shoulder holsters where the strap goes around his chest and another up over the shoulder..."

"What colour?" I asked. "The leather holster."

"Black. For sure. Then he slipped into a casual jacket though it was too hot for any type of coat or jacket...I suppose to hide the shoulder holster...there was a TV Cop who had one...that's how I know it was a shoulder holster...bends down and pops the trunk. Walks around with a black plastic bag...a garbage bag tied up and puts it into the boot. He seemed to fiddle around with something before he straightens up, taking a small overnight bag, and closes the boot. Walks to a white...I'm not good with cars...it wasn't a Ford or a Holden...maybe a Toyota...it was a Hire Car though. It had that blue butterfly emblem on the back window...and away he goes. No more than fifteen minutes later Maddie's car explodes in a fire ball...luckily Maddie had been walking towards it but veered when she saw me still there and had come over to talk to me...Damien can be a slow drinker at times. A stubborn, little bugger when he chooses... he keeps on falling asleep... I had just finished burping him and had put him into the Capsule when Maddie said hello...then her car just blew up. Frightening. That's about all I can tell you... sorry."

"No. That's very helpful." Mar cooed, as she helped the young Clare into a penguin onesie outfit. Clare had taken an instant attachment to her. The little one proud of her 'penguin onesie' though her mother had chastised her about putting it on before she had her evening bath.

"You must be some-one special. Usually she is very wary of strangers. Gives them a wide berth."

Mar gave a harrumph.

"Dogs and kids. My speciality! Um... the guy... can you describe him?"

"Umm.... a runner... an athlete..."

"Why do you say that?"

She gave a cut off laugh. Holding her hand over her mouth.

"Like you two, I'm a runner. My husband is a runner. Most of our lives. You get to recognise the build. The stature. The way they even stand. He was a runner for sure... He had that ease of walking. Of holding himself erect. He walked with confidence... like a spoilt cat. Maybe military the way he stood so erect when standing at ease. He was over six feet tall. I'd say by a good three inches. Well-built, though not muscle bound. As I said, a runner. Well proportioned. A certain easy charm about his looks. Handsome though not Hollywood handsome... that doesn't make sense..." She shook her head laughing at what she had said. "Umm....athletically good looking, I guess would be a better description... Bald. Clean shaven. Tanned. He had dark glasses on so I couldn't see his eyes. His nose was broad. Possibly some aboriginal blood. Maybe Polynesian. Not Maori or Islander. His skin tanned not... um... you know... um... coloured, if you know what I mean. The skin on his face and neck was tight. Not sagging even though I reckon he may have been in his forties... middle to late forties.... and I can't tell you why I think that is his age. He wore a gold watch. Expensive looking and a little gold band on the right-hand pinkie... that's about all I think that I can offer you... oh!... no earrings which is a bit strange currently... he had some type of small tat on the inside of his... left? Yeah, left wrist. I don't know what of, as I couldn't make it out, but you could see the colouring...um...red and a bit of black."

"That's excellent... maybe in the next day or two we could organise some photographs... some mug shots for you to look at? A Police Artist to work up a sketch with your help. Would that be all right?"

"Sure... ring first, though please. Mothers' group. Coffee Club. Kindy Group and when I get the chance I call in to see my mother and mother-in-law... after I do the usual mundane household chores."

She smiled her beautiful, white, toothy smile.

We headed for home instead of the Office. It was getting on to five in any case, and it would have been close to six if we had hit the Office.

I'd had enough for the day.

"What do you think?"

"Mmm..." I replied. "To-morrow morning... um... I'll take the car after we get to the Office. Be back before Lunch time."

"Sure. OK. You don't want me to go with you... just personal stuff, heh?"

"Mmm...."

"Fuck, Joe! Get over it! I'd rather put up with your smart-arse attitude than this non-participation! Swallow a spoonful of concrete to stiffen up... Get over it, OK?"

The sour, petulant child had been scolded.

I turned away to hide a smile.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

It was the next morning.

"Don't drive down into the Basement. Park out front and I'll hop over into the driver's seat. I need to go and see some-one."

"You don't want me to come with you?" Mar asked again.

"Nah... it's better that you don't... I won't be long. A quick visit to the College Street HQ Building in town. Just for a catch-up. That's all."

"The HQ building in town? Where the air is considerably thinner? Yeah, Joe. And Pigs fly south for the summer."

She was letting me know that she was disappointed in me not levelling with her. I was being obstinate. Again!

It was a journey that I was glad that we no longer took daily. The peak hour should have been over thirty minutes ago.

It seemed that peak hour now lasted all day!

I had to ask where my old Chief in Narcs now resided.

His Secretary wasn't that enthralled on my sudden appearance requesting a minute with her Boss. He came out of his office unexpectedly, surprised that I was there.

"You come to see me?"

"Yes, Boss."

"On what? We haven't crossed paths for a lot of years now, young man... you're in the Murder Squad, so's I've been told. The Prima Donnas of the Force. Give me five. I'll be with you then."

He rushed away as though his bladder was on fire.  
On his return, he ushered me into his Office.

"You've got about ten minutes, my boy. Now, why the sudden interest in my welfare?"

"Prostate playing up, eh, Boss? You heading out within a month, so I understand. Is that true, Harry?"

"Yeah. I've had enough of the political bullshit on this floor...it was so much easier when I oversaw a couple of tear-away, gun happy, young undercover cops, some what? Fifteen? Twenty years ago, now?"

We both chuckled.

I'd had surprised when he took a position in the upper echelons of the Police bureaucracy.

This was the lofty altitude that housed the shakers and the movers of the NSW Police Hierarchy.

Harold Benson was an old-time Cop.

Earning his 'chair' by seniority and having something over those that made the decisions so it was rumoured. That I could believe! Harry was no bullshit. No fuss. Give him a bad time and you'd get a clip around the ears or mysteriously end up in a shallow grave out in the bush. There were rumours that the sudden disappearance of certain scum, drug dealers and stand-over guys was at the hands of good old Harry back in the bad old days even before I had enlisted. We both had history. We both had enough to put a noose around each other's neck. I figured that he may have a lot more to lose than I. Retirement loomed with a hefty handshake for him. A sizable Lump Sum and a Pension that would allow him to still buy a beer or two each day. I still had a lot of years to go to even get to an approachable level of largesse, as he had coming.

"What are your plans in retirement, Harry?"

He looked at me over the top of his glasses. Rocked back in his chair. A smirk on his face. He knew the score.

"C'mon, Joe. You didn't come here to ask about my health or future. What's your game?"

I shook my head slowly. Opened my arms in a gesture of surrender.

"You're not having a Retirement bash, Harry?"

"What? To sit there and listen to AO's who really hate your guts, going on about what a good bloke you are...and how you will be missed by the hierarchy and rank and file alike...c'mon! They know what I think about most of them on this floor...bloody two-faced so-and-so's. You don't police the populace any more. You pander to their bloody every whim.... paying more attention to the Lobby Groups than to catching Crims and protecting the people of the State...

so... what is it that you want from me. Cut the bullshit. You were always fair dinkum back then... some-one who you could rely on when things got a bit sticky..."

This stated so that I knew that he would always have something over me to even the score. That he still could remember certain details. Knowing Harry, it would never be written down but kept securely within that brain of his. He still had the talent to scare a few Officers.

I sat up in the chair on the other side of his desk. Looked directly at him hoping to catch a reaction with my question coming from left field.

"Remember Pickles? Is he still around?"

The description given by Rose Renshaw was 'Pickles' down to a tee.

The pinkie ring and the small tat on the inside of the wrist convinced me. The broad nose hinting at mixed blood, the clincher.

"Pickles? Shit! Now there's a name from history...why?"

He frowned, wiped both his hands down either side of his face. His demeanour not altered by the question or the mention of a former Officer who had 'history' with both Harry and myself.

I explained the assassination of Brian Mussellton yesterday morning. It was classic Pickles, down to the double tap...an over the top two bullets at point-blank range that he enjoyed executing. In the bad old days, it was with a 'throw-away' revolver, that was untraceable, with the punishment meted out to Drug Dealers who were not willing to share their spoils with him.... or Harry.

It was the Wild, Wild West in those bygone days.

"Joe...just let that go, will you? No good will come from it if you pursue that avenue of investigation. Thinking it be 'Pickles'. It wouldn't have been him. That's certain, OK? Be fair dinkum. Your supposition is based on a double tap murder at close range being the link to

how a bloke performed some ten...fifteen years ago. Not a logical supposition, Joe. Let it lie, OK?"

"Plus, that description of the pinkie-ring, the broad nose, the height and athletic stature and the small tattoo on the inside of the left wrist..."

He looked over at me with a blank look on his face.  
The visit was over.

He was not adding to the advice that he had already given me. The implied warnings.

I looked at the old bloke who was now approaching a weight that made it difficult for him to stand from his office chair. In the old days, he was lightning fast. A health fanatic...who smoked to extreme, I had to admit to myself. I felt that his once quickness of thought was also lagging, sadly. He was too willing to advise the negative...something that wasn't in his make-up in the old days.

He was a beaten man.

Tamped down by the system and possibly by the thoughts of his earlier, unlawful behaviour.

I shook his hand as I stood, thanking him for his time.

Suggesting we get together for a little retirement drink before we kissed farewell. Wishing him a long and healthy retirement. All the right platitudes that meant little to me.

Or to him.

I walked slowly to his closed door and opened it as I turned back to him.

"Have you any idea what-ever happened to Pickles? He went out on contract, didn't he? But no-one was ever sure who he contracted to... remember the book on him?"

Harry looked over at me with a look of thunder. He shook his head slowly and muttered that I had not changed that much in all these years.

"Still the stirrer, is our Joe, eh?"

I closed the door as I left.

## CHAPTER SIX

With the traffic still having all the signs of that morning peak hour gridlock, I didn't make it back to the Office until around Lunch time. I promised myself that I would, one day very shortly, move my abode to some outback town that didn't even have a set of traffic lights or a population count over five hundred people.

I was going to do it!

One day.

Mar looked up as I tossed the car keys onto her desk.  
"Get it done?" She asked for the sake of asking.

She really didn't want to know where I'd been or what and who I'd seen. My murky past scared her. She knew that the less she knew of those days the better off she was. If she was aware of any illegal or unlawful act on my part, partner, or no partner, she obligated to bring in the Integrity Unit. The Internal Affairs guys as they were known in a past life-time. She was that much of a straight shooter!

Sometimes I thought that she was far too straight.

All hell would break loose then. If she squealed. I would not even consider being the martyr, but take down as many of my cohorts as I possibly could. Even very good friends like Bazza Holtz who had been my undercover partner for several years, would not survive the fall-out. That attitude seemed a little off when I thought about. It made me feel bad about myself. Sure, I danced the fine line, but there were others who trampled over it! Why should I be the silly bastard who took the fall alone? I doubted that my life would be worth tuppence if the news got out that I was about to sing like a Honey-bird! The number of guys that I had something on had slowly dwindled over the years. There was only a hand full left still in the Force. The rest taking early retirement to take up lucrative careers if one is to believe the rumours. A few still on the edge, some have whispered.

Tripping the lights fantastic on the other side of the street.

I booted up my computer, bringing up the NSW Police Force front page emblem, scrolled through to the employment records and tapped in the name 'Pickles' and probable variations to the name that I knew of.

Walford Stanley Springer.

Walford 'Wally' Springer.

Wally 'Stan the Man' Springer.

Walford 'Pickles' Springer and Wally 'Pickles' Springer.

For some reason that I would never be able to explain, I also tapped into the Victorian Police Force employment records.

I had hits with both States.

That surprised me.

I had thought it highly unlikely that there would be two 'Pickles' in the world!

I bought up again the NSW Force emblem and entered in my rank, Badge number and my employment position. Detective Grade 3 NSW Murder Squad and the Case number of the Homicide Case that we were working on.

The employment record of Walford Stanley Springer rolled down the screen. It brought a smile to my lips seeing his Graduation Photograph. The same intake year as I, though I barely remembered him in the Academy. We moved in different circles and kept different class times though the occasional drunken night on the town was still clear in my mind. Even then he was a risk taker. The higher the risk, the more delight he seemed to experience.

The Official Graduation photograph as a youthful, short haired Constable in uniform seemed an anaesthetised version from the memories that I had of him. Then the shot of how I remembered him in undercover garb. A long mullet hair-cut. A Zapata moustache, perhaps better known in Australia as a Merv Hughes 'Special'. Dark sunglasses. That broad nose that hinted at mixed blood though he always denied the fact.

The employment spiel that went with the Photographs was typically succinct and lacking in detail, though what it did detail indicated a different person from the 'Pickles' that I had known during my time in undercover work. If you believed the hype, then he was a bloody white knight, with commendations for bravery and exemplary service.

The 'Pickles' I knew straddled that line between legal and illegal very comfortably. And very easily!

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

The Fifties and Sixties were a bad time for any young Cop coerced into undercover work. Some of the biggest Crims in the City were ranking Police Officers who thought nothing of

terminating a young undercover cop's career, or his life, if that enthusiastic young Officer got in the way of business as usual.

The burn-out rate was a major problem.

Young guys falling by the wayside an everyday occurrence.

Suicide.

Going feral or after the Star Wars Trilogy, 'going to the dark side' reaching epidemic proportions. And good guys hooked on the product, was not that rare occurrence.

Gradually through the early Eighties, things began to improve. The Politicians, the Police hierarchy and the Public getting sick and tired of the duplicity of a certain number of Police Officers. And new approaches instigated in the control and handling of undercover police work. Increasingly often, the guys worked as a team. Barry Holtz and I an example. With a 'Catcher' nearby just in case extraction was needed in a hurry. Or important information required transfer immediately.

In those days, cross communications were always a problem. That was before mobile phones, computers and iPads and the legal use of miniature cameras and bugging devices.

My wife Helene had been a 'Catcher' for Brendan Waszackinack.

Always known as 'Knackers' Waszackinack.

An undercover AFP Officer worming his way into the confidence of a SA Bikie gang. Hoping to get colour so that he could transfer to one of the larger eastern state gangs. Loyalty never a consideration to those boys. Then or now!

Helene had been an undercover cop with the AFP when I had first met her. Working behind a Bar of one of the notorious 'drug den' Pubs and Bikie hang-outs in the inner city. Me acting as an undercover cop at the time myself! We married inside six months and never regretted it, with Billy coming along within eighteen months of our marriage. She transferred to Cyber and Computer Crime but lured back as 'Knackers' Catcher by the offered money and the short-term aspect of the job. She shot and buried in a shallow grave in the back-blocks of SA.

Possibly the long lay-off from the ranks of undercover work her downfall.

Rusty.

Having lost that edge.

That sixth sense when danger was lurking.

She did have it once.

It is a definite art!

Shot by an insane Biekie who led a break-away group to form their own gang.

The Bow-legged Hog Riders.

The guy who had shot Helene now in prison never to be released for several murders, drug selling and distribution, cultivation, importing prohibitive substances and fire-arms, prostitution, and stand-over tactics.

The evidence that eventually linked him to Helene's death illegally provided by me and Knackers. Some ten years after the fact. That will never become common knowledge!

Billy, our son, had just turned ten years of age when his mother died.

A hard time for any kid, but tragic at that age.

'Pickles' had been Barry Holtz and my Catcher on a few sorties into the 'dark side'. The last time almost getting me killed and exposing Barry to an almost impossible scenario from which he was lucky to escape with his life. Several innocent persons injured during the ensuing gun battle, while 'Pickles' stayed low and cool. Neither Bazza nor I ever forgave him for that. We almost killed, only escaping the death trap by sheer chance.

"Pickles' had left the Force in early 2000.

That I hadn't been aware of.

Long before I had transferred into the Murder Squad environment.

The words told of him wanting to search for that perfect wave while he was still young enough to enjoy the challenge.

I couldn't help but laugh. Belly laugh. I had to stand to stop the tears coming to my eyes.

I tried to teach him to surf once. Way back when. He was bloody hopeless! He hated the cold water! The chill from a slight breeze!

Who wrote this absolute drivel? This fiction? There was not a word of truth in any of the information, except maybe his severance date.

I tempted to look up the precis of my career, just for a laugh. Then I thought better of it!

Mar looked up from what she was doing.

"You OK? Something has sure tickled your funny bone. Care to share the joke?"

"Pickles....." I managed to get out between the fit of the giggles.

I pressed the 'Print' tab and then scrolled up the Victorian Police Force emblem, going through the same series of password controls to gain entry into their Employment records.

A Stan Pickles was a respected Sergeant with the Armed Hold-up Squad within the Victorian Police. Had been with the Victorian Force for close on ten years. A man of integrity, having received several citations for bravery and commendations for actions beyond the call of duty.

This also got me into a giggling fit with Mar amused by my laughter. Something that had been missing for a while now.

"Pickles?" She asked again.

I could not reply such was my state.

I nodded my head.

His photo showed an older Walford 'Pickles' Springer. Bald. Suntanned. Grey, cool eyes. A broad nose hinting of mixed blood. A slightly down-turned mouth instead of the cheeky, smart-arse grin of his younger days. His past was wearing him down, perhaps. A strong, square chin. Lines now radiating from the corners of his eyes and his mouth. He still looked fit, judging by there being no excess weight to his face. More than likely he was still running. Lifting weights.

I shook my head slowly. A broad grin on my face. Like a cat flung into the air, he would for-ever land on his feet no matter the circumstances, I thought to myself.

"What's got you now?" Mar asked as she peered at me across the width of our desks.

"Pickles..."

"OK. I'll bite. Who or what is Pickles?"

I realised that I had overstepped myself. My past a closed book, never opened by anyone! Too many people would be hurt. I pressed the 'Print' button, then closed the files.

"You had lunch yet?" I asked to parry her question. "I'm starving. Let's get something and sit on the river bank. It's a bloody glorious day."

Marge followed me out to the Lift Lobby.

The doors closed on our Lift as the adjacent Lift arrived at our floor.

We did not see the Assistant Commissioner, Major Crimes, accompany five business suited chaps who were unmistakeably Commonwealth Cops, enter our Office area going straight into our beloved boss's office. Chief Superintendent Church would be busy for some time. Another day where he missed a meal break!

It would make him cranky for the rest of the afternoon, that's for sure.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

I impressed with Mar's self-discipline.

We were heading back to the office before she broached the subject.

"Pickles?" She asked, as though the question had been fighting desperately to escape the entire time that we sat on the banks of the murky, languid river. Enjoying our Lunch in relative silence. I smiled that knowing smile. Some would say that patronising look that I had mastered, so it was implied. What-ever. It had the effect of giving her a full head of steam.

I raised my hand to placate her.

"I think that I've told you before about Barry Holtz and I, straight out of the Academy, coerced to become undercover boys for the Narcotics Squad. Supposedly identified by our performances at the Academy, giving some-one in power the idea that we would be well suited to the role.... what-ever. Travelling up and down the coast in this fabulous Panel Van with all the bells and whistles. With surf boards strapped to the racks that we used every day. That couldn't last for-ever. Unfortunately, it didn't last for as long as we had hoped. But in the six to nine months that we did play the part, we had fun. Then it got down to more serious shit with Narcs. Our first real 'hands on ' Boss was Harold Benson. An old-school type of guy..."

We skittered between banked up rows of vehicles stopped at the set of lights at the busy intersection further down the street from our building. When we made the far kerb, I propped to continue the story.

Not that I am overly paranoid, but our building had ears, so it was rumoured!

"He's retiring in a couple of weeks. Harry. The attitude generally, is 'good riddance' with not even a function of some sort being organised for the massive amount of years that he served... regardless of his standing. That is wrong to my way of thinking... though he apparently has made it quite clear that he also is against any form of recognition for services rendered. He doesn't want any fuss made. I think it is mainly a guilty conscience. He...um...straddled that fine line very expertly indeed for a lot of years. 'Pickles' was also an undercover Narcs officer. My age. My intake year at the Academy, though we didn't mix. We took it in turns to be the 'Catcher' when we worked Narcs....I've explained that role to you before... I've been trying to run him down so that we can, along with Barry Holtz, have a quiet meal with the old Boss... along with a couple of others that we worked closely with during that period... you know, to at least say good-bye, no hard feelings to the old guy. You weren't a bad boss... that type of thing. I reckon every-one should have some type of bash... don't you?"

She looked sideways at me with that questioning look. She not convinced... in fact she ignored my question. Answering my question with one of her own.

"Pickles? How did he get that moniker? What was his birth name?"

I smiled at the memories, even though I knew that Pickles was one bent Cop. Always was. Always will be. Regardless, we had gotten into, and luckily out of some tight spots in the old days. In some ways, it's like soldiers in arms. There's this unbroken bond created between them when they have experienced battle time together.

That invisible tie of experiencing a life-threatening episode. Something that can't be explained or comprehended by those on the outside looking in. They would never feel or understand that type of companionship.

"His birth name was Walford Stanley Springer. I don't know whether you remember an American comedy act... umm, I think they may have been born in England. Both. A comedy duo. Laurel and Hardy? Started out in the Vaudeville days and silent Movies, crossing over successfully into the 'Talkies'. A skinny guy and a fat guy. The fat guy wore this little Bowler hat perched on his head. Several sizes too small for his head, it was. The skinny guy was always getting into the shit with the fat guy.... I can't remember which was which.... always saying *'What a fine pickle you've got us into this time, Stanley'*. That explains it...Stan Laurel was the skinny guy. Oliver Hardy was the fat guy...I think. Hardy would always say it to Laurel when things went pear-shaped.... they were a good duo. Made some funny Movies. Pickles would always say it. On the footy field. Playing cricket. Having one too many on a boys' night out or undercover when something went ape-shit. When-ever things got a bit tight you could bet your house on him uttering it. He apparently had always said it, even as a young bloke. It stuck. That simple...*what a fine pickle...*" I smiled at the memory.

"You track him down?"

"Yeah. In Victoria. Haven't spoken to him yet. I've got about a dozen guys who'll drink the old bloke out... more than half now out of the Force... maybe that'll do."

I was starting to dribble. That was when Mar would suspect me laying it on too thick and suspect a complete fabrication. From the old days, I had learnt the hard way that the best lies were part truths.

I was in fact trying to do the right thing.

I was fair dinkum trying to chase down some of the guys from the old days to organise a meal to drink the old bastard out. I figured that was the least I could do for him, regardless of his 'dubious' moral stance back then.

But that wasn't the reason why I had first tracked down 'Pickles'.  
I was sure that he was the 'Shooter'.

Never surer of anything in my life.

The pattern fitted. It was in his genes!

Legacies of the past don't die or disappear. Especially to those who are part of that heritage.

## **CHAPTER NINE**

"Joe? Marge? Office. Now!"

That was our greeting as we entered the Murder Squad Room after Lunch to commence our afternoon session. Our illustrious Staff Clerk 'Hendo' Henderson raised his eye-brows in response and whispered that we had missed all the fun.

I had no idea what he was getting at, but the contents of my stomach fell past my feet.

It was a rare occurrence that the Boss was ever shitty.... or that bossy!

"Boss? What's up?" Mar asked, as she stood at the door into his Office.

The room crowded which was a rare occurrence.

Several chairs wheeled from the General Office area into the Office to allow all the visitors to sit crowded around Abbey's little coffee table. His conference area.

"Marjory Hendricks. Joe Lind."

That was the extent of the introductions. I could have been looking at Santa Claus in his civvies for all I knew. I recognised the Assistant Commissioner, Major Crime and guessed at the other five persons as Commonwealth Officers. More than likely AFP. They had that look. Maybe ASIO for all I knew. Their combined silent stares in our direction, their sullen response to our presence. It was obvious that they weren't the shaking hands variety and an exchange of name to identify themselves was not in their make-up.

"Grab your deck chairs and squeeze in... onto the deck of the Titanic."

Whoops! Not good.

I shook out of my coat and hung it up as Mar placed hers across her desk, hanging her bag off one of the hooks on the hook post that we both used. I raised my eye-brows at my partner as we wheeled our desk chairs into the already crammed Office. Surely, we could have commandeered one of the Conference Rooms. As if reading my mind, the Assistant Commissioner instructed that this meeting was on the QT and had never taken place.

The synapses in my brain began their hectic circuit.

A head-ache of major proportions was brewing.

He continued.

"I understand that you are the Officers-in-Charge of the Mussellton homicide investigation. The man's body has been removed from the City Morgue. Taken to Canberra for a post-mortem. All forensic evidence, paperwork and details seized. All Forensic Officers' case notes. All persons involved asked to sign a confidentiality letter of silence that will be enforceable for seventy years or for the life-time of the signatory, whichever comes first. You two will be asked to comply with this also and hand over all detail, information and paperwork relating to the case, to these gentlemen. Your Computers taken from your Office and returned to you within a day or two after all matters relating to the case forensically removed. Deleted. Understand? You are not to mention this matter to any other person in any detail. Understand? You are not to mention to any other person the name or nature of the crime that you were investigating. Understand? You are to cease forthwith, all investigations relating to this case as of this moment. Understand?"

"Um... yes.... both of us understand. Can we ask the reason for this action, as I believe it has no precedence... a murder of a resident of NSW should be investigated by the trained Officers of the Murder Squad? That written into the legislation when the Murder Squad was formed way back when.... if my memory serves me correctly..."

I always was a smart arse with my mouth having got me into hot water on many occasions.

The Deputy Commissioner froze me out with a practised stare.

"Detectives, please sign these papers."

He ignored my comments as though I had not uttered a word.

He glanced over at two of the business suited gentlemen. They rose to sidled out of Abbey's Office, heading in the direction of Mar and my desks. They began to place the Murder Book and all items that they could find on the case into a couple of cardboard boxes, placing our Laptops on top of the pile. Rummaging through our desk drawers and side drawers to ensure that they had not left anything relating to the homicide behind.

I watched horrified.

If this investigation was now going to be run by some Commonwealth investigative body, then my computer search of 'Pickles' would surely raise that fluttering red flag. His sordid history easily ascertained. His long time ago association with myself exposed and there goes my career in a jet plane!

They especially, would not believe the tale that I had spun to Marge on the subject not more than an hour ago.

"Your Case Note books, please Detectives. Is there anything else? No? You should be advised that the central mainframe has been 'cleaned' of all material relating to this investigation. For you, from this moment on, the homicide did not and does not exist. It did not occur. Thank you, Detectives. You are dismissed."

I felt like taking a swing at the AC.

His attitude was way over the top.

I glanced at Abbey.

I could tell that he too, had a problem with the entire proceedings.

His hands obviously tied also.

Both Mar and I wheeled our chairs back up to our desks. A quick scan showed that our records, every drawer, and every document on both our desks had been rummaged through without any attempt made to disguise the exercise.

I looked up to see the single file of Officers leaving Abbey's Office. One could bet that they filed behind each other in relation to their Grade. Such are the faceless men!

Secure in their sense of self-importance.

Quite above the laws and statutes of the State. But knowing their places in the grading of their jobs.

Mar turned to me with a look of disbelief and shock on her face.

I was worrying about my future.

"Joe? Marge? Can you come into my Office? Sonny? You too please. OK?"

Arrh... a rear-guard action was about to be implemented.

He appeared to be back to his normal self. Perhaps the sign of the disciplinarian just a show for his visitors. Or maybe it was his visitors that caused his blood to boil. The anger to come to the fore.

Sonny Liston was the most senior in rank in the Office other than Abbey. He had been Abbey's partner when Abbey had undertaken a case load of his own. Since Abbey had suffered a heart attack some time ago and taken a six-month sabbatical, he had rid himself of the Case load. Sonny now paired with young 'wannabe' Murder Dicks as they emerged from the Academy, sorting the chaff from the hay, so to speak.

Not every-one cut out to become a Murder Dick. It took a special type of person to be involved with dead bodies, blood, guts and grieving, hysterical relatives.

We filed back into his Office as instructed.

"Sonny? Close the door on your way in, will you, please.... I can well imagine how you all are feeling about what has just transpired. I am not happy at all about it. I can imagine your nervousness with a whole assortment of problems threatening to be opened..." He glanced at me as he said this.

I looked at the best Boss that I had ever worked for. Again, a sense of surprise and uncertainty shrouded me. I wondered how much he knew of my past. It would seem a lot more than I had ever contemplated or suspected. He just shook his head slightly in my direction as an answer to my unsaid question.

"As you said Joe, a precedence has been set where a homicide case can be wrenched from us without a reasonable explanation being provided. I do not like that type of interference or heavy handed method on my watch. This is a homicide investigation. Not fraud or blue collar crime... or a danger to national security... that never stated. We have all signed a letter of confidentiality...and a fucking continued ignorance of this matter...Joe. Marge. Who in hell was Brian Mussellton?"

"A man with no past. No history. No records. No Medicare card. No driver's license. No Council rates paid. Water rates or Library Card. Zilch. Nada. Not even on the Electoral Role. I spent the entire morning trying to get a handle on the guy. There is nothing that goes back any later than the date that he supposedly retired from the Commonwealth Public Service. Some months back. I'm not too sure now, it was either his sister or his wife who mentioned that he had over forty loyal years as a Clerk with the PS. There is no record of that or of a Brian Mussellton of that address ever having existed..."

I looked over at Mar. Nodding my head in acknowledgement of her industriousness.

"OK. What about the shooter? Any leads?"

I squirmed a little in my seat, giving the appearance that I was trying to get more comfortable.... or that my piles were playing up. It apparently wasn't convincing.

"Joe?" Abbey enquired.

"Um....we have an excellent eye witness who gave one of the best descriptions that I have ever heard from a member of the Public...and several of the video feeds from neighbours Smartphones gave excellent images as the Shooter drove away. I was hoping to give these images, obviously taken from different angles, different perspectives, up to Forensics so they could synchronise the images. A possible photo ID analysis, may have been possible...that's about it, I'm afraid."

"Mmm..." Abbey had that far-away look in his eyes.

There was silence for some moments.

"OK....I guess that rolls it up. The case now does not exist for us though I'd like you to re-visit the Vic's house and pay a visit to that witness again to ascertain whether she'd been approached by any men in dark suits... arrh, no. Hold that in abeyance, until I give you a nod. Joe? Can you stay behind?"

Sonny and Mar got the hint and filed out of the Office.

Abbey ambled to the door to close it behind Mar's retreating figure. She turned, somewhat surprised. She glanced at me. A scowl on her face. She broadcast to me that I had not been open with her about something and that was what she had upset her.

Abbey stood by the window looking down at the Park and the River on the opposite side of the road. Jangling loose coin in his pocket. This a habit that we had noticed him adopt since we had moved into this building. He in deep thought for some moments.

"OK Joe, out with it. Who is this...." He asked.

He leant to take a series of A4 photographs from a desk drawer. He flipped them across his desk to me. It was the photos of 'Pickles' that I had truly forgotten that I had printed off before I had taken time off for Lunch.

"A genuine case of serendipity, I would imagine. I love the sound of that word, so musical. No?"

He looked across at me.

Smiled to himself.

Gave a cut off laugh before continuing.

"...Hendo noticed them on the Copier tray. Bought them into me not long before the Circus came to town wondering if they were mine. I slipped them into my top drawer as the 'Single File Boys' invited themselves into my Office. Unannounced. I have no idea why I did that..."

He slumped into his desk chair and looked over at me.

"Why were you visiting your old boss, Harry Benson this morning?"

I taken aback by his knowledge of my morning's agenda.

"Harry rang me. It seems that he knows you well enough to suspect that you may have some hospitable wish to organise a 'Going Away' meal for him...he asked that I make sure that I talked you out of the idea..."

"You know Harry?" I asked. A surprised tone in my voice.

"Yeah. We started our Law Degrees at the same time. I made the Bar exams. Harry never got past the second year... but we shared some time together back then... that was around the time that a couple of young enthusiastic Officer cadets started as undercover cops with him. You and young Holtz. Jeez... that's about twenty years ago now. Time flies when you're not paying attention... So, who's that? And no b.s."

He tapped his finger on one of the photos.

I gave him the same spiel that I'd given Mar, hoping that as it had been enough for Mar, it would be good enough for Abbey.

Maybe not, as he was shaking his head as I finished.

"You wanted a shot of him for old time's sake? That is so unlike you, I will not even comment on the b.s. factor...but it would be up past ten out of ten! It was so long since you'd seen him last you needed reminding? You intended to hang them on your wall at home because you're such a sentimental bastard? C'mon Joe...I know more about the history of all my staff then you give me credit for...and the look on your face spoke reams a little while ago when you realised that if the Feds make the connection, and the person in this photo sings to save his own arse, then your career could very well come crashing down with the Integrity boys not even breaking a sweat over you...am I correct? Arrh, also Joe, there are *very* few, *very* good liars in the world. People who have consciences, a moral compass, empathy, and a modicum of goodness in their bones don't tell very good lies. They always have 'tell-tails' when they lie. Understand. I recognise and can see your 'tell-tales.' So! Who is this guy and why did you get these official photos of him?"

Abbey never failed to surprise me. He was one hell of an Investigator whose talents perhaps under-used in the position that he now held.

"Yes, Boss... umm... The description that Missus Rose Renshaw gave us fitted 'Pickles' to a tee... I was going to take those shots with the normal dozen bald headed cop and crim photos to see if she could pick 'Pickles' out as the guy that she saw in that Parking Lot. Getting out of the vehicle that he stole. Driving away in another. A leased unit..."

"Now you're in a bit of a pickle yourself. The Feds may never make a connection.... but then they may. Especially now as they have your Laptop and your deeds in tracking your friend 'Pickles' down will become known to them.... why bloody 'Pickles' as a nickname?"

He held up his hand to interrupt me.

"No. no, Joe. I really don't want to know...if this Renshaw lady identifies 'Pickles' for them, then you're in the pickle yourself, perhaps.... look.... leave it be. I want to do a bit of digging myself on this.... this is completely unacceptable. I'll stay off the Internet and do a bit of old fashion Police work. I'll let you know what I find. If anything, and I'm not confident. You stay off the Internet yourself in this regard. It's too easy to trace, especially if they're keeping any sort of tabs on you. That may sound rather paranoid but I don't trust people who can make homicides disappear without any form of explanation, as though they are way above the law. I'll visit the lady in my own time. You've got several other cases that require both your and Marge's attention. I suggest you give them your total focus and forget the Mussellton homicide unless we have a need to speak about it in confidence and away from this Office. Understand? That's an order. Do not, Joe...do not go meddling on your own.... leave me with it for a while. I'll bring you into the loop if I think it warranted and worthwhile. Understand?"

## CHAPTER TEN

Mar and I had just returned to our desks after spending sixty minutes pounding the Running Machine and doing ten quick laps of the pool.

We had officially logged off before that afternoon ritual and had just returned to our work stations to collect our things to go home.

It was close on six.

My phone rang.

I was going to ignore its ring, thinking that it more than likely another Homicide call-out. We were not on duty. I shook my head and leant across my desk to pick up the mobile out of its base dock.

"Detective Joseph Lind? Murder Squad? You were at the Police HQ building this morning, yes?"

"Yes. Who's calling please?"

"Um...I'm sorry. Judith Peach. Harry Benson's Personal Assistant. There's no easy way to tell you this... um... Harry... um... he took his own life... they're removing his body now... I'm sorry. After you left this morning, he told me about knowing you way back and how he had a lot of respect for you. Said you were one of the good guys... I'm sorry."

I had trouble sitting down into my office chair.

"Anything I can do? How did he die?"

"No. Everything is taken care of. His wife died a long time ago. His kids...he hasn't spoken to them for years... around the time of his wife's death, I think. He had two brothers, though not close. He shot himself. Under the ear... I was not at my station at the time... he asked me to get some old files from Personnel... um... the AC, Major Crimes heard the shot. He was just coming back into the Office Suite area himself. He'd been out nearly all day... the AC Major Crimes, that is. He has his Office suite next to Harry... um... I thought I should tell you..."

"Yes. Yes. Thank you for that. I'm sorry. He was a... um... he didn't deserve this after so long in the job. Thanks for that...if there is anything that I can do, please don't hesitate to call."

I slowly replaced my mobile back into its dock.

"Joe? Joe? You OK?" Marge asked. Concern lacing her words.

"You've heard? Harry Benson?" Abbey commented as he came up to my desk. "Shot himself sometime around three this afternoon. Forensics have come and gone. In his Office. Christ. That's a horrible way to end your career on the eve of retirement.... I'm sorry Joe. Your first Boss is always some-one special regardless of the circumstance. Take the day off to-morrow. OK? Go home, eh? Take it easy. Mar? I'll come by your place to-morrow morning to pick you up. Say around nine? Nine fifteen? OK?"

Mar nodded her head. A surprised look on her face as she watched Abbey return to his Office.

"What was that all about?" I asked slowly.

"I have no idea, Joe. C'mon. I'll get you home. Have a stiff Scotch and go to bed...take it easy to-morrow..."

"Nah!" I replied quickly, as I rose and slipped into my old leather Bomber Jacket. A feeling of anger and... helplessness overpowering me.

"Nah, I want to pound the pavement straight after tea. You with me? No? And to-morrow, I am going to buy a throw-away phone and make a couple of calls...I do not believe that Harry would do that... it's not in his DNA. Some-one else pulled the trigger."

"Joe... don't do anything stupid, you hear? You have a propensity to continually cut off your nose and stir the shit out of people that you should leave well enough alone. What-ever you do, you keep me in the loop... with the truth and not a bunch of lies or pure bullshit like you been sprouting to-day. You're a shit-house liar, Joe Lind. You couldn't convince a ten-year-old that Santa and the Tooth Fairy are true people, so cut out the crap before it buries you. OK?"

## **CHAPTER ELEVEN**

"Coincidences in life are bloody rare." Abbey stated as he drove his car away from Marge Hendrick's address.

Sonny Liston sat in the back seat carefully reading what seemed like a very thick file.

"Coincidences in Homicide investigations even rarer! I must admit that it has been a lot of years since I've rubbed shoulders with Harry, but if there was a bloke who wouldn't shy away from a fight, it was Harry. He loved a good scrap..."

There was silence as he ran fading memories through his brain.

He glanced over at Marge.

"Would you believe that all proof of a Sergeant Stanley Pickles, supposedly recently of the Armed Hold-up Squad within the Victorian Police Force, has been completely deleted from their Personnel Files. In fact, a drop-down box...a dialogue box, refers you to their equivalent of our Integrity Unit...they with a similar penchant for complete privacy with no way of knowing or getting into their records to scan their members. Also, all records of his previous employment with the NSW Force deleted. He now officially does not exist...very suss, don't you reckon? They...who-ever they are, acted post haste in that regard...bloody miraculous don't you think? Joe seems certain that his old mate 'Pickles' is the shooter... do you know where that name came from?"

"Yeah...."

Marge related the story that Joe had related to her the day before.

"Bloody Joe! What Hornet's nest has he jiggled this time?" She concluded.

"Um... I think that they may have been born in England, but it was in America where they made their Vaudeville debut.... I could be wrong though. Why else would you call a bloke that? It is interesting that when he joined the Vic. Force, he should keep that variation on the name. That's what a professional would do..."

He gave a chuckle before he continued.

"Joe sure has a talent, now doesn't he? If you look at it, if he hadn't made the connection to 'Pickles', an old-time acquaintance, on the description given by a single witness, then the entire thing would more than likely have disappeared and we'd be none the wiser. They'd have taken the body, the case and that would have been it. To be able to delete the very existence and history of a former NSW Police Officer sure takes some power. And then Harry says good-bye in a completely unacceptable way. That's rather scary. And not coincidental. We are meddling with the big end of town, I think."

"So, where are we going?"

"Firstly, to see that lovely Missus Rose Renshaw. At her place of breast-feeding. I seem to remember that she sent her young daughter to Pre-School on a Monday and a Wednesday. Umm, would that be right? I really do not want to trample around her neighbourhood at this point in time."

Marge nodded her head in agreement. A worried look crossed her face.

"I don't think he will..." Abbey muttered as though reading her mind. "He'll swim around the edges for a while. Taking a nibble here. A tiny bite there. He will not take an unpremeditated lunge into the middle of the school... well... I certainly hope not! Especially after that bloody show of force yesterday lunch time. It could get us into a little poo. Up to our arm pits, actually... but then, we aren't exactly complying now, are we?"

"Turn right at the next cross-street. It's a dead-end street as it runs into the Playing Oval. There's two Parking areas. One on the left. The other on the right beside the Pre-School is where we'll find Rose Renshaw. Hopefully. Yes. There's her car. Right up in the corner under the shade of that Gum...."

"Is that where the four cars were burnt?" Abbey asked as he propped to view the scorch marks still evident in the tarmac. "Makes a bloody mess, doesn't it?"

"Yeah....and the smell is quite extraordinary." Mar replied. "There she is, doing her laps of the Oval. Ten three times a week pushing the pram.... they're a bloody keen lot, these young Mums."

Marge Hendricks alighted from the 'Unmarked' as Renshaw walked to her vehicle.

That brilliant, toothy smile a greeting when she recognised the Detective.

"A good morning for it." Marge commented. Scanning over the entire Sports Ground as she walked towards the young woman.

"Yeah, sure is. I just hope that the weather lasts. We're going north for the holidays. Next week-end. For two weeks on the Sunshine Coast. Everyone's going. About twenty of us. A genuine caravan convoy... both sides of the family and a couple of cousins. Should be a good time. My little one's first official holiday."

"Careful driving. It's a bit scary with some lunatics getting out on the road at that time... umm... remember we said that we may ask you to look at a few 'Mug Shots'? I've bought a few along. Fifteen in fact. Would you mind looking for me? Oh! This is my Boss. Chief Superintendent Robert Church. Rose Renshaw, Boss."

Abbey stuck out his hand. Rose confidently shook his.

"Must be important if the Boss comes with you...I'll just put Damien in the Capsule. It won't take long, will it? I reckon that he will start wailing very shortly. He's pretty famished."

Renshaw skimmed through the pile of A4 photographs. Twice. She pulled 'Pickles' photo in a Victorian Police Officer's uniform from the pile.

"That's him."

"Are you certain?"

"Yep. Couldn't be surer." Her son started wailing. She looked towards her car then quickly back to Marge. "Um... is there anything else? I'll need to feed him before he gets himself into a right royal twist... one thing..." She bent into the car and picked up her baby boy. Opened the front passenger door and slipped into the seat, throwing a baby towel over her shoulder as she exposed her breast and led the little one to the teat. Completely unconcerned at the presence of Marge and Abbey. "... um... one thing?" She looked up at Marge. "Will I be required to appear in Court, or anything?"

"No... I doubt it. No. You won't. Hopefully, this will be the extent of your involvement. Thanks for that. Take care and have a safe holiday."

Both Marge and Abbey returned her wave as they drove around the small allotment to exit onto the street.

"I wish all witnesses were so sure. So very precise in their descriptions as she was. A very observant young woman. On the ball. I hope that we do not have a call-out with her being a homicide victim... it would seem that some-one can do what they like when they like in to-day's climate." Marge commented as they drove away.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

"Sorry to be a nuisance this early in the morning. You spoke to me late yesterday. I thank you for letting me know about Harry. I'm Detective Joe Lind... um... may I come in?" Judith Peach was somewhat surprised.

She looked up and down the street before she stepped out of the way to let me into her home.

"Arrh... how did you find my address? How did you know that I wouldn't be going into work to-day? Why must you come to my home when you could ask any question you like at my place of work?"

She stood beside the open front door. Nervous. Unsure. Her Boss's suicide had affected her tremendously, so it seemed.

"If you prefer that I go, then I'll make arrangements to have a talk with you at another time. I can see how much Harry's death has rocked you. He was my first Boss when I came out of the Academy. His death has rocked me a bit too...your first Boss has a special place inside you, regardless... I'll come back at a better time."

I took a Business Card from my pocket to hand to her.

She rubbed the nape of her neck as though it was a nervous reaction; a life-time habit. Probably her mother had a similar gesture when under any form of stress.

She peered out at the street again before she slowly closed the door and ushered me into her home. I followed her out into a light and airy Kitchen which was in complete contrast to the Lounge and Dining Room that we had walked through. Big, bulky furniture of another time. Perhaps around sixty years ago. She gestured for me to sit on a tall Kitchen stool fronting a small breakfast nook that was an extension of the counter top. The Kitchen had only been re-modelled recently.

"Um... coffee? Yes? Perhaps a piece of toast... um... I guess that I should have something to eat too. Though I don't really feel like it..."

"Thank you. Yes. Yes, you should eat. A piece of toast for me will be fine...you have recently had a re-modelling exercise. I like it."

"Yes, so do I, but my husband was against it for a while. This was *his* parent's place...we moved in here to take care of them until they died some years back. It's a big house. Too big now just for the two of us. A Granny Flat out the back where we stayed for some years. Until they both passed. I'd like to sell it and move closer to both our works..."

"What does your husband do?"

"He's an Accountant with the Finance Department. The Commonwealth Public Service. We were lucky...we lived down in Canberra...which I prefer much better than Sydney even though Winters are colder and on average, the Summers a lot hotter... and dryer...a much nicer place than Sydney. Safer. A more relaxed life-style. We moved up here to keep an eye on his parents... that was around a dozen years ago... maybe a little longer..."

"You join the Police Department then?"

"Yes actually. I was lucky. I was the Personal Assistant to...um...a high-level Officer in the AFP...Harry's old PA retired so it fell into place rather fortunately, actually... maybe there was a little behind the scenes pulling of strings... at a guess." She gave a hint of a smile. "My husband relocated up here on a promotion, so it turned out well. We still have our place in Canberra. We rent it out to one of our sons and his family. A good arrangement."

"Was he a good Boss? Harry?"

"Welllll... he could get difficult at times... as though he forgot to take his 'good mood' tablet... that was our little joke to clear the air. I can't understand why he would shoot himself. All he had to do was stop taking one or two of his tablets... or for that matter take a

couple too many... a little less messy I would have thought. He only had about three weeks to go before he was retiring...."

She blew her nose. Wiped away a couple of tears. Pushed a plate of toast lathered with butter and Vegemite across towards me. A steaming mug of coffee.

"Silly I know... for a middle-aged woman. The only way that I would have my toast from when I was a little girl." She tittered at that, which seemed to enliven her face. She was quite attractive in an old fashion way. "Your visit sparked him up somewhat. He confided in me after you left that he thought that one day you would be on our floor...a true terror keeping the questionable antics of some at bay..." Again, a smile on her face. "He was a bit of a terror in his younger days, so I'm led to believe. Was not an honest cop. A straight shooter such as yourself. So, he said."

It was my turn to give a cut-off laugh.

"Yeah, well... the stories you hear, you sometimes wonder where all the good cops are... you, umm... mentioned to me on the phone that you were not in the Office. That you were away chasing up some Personnel Files. Is that a normal, usual thing for you to do? I would have thought that you would just get on the phone to Human Resources for a Clerk to fetch what-ever he may have requested. They'd bring them up to you..."

She looked at me with a steady gaze. I thought that she was on the verge of asking me to leave. She had that look in her eye.

The shutters were coming down.

"Is there something that you are trying to imply, Detective?" She asked icily.

I was somewhat surprised at her sudden change. A guilty reaction perhaps. Or maybe a suspicious or paranoid mind may be.

"No. Forgive me. Once a Detective, always a Detective. We can't help ourselves at times." I smiled.

Took another piece of toast and sipped on my coffee, letting the moments pass without looking at her.

"Yes..." She seemed to relax a little. "He was very particular. That was when he did it. When I wasn't there as though he was protecting me from the initial shock. He would have known that I would have flown into his Office at the sound of the shot...he wanted to spare me that horror...he was quite emphatic that I should retrieve the files. It took a while and I needed one of those file trolleys... there was twelve thick files... there should have been a couple more, but we couldn't locate them... some idiot more than likely put them out of

order... never found until some-one comes across an 'S' file amongst the 'B's... it's known to happen."

"Can you remember the file names?"

"Why would you want to know that?" She asked. A tinge of doubt in her voice.

I shrugged my shoulders.

"My typically suspicious mind. A loose end that teases my brain."

Another one of my boyish grins. They apparently were losing their appeal as it failed to work, so it seemed!

"Um... yes... I think that I have the list still. It's in my coat pocket. Won't be a moment."

She returned quickly with half an A4 sheet of paper. It had been torn in half. There were fifteen names with their Service number and rank listed. Four circled in red Biro. I looked quickly at the list. My heart began to race.

"Um... those names circled? They're the ones that you couldn't locate, I presume? Fair comment?"

"Yes. Though I and two other File Clerks did look about for them...high and low actually."

"How long do you think you were away from your station?"

"Oh, about two and half hours."

"You said that the acting Deputy Commissioner, Major Crimes heard the gun shot?"

"Well...yes. That's what I overheard him say to the S&E guys who were called in to investigate the tragic event."

I nodded my head.

"The files? Where are the files now? Did you return them?"

"No. They're in the safe. In Harry's Office. Standard security arrangements. Nothing... especially Personnel files, left on a person's desk overnight. It was a bit awkward with every-one else in the room, but as Harry was deceased, then I was responsible for their secure location overnight."

"Who else has access to Harry's Safe? It must be one huge piece of furniture to hold all those files! And the trolley too, I suppose!"

The last comment meant to draw her attention away from the audacity of the question.

It didn't succeed.

"Why do you ask? You're one snoopy Detective."

There was now a tinge of anger to her voice. She looked at me with growing suspicion.

"I was hoping to have a look at a few of those files if I could...in regards to a Homicide investigation that is going nowhere..."

She looked at me coldly. Shook her head.

"I suppose that you are going to tell me that Harry requested those files on your behalf? I don't think so...no."

Words were not going to work. A pleading look my only come back.... I must have got my various facial expressions mixed up, as it failed in its intended purpose.

"I think that it's about time that you left, Detective. You can look at those files if you have a Court Order or the written consent of the Commissioner. I didn't come down in the last shower, young man. Keep that list; though you have no idea where it came from. Finish your coffee and leave my house, Detective. I have a migraine coming on. I can feel it! Good morning to you, I'll see you to the door. Be assured Detective, this visit and conversation did not occur... until I see you again with that authority. Perhaps?"

She closed the door silently behind me.

I felt sure that her assurance, her word, could be taken on face value. She would be able to sniff out the 'dubious' circumstances after half a life-time positioned in the secret hallways of the AFP Headquarters in Canberra.

That association within itself, was very puzzling.

Circles within circles.

I needed to speak to Abbey away from the Office.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"Boss? You're not in the Office?"

"No. We've just done our mid-week ten laps of the Oval...and I'm betting that you aren't at home taking it easy."

I understood.

I would have bet the house that that was what Mar was going to do this morning. Get Rose Renshaw's I.D. of 'Pickles' being the guy that she saw hop out of the car. Linking him to the assassination. I also reckoned that Abbey wouldn't leave Mar out on a limb to undertake the task by herself. If for no other reason than to protect her if the shit flew!

"Can we meet? Is Mar with you? Ask her about my half-brother. The Concierge. I think both you and I should meet about twelve noon for lunch. See you then. OK?"

I had pulled over alongside a Park to make the call.

It was such a beautiful morning, I hopped out of my car and wandered to a hard timber slatted park bench. Primarily constructed to resist a long-term arrangement of placing your butt on them, so I believed. They were that bloody uncomfortable! I scrolled through my contact numbers and pressed the green button.

"Hello?" Very groggy.

I had obviously woken her.

"Carry?"

"That you, Joe? What time is it? Shit! It's not even ten yet. Have a bloody heart, Joe, I've just come off a double twelve-hour shift. Ring me next week, huh?"

"Sorry...but I have to ask. Were you the Chief on Assistant Commissioner Harry Benson's death? His suicide? Yesterday afternoon?"

"Joe... ring me back in a week, will you."

"Was everything above board? No suspicious circumstances at all?"

"Bloody hell, Joe! You can be an absolute pain...No. None. I'll be doing the autopsy tomorrow morning. Why? What are the Conspiracy Theorists putting out already? Murder? Not on Joe. The AC Major Crimes and his PA rushed into Benson's suite at the sound of the shot. That's plain to see on the video image as they ran down the corridor towards the suite.

No-one else was in the Office suite. There's sufficient coverage of surveillance cameras in the area that showed nothing. The Lift cameras the same. Nothing! OK? Good night!"

"When was the Safe opened?"

"What? The Safe? It's a bloody big Safe Room like in a Bank...when was it opened? It wasn't. I even checked it when we got there. It was locked. Harry Benson's PA opened it after we gave her permission to enter the room after the AC's body was removed. She deposited some files...no she wheeled in one of those file trolleys full of files into the Room and closed the bloody thick door. Re-set the locks for a couple of days hence...I have no idea why she did that..."

"Could you see right inside the Room?"

"Arrh, shit, Joe! Yes, just shelving. Some open. Some closed with locks on the individual doors. That's all. No mysterious shooter was hiding in there, Joe. Good night, Joe. Ring me at a respectable time in future. Not at ten O'clock in the morning when I've just finished a double, eh?"

## **CHAPTER FOURTEEN**

One of my recently discovered half-brother had reserved a table for four outside on the planking above the lapping water.

We were partially isolated from other patrons of the Restaurant by a step-down in the outdoor eating area. The sun was warm though dappled by the cantilevered sunshade umbrella above our table. The view across Botany Bay to the runway extension jutting out into the water impressive. Especially when 747's lumbered into the air. We were far enough away to not hear the jet engines whining their farewell lament. The large cantilevered umbrella helped to hide our position from the rest of the Patrons dining on the Outdoor area.

There was a slight breeze from the south keeping the heat bearable.

After the formalities of introductions to my half-brother and instructions not to treat our wishes in any way dissimilar to all his customers, we settled into a light banter until our food arrived.

The best Seafood in the world!

We doubted that our wishes were respected, as our plates were piled high! All at the Chef's price!

"OK, why did you want to meet us?" Abbey asked as he scraped the crumbs from his plate. Washing it down with a couple of gulps of ice water.

"To share this beautiful meal with you and to get you out of the office for once, Abbey."

"Well, that sure is appreciated.... I'll remember it for at least a week. Maybe I'll even return the favour some day when we can spare the time. But as I've said before Joe, you may be a bloody good bull-shitter, but you sure are a bad liar!"

That appeared to be a consensus around the table.

"OK. I went to see Harry's PA this morning and have a chat with the Lead Forensic Officer called out on his death...there appears to be nothing suspicious about the suicide with even a note left explaining his actions...the files that he had requested prior to him blowing his brains out were a message within themselves...in a somewhat obtuse manner. He instructed his PA, Judith Peach, to retrieve certain Personnel Files from Records. A rare event apparently. Obviously so that she would be out of the Office Suite when the sound of the shot was heard. That's her take on the matter. He wanted to spare her the shock of finding his body. But the apparent obtuse note was the names on those files that Peach brought back up to the Office after some ninety minutes of searching...."

"Hang on Joe. I was under the belief that Harry Benson *did* leave a suicide note explaining why he should do such a thing. Something about retirement scaring the shit out of him with him having never prepared himself for the long, lonely days ahead. Sad eh? A bloody healthy financial hand-shake gone to waste. Bloody sad... who gets that, by the way? Did he have any relationship with his two sons that you knew of? An unexpected windfall from a father that they hardly knew...or cared about, more than likely."

"Yeah. They being the closest living relatives would share in the Pension amount that Harry contributed. Not the Government subsidy... um... there was even a story going around that he concreted in his little back yard.... he had bought a large Villa with water views after his missus died, way back. Somewhere around the Spit. Middle Harbour. Harbord. Not sure now. He didn't like gardening. Had no other hobbies. Not even a dog or a cat! The Strata people not amused, apparently. They even took him to Court to have it dug up..." Liston added with a laugh. "That failed. Apparently, there are some Esteemed Honours who still believe that a man's home is his castle... there has been ill-will with the other neighbours ever since! Go figure some people. That environment would be a nightmare to retire to... and he had no wish to travel... only foreigners over there, was his oft-heard remark, in that regard. Christ, don't people realise that retirement is something that must be planned... you can sure live to a ripe old age once you leave the work-force. You have to have something to keep you interested, especially if you are by yourself!"

"Yes. A bloody, crying shame." I agreed.

We all had been to Retirement Seminars where the advice was just that.

"Um... It was the names of those former Officers, not the contents of the files or his sad suicide note that are the cryptic clues... umm.... when we were in Undercover, a lot of our communication had to be cryptically constructed.... you know, before mobiles and computers and iPads.... he was an ace at it... and so was I. We tried to outdo each other in that regard. It became a game between us..."

I smiled warmly at the memory. Took a sip of my Zero Coke. I found it difficult to swallow as my throat had constricted and I had an empty feeling in the bottom of my gut.

"It wasn't the act of retrieving the files but the file names themselves. The names all top honour Cadets at the Academy or thereabouts within a three-year period around my graduation. The year before, my year and the year after. I knew every one of those persons. Not all intimately. But I knew them all...or of them."

"OK...what is your skew on the list?"

I took the half page from my pocket and slid it across to Abbey.

He read it slowly then gave it to Liston.

They gave each other a knowing glance.

They obviously knew more than were willing to let on.

Possibly more than I!

Marge took the list from Liston, but by the look on her face she was none the wiser as to the hidden meaning of the list of names.

"There is perhaps two that may ring a bell with me, but I don't understand." She stated.

"It may be best if you stay a little in the dark then, Marge. For your own career path and safety."

Abbey looked over at me.

"She gave you this list voluntarily? Without any form of doubt? Do you think that she was aware of the message involved?"

"Arrh... as you can see... it was an A4 page that has been ripped in two. I'd hazard a guess and say that Harry Benson had left a note on the top half directing her to pass on the list to me... without others made aware of the arrangement. I think she may have had a suspicion.

She is some smart lady and at one time was the Personal Assistant to a high standing AFP Head in Canberra... and she hinted that she thought that she may have gotten the PA job with Harry through some sort of secretive arrangement... a few strings pulled, was how she put it. A favour or two repaid perhaps... or positioning a very fine mole into the hierarchy of the NSW Force that could get to Personnel Files when-ever they were required...either for her immediate Boss, Harry... or..."

"...or perhaps for her AFP 'Handler' perhaps..." Abbey finished off my thought.

"Joe. Joe. You are delving into the realms of the Conspirators. You are always susceptible to paranoia drivel." Mar chastised.

Both Abbey and Liston laughed at this, though they asked that I continue.

This took Marge by surprise. The expression on her face revealing that she now thought that the three gentlemen sharing her table, were all slightly mad! And Paranoid!

"... um... looking at the list, there is a close association with the AFP. Several of the men have slipped over to the AFP through the years. And as I can see that you know, several have spent time in prison but still hired by a Security Firm that some have hinted at, is a front for another 'alphabet' secret arm of Government bureaucracy. While others have remained within the Force, the three others circled are the most interesting. Those three names have disappeared off the grid...including 'Pickles'. Our Number One suspect for the shooting... and there are a number that have died. About half in fact. Either by their own hand or drug overdoses... after slipping to the dark side. Or have been pensioned out due to mental health problems... which wasn't that unknown back in those days of undercover work."

"Sounds as though you should be included in that lot!" Mar scoffed.

I figured that she was feeling a little left out of the loop and because of that feeling, had gone on the offensive in her own indomitable way.

"Hang on, Joe... the removal of all trace of 'Pickles' name from the official Personnel Files of both the NSW and Victorian Forces within a twenty-four-hour period, involves, one could surmise, the work of a very powerful Commonwealth body... if that be the case, then one could assume that 'Pickles' is protected by that very body. Another step and it is not hard to see that he is employed by said Body... so why is said Body going around assassinating a Clerk of forty years' service to his country? That they seemed to have been closely protecting for all that time?"

"She's almost caught up with some very intelligent guesswork." Abbey beamed at Marge.

"Exactly, Marge. You've hit it in one." Liston exclaimed. "That's the paradox of the situation... we are back to asking the question, who was Brian Mussellton?... and I'd say that is not his true name. Um... Joe? We... arrh... after we saw the Renshaw woman this

morning, we visited Short Street. The location of the Crime. The house is empty. Completely empty. Even the carpets have been removed. Supposedly one would think to nullify any chance of trace being discovered. DNA. A word with the near neighbours gained some useful information that was not forthcoming previously..."

Mar took over the narrative.

"Mussellton was picked up every morning by a Commonwealth car and presumably driven to work. Every morning. Ditto for his return journey at the end of the day. Mrs. Mussellton was not the woman whom we thought was the wife. The woman sitting at the table bawling her eyes out was the wife...so why the subterfuge? One could assume the 'talker' was the wife's 'minder'.... the neighbours said that the situation had existed for over twenty-five years. That was the longest memory of one of the neighbours. Not the dozen years related to us. Moving in after the death of her husband. A bloody big furphy... one could assume that they knew they were heading for a very quick relocation because of the shooting and they slipped up with the official bullshit story. The close neighbours all mentioned the same thing. That they all thought it a bit strange. When-ever the 'real' wife got into a back-fence conversation, or while out shopping, the supposed sister-in-law was quick to steer the wife inside. Or away with some excuse. Not cruelly...or suddenly, or rudely...but it was noticeable. This set-up is definitely not 'Witness Protection' or some such. No way. This arrangement draws attention to the situation. Witness Protection always seeks to go the other way. To blend in; to mix; to become a part of the local community without sticking out or drawing attention to themselves. They definitely do not have such a close relationship with 'minders' or have travel arrangements so clearly undisguised."

Abbey nodded his head.

"So, the sixty-four-dollar question still remains. Who was Brian Mussellton?"

"Both Sonny and I have an idea, or have at least heard of all those persons noted... on your list, Joe..."

"Speak for yourself!" Mar interjected with a grunt.

We all smiled at that. Mar was usually the one who was three moves in front of me, at least!

"...even from long ago memories. We need to clarify these names. Get to know of their histories again..."

"We won't get permission to view their Personnel Files. I'll stake my reputation on that." I stated forcefully.

"Well....perhaps there is a way.... maybe of their early history. There should be the original Academy files on each of them... the current Assistant Head of the Goulburn Academy is a

very close friend of mine." Abbey offered. "Perhaps we could peek, as he turns the other way, so to speak."

"Then to Goulburn we go. It's a fine day for a drive to the southern highlands." Liston announced rubbing his hands together.

"Let's leave it until to-morrow morning. Early. Say around four thirty, I'll pick Joe and Marge up on my way through. That would put us at your place around five about, Sonny. OK? We'd make it to Goulburn at that hour of the morning no later than about six-thirty. A good time to drop into my old friend's place unannounced. He'll love it!"

He gave a laugh at this. Obviously, there was a strong relationship between the two.

"Let's make an appearance at work. I'll drop you two off at Mar's place for you to pick up your 'Unmarked' so that you can at least get home...and your appearance within the Basement area is independent of our arrival. It'll also mean that we don't dawdle into the office at the same time looking like the proverbial stuffed ducks. Joe, my compliments to the Chef and your brother. That was the best sea-food I think that I've ever had."

As we all had trouble standing up, we all agreed that we had eaten more than our fair share.

We should organise a Squad function here soon, I thought to myself. An excellent idea, I answered!

Leave it with me!

## **CHAPTER FIFTEEN**

"Bloody hell! Bob! You sure know how to surprise a bloke. I haven't even had a shower yet. C'mon in. Your associates too. Mum? Love? Look who's dropped in at such an ungodly hour...."

"Bob Church? I figured it was about time that I rang your missus. It's been a couple of weeks since we last spoke over the phone. Coffee? Have you had breakfast yet. I hope not that Fast Food Drive-Thru fat. You know that is bad for your heart, Bob. Cereal? Eggs? At least some coffee? Who's your friends? Sit. Sit."

Introductions around the scurrying activity in the Kitchen amid a duel conversation from Darren and Sandra Hillston. Superintendent Hillston was the current Assistant Head of the NSW Police Academy.

"You're not taking notice of your Doctor's orders..." Scolded Sandra Hillston. "You're more intelligent better half, Banjo, is worried that you are starting to fall back into those bygone days of long hours, not the proper food and very little sleep. C'mon Bob. She's more important to you than your job. Now isn't she?"

"Banjo?" Mar asked. "I never knew... is that her nick-name?"

"Her maiden name was Paterson...and she is related to the famous man...a grandniece or something, isn't she Bob?"

"I think a third cousin actually, which isn't recognised as a blood relative...but she insists on keeping the nick-name saying that it's better than her given name, which she has never liked. Even when she was a little girl."

"OK, Bob....we know that you turning up with your 2IC and your best Murder Squad team in the early hours of the morning, isn't because you have missed our company...although when are we going to organise that Caravan tour up to Darwin and down the west coast? That's more important than something that you obviously want from me as a favour...don't forget, we go out around the same time and that isn't that far away. We've got to start planning for that trek...."

"Well... yes. We must plan that trip. Soon. Within the next 18 months at the most... um... Darren, I would prefer to keep you in the dark as much as possible for our reason to be so rude in just turning up at your door so early, as it relates to ancient history. Long before you warmed the chair at the Academy. We would like a look at some ancient records concerning Recruits in a three, maybe four-year period in the late eighties. Early nineties. The reason, you'll have to trust me on.... and it is confidential. Us being here and looking at those records..."

"You know that those Records are sealed. The only way that anyone could peruse them is with a Court Order or the Commissioner's signature of approval. You know that Bob."

"Mate, I wouldn't have asked if it wasn't important. All I will say is that it concerns a murder that was... arrh... purloined from us by a... a... um... an organisation that has the power to completely delete an Officer's Service and Personnel File from the Force's data banks...that includes the hard file copy too."

Darren whistled at that piece of information.

"So, if they are that... good, wouldn't they have thought of these early Records? And what are you hoping to find in these early papers on certain Recruits? Or shouldn't I ask?"

"Maybe you shouldn't ask or even think about. Look, I can understand your reticence and if you would prefer that you not cooperate, then we'll head back to Sydney. After we finish this superb breakfast.... OK?"

"It must be important for you, otherwise you wouldn't have come all this way..." Sandra hinted as she finished off her coffee.

"Um.... Sandra.... um.... the less you know of my reason to be here, the better it may be for you. I'm afraid we are dealing with some very powerful people... and organisations."

"I'll go and have a shower. Good to see you, Bob. Not too long before that trip, OK? I'll get Banjo to badger you incessantly. I'll see you. Nice to meet all of you.... I can't remember your names. Sorry." She gave Abbey a peck on the cheek. "Don't you dare go without saying hooroo. Okay?"

Abbey turned to his old friend.

"Look, I wouldn't put you in this situation if I thought that there was an alternative... but they've been one step ahead of us right through this investigation..."

He sat there nodding his head.

"Some-one was killed, so you say.... in extraordinary circumstances and you say that you are sure who the Perp was, but he is in some sort of protection? What you're saying is that it was a professional hit from inside the Organisation... am I right?"

Abbey looked down at the table and slightly nodded his head.

"Umm.... I can get you into the building and the Records Room without being spotted.... or recorded. As long as we leave now. I'll take my uniform to have a shower and change there... I can isolate the Records Room for about two hours max. There are a couple of computers there that you can use. Printers. Copiers. That long enough?"

"You sure, Bob?"

"For you and no-one else. OK? Let's go. Follow me exactly. OK?"

## **CHAPTER SIXTEEN**

The Academy was rousing with students doing their laps around the superb playing field as we followed Darren's car through the check-point barrier. The sun, at its morning's low angle, peeked through the abundant tree covered grounds. The road seemed to weave halfway to Sydney and back before we stopped at the blind end of a long, low building that was not the main Administrative structure, the Class Rooms, or the Dormitory buildings. Though it was close by them in a purposely designed pattern. We pulled into a small undercover loading dock which was a bit of a squeeze as it looked designed to admit a five-

ton truck only. He beckoned for us to follow him quickly as he scooted up a small set of stairs to stand in front of a Loading Dock entry door clearly marked: -

PROHIBITED ACCESS  
BY AUTHORISED PERSONNEL ONLY.

Darren produced a master-key and unlocked the door, slipping quickly through it with us right behind him. A long corridor, then to the left to a one and a half door configuration marked: -

CENTRAL FILE REGISTRY  
AUTHORISED PERSONNEL ONLY

These types of signs always amused me.

As though a person illegally on the premises would take notice of them. Otherwise, why have the doors sign-written in such a manner? Who else could the information be for? And if it was that important to restrict access, why clearly identify what was behind the doors for the Trespasser to be so easily informed!

Lights were not required, as one length of wall had highlight windows with obscure glass fitted. Facing east, which let in the early morning rays. Several Computers were humming away. Darren re-booted two sleeping peacefully and typed in his Pass Word. Tapping in the required gateway controls to bring up the NSW Police Force emblem 'front page'. He then tapped in the necessary commands to bring up the ancient Personnel Files in the time scale that we had mentioned. The room stacked with long lines of those movable large steel cabinets. Each one clearly marked with a year and a series of capital letters.

Easy to negotiate through quickly. Not having to amble down narrow aisle-ways with towering shelving on either side filled with musty old files.

A peach!

"OK. Away you go. The paper copies with more information alphabetically arranged into each year.... um.... late eighties, early nineties are down the third aisle, I think. I will leave you to it. I'll place a barrier at the front door saying: -

WARNING  
*Fumigation in progress.*  
*Access denied until further notice.*  
*Please see the Assistant Superintendent before entering*

Ring me on my mobile when you have finished.... please ensure that is no longer than around zero eight-thirty. That way we will negate any questions that the clerical people may want to ask. I'll come down to escort you out."

We had only fifteen names to look up. While Abbey downloaded the Computer files of the fifteen onto a Flash-drive, we three scanned the paper copies looking for anything relevant to our search not included in the Computer files. We took a photograph of said folios with our Smart phones, hoping that sufficient detail would be captured to be of help.

We were done well inside the time limit.

Darren Hillston accompanied us to the front gate on a Quad Bike to sign us out.

We were more than pleased to be out of there, realising that this cloak and dagger tip-toeing around was not in our genes. I especially, wondered how I had survived the Undercover Narcs and Vice work that I had undertaken in my younger days.

I was sweating profusely and was a ball of nerves.

On the return trip, back up the Motorway to the City, Sonny Liston downloaded the contents of the Flash-drives into his Laptop and read aloud the contents of each file. There were few revealing details and we felt an air of deflation of not having achieved a lot for our troubles.

"Don't get too down-hearted. The stuff that you have on your mobiles should give us what we want. They certainly wouldn't want that on the hard drive if it is what we hope it is. So, buck up until we get back into the Office and download the stuff off your phones onto the one laptop. Yours, Marge. You are selected to trawl through the stuff to see whether there is anything questionable that we have photographed. Only because you are by far the fastest reader!"

## **CHAPTER SEVENTEEN**

Marge spent the entire afternoon cocooned in one of the small Interview Rooms transferring information from each of our mobiles onto her Laptop. Only appearing to grab each of our phones in turn. She then enhanced the detail and placed all relevant folios into a Folder with the correct name attached.

She phoned me asking that I join her at her temporary location of work.

"I can understand why there may have been conspiracy rumours abounding of that time back in history when you were a raw recruit slaving away mentally and physically at the

Academy....though it fails to answer why our Brian Mussellton was so brazenly murdered. Your 'Pickles' even then was being assessed as a somewhat fringe sociopath who may come in useful in the future of the AFP or other covert organisations, though there is no mention by name of those other bureaucracies. You've done it again, Joe. You've opened a can of worms!"

Abbey walked in at that moment, clearly agitated.

"Mar, was there anything useful?"

"Enough to explain to me the seat of all your concerns..."

"Good.... um.... get two Flash-drives off Hendo and download all the information onto them. Make sure that the transfer is achieved and then delete all the information that you have from your Laptop. Give one of the Flash-drives to me. The other to Sonny. Come to my place say... come for tea... say around seven... Leave to-morrow morning free. We have been summoned to the Halls of Power...."

"Police HQ?"

"No. State Parliament House. Be here no later than eight-thirty tomorrow morning. We'll go together in my vehicle. See you to-night. Go home after you have done that downloading and deleting."

He walked out quickly from the room.

"The stuff that we got is that good!!??"

"It explains a lot of things that were going on that I wasn't aware of.... whether crimes, fraud and the like were committed.... or any crime at all was committed, is not for me to say. But if it ever got out it would look mighty bad for a few people still employed in the Force, that's for sure. Get me those clean flash-drives, will you? Sixty-four gig each should be good enough even considering that they are all photographs of folio pages that I've worked on with Photoshop. There's a good lad..."

I could tell she had wanted to expand on what she had, but Abbey's demeanour put paid to that!

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I had to re-assess my belief that my Spag-bole was something that Royalty should savour after we had the evening meal prepared by 'Banjo' Church. All she would hint at, was the way that the spaghetti was prepared being the difference. That was the only piece of information that she was pleasantly willing to give me.

We cleared up the meal things and sat around the table while 'Banjo' excused herself and went to bed.

Sonny Liston took up the dialogue.

"I've had a chance to scan through the folios that Marge has Photoshopped for us.... it certainly fills in a lot of loose areas for me.... so.... Perhaps some background first..."

He stood and began pacing around the table as though he was a Lecturer and we, his bug-eyed pupils.

"ASIO was formed after WW2 when the threat of global Communism became evident and thus, the Cold War began. The prime responsibility for ASIO was to identify Communist sympathisers in our communities and watch their movement and associations. To help with this, idealistic operatives employed to infiltrate the various elements such as the Leninist, Trotsky, Stalinist, and Maoist splinter groups. In Australia at least, these 'week-end' communists largely were ineffectual.... a bit of a party joke really. We were too far removed from the centre of intrigue; that being Europe and the US. Mostly, these undercover operatives not paid, or if so, paid a pittance. They not trained in the art of deception and espionage. They simple carried out their 'role' for pragmatic or idealistic though often naive reasons. Their detection was always on the cards. Their burn-out sequence expected. Later life mental problems were real. In saying that, there were apparently some very talented 'double agents' that came from those ranks. The semi-secret government agencies usually had as a core, former Defence Intelligence personnel who had seen service as such during the War. And even idealistic servicemen who felt that the communist march of influence severely threatened Australian democracy. They had just returned from war to protect our way of life. During the fifties and sixties, the hiring of additional staff was rather ad hoc and dangerous with very little security clearance and examination being achieved for these new recruits."

He leant across the table to scan a page or two of writing that he had in a large file. It was not an official NSW Police Force binder file. He stood erect again and began pacing as he spoke.

"Skip a few decades and little had changed. We still had ASIO with that sprinkling of covert agencies with the AFP coming into existence. The Vietnam War was a catalyst, a watershed in the changing for-ever of the democratic life-style of Australia. Because of the general

unrest manipulated and stroked by 'left leaning' organisations and Unions, and mainly covert communist organisations directly funded by Moscow, large processions and unruly protests became an almost daily occurrence in all State Capitals and Canberra. During the seventies, the enlistment of Police Cadets fell to a new low. Supposedly because of this new-found distrust of all Government levels and their personnel. With the rapid expansion of ASIO and the AFP mainly because of the general unrest of the populace over the Vietnam War, suitable recruits were at a premium for all organisations. Up until around the mid-eighties, the general rule was for those organisations to poach from the relevant State Police Academies and the campuses of the Universities. Even though the Peace movement could be accused of stemming from the University youth, the identifying of suitable on-campus personnel was a highly-organised operation. On-Campus intelligence of the student's political leanings was well identified during that period....and still is to this day! These other covert Government organisations would only be interested in poaching the top 10% of Officer recruits in the Police Academy. This did not necessarily obtain the most idealistic recruit for their purposes as this more cerebral faction would be more suitable in areas such as Fraud, Internet Fraud, though that was in its infancy then, white and blue collar fraud and other similar more cerebral pursuits. The majority were not necessarily the best 'streetwise' cop for these other bureaucracies to utilise as operatives or even double agents infiltrating suspected communist enclaves. And several mishaps in the late eighties proved this philosophy."

He stopped to take several gulps of coffee.

Abbey took up the narrative.

"As you can imagine, this poaching had a severe impact on Police numbers. During that time, the drop-out figure was around 20%, so with this poaching, the real numbers recruited barely kept pace with natural attrition. Retirement. Cessation of Service. That type of thing. Also...um... included in that, especially for the Victorian Police, was the bad years where bad guys were shot on a regular daily occurrence, so it seemed. The incident of cops being killed, also a frightening regular event. A bright spark in the AFP at the time, realised that this poaching exercise was not necessarily giving them, or the other covert organisations such as the Commonwealth Intelligence Analysis Group... which it is rumoured operated Australia's equivalent of the CIA 'Black Ops' boys.... 'Pickles' more than likely is on their payroll.... um... giving them the class of person that they really sought or required. So, a program of 'bleeding' Police recruits as they emerged from the Academy was instigated. Completely without the blessing or knowledge of the Police hierarchy. Harry Benson and a couple of his equivalent rank well positioned to help. It has been said that the lever used was the... um... the less than moral behaviour shown by these chaps until then.... throughout their Police Force careers... co-operate with us or risk being exposed for your....um, straddling of that fine line between legal and illegal, so to speak.... and to be sure, there was some remuneration involved, also, to line the pockets of those in a position to help the cause."

"Um....are you saying that my and Barry Holtz involvement in undercover work was less to do with us voluntarily engaging in the activity, but more to do with manipulation and covert coercion?"

"Yes." Sonny Liston contended succinctly. A smile on his face. "Exactly! You weren't as clever as you thought, eh, Joe?"

I buried my head in my hands at that, now unsure of the veracity and execution of a fair number of our undercover exploits.

"Joe? I never thought you as naive...but it seems you and your undercover partner were to some extent...there was some-one always watching...that is all I will say on the matter."

I wanted to get up and run and it took all my will to stay cemented to the chair. What this meant of course, was that there was likely evidence out there... somewhere... of all our deeds. Some-one knew of them intimately! That was beyond scary.

I would need to sit down with my old mate and partner, Barry Holtz and have a darn good yarn to him.

"This practise was still the wrong way to go as they still concentrated on the top 10 to 15 % of Graduates from each of the State's Academies....taking the fifteen names that Joe obtained from Peach, that list would represent a fair indication of the success of the program. A microcosm of the failure would be a better description! Fifteen names. Four erased from our systems. Presumably because they were recruited by the AFP or others. More than likely by other secret Organisations within Australia for God knows what use... Departments that you could only imagine. Our friend 'Pickles' included. Of the remaining eleven, seven have either died by their own hand, gone to the dark side, OD'ed, ended up in Prison or pensioned out with mental health problems. Over a 50% failure rate on a grand scale. The other four, including you, Joe, and Barry Holtz, are still in the employment of the Force. Not a good result for the top 10% of the recruits. They continued, I would contend, in a criminal manner, to try and place very square pegs into small round holes! For at least those three years. We think it could have continued on a smaller scale for a couple more years. Disgusting! Disgraceful! A complete waste of talent, brain power and unadulterated enthusiasm to right the wrongs of society. Often the less 'bright' shall we say, make far better street-smart Cops.... or Operatives depending on where you stand.... but that fact took a long time to sink in. In the meantime, Harry Benson, and his ilk, plus cooperation from Lecturers and Supervising staff at the Academy, lined their own pockets over the deaths of young, eager cadets. Not a good look. The hierarchy must take some responsibility for this situation. Ignorance is not a defence. If this was made public, then there are those still in the Force and Commonwealth Government Agencies who would be asked to leave.... and the embarrassment at the irresponsible slant on young lives would never be lived down.... I repeat, over that three-year period, over half self-harmed! A completely unacceptable situation when you are dealing with the lives of young men."

"That's the real reason why Harry shot himself. The guilt just kept on building. Seeing me bought it to a head...."

"Yeah..." Mar replied. "But he had enough decency in him to leave you the cryptic clues, knowing that you would follow it through. How-ever! The sixty-four-dollar question.... what do we do with this knowledge?"

"Mmm.... that's the crux. A lot of good cops will be sucked into the vortex as innocent bystanders... and Officers still around who had positions of responsibility back then, will be nailed to the wall. Guilty or not guilty. But guilty by association, along with those still left in the Force who had a hand in the program..."

"Do we know who they are?" I asked.

"Yes." Liston replied. "We've had an inkling for some time on the mechanics of the Program, through rumours, quiet dissatisfaction relayed by some of the fellows who made it through but not the participants. We can now truthfully say that our suspicions of certain Officers have been reinforced."

I turned to look at Sonny Liston. A tall, elegant type of bloke who, as with Abbey, would be retiring very shortly. A sudden thought expanded in my sticky grey matter. This whole investigation was outside the realms of the Murder Squad sphere of influence. I was not a long-term member of the Squad yet, but I could recall numerous times when Liston went AWAL for no apparent reason...and no reason really given. This was one cool dude who was involved in numerous clandestine investigations outside the realm of the S&E or Integrity Unit. He was on various secret Police Force endeavours that involved personnel inside and outside the Force.

I glanced across at Abbey, who seemed to read my mind.

He nodded his head slowly and gave me a wink. A slight smile. Mar noticed the interchange and gave me an enquiring look. I shook my head which must have made her boil inside.

I knew I was heading for one hard grilling sometime in the future. When it suited her.

The trouble with Marge Hendricks, was that she was one straight shooter. If she was ever a party to any form of corruption or offence even by her partner, she would head straight to the S&E Team. So, I thought!

"What about the AFP and those other Organisations?"

"They're way outside our sphere of influence or investigation.... I guess we can approach those that we know of and have a quiet word to them. Ask them to politely retire without

fanfare or fuss. Those of course still within their ranks who were responsible.... I guess we owe the victims of the Program that much...."

"It could possibly back-fire. Leaving you out on the proverbial limb without a safety net. Your retirement fund could very well be in danger, Boss. Why not give a 'heads-up' to the Integrity Unit?"

"Then there goes your career, Joe, if I can read correctly between the lines. They'd look at every Cadet from those times with a fine-tooth comb. Up to their present station, to see if there has been any.... um.... collusion in them obtaining some degree of preference in climbing the career ladder. Perhaps your friend Barry Holtz, Joe, may have been a little more dishonest in that respect. After all, he is a Chief Inspector while you trundle around as a lowly Detective..." Marge responded rather acerbically.

I looked over at her. If looks could kill she'd be gagging out her last breath about now.

"Not on!" I angrily said to her. "Not-fucking-on!"

Abbey interrupted quickly.

"We do now have another problem.... that is, that should our new-found knowledge be reported. Or not. If it isn't, then we are just as guilty.... allowing the actions of those some twenty years ago to affect our moral compass."

"Mmm.... perhaps only one person here would suffer the consequences of such a revelation with us three wearing the brand as some sort of 'whistle-blowers' which would have a similar effect in shortening our own careers... we should perhaps think about it. An assassination in a leafy suburban street sure has had major ramifications.... that was never foreseen.... what-ever. I think that the knowledge that we have imparted, stays with us. But I guess it is only fair that we take a vote on it. Let's sleep on it for a couple of days, eh?" Sonny Liston suggested.

## **CHAPTER NINETEEN**

We were ushered into the Minister for Police office suite.

Two dark suited guys were seated in deep cushioned lounge chairs in one corner of the huge office.

"Ah! SC Robert Church. Detectives Liston, Lind and Hendricks." He stated, as though he was pleased to see us.

He shook our hands.

I was amused that he neither introduced himself to us, *call me Bruce as we're all friends here*, or to gesture to the two men seated on the opposite side of the room. We nodded our acknowledgement to them as we were seated. The Minister then announced that he was intending to leave the discussion up to us and immediately left the room!

What a wooze!

The look on Abbey's face said it all as he glared at the disappearing figure of the Minister.

"SC Church? I believe that you and your subordinates signed an understanding of confidentiality under The Commonwealth Secrets Act some days ago?"

"That is correct. You have us at a disadvantage, as you seemed to know us but we are completely in the dark as to your name, rank, employment stature and Department Name. Would you please mind offering us the respect that we have chosen to show you?"

"You are aware of the details that you were counter-signing, were you not?"

"As I said, before I answer any of your questions, I would like to know to whom we are talking to. Otherwise this meeting is over! Understand?"

The two men glanced at one another. Nodded their heads and quietly acceded.

"Armm... I'm Jeremy Price. Head of Operations. Internal Investigations. A Branch of ASIO based in Canberra. My small group investigates any wrong-doing that our field operatives... or for that matter any employee of ASIO.... may undertake."

"Much like our own Integrity Unit, now known as the S&E Team.... or as it was known several years ago, our Internal Affairs Group. Loved and held dearly by all employees..." Abbey interrupted.

The side-ways insult not lost on the two men as they nodded their heads slightly and smiled.

"Arrh... yes. Much the same. And held in high regard too." He added with a smile. "...and this... um.... is Bradley O'Rourke. Head of Commonwealth Security Intelligence Analysis Group. Now, can we continue?"

"Do you have any form of ID?"

"I think that our presence inside the State Minister for Police inner sanctum is sufficient proof of our bona-fides. The fact that the Minister was willing to leave us to our own devices should be further proof of our legitimacy! If you would prefer that we continue this discussion at your Commissioner for Police Offices, that can be arranged. Or perhaps the

new ASIO HQ building in Canberra? A nice time of the year to travel to the Nation's Capital. It was felt, how-ever, that this meeting would gain more credence and weight, if held within the State Parliament precinct....at your Minister's Office. Perhaps a coffee, a cold drink before we continue?"

"Perhaps that would be a wise choice to let the dust settle, eh?" His mate added.

We nodded as we stood and headed towards a small credenza on which sat a drip Coffee Jug and the necessary additions, including a small assortment of chocolate biscuits.

We poured ourselves a coffee and sat back down again. Holding the cup and saucer in our hands.

"First up..." Abbey began. "As Head of the NSW Murder Squad, I am appalled that a Commonwealth body can just walk heavy-handedly over the State statutes and basically make a murder disappear. A blatant, cold-blooded assassination... with no explanation offered. We are within our rights and have a duty to the citizens of NSW to continue to delve into this homicide..."

"Not if it is a security risk and of national import..."

"Words to hide behind... He was a fucking middle management Public Service Clerk for forty odd years, for God's sake!" Sonny Liston couldn't help but join in.

"Umm... not all things are as they seem..."

"That is really beside the point. An assassination in a peaceful suburban scene.... it looked as though it was a well-planned hit except that the Shooter did not even use a silencer.... sloppy. Very arrogant. With the degree of hard-core minders about the Victim, you could have taken him out the back of Bourke... him and his missus... if she was in fact his missus, and shot and buried them both in a shallow grave under a Coolabah bloody tree.... and no-one would have been any the wiser. By the way, what has happened to the supposed Missus Mussellton? And what was their real names?"

"That is of no importance to these discussions."

"Sorry?" Abbey baulked. "It would appear that nothing is to be achieved by these discussions as long as the both of you blind-fold and bull-doze us. We are not the guilty party here and we sure as hell aren't security risks to the Nation. We are honest Cops just trying to solve a bloody, sadistic execution!"

"We agree that the 'exercise' lacked a sense of professionalism. The guilty party has been reprimanded for his amateurish execution. Too arrogant. Too cocky! Yes. We both agree. He has been isolated so we are led to believe..."

"A blatant homicide in a quiet Sydney suburban street and the Perp is reprimanded!!!?? Isolated!!!?? What type of society have we become when that is the sentence, the punishment for cold-blooded murder? You are led to believe that he has been isolated!? What exactly does that mean? And what sins did the victim commit?"

"We cannot divulge any more of the situation. We are primarily here to inform you that we are aware that you continued to investigate the matter after you gave your assurance that as of that date, you would no longer meddle into this case. Under the Secrecy Act, which is what you signed, the four of you, Church, Liston, Lind and Hendricks could be jailed without a trial for five years. Your career in the NSW Police Force ended. Now, there is nothing more to be gained by continuing stubbornly in that regard. Both you and Liston have what? No more than three, maybe four years before you can take voluntary retirement. To lose the pension benefits accrued over a life-time career, a brilliant career from all accounts and one that both of you should be very proud of, would be a heart-breaking matter. Both Lind here and Hendricks have long and promising careers ahead of them. It would be a pity for them to have that taken away from them. Am I clear? I warn you again, this case is closed. The matter ended. We admit fault in the manner of the crime but that is as far as it goes. National Security.... and you will have to take my word on that, was jeopardised. The matter is now dead. Do I have your understanding on that?"

There was silence in the room until Abbey broke the quiet with a well formed expletive.

We all nodded solemnly.

"Do I have your assurances and cooperation in this regard?"

We again nodded our heads. Like the three wise monkeys and friend, we sat there silently.

"OK. I will take your word that you mean it... so... perhaps we may divulge a little information seeing as how you now understand the severity of the situation."

We sat there tight mouthed feeling for all the world like chastised small children having been sent to the naughty corner.

He nodded to his associate, Bradley O'Rourke, who cleared his throat. Shifted in his chair. He didn't look convinced that he should impart any information to us and was the unwilling partner in any disclosure of information.

"Um... in the seventies, eighties and nineties, the US Government negotiated with the Australian Government of the time to build a number of.... what was termed as Communication Complexes. The one at Exmouth in WA is a fine example and easy to look at. There is even a beautifully built Look-Out platform on the edge of the neighbouring escarpment from which a view of the complex is possible. Pine Gap is another establishment. These were required for various reasons according to the US sources. They

had hoped to construct up to seven. They settled on five, three of which are known to most Australians and have been broadcast at one time or another, across our newspapers and TV screens. The Government agreed to restrict the number to five.... there had been strong opposition at the time to reduce the number to two.... but the Government of the day would allow the five established as long as Australian experts in the field were allowed access. The Americans begrudgingly granted this provision but in practise, they limited the Aussie Scientists access to the lower levels of the Complexes' abilities. To one fellow, a Gilbert Paul Holloway, after only nine months of service in one of these establishments, the type, degree, and amount of information gathered was not in keeping with the original joint understanding between the two countries. To his way of thinking. It must be understood with these establishments, if they have the power to transmit almost worldwide, they also *may* have the ability to receive in almost as wide band. This chap became somewhat disenchanted, with him covertly identified as a possible security risk. Just that one person caused the.... somewhat restrictive access considered null and void by the Americans. No Australian personnel permitted in areas considered too sensitive to American security at any of the establishments. They also requested of our Government to place the chap on 24/7 close, very close quarters. They could not imprison him under the laws as they stood at the time and the Government was not willing to have the chap and his family permanently disappear. It wasn't the Australian way..."

He paused to finish his coffee and get a re-fill for himself. He turned to us as he waited for the water to re-heat.

I amused by the contradiction of killing the man at the time as not the Australian way.... instead wait until he retires and pop him off then. His natural life-span was on the slide in any case.... that must be the Australian way. My sarcasm not appreciated. In fact, my comments were entirely ignored by the two dark suited gentlemen!

"He was employed in a field where his considerable talents could be utilised and where a close watch on his movements could be maintained at all times. It worked!"

He sounded surprised. He slouched back into his chair.

"But it was very costly....and successive Governments continually nagged the US for their help and cooperation in that regard.... we're not talking here of an amount that would bankrupt Fort Knox.... but there was no suitable response from the Yanks.... as far as the Australian Government was concerned. With the man's retirement, things became more... um... difficult. Next thing we hear is that the chap has been assassinated.... you now were introduced to the situation because of his unexpected execution becoming your homicide investigation."

"The sixty-four-dollar question is, by whom? We know that the Shooter was Walford 'Pickles' Springer aka Stan Pickles, but on whose order, was the assassination generated?" Mar asked pointedly.

"Um.... a trawl through the Australian Agencies has failed to uncover that fact.... we do know now that Pickles did receive payment for the job. As far as we have been able to ascertain, he received close to \$40K for the hit... that is not the way any of our Agencies operate though... um... employment and execution of work.... perhaps a bad way of putting it... by those persons is often contracted out... we do not have the resources to employ that type of person full time, if you understand?"

"Inflation has caused a bloody increase in the cost of tapping some-one..." I mused aloud.

"He isn't in the country, is he? You know that? Right?" Abbey asked forcefully.

They both nodded their heads in unison.

"That's correct. I'm afraid." O'Rourke offered. "... and we have our doubts that he will ever set foot back into the country."

"So that's it... and you suspect possible CIA involvement... that's what you are hinting at..."  
"Or another of the myriad US agencies who conduct 'black ops' operations. Yes." O'Rourke muttered. His head bowed.

Jeremy Price bought the discussion back to the bottom line.

"We must warn you that the information provided cannot be divulged to any third person, written down, recorded or made public. You understand that?"

We four nodded our heads in unison. A little concerned where this newly learnt information may take us.

The Minister chose at that moment to re-enter his Office as though he had been listening outside through the door. A wine glass held to his ear!

"Good," He uttered pleasantly. Optimistically. "I hope that the matter has been resolved. There is no need to broadcast this meeting to Fred and his mates down the road, is there?"

He smiled the Politician's smile. A practised reaction. He looked down at us.

"Um... Fred and his mates.... it's just a saying. My father used to say it all the time.... or.... I'm going to see a man about a dog..."

He was dribbling shit, trying to hide his nervousness, but instead, focussing it in spades.

This for the benefit of the us all sitting there with blank expressions on our faces.

What a silly prick, I thought to myself. How on earth do these people get elected!

This was our cue to be gone from these rooms.

We shook hands with the Minister, nodded our farewell to the two dark suited men who still sat easily in the comfortable lounge chairs as we were escorted from the room.

"Bullshit. Bullshit. Bullshit!" Abbey exclaimed as we walked away from the State Parliament building amid the throng of Lunch time Office workers. He sure had a head of steam up. "Blaming the US Government with its countless secretive organisations... I'll bet that 'Pickles' is still in the country and obtaining a weekly salary from some-one! Shit!! Let's take a walk down to the Mitchell Library and use their computers, shall we?"

"I think not, Boss." Liston mumbled through the side of his mouth. "Let's walk back to the College Street HQ building to get the car. We may be able to use one of their computers instead. I do not like the look of all these dark suited men milling about."

We all laughed at that, which broke the solemn feeling of the four of us. It was Lunch time, the sun was out, it was warm and the streets were a mass of Office Workers scurrying about.

In this part of town, most men wore suits. Dark suits!

## **CHAPTER TWENTY**

The four of us hunched behind a computer flat screen in the rear clerical area on the Ground Floor of the Police Force HQ building.

Mar bought up Google and typed in the guy's name.

Abbey straightened.

"If you think about it, if those people can wipe employment details of people from two State Police Forces' registers, then they sure as hell can obliterate the existence of a fellow citizen who has committed treason... or at least threatened to... did you get that take on the way he told the story. That Gilbert Paul Holloway didn't actually commit a crime, he only hinted that he may divulge the essence of these Communication set-ups by the Yanks."

"Yeah.... next you'll be shot for thinking dirty thoughts. It's on the cards! They can't erase every article in every newspaper that may have mentioned the guy's name. Surely.... no.... here we go. That's rather peculiar... the event was not really explored here in the eastern states... but reported on quite extensively in the Westralian Newspaper. I'll print out everything and we can pick the bones out of it.... is any-one else hungry? They have an

excellent Dining Room here. On the top floor. For your rank and above, but you, as a Supervising Officer, can invite lower ranks to share in one of the perks of your rank." Mar commented with tongue firmly planted in cheek.

We waited until the Printer had finished its task, slipping the A4 print-outs into several Manila Folders and then headed for the bank of Lifts.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE**

"Do you mind if I join you?" The Assistant Commissioner, Major Crimes, Steven Maloney asked, as he scooted a chair from a nearby table across to ours. Clearly not waiting for our approval or dissent. We all shifted closer together to give him space.

We had finished a superbly cooked meal and were sipping on coffee to round out the hour.

"Harry Benson's funeral is the day after to-morrow. We'd appreciate if you all could come. You especially Detective Lind. You were a bit of a blond-haired boy to him. One of his successes, he was often heard to remark. No eulogies, no ten-gun salute. No State funeral. Simple is how he would have wanted it.... a couple of drinks at the nearby Pub in his honour.... for those wanting to have a last drink on him.... arrh.... have you closed down that dreadful shooting homicide of last week?"

"It would appear that the Perp may never come to face justice in this country. It would appear that he is overseas. Destination unknown... and the reason for the shooting is clouded in secrecy, mumbo-jumbo and bureaucratic bullshit..."

The Assistant Commissioner, Major Crimes placed a hand on Abbey's arm in a conciliatory manner.

"I'd be very careful how you word that and who you tell, DS Church. There's such a thing as bogey men you know.... so, the whole matter is satisfactorily put to bed... including any wrongful rumours of sins of long ago."

It was artfully worded. Not as a question, more a statement. An order. And it could never be fully understood whether he meant the murder itself or the sins of the past of certain ranking Officers or the poor chap Holloway aka Mussellton. We how-ever, would for-ever live with the legacy of that knowledge.

A heavy burden for sure.

Especially for Marge who was a complete straight shooter. She would, over the coming years, have many a sleepless night over the knowledge that now was expected to remain hidden from all eyes and ears.

Another who now knew of the legacy of sins past.

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