



DEATH STALKS HER

A Detective Joseph Lind Crime Story
by

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MURDER SQUAD DETECTIVES

JOSEPH LIND
AND
ISABELLA ‘SOPHIE’ GRASSO

**DEATH STALKS
HER**

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Across Australia, one woman dies every week at the hands of a spouse, ex-spouse, friend, or a lover/former lover...in other words, someone she knew and trusted was responsible for her death.

That is a sad statistic...a shame on societal Australia...but it is a common statistic around the world in every democracy...every society where records are logged and archived.

Approximately 80% of all Police 'Call Outs' across Australia are to Domestic Violence events. An uproar in the family home with the majority fuelled by alcohol or drugs...in this atmosphere of "stay at home" restrictions caused by the amazing spread of the Delta strain of Covid 19, that reality is only increasing.

A sad statistic...

The Australian Federal Government in its 2021 Budget allocated over AU\$3B towards Women's health and Safety issues...some say it is not enough while others wonder where most of the money will be spent. According to experts in the field of Women's Security, while the extra amount is welcomed, it does not answer the basic problem...that of the wider community's acceptance of women's role in suburbia...the problem is a deep-rooted one which can be improved only by educating the young to learn respect for the other sex...a strategy that will take years to engender the correct attitude towards women's roles in society.

There are those who will subscribe to the theory that it is all the women's fault.

If most men were completely honest on the subject, their early childhood and up to early to mid-teenage lives were controlled, educated, and punished by their mother...how men act is a huge consequence of their early years. Mothers were the dominate adult in most cases...and it has steadily worsened because of rising divorce rates where the children of the union are divvied off to the mother...usually...with fathers' influence paling as time goes on. Mothers continuing to pick up, cook, dress, wash and ensure the house is clean in front of these impressionable young boys...the daughters of this lob-sided 'arrangement' see their delta mother...strong attributes which these daughters want to emulate...but the male is not willing to be the subservient example. If that is not a part reason than can we continue to blame most Religions with their continual sermon of a patriarchal world where the 'little' woman is the vassal, the servant, and the child bearer?

No matter the basis for this ever-spiralling problem, women are the hunted...the object of men's base instincts with death stalking women daily.

CHAPTER ONE

It had been four or five years since we enjoyed a holiday as a family unit. Sure, we had Muscles and Marge with their triplets join us in a 'Air BnB' restored Queenslander house that had accommodated all of us comfortably the last time we had enjoyed a holiday together. It had been a beaut time which my two girls though eighteen-months younger than Muscle and Marge's triplets, had gelled into a 'sisterly group' who spent all their spare time in the inground pool on the premises during that holiday period...it seemed such a long time ago now that we look back on it...

At that time, we had not adopted Danni into our family...and when we did, she bonded with us as though she had been born into it. Even with all the torment in her younger life, she was way out front in the intelligence stakes and was leapfrogging our Samantha at School. That seemed to wash off both our Sam and Aleesha and the three of them even approaching their teen-age years were particularly close.

We accepted Muscle's wish to again holiday with us but when we learnt that Marge would not be going as she was in the middle of her Law Studies at Sydney University, my concern grew that Tellie would be the one left to care for the triplets on top of our two. Danni marooned in Melbourne with the city in complete Covid shutdown. Nobody moved out of or into the City limits. She was bitterly disappointed she would miss these coming holidays with us.

Our fear of Tellie left to care for all the kids was far from the truth as we spent seven days on the Gold Coast. Muscles usually taking all the kids to the Fun Parks like Dreamworld, Sea World, Movie World and Wet and Wild attractions daily with him enjoying every ride they went on together. When those 'money-pullers' were exhausted and the kids enthusiasm satisfied, we all would walk the sands and enjoy the sights of the Gold Coast. The kids were often too tired to be a problem. Often, with the kids out for the day, Tellie and I had valuable time together just walking along the beach, sitting enjoying an ice-cream together or swimming at either the beach or the adjacent pool where we were staying.

Just what the two of us needed...

We then spent an idyllic five days at Caloundra on the Sunshine Coast north of Brisbane before we had to return to reality...completely relaxed and looking forward to work once again...Covid ready.

We were lucky to be able to enter Queensland and were concerned about returning to NSW because Queensland had a nasty habit of closing the NSW/Queensland border at the drop of

a hat! They had closed the 'borders' on several occasions which fouled many a holiday...or made people broke having to extend their holiday period when it wasn't either planned or budgeted for...a real bugger!

We were extremely fortunate to side-step several of those occurrences as we could still be in Caloundra on the Sunshine Coast of Queensland, locked down until further notice because of a minor Covid scare somewhere in the State. I was a little concerned as such a predicament would put a strain on our finances if it occurred...fortunately, that wasn't meant to be. We flew over the border of the two States without a hitch, ready to commence working once again in this crazy world.

CHAPTER TWO

It was close to nine and she was angry at herself for spending too much time at the University Library on such a lousy night...windy, cold and with no moon...it would mean extra walking time through the grounds to get to her car. She tightened her scarf around her neck and did up the zipper a couple of notches as the strong breeze was frigid...coming straight off the snowfields down south. She smiled as she thought of the kids and how she missed them. That came as a bit of a surprise because as they got older, there appeared to be a rift between her and the three...it didn't come as a surprise as they were now teenagers entering their most troubling years according to some you spoke to...they were still good kids and yeah...she missed them. They on holidays in Queensland while she struggled with her studies, always seeming to be behind other students so she thought.

Never mind, she thought to herself as she smiled. The kids will be home to-night all being well if the Queensland Government doesn't close the borders because of another minor Covid outbreak up there. She was amazed at how difficult it was to enter her home devoid of the laughter, the cries of anguish and the welcome kisses handed out by her three children...and yes, even Muscles with his terrible jokes!

She watched him closely as he walked towards her.

He seemed nervous, disturbed, his hands and fingers having a life of their own. His hoodie pulled over his head shading his face in blackness...but still, he had this nervous energy about him so she watched him carefully and walked as close as she could to the edge of the path away from his progress. She saw him tense up, side-step into her, and begin to bring his arm down on the base of her neck. She moved away from the blow, his stiffened arm glancing off her shoulder and down her arm. As she began to fall away from him, she brought her foot up

hitting him flush on the hip. A misfire as that hadn't been her target! If she had felled him with a vicious kick to the nether regions, he would be writhing on the ground with his balls somewhere around his armpits! Regardless, he fell awkwardly on the concrete pathway, rolling away, moaning as he uneasily stood, looking down at her prone body. Her leg ready to spring again. He feigned another attack with her flat on her back on the grassy slope beside the pathway. He then thought better of it as the woman lifted her bent leg ready for his lunge at her...he turned and hobbled away into the night. The sharpened machete almost dropping from his grip. Its sharp edge glinting sparks of light from the few footpath lights.

Several minutes passed before a Security Guard on his normal walking beat noticed her flat on her back and crying in pain. There were shrill whistle blows and panicked information blared into the small personal communication set which beckoned other guards to rush to the scene. Out of breath and not wanting to chase a tortoise with a broken leg!

One of the Security Guards came to sit beside her, motioning for her to remain still and lie on the grass moist with dew...not an option she took with good humour.

“The local cops will be here in a second so just relax huh?”

That was the last thing she wanted to do...her first thought was to stand and chase after the bastard, but when she lifted her head, a stab of pain enveloped her shoulder and neck...it had not been a glancing blow!

Two other Security Guards returned bending over trying to catch their breaths...out of condition, overweight men who should not be employed as Security Guards anywhere near the sprawling University grounds as the word was a crippled Cockroach could outrun them!

“Stay still, missus...an Ambulance has been called along with the local lads...” was the constant call.

“I am not some-one's missus...” She objected strongly. “I am a former Detective with the Murder Squad...perhaps a long time ago but I will not take it easy”. She spat out. “That bastard deserves to have half the Police Force on his tail though I doubt that will ever happen!! I saw the machete and wondered whether I was supposed to be hacked to pieces if I had not fought back...I pity the next victim who hasn't the training I have had over the years”. Anger lacing her words.

She was right on that summation as the news of the attack would travel further up the chain of command...but with nothing occurring there was no major investigation as it was one of many committed yearly. The coppers did not have the resources to investigate every attack on a female in the University grounds. However, once it was common knowledge she was a

former cop and married to one of the nicest blokes in the Force, the wheels of investigation began to pick up slowly.

Her built-up anger more at herself than anyone else though she was still curt with the University Security Guards who she considered as poor examples of any form of guard! She wondered why they were employed as they were useless as a carpenter's hammer when pop rivets were the go.

She tried to stand again but found it extremely painful...she carefully lowered her head back onto the grass groaning through the pain. She'd take the offered advice not to move until the Amboes arrived...they'd be able to give her a painkiller...

"I found it more satisfying rearing triplets than trying to catch bad boys all the time..." She groaned to have that last word!

"Yeah, okay...I think you either have a fractured collarbone or shoulder blade so stay still until the Ambos have a look at you, okay. Settled down...try to relax".

CHAPTER THREE

"Brian Sarvich...he's your husband? Muscles? Yeah? Well...I'll be...I think you may have a fractured Scapula and/or a dislocated humerus from the Clavicle...painful. It needs some X-rays to confirm it so an overnight stay for obs...at least a two to three days stay at least...could be for a little longer..."

"It was a glancing blow..." Marge Hendricks complained.

"Yeah, well...a bit more than a glancing blow...if he'd hit his target area you could have been knocked out with the right clavicle...the collar bone in all sorts of problems...God knows what would have happened if he had succeeded...we'll lift you onto the trolley...don't you help, okay". The pony-tailed Ambo instructed. "Your attacker has had experience with judo or karate or one of those unarmed combat regimes to be able to supply such a blow...thank Christ you moved as the blow was delivered...it saved you from whatever he had in store for you. Rape. Being carved up...who's to know..."

Like an obnoxious stubborn person, she did try to help as she was lifted carefully onto the gurney by a team of Amboes and Helpers. A loud squeal told even her that she was hurting

and needed to stay as still as possible. The Chief Ambo shook his head and commented on how difficult and stubborn she was...

“Bloody Hell...I’ve seen Rugby League Players walk off the field unattended with a broken collarbone without even wincing...” Hendricks complained, wincing in pain as the gurney was slid into the back of the Ambulance.

“Yeah, well...they’re the no brains part of society! Brian Sarvich’s missus...who’d a thought?”

“Why does it seem so preposterous?” Marge Hendricks winced as the gurney slid into the rear of the Ambulance.

“Because...you know...if he’d been a couple of inches taller, he would have doubled for John Cleese out of Fawlty Towers and the Administration of Funny Walks...I bet that is one of his party tricks after a couple of beers”.

“Yes, and no? And?”

“Well, you know...” The Ambo was digging a hole for himself. Marge was enjoying his discomfort. “You know...you’re too good looking to be married to such a skinny bloke...does he eat okay?”

“Perfectly well and in almost fifteen years of married life he has not complained once of my cooking...” She gave him a tight smile as the rear doors of the Ambulance closed on her prone figure.

CHAPTER FOUR

We’d arrived home on the late flight from our joint hols to sunny Queensland with Muscles informed by a phone call of Marge’s mishap as we waited for our luggage at the baggage Carousel. Tellie offered to take all the kids back to our place as Muscles and me went onto the Hospital. Luckily, Melisa was still living in the attached ‘grannie flat’ so we asked a favour that she stay overnight with all the kids crowded into the two beds while us adults visited the Hospital.. She slept in the vacant Danni’s bed next to the five kids sharing Al and Sam’s beds. Once the kids were in bed, Tellie also came to the Hospital to join us some two hours later.

By the time we arrived at the hospital, Marge had had all the X-rays necessary, her few open wounds cleaned and bandaged up and she tucked into a Ward bed. Propped up with half a dozen pillows. Her right arm immovable and placed in a sling. She was located into a private wardroom. The room now crowded with well-wishers, flowers, and balloons as though she was a fifteen-year-old girl losing her tonsils...or appendix! This a little after the night visiting hours had finished.

The door was open, so I didn't notice Clive Bellamy, the Boss of the night-shift Murder Dees slip into the room. He saw me, nodded towards me then tilted his head requesting I go with him into the adjoining corridor.

I followed him out wondering why he and his 'Two' were involved in the Case...it was a simple 'Attempted Assault' on a female. It matters in some instances who you are and to whom you are attached! A case of who you are and know rather than just an ordinary citizen...

"You'll know early enough...to-morrow, if not the day after. I've put in my retirement date for the end of next month...six weeks away. Arrh...you should seriously think about tossing your hat into the ring for my job..."

"What!? Night-duty Boss?" I commented incredulously. "Your job!?"

"You'd shoe it in...and keep in mind you would then be only one step from the Deputy of Major Crimes when it becomes available...keep in mind that John Sergeant will retire himself inside two years...and the present head of Major Crimes Sol Bunning will be gone inside four to five years. It's a massive change of the Old Guard and the Force will be all the better for it...I can see by your expression you are not that keen...Joe? Think about, eh? Inside two years you could double your present take-home pay...a big jump. Think about it, okay? Now, can you help me empty Hendricks' room so me and my boys can have a few quiet words with her about her attacker? Um...we're here as a favour to the local lads. They called us in knowing while it wasn't a homicide, it involved a former cop who is married to Muscles...a favour".

All the visitors obeyed the big man's request to file orderly and quietly from the room planning to meet up in the Ground Floor Café if it was still open...to share a java and to catch up. There were faces I did not know, friends of hers from Uni or her Tennis or Pilates groups. Introductions were hard to organise what with the gaiety of all who were present...not my idea of a recuperative event though Marge seemed in her element. She sure was one popular girl...Muscles was the exact opposite! His concern for his wife overshadowing his take on it being a lucky survival exercise.

Two nightshift Dees came into the room to stand at the foot of the bed while Bellamy sat in a visitor's chair so he could see Marge's eyes...he was an old-time cop who still could teach me plenty...Marge's right eye was swollen, black and blue, and closed. It looked sore and puffy.

"He get one in?" Bellamy began.

"If he wished...this is the product of him slipping down my face to hit the right collar bone...not flush but more his arm slipping down the side of my face...thus the black eye".

"Did you see much of him?"

"He was nervous...sweating. I could almost smell his nervousness. He stood no more than 156 may be 160 tall. Wide shoulders and a barrel chest as though he was into weightlifting...or at least was a gym-junkie. His calves too had built-up muscle tone...I couldn't see his face because his hoodie was shading it, but I got the impression he had skin colour and wide nostrils. I have no reason why I would say that but when I was falling...or had fallen onto the grass, his face was exposed momentarily, caught in one of the tall security light beams. He wasn't wearing jeans, but some type of exercise pants...not trackie-daks...and he had new Nike shoes on...top of the range...he wore light leather mittens...both hands...you know the type that cover the palms but not his fingers...yeah, he was a gym junkie for sure..."

Bellamy had nodded at each bit of description, glancing at one of his Dees who was recording every word and every movement on his 'smart' phone.

"Anything else?" Bellamy urged her.

"Nah...oh, I heard one of the Security Guards say this was the fourth attack...similar attack inside a couple of months on campus grounds...and they seemed to think it was the same guy as all the attacks were similar...a high arm movement down onto the side of the neck or shoulder...these attacks have resulted in two rapes on the campus grounds...and several other attempts in the same time-frame...just as well the bastard didn't knock me out as I'm a little old to survive a rape".

A citizen would not have noticed so many pieces of description. Hendricks had left the Force over a dozen years ago, but her observational skills had not deserted her in that time. She may have left the Force, but the Force remained a part of her. I nodded when she looked at me, letting her know she had done good. Muscles circled around her bed opposite where Bellamy sat. You could tell he was proud of her...and concerned for her.

CHAPTER FIVE

As we drove home, I relayed to Tellie the conversation I had with Bellamy suggesting I go for his job as the Night Duty Overseer. Within a few short years the opportunity would arise to move further up the totem pole into the higher echelon of the Force.

Tellie sat there thinking it through, silent for some time.

“Double your salary inside five years...you’d be coming close to sixty by then...would we need that type of salary increase at that time of our lives? That’s the carrot, isn’t it?”

“Well, it would make our payout superannuation fund look so much healthier...” I replied, always the logical one. “If you reckon that is the carrot, then the stick is at least two to three years of being the night duty Overseer...Clive Bellamy’s job which has got to be twice the workload of us Dayshift guys or Denny Turner’s position of Head of the Dayshift Dees. If I don’t think that the salary increase is a carrot, then the whole exercise falls in a bloody heap. To be truthful, I couldn’t do Bellamy’s job...and further, I have had no inclination to even *act* in his position whenever he was off on leave or whatever...it’s been offered twice, and twice I’ve knocked it back. There are those who always thought that was a bad mark against me, but I’m not concerned by someone thinking bad by it...I’ll think about it...but it would also involve a huge change to our lives which would not be easy...our entire lives turned upside down with me on permanent night duty with a ten to twelve hour stint every night”.

I glanced across at her as I shook my head slowly, waiting for her reply. “What’ryerreckon?” I asked wanting the conversation to continue. “It is my body and mind on the line here! Our marriage would be stretched, I reckon, as we would see each other as a hello/good-bye custom each morning and night...except for the weekend when we would need to catch up. No...not my way of living. If I were meant to become a night person, I’d have bigger eyes to see better in the dark! Perhaps radar like Bats have...no...you know me, I’ve never been a night person...”

“Or a morning person...” She giggled. “Let me sleep on it, Joe...we need to sit and talk it through over a cuppa after the girls have gone to bed. You right for next weekend? You thought anymore about catching a flight to Melbourne instead of driving? Driving takes us what? Around eight hours one way? A flight around an hour...”

“Plus, the early start...the frigging around at both ends...getting a hire car and settling into hotel accommodation that would comfortably house the four of us...and Muscles’ triplets have been wanting to come with us...that’s five air tickets which would cost us more than the fuel costs if we drove...”

“Muscles would pay for his three kids...” She fell silent until she surprised me starting up again. “Yer still not liking flying?”

“No!” I retorted sharply, wanting the thought of flying put to bed.

“That eats into the time we can spend with Danni...by something like fifteen hours of daylight”.

She was not going to stop until I had finally agreed...I’d need a prescription for some type of anxiety ‘blocker’ before I gave in.

“It’s a waste worrying about it at the moment as Victoria has slammed its borders shut with NSW until further notice...could be months...Danni...poor Danni...she’ll be fretting...”

“And us and the girls too...”

That ended the conversation. I took a silent bet it would be revisited at the evening dinner table with Al and Sam egging on their mother, all wanting to fly...the drive down and back was so boring for them...what were my chances of getting my way?

Next to zilch!

CHAPTER SIX

She always hated the Night Shift, not because it crawled slowly through the night with little to do except checking vitals every hour...and making sure all the Patients were comfortable and sleeping peacefully. No...it was the walk from the Hospital Entrance to the Staff Carpark when the shift ended. In daylight it was such a beautiful area with tall trees and meandering pathways, little manufactured hillocks, and private seating areas...but at night, especially after the midnight hour and knock-off time between 2 and 3 in the morning, the area took on a persona of its own. Shadows and light beams played with your paranoia...your fears and the stuff that made your nightmares.

Most times she had someone to walk with...to talk to as they walked together...several people in fact. Some from her Ward but it didn’t matter as they all had known one another from working in this Hospital for quite a few years. To-night, she ventured from the Staff Entry door with a feeling of doom. The wind whipped at her uniform, her ‘puffer’ coat protecting

her from that cold, furious wind funnelling between the two multi-storey sections of the Hospital. Her hair pulled tight in a ponytail, delighting in the wind. The low-hanging branches of trees wanting to entangle her hair in a death embrace...she didn't see anything, just a slight shushhh as the first blow hit her. She was thrown off-balance hitting the grass beside the pathway hard, taking the air from her lungs. The second blow causing her head to break free from her body, the implement burying itself deep into the earth which wanted to hang onto it, so it seemed. It took the Perp moments to free it...you never know, you may want to use it again.

He bent to examine her closely. Pulled her uniform up to expose her tights and underwear. He felt himself harden as he went to rip the tights and underwear from her...then he came, feeling the warmth of the liquid make a mighty mess in his underdaks. He stood and ran towards the parking area annoyed at himself...this was how it always ended just when he had the victim helpless, unable to stop his advances...

CHAPTER SEVEN

It was the scream that summoned a nearby Security Guard. One look at the body caused him to lose his Lunch recently eaten at five-thirty-nine in the morning. The body had laid there unnoticed for around two and a half hours.

He called the find into his Boss after he had steeled himself...gathered himself to begin to think clearly again. He was walking with a woman who was coming on shift, both talking of good things that made them laugh, until...both were now holding onto one another unable to put two words together. Neither sure who was holding up whom. That exercise now forgotten. The woman ran to the safety of the hospital foyer area. There she collapsed onto the polished timber floor. An emergency call sent instantly through to the local Police Station who sent out a Divvy Van to investigate.

After the two-man team of Constables had looked at the bloodied body and convinced themselves that it was indeed a dead woman, her injuries suggesting a brutal murder and decapitation, the senior Constable again contacted the local Station reporting that an alleged homicide had taken place out the front of the Hospital's main Entrance...or near there in any case...

The night-shift Murder Squad Boss was notified, as were the Forensic Trace team and the Forensic Pathology team. Unfortunately, it had been a busy night and the night shift Forensic Trace people were more than busy. The problem with staff being off work because of Covid.

The two-man teams thinned by the number of jobs they were asked to attend that night...and the crawling spread of Covid that had decimated the numbers of personnel on-call right through the ranks.

Because of this, it would take them three hours to report to the scene.

Because of the delay, the day-shift Forensic Trace people were summoned by a telephone call that shortened their sleep for the night...as were the Murder Squad team...all would receive an additional three hours overtime plus a 'call-out' fee...the night shift regulars pleased with the decision for them to forego this homicide...it had to be a full moon as there was a definite spike in crimes across the board...all bloody night...and a cold bloody night at that!

CHAPTER EIGHT

I had just entered the Squad Floor after spending ninety minutes before my knock-on time down in the Sub-Basement Gym and pool. Hendo cornered me. I shied away knowing full well what he wanted me for...I wasn't in the mood this morning having heard of the eventful night by night-shift Dees who were doing laps of the pool and thirty minutes on the running and rowing machines with me before they headed home.

They had warned me of several 'left-over' homicide deaths that we dayshift guys would have to pick up as the nightshift guys were understaffed by Covid and over-worked...bugger!

"Sorry Joe, but we have a 'left-over' from the night shift...it was that blood moon last night...the closest the moon comes to earth, a full moon, and an eclipse just to round it out. Everyone on night duty has been run off their feet...so...you and Sophs are it. You're next in line...no favouritism from this side of the aisle".

It had long been whispered around the floor that I was Denny Turner's favourite Detective and as such, received the pick of the Cases. The pick of the Cases, I would respond!? There is no such animal! They would laugh in reply, happy to have got a rise out of me...and that occurred a number of times over the years...

He went to walk back to his desk at the front of the floor closest to the Boss's office doorway. Instead, he stopped and turned back to me. He handed me a card with his scribble on it which was hard to decipher at the best of times. I would need to compare his writing with the information placed on our smartphones to figure it out. He should have been a doctor with that sloppy style!

“I’ve already placed all the particulars of the homicide onto your phones, have created a Murder File as back-up hard copy...so...away you go...” He began to head for his desk after handing me the newly created Murder File Book, but in mid-stride he turned back to me again. “You swimming the laps again, huh? I can smell the chlorine wafting off you from here...do you think you should have a shower before you head out?”

“Done Boss. Already...”

“Another could help...”

“Haven’t got enough time Hendo. Our Deceased has been laying out in public view for what...close on five hours...bad for a successful post-mortem especially”.

“Going on the initial report, it would not be hard to establish ‘cause of death’. Decapitation with deep cuts across her entire body and legs...this guy was cutting up the meat into smaller portions to fit onto his BBQ!”

“Hendo!? Fuck that is sick...show a little respect for the dead...” Hendo was chuckling quietly as he walked away. “...and I don’t need that visual cue when I take a squiz at the body...bloody hell! You’re one sick bastard at times, ma man...but I’ll miss you when you finally retire”.

“But truthful, I reckon”. He responded over his shoulder. Another burst of laughter as he walked to the front of the Squad floor and his desk. There must be a sense of the macabre in most Murder Squad Dees, so it seems only natural that the Head Clerk also had a similar trait...to lighten up the heavy mood that often lowered itself over the office. The news was Hendo would be retiring in the new year which would be a blow for the successful continuation of our Branch. I doubt there was anyone on earth who could successfully fill Hendo’s shoes...and we had spent years training him to our liking.

We’ll sure miss the old guy...

CHAPTER NINE

“A busy night by all accounts...there are a couple of teams doing extra hours...poor sods”. Brenda Wzerlic offered. “Have you seen enough? She’s been out here by herself for too many hours just because it was a full moon last night clogging the system...and a thirty percent

covid cases within the Morgue Precinct. Did you get up to have a look at it? A blood moon...a beautiful sight with the moon...bloody big..."

"Sorry no, though my two got up with their mother to have a squiz...and to take some good video of it so they have boasted...for a school project and 'Tell It Time'...me? I slept through it. They say the full moon effects only females..."

"Joseph Lind! That's the most...grr...you're getting worse the older you get..." She realised I had made the comment to get a rise out of her. She shook her head giving me a smile that had been too infrequent over the last couple of months. She had separated from her 'roving' medical surgeon husband after one too many 'escapades', been through the twelve-month emotional barrier and with more than half of the sale of the Paddington terrace, had purchased a free-standing home two streets away from the Coroners Building at the back of Lidcombe. Close to work which was a ten-minute walk in all weather.

I nodded slowly. I was on my haunches looking at the Deceased. Her head was away from the rest of her body. Her body a series of deep cuts...

"What was used to kill her...she has been lacerated...I don't think there is an area not touched...anger...sheer anger". I stood awkwardly, helping Wzerlic to her feet. "I understand you found a joint..."

"Yeah...two streets over from the Coroners, Pathology and Forensic Sciences Building. Very handy to the Office and a decent price that I can afford with a small bank loan to help...but it is not exorbitant...I think it may have been a little less asking price because it is well removed from shops, schools, and stuff. Taking a couple of days off next week to pack...and stack for the Removalist guys to take over to the new abode. My mother and sister will help me, thank God! It has a pool and jacuzzi which I'm hoping will be used on the night. A good-sized backyard for my dogs...they'll think they're in heaven after the pillowcase sized backyard at Paddington. My mum has already taken ownership of the bedroom and attached ensuite...that's the real reason why I purchased that house as it has an attached Grannie Flat...for Mum and her frequent visits. A little more money but not exorbitant. I'm going to have a house-warming party in three weeks...make sure you come...you and the girls...I'll remind Tellie when the time gets closer...through Muscles...he's sure to remind you...the instrument used? May be a Bush-knife, a Machete...though Forensics are saying more likely a spade sharpened on two or three of its leading edges...which brings in pre-meditation and preparation...I'll bet a former boyfriend, current partner...you know, the normal list of suspects...all male..." She gave me a tight smile. Her effort to join me at the summit of Mount Discrimination and its partner Mount Sexism being successful.

“Or a former girlfriend to remain neutral...and really...it’s the middle of winter so I doubt anyone would be stupid to use the pool...or the jacuzzi!”

She glanced over at me, shaking her head as though I was a lost cause.

“How’s Danni doing in Melbourne all by herself?” Safer ground she thought.

“Ha! She is not by herself let me tell you...but sure, she goes through bouts of being homesick but that is decreasing...apart from that she’s loving it. Her enthusiasm for certain subjects is endless...Computer Science seems to be her love at present although she’s talking of becoming a Surgeon...a Doctor with Médecins Sans Frontières. Doctors without Borders. That could change at the drop of a hat though! She talks in another language when she starts to tell us about the subjects she is studying...she’s cool...no worries...but this Covid shutdown of all Victoria is stopping us from seeing her which is causing both her and us some grief...it’s me that has a problem of flying down to Melbourne instead of driving the distance...my doctor has helped by giving me an anti-anxiety pill to relax me...I reckon I’ll sleep most of the way so if the plane suddenly dives for the ground, I’ll miss all the excitement. What with the Covid Shutdown causing Victoria to close the border between Vic and NSW, it could be a while before we catch up in person...telephone and ‘zoom’ calls not the same thing as being there in person”.

“You can be such a wooze, Joseph Lind. I’ve heard that Clive Bellamy’s position is now advertised in the Dailies and the internal Gazette. You’d be a shoo-in Joe...”

“If I went for the job, yeah...but...I don’t think so. Night shift duty is not my style...and to be honest, night duty for the Dees who would work under me is far busier than anything us days shift guys experience. Brutal death is a night-time phenomenon. At my age I’m not looking to increase my work load no matter how much extra bucks I’d be pulling...and continuous night duty...it’d kill me and lessen the time I can spend with my girls which is not ideal even now”.

“Have you talked it over with Tells?”

“Yeah...her attitude is she’d respect whatever decision I’d make...no...it’s not for me. I’ve never put my hand up for the occasional duty when Bellamy went on holidays or long service leave...that time he had off when he had that heart op? Nah...I think Jerry Stanley acted in the position every time so he’d be the favourite unless the hierarchy wants to bring in someone fresh...a new face with different ideas can do wonders for the running of a Branch...I reckon they could do such a switch which will be a slap in the face for Jerry Stanley as he has worked hard whenever he has sat in the position...without criticizing Jerry it would be a wise decision I reckon”.

“Next step up would be the Deputy Head of Major Crimes...you’d be above your Boss, Denny Turner...and you are one step closer to a Deputy Commissioner’s position...”

“I feel so humble that many people think I’d make a DepCom within five years...I’ve talked about it with Tells. We really don’t need the extra change and we definitely don’t need the turmoil of a couple of years working from 1700 hours to 0800-0900 hours the following morning. That’s what Bellamy is doing every night...fourteen...sixteen hours every twenty-four shift...I doubt there’d be anyone in the Force who could match those hours every day...even Bellamy shames the hierarchy with his want to work”. I scratched my chin. Smiled at Wzerlic. Shrugged my shoulders. “His problem is that he doesn’t have a home to go home to. He and his wife would pass in the Hallway and not know one another so he quipped once...”

“She died a while back...”

“Yeah...about two years ago...but he’s made a rod for his own back which he now can’t get out of. I’m not certain he’ll retire comfortably...we’ll see”.

“That’s Clive. I doubt anyone could work those hours and still be sane. You’d be able to call the shots on hours worked...a large bowl of dosh your return. A lot more than you are earning now...and once you have made Head of Major Crimes, more than double your present salary, but yeah...I know where you’re coming from. It would not be my cup of tea and I’d miss the grunt work...you’d miss the hunt...the chase...the nabbing of some stupid perp...yeah, I know. You’re not a desk jockey”.

I nodded in agreement. She’d got it in one!

CHAPTER TEN

I looked around at the narrow strip of landscaped area wondering where Sophie had disappeared to.

She came up behind me near lifting me out of my shoes as she spoke.

“There’s been ten bashings in these landscaped areas which surround the Hospital in the last twelve months. All the victims female...mostly young in the twenty to thirty age group. This is the first homicide in this area but some of the attacks have been gruesome...with two

women still off work suffering mental problems that have prevented them from returning to work because of the abuse they suffered...not good for staff morale”.

“Raped?”

“Arrh...I don’t know...”

I looked down at her with a grim expression.

“Then find out, huh?”

I was being a little over the top but whatever, she needed to get over this abhorrence of not being able to look at a bloodied corpse instead doing something away from the scene. Her career as a murder dee will be cut short if she fails to scrutinise a corpse. Her transfer to another area assured!

She sheepishly gave me an A4 sheet with ten names and addresses with mobile phone numbers printed neatly on it.

“I got that list from the Hospital Security Section...I’m sorry, I should have asked what injuries they suffered and whether they had been raped...”

I nodded.

“Yes, you should have to ascertain whether we are talking about the same Perp who has upped his game...come on, show me where the Security Section is, okay? You think this is where we should start, huh?” I asked, tapping the single sheet of paper with my knuckles. I was a little miffed at her not telling me where she was going and why...I knew the real reason for her deviation was to minimise her looking at the body but really, that needed to be resolved quickly as I was not going to go easy on her with my monthly progress report to the boss if she couldn’t feel the monkey on her back!

I tried to think back when I was her age and whether I too had similar misgivings at looking at bloodied corpses...I couldn’t remember! That’s age catching up with you I thought...

She nodded, pleased with her initiative...I wasn’t impressed mostly because she hadn’t told me where she was going or what she was planning.

“Next time, Sophs? Fill me in before you tear off on your own...just so you didn’t have to look at the Vic...and yes, you’re right, it was bloody gruesome. There’s nothing more gruesome than a decapitation and multiple slash marks to the body”.

I pulled her back away from the entrance area into the hospital. There were uniformed cops and hospital security guards in small knots all having their say on the night's shocking homicide. I sat her down in a small bay area surrounded by built-up garden beds and a seat that followed the curve of the brickwork. We were partially hidden from the gathered stickybeaks. Sophie had tears in her eyes.

"You okay?" I asked, concern from a wrinkled brow telegraphing how apprehensive I was in her actions to avoid looking at the Vic.

She nodded, repeating several times that she was.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Truly. Yeah, I'm fine..."

"Okay...what do you think we should do with this list?"

"Check them out to see if there has any similarities to our Vic...you know, our Perp might be upgrading his MO..." She looked down at her hands. "There's no similarities is there. This is the first homicide case".

"Mmm...I see...what about these victims?" I knocked the page with my knuckles. "Do you think they may not like having their assaults questioned...turned over again? Weeks...months later? The local lads who have overseen these various attacks would have all that information that would negate us going to the source...don't you think?"

"Oh! I didn't think about that. They could be shoved back in time to that terrible night they were attacked..." She looked up at me, tears filling her eyes. "I fucked up, didn't I?" She sniffled. In an unladylike manner, she swiped the sleeve of her coat across her nose...five-year-old kids do that...and bloody Tradies!

"No...you didn't fuck up...you just forgot to think of our victims and how they may feel...and another thing, guys who attack, assault, and possibly rape their victims very rarely step up to murder...it's very rare...it does happen but rarely...so we are looking at multiple perps I reckon...two different types of bloody idiots who show no respect to the fairer sex...keep the different crimes separate in your mind".

We sat in silence, me listening to the wind rustling the leaves in the crowns of nearby trees. I looked up picturing the area at night. Dappled light from high light poles shimmering through the tree crowns giving the area a surreal appearance...a little creepy I would have thought. I scratched my ear as I glanced at my young partner.

“The way the woman died...he wasn’t interested in raping her. That is my take on the situation, whether it is collaborated or not at the post-mortem we’ll have to wait and see...but I’ll take a fiver on it that she wasn’t even fiddled with down there...this Perp has different reasons to killing in such a manner. I’m sorry, but you can learn a lot just taking in the Vic as she lies out in the open. Your phobia at looking at bloody victims? You’ll have to come to terms with it otherwise you’ll fail my next report on you...understand? As a Murder Dee you will need to look, no...not look but scrutinise the body and all the visible wounds for you to process and advance your investigative procedures. Understand me? To even help with those gut feelings you get which may lead nowhere or they could be the key to unlocking a homicide...but never...never think it is unimportant to look at the victim...to really look at her injuries...she at least deserves that from us”.

She meekly nodded never looking up at me.

If she did not get over that huge hump, she would never progress as a Murder Dee...she should seek a transfer to Highway Patrol...nah...they often are involved as first responders in attending gruesome traffic accidents...no...to White Collar Crime or Robbery. Somewhere where her talents which I have amply seen, can be used to best affect...

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I introduced myself to the Head of Hospital Security who was standing amongst a group of his fellow security personnel...most overweight and unable to catch a dead cockroach if they tried their hardest.

“No, I remember him well...Arab looking...I wondered how he made it into the Force at our first meeting...”

“By filling out an Application Form, being accepted into the ranks of those at the Goulburn Police Academy and doing well in his written and practical exams...the same way we all became members of the NSW Police Force”. This said with a degree of anger as a response to the silly and discriminatory opinion. This guy knew how to get up my nose bloody quickly...and right or wrong I responded with a quip of my own...without thinking.

“How did you get your job...by being a certain weight?” I asked sarcastically.

“Whoa...whoa...settled down Detective. I meant nothing by the comment...”

I didn't believe a word of it, instead I asked for the Uniform Cop's name and what Station he was from.

"Yeah, I remember him well...Wasim Mahmoud...Senior Constable Wasim Mahmoud out of the Liverpool Police Station...it's no more than a ten-minute drive from here...good hunting".

I thanked him for his help before turning away from him, waving my thanks over my shoulder. I scrolled through my directory to get Greg 'Brin' O'Rourke's mobile number. He was Shelley's long-time love and live-in partner. He would have to know if a Senior Constable Mahmoud worked out of the Liverpool Cop Shop.

"Joe...when are you going to have one of your famous BBQs again? They say the greater Sydney area will be free from lockdown sometime in October...the same for Melbourne...make it the first weekend after that, okay? We will show off our twins who are growing fast".

"When the Covid restrictions are removed...hopefully by mid-October the way they are talking. I must state that the first weekend the borders are open, we will be going straight down to Melbourne to see Danni...it's been too long...the second weekend for that family BBQ...with the entire crowd...promise. How's Shelley?"

"Enjoying motherhood...she's never been so happy...you can almost feel it...she's a good mum...they are almost two...you'd be hard pressed to recognise them as it's been a while...no-one's fault...you know..."

"Christ, how time flies...yeah...it's been around six months since we got together..."

"While I've got you Joe...um...Bill and Melisa have split...Bill is heading down to Gippsland on an essential branded Government project. That's how he obtained travel permission across the NSW/Victoria border and how he got to the border in the first place..."

I sat down on a nearby curved seat. Bill had not spoken to me about any of this...then again, neither had Melisa! I went numb from my feet to my head. Sounds and noises deadened, seeming to come from a long way off. Through cotton wool packed tightly in my ears. The voice on the phone eventually pushing me back to reality. I was disappointed in both Bill and Mal not confiding in me. Now I knew why Mel had seemed so aloof lately...

"Joe...Joe? You okay? You still there?"

“Yeah...no, not really. Can you talk for a bit? Yeah...yeah...” I stammered out, afraid of what may come next. “Is that fair dinkum or was he just spinning a tale?”

“Oh...I’ve never checked so I really don’t know...would he be capable of thinking up such an involved bullshit story?”

“That’s the sixty-four-dollar question...I don’t think so, but you never know...look, leave it with me as I’ll follow it up...Mel has said she wants to move out...she’s apparently putting her hat in the ring for jobs being offered in the AFP Offices in Indonesia and South Korea...I reckon in a bid to cut the ties completely...now that I know her reasoning I can understand it. She knows she has always got a roof over her head, but I guess she wants to cut that string...that’s understandable. Her self-righteous family out west disowned her years ago so all she has had is us...and Bill when he was his old self”.

“Mmm...I can’t say he needs constant attention because he doesn’t. He can exist in his own little world quite comfortably. What worries me is his compensation payout for the accident...several million which a shrewd bastard maybe able to prise out of him...you know?”

“Yeah...I agree. Is there anything there that would show where he may be heading? You said may be Victoria. The Victorian border is closed to NSW ‘natives’...isn’t it?”

“Otto Fletchheimer...he is a Master Artisan in furniture design and manufacture. There are pieces of his work in the new Parliament House, and every State Parliamentary Building in the country. His stuff is gorgeous. Beautifully made. Bill’s been in contact with him over the past month or so on-line...and Otto is in the Gippsland area...somewhere...in a bush workshop and cottage where it snows in a good winter...not Bill’s favourite weather that’s for sure”. He chuckled.

I nodded, asking him to spell out the name. My stomach still had not bounced back as it sat somewhere near my knees, and I was still hearing through cotton wool ears. I’ve spoken to Bill every week and there was nothing of this type of thing mentioned. I was sure of the fact that Bill couldn’t lie and since the accident, he was more like a bloke in the autism spectrum though in his case it was more because of the damage the accident caused to his brain...but there were so many similarities of him being autistic in a mild sort of way. Just the manner of his leaving more I think because Mel had tried to talk to him about ending the relationship...in his mind, he had given Mel her freedom by just splitting...it would be his way of handling the situation...simple and straight forward to his way of thinking.

“I’ll chase that out...workwise...umm...the reason why I rang you...Senior Constable Wasim Mahmoud...know of him? I have information he was the Lead Officer in all the

incidents involving staff...most Nursing Sisters who were assaulted...attempted assault and rape here at the Hospital”.

“Yeah...a good bloke. He has taken a step up the ladder...he is now the Number Two at Parramatta Cop Shop on the ground level of your building...why are you enquiring about him?”

“We have a homicide...bloody gory...in the Westmead Hospital grounds...and we were informed of a spike in assaults and rapes of women as they knocked off. All the victims on night duty. His was the name given to me as the Lead Officer in most of those incidents...I just wanted to talk to him about those assaults, that’s all...”

“Okay...yeah...no worries...he’ll help you out...he’s that type of guy...fair dinkum...a nice bloke. Let me know will yer about Bill and where he is, okay? The only problem is there may be black spots down in that area for mobile phone coverage...it’s wild country. Gotta go...keep me or Shells in the loop will yer...we owe him big time as he has done a magnificent job on most of our old furniture and all it cost us was an extra mouth to feed each day...Joe? I gotta go”.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“You all right Boss?”

I looked up at her with a stunned look, not really registering her presence. I shook my head hoping that would clear the feeling of my blocked ears.

“Um...my son Bill...he’s dropped off the grid...you haven’t met him, have you?”

“No...though I knew you had an older son from your first marriage...and he had been involved in a terrible Bike accident...”

I nodded, wondering how she came to have that little bit of gossip. I wasn’t sure whether I should tell her all my family secrets...

“He...arrh...he did Law at Uni...did extremely well both he and his school mate, Ben. Bill went into the DPP’s Office. His mate Ben into private practise. Bill was the blond-haired boy with a beaut future ahead of him at the DPP...they thought the world of him...and he was proving that he was going to be a ‘gun’ for the prosecution...he had an accident while riding

my bike...more his actually...home from work one night...he'd worked back..." I was rambling unable to stop myself. "He...arrh...he suffered massive brain damaged and he was that close to death on several occasions. He...um...he got through that...had to learn all over again how to walk, talk, eat...you know all bodily functions...but he was a shadow of his former self...to put it into perspective you would think he was autistic...he and Melisa had been going together since their Uni days and she stayed by his side for all this time...but she was tiring of the relationship as there was no depth to Bill's emotions...love...even just having contact was foreign to him. They've called it quits and Bill has left for...Victoria's Gippsland area...by himself...he's okay...he doesn't need constant care or anything, but he needs someone to keep an eye on him...and driving a vehicle...that's very suss to me...and Mel? She's now looking at a transfer to an AFP Office overseas...anywhere...Perth or Darwin even I suspect...to be far away from us...more importantly... from Bill".

She nodded. I was sitting half bent over in a rigid position wondering what else could happen this day...

"He may surprise you..."

"Yeah...he may...anyhow, back to our brutally murdered victim..."

"Gloria Evie Mitchell...twenty-seven years of age. DoB one July Ninety-four. Has been working here since she obtained her Nursing Degree from UNSW. Lives at home with her parents and one younger sister aged nineteen. Address Clifftop Crescent Telopea". She looked at me as she closed her 'smart' phone, expecting I thought, some sort of praise for what she had done.

I nodded.

"That's good...do you know if the body has been removed?"

"Yes, though the forensic trace team are still there on all fours..."

I stood to walk slowly towards the crime scene.

"Do you think he'll be alright?" She asked.

"That's the question I'm asking myself...and the answer? I haven't a clue. He should be okay, but this would be his first flight from the nest if you get my meaning...yes, he should be okay..." I was trying to convince myself. "After he came out of hospital and the recuperative regime, he and Mel lived with us...you know, in the other half of the house...then he got interested in all of Shelley's antique furniture that needed some loving care" I again was

rambling hoping to make some sense of all of it. “He...um...he taught himself how to French Polish and in the end, he was living down there...Mel would often stay with him but Shells was there all the time so there was no worries. Mel found it difficult to get to work from there, so she moved back up here...that is when they decided to split, I reckon...about six weeks ago about...it took him that long to gather up his goods and chattels, buy a decent 4WD though I didn’t like him driving...and the rest as they say is history. Except for these Covid restrictions I’d go look for him myself...I’ll try to contact him to-night...”

By that stage we had arrived at the crime scene where there was little to see. Police tape fluttered in the strong breeze cordoning off the area. The forensic trace people were still squirming about on all fours but that was all, apart from the ‘On-scene’ Officer and a couple of the hospital security guys stickybeaking.

I turned to Sophie. “I think we need to visit the parents...a shithouse job but as we are the Lead Dees on this Case, it falls onto our shoulders...you with me, Sophs?”

“I don’t have a choice, do I?”

Bloody Hell! Don’t tell me she has another bloody phobia apart from viewing gory victims...that’d break the camel’s back as far as I was concerned. I guess attending autopsies would be nada also...that was the first time that thought had hit me...not good.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I’d never given it much thought before...perhaps it was my concern for Bill that made me immune to the grief that was unleashed in the Mitchell household that morning. We had the dubious chore of telling the Mitchell family of their daughter’s demise. Mister Barry Mitchell had taken a sickie that day after waking up around three that morning with a head feeling as though it weighed a tonne and a stomach that released a constant wave of deep spasms. The missus was on the verge of calling an Ambulance but after some angry insults chucked in both directions the pains decreased and by sun-up had gone...

I’m not the one who believes in such connections, but Sophie was all for it.

“That heavy head sensation...” She began with me jumping in to interrupt. I had a feeling she was going to connect those sensations and pains to the decapitation and even the slashes down their daughter’s body...regardless, we left the family to their grief with me feeling unsettled. I never liked these duties which were harder when the family showed the true depth of their

sorrow. Sophie was bawling her eyes out, even as we drove away from the address and only finally stopping as we drove down the entry ramp under our building.

I headed back to the Office, parking our Unmarked in its designated spot on the second Basement level down. I could head for the Fire Exit out onto the Plaza area where I could walk to the Parramatta Police Station. Sophie balked when we hit the sunlight, her face flushed, her nose red as were her eyes...as she had joined with the wails from Mister and Missus Mitchell for their dead daughter.

I nodded as I looked at her, agreeing with her request to go upstairs and freshen up while I interviewed 'Second-in-Charge' Wasim Mahmoud in the ground floor offices of the Police Station. I detoured to the Java Pot to have a caffeine fix, sitting under the dappled shade of spindly gums. The afternoon cool. My nerves needing the calming effects of coffee...and a couple of minutes of quiet reflection. Was it Bill's escapade to Victoria that worried me to the point of me not affected by the Banshee wails at the Mitchell's house...or me becoming cold and unaffected after all these years in the service of the Murder Squad? I knew this hadn't been the first by a long shot and wouldn't be the last...when I went to pick up the coffee mug, my hands were shaking. I carefully placed the mug back onto the tabletop and rested my head in my hands, my elbows on the table.

I cried softly...privately.

After the tears had made their way down my cheeks, I picked up my mobile and scrolled down to Denny Turner's number.

"Boss? If I could, can I have the rest of the afternoon off..."

She must have heard the tremor in my voice.

"A tough scene, eh?"

"Yeah...and Billy? His gone missing..."

"You need time off to find him?"

"Arrh...thanks for the offer..." I took a couple of deep breaths to compose myself. "Um...I'm sure he's heading for the Gippsland area in Victoria. Because of the covid restrictions I couldn't get to him in any case...I'll try getting onto him to-night...his mobile".

She asked the most obvious question.

“He couldn’t get over the border as Victoria is shut down...”

“There appears to be a Victorian Government assignment or a contract which Bill has signed up for...something to do with planting trees to replace those burnt in the Black Summer fires of twenty-nineteen and twenty-twenty...that’s all I know...”

“Okay, Joe. I understand...if you need time off take it, okay. You’re owed bloody weeks by the Force so don’t sweat it”.

I ended the call, taking my time sipping on my java. When finished I walked unsteadily back down to the Basement parking garage to drive the Unmarked home.

I was asleep before I hit the pillow, three sleeping tablets and a hot toddy doing the trick.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Boss called me into her Office. I’d come in thirty minutes earlier to make up for the afternoon I had off. I’d been heading for the Sub-Basement when she had called out to me. I wondered what time she started as I had never beaten her on the morning start-up time.

“How are you?” She asked out of genuine concern.

I nodded that I was okay.

“Um...Sophie? She’s put in a request to relocate to White Collar Crime or Robbery/Burglary...which one do you think she’d be better in. I do not want to make a recommendation just to get her out of here...which one? Your latest series of reports had me concerned for her and I don’t think running away from the problem will do her any good...she shows tremendous promise which I don’t think she should throw away”.

I was knocked for six, unable to think straight. I sank slowly into one of the visitor chairs facing her.

“Um...not White Collar as she’d be bored shitless...”

“Robbery then?”

I shook my head slowly...

“Vehicle Theft I think would be better for her...or back in uniform though she is still a good enough Dee in mufti to stay in mufti. Vehicle Theft...a lot of computer work mixed in with daytime raids and on-site interviews. She was showing real promise...” I shook my head again. “She needs to think about it as she was showing promise...real promise in extending scenarios in her head and then reporting them in a way that was totally logical and acceptable...real promise. She often had me thinking *‘how in hell did she think of that’*. I know I’m slowing down a bit but not by that much. If she could just get over her timidity in viewing bloody victims and no stomach for autopsy attendances...she was showing real promise...she’s too young with only a year or two in experience to be shovelled out to an Area Command Station...they are always wanting Dees with experience...not one-year apprentices”.

I was rambling not wanting to give her an opening...it often came down to you being incapable of getting the person over the line...a case of character clash so some would say ignoring the facts of the relocation. My name would again be whispered as the Dee who everyone found it hard to work with...which was nonsense as my long-term association firstly with Marge Hendricks, and then with Shelley Shields were two of the longest in Murder Squad history...so I told myself...but it was true!

“Firstly, she needs that initial investigative period where she can sort through all the evidence obtained thus far; then the next step of questioning all information she has harvested to produce a logical conclusion to nab the guilty guy. She loves that hunt...and that climax...”

“Joe, you have just described yourself...or any successful Dee out on the floor...except for those particular negatives which she displays...a session with Phelps...maybe a series of hypnoses sessions to settle her...might work, do you think?”

“Worth a go, boss. Worth a go, I reckon”.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Well? Have you and Turner worked out what sphere...what Branch would better suit me?”

“Yep! Here in the Murder Squad. Sophs. You are a good Dee and show substantial talents in the gathering of information, collating it in your head into a workable, logical alternative which usually ticks all the boxes...and you love the arrest and charge procedure...you love it when your bad guy goes down...that Achilles heel? Would you be willing to try a couple of

hypnoses sessions with Phelps? The Force Shrink. You know, to see whether you can look at the Victim, view the autopsy and not run from either?"

She looked down at her hands, clasping and unclasping them.

"You have faith in my ability as a Murder Dee...here...on the Squad floor? Are you right in the head?" A smile to go with the question.

"Yes! I've always said that you would make an excellent Murder Dee...you know that. Do you enjoy working as my partner...my colleague?"

"Joe? I doubt there is anyone else who can teach me as much as you...yeah, I love working with you. You can make things so interesting when others would pass over them saying they were unimportant. You've taught me heaps except how to work a wreck of a car into a showroom vehicle...so I'll give anything a go that might help me...but one thing Joe...if I begin to have sleepless nights and nightmares of squashed, bloodied bodies...I'm outa here...okay?"

I nodded, at least we had a beginning...

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

He raised the counter flap to allow us access to the work area behind. We followed him along a wide corridor, offices, or alcoves on either side until he wheeled us into his small Office that had a view of an outside retaining wall as its claim to fame.

"Excuse the mess..." He muttered as he ushered us to two visitors' chairs that he had hurriedly cleared of files, folders, and loose paper to drop them in an available corner on the floor...not a fusspot. A smile at my thought. He poked his head out of the office requesting someone to rouse up three flat whites all with one sugar. He turned quickly to make sure he had the correct order. I nodded, smiling at his hospitality.

"Take it out of petty cash...there's a girl. Thanks". I doubted she could have ignored his order.

"You're the two Dees who are 'leads' on that ghastly decapitation kill at the Hospital the other day...any suspects?"

“No...but we think there could be a link between that killing and your assaults and rapes within the hospital grounds over the past year...”

“A link? I doubt it...why do you think there may be a link?”

“Purely the fact that all of these crimes were committed within the hospital grounds...and early in the morning...the middle of the night”.

“Mmm...” You could tell immediately he was not on the same page as us.

There was silence as the young Constable walked quietly into the Office to place three containers of coffee onto Wasim Mahmoud’s desk. As she turned, she baulked and smiled at Sophie before exiting the office.

“She and I were at the Goulburn Academy together...” Sophie informed us. A nod from both of us our acknowledgement.

“Yes...I don’t know...” He rubbed his hands across his face before placing a container of coffee in front of Sophie and me. “Yes...I oversaw the investigation of ten assaults and rapes over a twelve-month period...sure, I can see a link between all of them...but to link those with a gruesome murder? I think you could be drawing a long bow...” He shook his head slowly.

“Those ten? The assaults didn’t lead to ten rapes, did they? They began as a series of...the first instance was hardly an assault...and I’ll lay odds there was several such incidents not even reported to us coppers. He was starting off all thumbs and nerves...it took him a while to progress to decent assaults where the victim was taken to hospital for the wounds inflicted. Once he was over that hurdle, the rapes became more vicious, more frequent...he had an itch that he couldn’t scratch...we are quite sure he is the one and only just going on identification markers...not all similar as they never are but there were one or two similarities...”

“It makes you wonder how vicious rapes begin for a perp...he had to have made several attempts before he mastered the attacks...true? You know, like experimentation on unsuspecting victims. Is there any similar attacks where the Perp was all thumbs...attempted rape...at that time of morning across Sydney...or assaults that could have led to rape but didn’t because of his fumbling? One of the Courses at the Academy had a Psychiatrist informing us that many of these attempted rapes ended early because the Perp came way too early”. Sophie offered with both Mahmoud and I left to ponder her thoughts put into words.

“The description similarities are also a constant when we compare several assaults occurring in the University campus nearby...he has been broadening his ‘hunt’ area so a murder as a

result? Believable...no matter how gruesome...but I have my doubts he matriculated to that level...murder by decapitation doesn't sit with the methodology of the rapes and attempted rapes that he has committed over about the last twelve months. We're talking about two different Perps is my summation”.

“He was upping the ante at each attack...he could have stepped over to homicide, yes?”

“Yes, he could have...but I have my doubts. Very much so”.

Mahmoud took a couple of sips of his coffee before speaking.

“Okay...yes...sure...we noticed this escalation...this improvement in style of those assaults...with the resultant rapes only occurring a number of times but were conducted in an ever-shortening period between each event...that's as far as we got, I'm afraid...and then I was transferred to this position...”

“The period between each rape...at the Uni and the Hospital...were increasing in tempo and sequence...yes?”

“Yes. For the twelve...fourteen months I was on the Cases...”

“Being transferred to this location? It wasn't a promotion...”

“Arrh...no. I requested it. Thankfully, I had a good enough work record and ethic for them to want to retain me. To be truthful, I wasn't meant to be a Senior Sergeant-in-Charge of every petty crime, robbery, assault, and everything else that occurred in my Area Command District. I requested this transfer as I wasn't meant to look at what sadistic bastards will do to their better half in domestic violence attacks. Here? I deal in the everyday facts of each Officer, his sick leave, holidays and if he needs any new biros or pencils. I have three exceptionally good people who do the bulk of the work for me...that suits me fine. I've got just over fifteen years before retirement...this job suits me and ensures that I will retire instead of going out boots first...touch wood”. The rider said with a smile.

“You don't miss the parry and thrust, the hunt and the nabbing of some nong who can't get past his anger at being rejected by his ex-spouse? His answer? Kill the bitch...and all the kids as well!”

He shook his head followed by a chuckle.

“Nope...none of that business...I'm not kept up all night with visions of bloodied and bruised faces and twits whose IQ can be counted on fingers and toes...nope...I don't miss that at all!”

I nodded. I could understand that. I was hoping that Sophie took it all in and came to the conclusion that she was one of many, not standing out there at the head of the queue by herself. The first to view the bloody attempts at paying back the missus for all the things she did wrong.

Mahmoud interrupted the silence by coughing as his coffee went down the wrong way. He bent over, his forehead on his desk as he tried to choke off the coughs that were in his throat and coming up fast.

“Struth...sorry”. He wiped his eyes with a handkerchief and loudly blew his nose. He stood then bent over to help whatever he was experiencing. Coffee and air going down the wrong way. I figured he was a ball of nerves, even conversing with us setting him off...

“Excuse me...getting back to those assault and rape cases, are you saying he was sharpening his skills as the assaults occurred until he was able to control a woman with power, strength, and fear, enough for him to rape the poor girl?”

I nodded.

“That’s what it looks like to me...and now he has matriculated to killing...”

“That’s well and truly outside the norm...it just doesn’t happen that way”.

“There’s always that first one...” I concluded with a smile.

I got the feeling he did not like being second-guessed or opposed in any way...Shelley’s partner Brin O’Rourke had said he had a good reputation and was well liked and respected by his subordinates. To me, this would indicate a man who was constantly tamping down his emotions, thoughts, and opinions...not a good way to see retirement, I thought cynically.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“You think the same Perp is responsible?” Sophie asked as we were heading towards the sub-basement parking bays. “Personally, I don’t think so, Boss. Arrh...where are we going?”

“To see Marjory Hendricks...my former partner...my first partner when I joined the Squad. She’s still in Hospital...and to answer your first question? They are two different perps...one honing his skills in assault and rape...and the other? I wanted to see what Mahmoud

thought...if he had connected the two...but he hadn't even thought the assaults and the rapes weren't committed by the same person...they were two separate entities to his way of thinking...so...his current position? It suits his disposition. He'll shine in that job...either that or he may be better suited as a desk jockey or somewhere in Sales...the Cop Force is slowly killing him. Lay odds he already has a couple of ulcers”.

“He thought highly of you too...and by the way, ulcers are caused by a certain bacterium in your gut...and not pressures of any kind”.

“Mmm...who told you that?” Good I thought. The young lady is thinking for herself. “Just remember him Sophs...he has after what? Twenty years? He's found his niche. Your niche is here with us. The Murder Squad. How are you doing with Doctor Phelps?”

“Um...I've had two sessions with her...you know, just talking. She won't start the hypnosis sessions until she has some idea what triggers the response when I see a battered and bloodied body...next week I suspect”.

“Mmm...” I commented as we drove out into the sunlight. Spring was on top of us. Sophie turned the Unmarked into the flow of traffic while I entered the hospital location into the GPS thingamajig.

“Don't need that, Joe. It's a ten-minute drive from here, no worries”.

As always, we had a problem trying to find a parking spot in the ‘official’ parking bays...they were all full. We eventually settled on a ‘No Parking’ bay for emergency hospital personnel only. I pulled the visor down to display our “Official Police Business” card for all to see. I reckon all it would do is get someone boiling at the insolence of the coppers to park anywhere when there was a five-bay block for ‘police vehicles only’ on the first level of the multi-storey parking tower...but that was miles from the front entry door...

Marge was snoozing as we entered her wardroom.

I walked over to the window line to peer out onto the planned garden area below where ten women in the last twelve months had been brutally assaulted. A proportion of those raped. The pathway not meant for those who might be in a hurry. To get from the Staff Entry/Exit of the Hospital to the Staff Carpark, you wandered about for kilometres. The pathway meandered in sweeping curves with mounds topped by tall, thin gum trees like those on the Police Plaza at the front of our building. Little limb spread and a small crown which was not meant for shade. At every change of direction of the path there were cut-outs with walls of brick and circular seating following those brick walls. They retained small hillocks where at least one spindly, tall gum grew. From this perspective it looked quite impressive, but at night

with filtered light from the security lights coming through the tree crowns, the area would have a sinister feel for anyone scurrying through. It hit me as I gazed down at the garden area that the perp could have been seated in one of these circular ‘cut-out’ areas patiently waiting for a lone woman to walk past in the semi-gloom...no-one would have spotted him in some of those areas. I needed to check with Forensic Trace to see whether they had discovered any DNA trace from any of those seats further along the pathway.

I raised my hand as I walked back out of the wardroom taking my phone out as I proceeded.

Dee Dee Symonds picked up my call.

“Were you involved in obtaining forensic evidence in that planned garden area at Westmead Hospital? Sister Gloria Mitchell’s decapitation death?”

“No...but I can take your query and ring you back with an answer, if you like”.

“Okay...um...how many of those curved seating areas were ‘de-bugged’ for want of a better description? That’s what I want to know, okay? Were all seating areas in that planned horticultural area scrutinised? From the Staff Entry area through to the Staff Parking area?”

“Hang on Joe...I’ll put you on hold...”

I listened to ‘elevator music’ for what seemed like hours. The choice of music has that effect on one’s sense of time, so you never notice how long you have been hanging on for...it kills that sense!

“Joe? Um...Tracy Hurley was the on-site Lead Forensic Officer...I’ll transfer you across...”

Again, the bloody music before a pleasant-sounding woman picked up the line.

“Detective Lind, is it? You’re a Murder Dee, aren’t you? What interest do you have in a series of assaults and rapes on the Hospital Grounds?”

“Gloria Evie Mitchell was a Nursing Sister here at the Hospital. I am Lead Detective on her decapitation and death case...but I’m also intrigued by the number of assaults and rapes in the last twelve months committed in the same area...arrm...I’m interested to see if there is a connection”.

“Oh...sorry...forgive my ignorance...”

You should be sorry, I thought. Not putting into words what I really thought of the woman who spoke down her nose the longer our conversation continued with she thinking she was being criticized for a slack job...I must remember to ask Tellie what the woman is like to be a work colleague.

“Yes...forensic search? Was every curved seating arrangement examined in that landscaped area?”

“Arrh...no. Only the section closest to where the victim was found...a problem?”

“Our Perp could have been sitting in any one of those ‘cut-out’ circular seating areas waiting for the right woman to come along...my fault in not asking you to check every circular seating area...and the ground around there. Umm...could you go back and examine those other areas from the Staff Entrance Bay up to the Staff Parking Area...and the nearby brick paving areas at each point?”

“Detective? It’s been several days...”

“Humour me will you. There’s been no rain or frost as far as I know. Let me know the results. You have our Responsibility Codes and Case File number. Thank you”. I hung up not wanting an elongated excuse as to why they had not thought of it while on site. My fault I guess as the Lead Case Officer. What they heck...we’re only human. I had to smile as the extent of trace found could be mountainous with half the population including Patients of the Hospital known to sit out there on a fine day!

I returned to Marge’s Wardroom and stepped lightly across to the window line. I thought Marge was still dozing but she commented on how pretty the area looked during the day.

“A place not to tread at night though I betcha that wasn’t the initial intent of the Architect or whomever designed that area...” Marge rolled over and with her other hand grabbed the ‘pull-up handle’ to sit up straighter in the bed. With grunts and groans she looked over at me, then at Sophie.

“How’s the old bloke treating you, young lady?”

“Good...”

At that comment I turned to look at my old partner. The swelling to the side of her face was receding though the yellow and brown bruising still showed she had taken a decent whack to the side of her face and neck. Still...it didn’t look good.

“I’m to be released on Friday...thank Christ”.

“You’ve hardly paid homage to the man in all the years I’ve known you”.

“Yeah, well...I’d pay homage to anyone who can help me get out of this place as early as next Friday...I’m over it! Yes Tonto, I’m bloody impatient to get over it”. She smiled knowing she had taken the moniker from Shelley and her silly repartee in calling me ‘little one feather’ and some such.

“You were lucky...” Calling me Tonto warmed my heart even though it had been Shelley who had started the whole Tonto, Kemosabe thing and our repartee on the horses...funny, but I missed that light-heartedness and absurd comedy.

“Yeah, so they say...I’m glad I still had that training in unarmed combat from the old days still in my mind...I got him flush on the hipbone with the heel of my foot...that had to have hurt. I saw him hobbling away so it did...the bastard. He’s had no training in unarmed combat as he didn’t stand in the correct position to deflect the heel of my foot...he’s bloody lucky I wasn’t exactly right to kick his balls up under his armpits where any sort of under-arm deodorant would sting like blazes. All the nurses are talking about their colleague...decapitated and lacerated down the length of her body...now that is one sick bastard...not ma’man, I’m certain of that”. She looked at me as though challenging me to disagree with her hypothesis.

“Hah...they have been saying you were screaming expletives loud enough to wake the dead...” Me staying away from any conflict with my former partner...

“Yeah, well...it bought the security guards arunning quick smart, but they are so overweight and out of condition they couldn’t catch a one-legged tortoise...next time, he’ll have the stiletto heel of my shoe straight in the middle of his forehead...if I happen to be wearing a pair...which is kind of rare I must admit...you collar that murder case here at the hospital?”

“Yeah...a bloody sight, let me tell you...”

“You didn’t look at the victim, did you Sophie? You couldn’t look at the remains. You’ll have to come to terms with that if you want to remain a Murder Dee. Isn’t that right, Joe?”

I smiled, nodded.

“Like you Joe. You’ll have to overcome your fear of flying as it looks as though Danni is bedded in for a couple of years down in Melbourne...”

“Tellie has a big mouth...what, the two of you sharing hours on the phone, eh? No secrets huh?” I replied a little miffed at my phobia getting out.

“Yer can’t really take a dig at me about gory murder scenes now, can you?” Sophie countered.

“Don’t get too smart, young lady...the two are as different as chalk and cheese...”

“Listen to the man...he can make sense of a nonsensical situation...typical male!” Marge joined in. “Any progress on that homicide?”

I shook my head.

“Funny...I can’t tell you where I heard it but my assault on the Uni campus is the sixth such incident over the past eighteen months or so...some-one is getting away with assault and rape...enough to continue the habit if it is the same son of a bitch...could be he is also responsible for all those rapes and assaults here at the hospital...you know, he has broaden his field of operation as there wasn’t sufficient pert young women at the Uni...”.

“And the incidents of assault and rape in these hospital grounds is even worse...ten assaults and rapes in the past year...not all assaults have led to rape...though it was obvious that is what the perp had in mind...but it is possible it is the same perp who has been honing his skills. I’ll agree with you on that one Mar”.

“Any DNA to substantiate that claim? You know...that it is the same person...he must leave traces of himself at every crime site...and in the women if it extends to rape?”

“I haven’t much followed that point up as all these cases have been overseen by the local guys. Our Murder Case seems to have been a one-off incident...touch wood”.

“So far...”

“Yeah, so far...”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“He didn’t mention that Joe...Senior Sergeant Mahmoud didn’t mention those numbers attributable to the University grounds assaults...”

“Could have been an oversight I guess, as we were asking questions of a homicide in the hospital grounds...not on the Uni campus. I’ll give him a ring...”

I walked towards the external window-line to make the call. I was about to close my mobile down when the phone at the other end was picked up.

“Sorry...arrh...this is Sergeant Mahmoud’s phone. Who is calling please?”

Not bad, I thought. A promotion, an increase of twenty-five percent in his wages package I would imagine, his own office and a woman to answer his mobile. I identified myself and asked that the Senior Sergeant return my call. I supplied my number. He rang back quickly, apologising for his absence and asking what my query was.

“Staff! A bastard until you skim the troublemakers out of the equation...I still have a few to go...the assaults, attempted rapes, and rapes within the University grounds...that too was becoming a problem. I apologise for not mentioning it but as you were the Lead Detectives in that ghastly homicide within the hospital grounds, I didn’t think it was important to your Case. Sorry...yes...um...why is it a concern of yours as you are murder does not responsible for assaults, attempted rapes, and rapes?”

“Um...yes...we are trying to cover the board to see whether there is any connection between the hospital attacks and those on the Uni campus. How many? On the Uni campus? I understand it was around five in the past year...culminating in Marjory Hendricks’ assault a week ago...”

“She was your partner once...yes? She was lucky as the last two assaults before hers have ended in rape...I guess she put up a fair fight which caused the perp to flee before he could have his way with your friend...your former partner”.

“Any evidence to suggest the same perp may be involved?”

“Arrh...I’m not up to date on those assaults as I transferred before any DNA trace comparison evidence was known. Arrh...Senior Constable Grace Stafford out of the Liverpool Station has inherited those cases...one sec...I’ll give you her number...one moment as I fish it out...sorry”.

I wrote down the number on my mobile as he read it out.

“She’s a good operator...I reckon she’s not long in that job as a promotion will beckon her...she has nous...and balls!”

I transferred her number into my mobile...Liverpool Area Command, ringing her immediately.

“Detective? How can I help you?”

A voice that would calm a tempest, a smile in the tone of her voice. I explained my interest in the attacks on women in both the hospital and university precincts over the last twelve months, and me and my partner being the Lead Dees in the recent homicide of a Nursing Sister in the grounds of the hospital have an interest in all the attacks.

“Arrh...and as you are a Murder Dee, what is your interest in those assaults and rapes in both the Uni and Hospital grounds?”

I explained my interest as succinctly as I could, leaving out that the last assault within the university grounds was Marjory Hendricks, my former partner and colleague for around twelve years. I was supposing that maybe, the Perp in all the Cases had stepped up to vicious assaults that included decapitation.

“You think there could be connections? The young Nursing Sister who was killed. Was she raped?”

“I don’t know, but I would be derelict in not looking down that avenue of investigation as we try to unravel our murder case...”

“Yes...um...yes. I have thought the same thing and have requested Forensics to compare all available DNA trace on all the assaults in both the hospital and university grounds...could be another week or two...”

She was up with it...I was impressed. I was tempted to add that Senior Sergeant Mahmoud had failed to request a similar comparison examination while he was in charge.

“Yes...let’s just say that the former ‘In-Charge Officer’ failed to think there was a connection...”

“Descriptions from the victims? Is there any similarities?”

“Descriptions are notoriously unreliable but yes, I have two of my officers comparing those aspects as we speak...”

“Could you keep me in the loop Senior Constable?”

“Certainly, Detective...and you me”.

I rang off and walked back over to the bed to pick up the remnants of the conversation between Sophie and Marge about the shoes her perp was wearing.

“Boxers’ ring shoes. They shouldn’t be worn about as the soles wouldn’t take much punishment on most surfaces away from the ring...” Marge concluded. I nodded getting the gist of the conversation. Sophie excused herself saying nature was calling exiting the wardroom looking for public toilets ignoring each wardroom having their own shower and ablution Ensuite conveniences. I shook my head, raising my eyebrows as I mentioned to Marge that this was not an unusual occurrence as Sophie seemed to disappear at the drop of a hat.

“You’re a little ambivalent in regard to your young partner...hmm?”

I nodded, not wanting to get into it now. I gave her a smile, a kiss on the lips and a wave as I too exited the hospital room, almost colliding with Sophie as she rushed back into the room. I gestured towards the Ensuite door shaking my head as I did so.

“Yeah...I know, but there was a toilet block for visitors down the corridor...um...there are three Gyms used by boxers...not gyms that the usual gym junky uses...but gyms used by the serious boxing fraternity...one in Blacktown which I think is too far away, one at Pendle Hill and the other at West Parramatta...Holroyd...a stone’s throw away...”

“Worth a visit, you reckon?”

She nodded as we waited for the Lift down, that look on her face that meant she was on the hunt...

“Um...Sophs? Don’t get confused about which case is ours, huh? We are investigating the recent homicide, not Hendricks’ attack, okay?”

“Yeah, I get that...but if our investigations can lead us to Maggie’s attacker, then all the better especially if it seems all the attacks in the hospital and Uni grounds are connected...one large swoop picks up all the bastards who like attacking defenceless, young women in the middle of cold dark nights”.

There was a note of venom which I had never heard before from my young partner.

Good!

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Joe? Tellie here. This is not a personal call, okay? Trace Elements found around the victim...arrh...sorry...the Nursing Sister who was decapitated at the Westmead Hospital...”

“Gloria Evie Mitchell...” I reminded her. She appeared a little nervous.

“Sorry...yes...do you think she felt much?”

“Um...they did a series of tests in France when the guillotine was being used daily...no...the body immediately goes into shock which minimises...or masks any pain felt...as long as the cut is clean and quick like the action of a guillotine...much more humane than death by hanging which was much preferred in most other countries having ties to Great Britain”.

“You’re having a lend of me...”

“Truly my love. No...”

“Okay...I’ll do a little research of my own to confirm or debunk your theory...arrh...where was I? Yes...um...yeah... we recovered mainly sweat globules which we were lucky to retrieve from the grassy area though several were lifted from the concrete pathway and the brick paving area in front of that circular seating area. A lucky result by a young Forensic Trace Officer has produced a hit...arrh...a Moses A’Aropode. Hope I pronounced that correctly. A Samoan national who has served time for assault, rape, attempted rape, and attempted murder in his home country. There is no evidence that he arrived in Australia by legal means. Could have used an illegal Passport or come through the various Ports of Call on the eastern seaboard. Could have been a deckhand on a deep-sea Trawler...who knows. He has an International Arrest Warrant taken out on him by the Samoan Authorities. He had been identified by witnesses to the crime and forensic trace at both crime sites. Both savage assaults causing the near death of two young Samoan women in Apia...the Capital City of Samoa...neither woman were raped which to me is a bit puzzling as his previous criminal acts show a propensity to rape and to assault young women. These charges against him which caused the International Warrant are for attempted murder. He’s upped the ante so it seems. They usually don’t do that, do they?”.

“Mmm...no...usually a rapist sticks with what gives him the pleasure...the power over women for which he is striving. For a bloke to go from assault and rape over to attempted murder shows an incredibly angry soul...he has a real hate of women...how do you spell the name?”

She spelt out the name slowly, a smile in her tone of voice as though she was dealing with an idiot!

CHAPTER TWENTY

We had not decided on which Boxers' Gym we would visit first when a burst of a nervous voice blasted from the Com radio...all channels.

'Officer requiring assistance; shots fired; urgent assistance required; Parkland Road North Rocks. I repeat...'

"We're close to North Rocks. Sophs? Do a youie, click on our lights and siren and head for North Rocks Road. The Cumberland Highway crosses over it...two minutes away...if you give it all it's got...but don't break the sound barrier!" That would be the last time I would ever ask Sophie to plant her foot to the floor!

She planted her foot after doing a handbrake turn that startled the bejeezus out of me. The throaty roar of the exhaust was near music to my ears though as we headed back the way we had come. Most drivers veered out of our way but there were those who must have been deaf, their rear-view mirrors never used as they stubbornly kept to their lane. A couple of blasts on our horn, blinking high beam eventually dislodged them from the outside lane though precious moments were lost in getting around these cretins!

I'd always subscribed to the theory that my former partner, Shelley Shields was one of the best 'pursuit' drivers around. Now I needed to look again at that supposition as Sophie was a step above Shelley...so much so she frightened the hell out of me. I looked across at her, her seat set forward to its limits; a 'booster cushion' ensuring she could see over the bonnet; a steely, concentrated look that thrilled and frightened me at the same time. All she needed was her 'CAM' license and she'd be racing on a track! That had been one on her bucket list, so she had once confided in me...to race the souped-up MGA that her late father had built and which she loved to drive...anywhere. Any time. She'd mentioned it several times as though it was very much on her wish list!

As we neared the street, we doused the siren letting the radiator, rear parcel tray, and windscreen blue and red lights blink off and on. She slowed to a crawl watching the row of suburban houses slip slowly by.

“Stand down all those personnel heading towards North Rocks. Situation resolved...I repeat, all personnel heading towards North Rocks to stand down as the situation has been resolved. Reports from the site have indicated the situation has been resolved”.

“Bloody hell, we’re at the address in any case. Sophs? Drive up the street and stop at the house number...there...there’s a Divvy Van parked skew-if in front of it. Stop up close behind it”.

She turned off the motor as we sat in the Unmarked looking around, parked up tight to the rear of the Divvy Van. The tick of the cooling motor the only sound. I quietly lowered my passenger side window craning my neck to look in every direction.

“See anything?” I whispered. Why was I whispering? I can’t tell you why, but it seemed the right thing to do...

She shook her head.

“Two Ambulances have pulled up behind us...” She whispered back, stabbing her thumb towards the rear of the Unmarked.

I wasn’t too sure where Comcentral were getting their information from, but from our perspective, a deathly silence did not engender confidence in the situation being resolved satisfactorily. No assistance required. If the situation had been resolved, I’d have expected a couple of Uniforms from the Divvy Van to approach us...there was nothing except that silence that turns scary...makes the hairs on the back of your neck stand and wave in the breeze. I sniffed the air a couple of times like a wary fox not comfortable with what he can smell. Me? I couldn’t smell a bloody thing...but the silence was overbearing.

“Mmm...” I unholstered my Glock, checking the magazine, placing one in the spout, and clicking the safety on. “You stay here...I’ll go tell the Amboes to stay in their vehicles and I’ll then check out the house. The front door is wide open...”

“That’s a security screen door most likely locked and Boss...where you go, I am right behind you...you go in, so do I”.

I wish she’d stop calling me boss. I was her partner on equal footing, but she would always come back that a Grade One Dee on probation was not equal to a Grade Four boss...I couldn’t argue with that point. Her logic beyond reproach had me groping for words never found. I nodded which I think she may have thought was my acquiescence to the ‘tag’. The matter resolved to her satisfaction.

I sat silently, thinking we should call for back-up before we did anything.

“Right...as quiet as possible...just click the doors closed and have your Glock out ready to use”.

We crouched to walk back to the two Ambulances to tell them to hang five until we checked the joint out before we called them in. The Amboes did not hear the later ‘All Points’ to stand down as the matter had been resolved...that was not the impression I was getting at present...that the matter had been resolved.

“Around the back...be careful when passing any windows...”

Sophie nodded angrily. She had topped the class in such manoeuvres and was always the one in demand to cover for a colleague in pretend ‘war games’ back at the Goulburn Academy which she angrily informed me in a forced whisper.

The silence was oppressive hanging heavily around our shoulders. I thought I could hear the rafters’ creep and the incessant chewing of termites on stud timbers. The sounds of traffic and other suburban echoes were drowned out as if a ‘silent cone’ had been lowered over the entire property. I was feeling a little skittered which surprised me. After all these years in the Murder Squad and a decade of living by my wits in undercover narcotics, I felt my nerves raw on every extremity. Tellie and the girls flashed through my brain, and I balked, uneasy about continuing. My mouth was dry...swallowing difficult. I stopped and turned to Sophie.

“I think we should call for back-up...wait until we have reinforcements...that’s in the Policy and Procedures Manual”.

Sophie stood, frowning as she assessed the situation.

“We maybe too late if we wait...”

I nodded, not at all sure of what we may be too late for. None-the-less, I straightened to ease my back. “Nah!” I whispered. “We go in now...you with me?” My foreboding disappearing. as I was again on top of the situation. I had made a positive move which dispelled my fears. “C’mon. Let’s go”. I commanded confidently, still in a soft whisper.

The side gate was open as we continued to crouch down especially passing any windows which were few on this side wall of the house. We gained the back corner of the house, again with nothing to see. I was beginning to sweat with my breathing ragged. Not good, I thought. Not good at all. As if I had spoken, Sophie sensed my apprehension, moving past me to begin to walk along the path beside an open veranda that ran the width of the house. Two steps up

onto the veranda. The back screen door and back door were open, a prone figure lying across the threshold. A pool of blood formed around his torso and head. Sophie bent down to check his pulse and to remove the handgun he half-held. She looked back at me to shake her head.

The guy was dead.

She stepped over the lifeless figure to sidle through the opening, immediately entering the Kitchen. The dead guy's handgun she placed carefully on the Kitchen counter. There was blood smears on the countertop and across the cupboard doors above. I stayed at the entryway, the start of a smile on my lips. Sophie had not flinched at the pool of blood or the smeared remnants...she gestured for me to follow her up the hallway checking room by room. Left and right. Sophie crept into the first bedroom...obviously a kids' room where six kids were squeezed into the one double bed. They looked as though they were all asleep until she checked for pulse...they were all dead but there were no indications of cause of death though one or two kids had foam dribbling from their mouths suggestive of them being poisoned...what a bastard...why kill kids who had their entire lives ahead of them. A thought suddenly popped into my brain...why spare their lives when both Mum and Dad had also been shot to death...maybe. My imagination once again going in an uncontrollable direction.

I heard a gasp as Sophie sunk to her knees beside the bed. With tears flowing she prayed for the poor children.

As she unsteadily rose and tiptoed to my side at the bedroom door, she sunk into my side to rent her sadness. I waited until she had silently sobbed herself out wondering how in hell women can do that...when I allowed myself to cry, I wailed like a banshee unable to stop the awful noise erupting from my mouth.

"I didn't know you were religious..." I whispered into her ear as she hung onto me.

"I'm not..." She sniffled, swiping the sleeve of her coat across her eyes. "But don't you think these innocent young victims of some sadistic and cruel bastard deserve a little sentiment...a little respect and a few words for Our Lord to accept them into His arms...don't you think?" She again swiped her coat sleeve across her eyes to try and quell the flow of tears.

"Yeah, I guess...if you think that way..." I countered in a husky whisper. My wail beginning to climb up my throat. I double-downed on its eruption as the Devil himself would hear it...

The Lounge Room was empty and silent though blood drops showed someone had staggered into the room on their way out to the rear door...to escape...not making it. I scolded myself on drawing up scenarios in my mind as we were not even on top of the situation...my

suppositions could wait until the scene was under control with those wild thoughts coming after that...

We moved further up the hallway to open the Bathroom door with my foot. Blood. Plenty of it and I'd say its owner had bled out in the bathtub. He was lying at an uncomfortable angle, his skull pierced by the old-fashion, fifties-style chrome waterspout. I figured he had fallen from loss of blood, mostly puddled on the floor. He completely oblivious as the huge hole in the side of his skull made sure he was dead...and two entry wounds in his chest. Why he staggered into the Bathroom was anyone's guess...and I knew it a waste of time trying to figure it out as a logical sequence...he was well past thinking logically!

Again, Sophie shocked me by moving past me to check his pulse and remove the handgun that he was half-lying on. She placed it gently in the wash basin after she had removed the magazine, expelling the ten-round mag of its remaining bullets...seven in the mag she indicated with her fingers. Three expended. Again, she leaned over to check the young man's pulse, again shaking her head.

Two men. Both shot. Six kids more than likely poisoned on our first assessment. What in hell had gone down here?

Stay at home orders due to Covid adding that extra layer of pressure onto an already overstretched existence in suburbia... emotions rubbed raw by the enforced shutdown. Yeah, that worked for me.

We walked into a front bedroom which was neat and tidy with not a thing out of place. I pointed to the ajar door opposite across the hallway that would be the main Bedroom. Sophie nodded...this had to be the site of turmoil that we had seen as we tiptoed through the rest of the house. The Bedroom door had a smeared blood handprint on the outside face...not a good sign. We stood either side of the door as I gently eased the door wide open with a foot. A little afraid to poke my nose around the door edge. I was about to move my gun hand around the door edge then my eye...old age, uncertainty and anxiety were gaining control of my actions.

"That's far enough...you poke your nose around the doorframe, and I'll shoot it off...I reckon I've got two of your mates so really, don't you think that's enough?" The voice was tremulous, nervy, and forced with pain amplified.

"I'm Detective Joseph Lind and my partner Detective Sophie Grasso..."

"What area are you from?" This time there was less emotion in her voice.

"The Murder Squad...out of the Police Building at Parramatta..."

“What are you guys doing at a domestic violence incident?”

“Hardly a local issue now with eight bodies so far...”

“Count one more though I heard her move some time ago...nothing since...”

“Who are you?”

“Constable Greta Turnbull out of the Liverpool District Area. I’m stationed at Fairfield...”

“You flying solo on a domestic violence call-out? That’s so wrong!” I angrily replied as I stepped into the door opening in full view of our Constable. My hands raised, holding my Glock by the trigger guard to show I meant no harm. She was sitting on the floor, leaning up against the far wall beside an unmade King size bed. She had blood on a hand that was pressing into a bloody wound to her side. In her right hand she held her Glock resting it carefully on her knee. There was blood trails down the wall that disappeared behind her back. She had been hit by several slugs hitting various parts of her body, forcing her back to the wall with gravity allowing her to sink to a sitting position, her knees drawn up with her resting her Glock firmly over the knee...she had her wits about her even though she had been hit by at least one bullet.

“He got a lucky shot in that slammed me against the wall...I’m sure I got a kill shot in on the guy...I just sunk to the floor...I couldn’t move...”

“Could you lower your Glock...or place it on the floor. Why didn’t you press your comm-button or request back-up on your personal radio channel? Sophs, get the Amboes here quick...”

Sophie left the room. I heard the front door open with Sophie’s shrill whistle alerting the Amboes.

“My radio? It took the full force of one bullet blowing the emergency button and call-out functions to smithereens. I’ve just been sitting here waiting as I knew back-up would eventually arrive...”

“After you’d bled out by the look of it...you mentioned some-one else here in the room?”

“Yeah...she’s on the other side of the bed...on the floor”.

I holstered my Glock as I walked quickly around the bed. The woman was lying on her back, her breathing ragged and painful. A two-man ambo team came into the room followed by

Sophie and another Ambo. I moved out of their way pointing to the woman on the floor. I thought she was close to death...so did the Amboes.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

We were sitting in our Unmarked, windows down with a pleasant breeze wafting through the car. Sipping on large McCoffees that a thoughtful Constable had bought for us...along with a dozen other orders given out to a multitude of other onsite Officers. We were watching a steady parade of Forensic Trace and Forensic Pathologists come and go through the front door of the house in question.

Everyone was asking the same question...what had gone down inside the house to see eight deaths...another as it was touch and go for the woman according to the Paramedics. She had been whisked off to hospital under a cloud of *'will she make it or not'*. A Code Red patient. The young Constable who had walked into the mess was a mess herself, unable to answer a single question, mostly from the S and E Detectives summoned thinking a cop may have drawn her pistol and fired causing the death of one of the two male deaths. It was protocol to bring these bastards into the murder scene when there is such a scenario But they usually attacked when subtle diplomacy may be the best way to go.

In her present state she was unable to articulate what had her sitting against a wall in the master bedroom and who had taken a pot shot at her. It was not a fatal shot but was still very painful. I was pleased when her District Boss came to rescue her from the continuous questions fired at her by the S&E Detectives...achieving nothing but to shorten the odds of her leaving the Force once she was able...another promising career pulled up short. I was still angered by her solo entrance onto the scene...that was a no-no in all branches of the Force, especially if it had been called in as a DV incident with shots fired.

“Good morning detectives...” Detective Eric Hall offered as he bent to see us still lounging in the front seats of our Unmarked. We expected visitors to tap on the roofline to denote their presence. “You were the first on-scene detectives...can you give me an account of what went down here this morning?”

I took a sip of coffee before turning my head to look up at him.

“Detective? We may have been the first-on-site after Constable Turnbull, but we are still baffled as to what may have gone down here this morning...we still don’t know, and every summation has holes in it...we took our time making it inside the house...”

“With your handguns drawn?”

I gave him a sour look.

“Detective? You’d have to be a complete idiot to enter this house without guns drawn. We had no idea what went down, whether there were bodies shot to hell or a perp laying in wait wanting to go out in style by shooting a couple of cops...me and my partner...”

“Why didn’t you call for back-up before entering?”

There it was! The crux of the matter and the point they wanted to crucify me on.

Again, I gave him a stony glare.

Detective?” I paused to take another sip of coffee. “According to the ‘all points’ on the Comcentral radio chatter, the matter had been resolved so while we thought the situation was over and it was safe to enter the house, we were not going to call the troops in until we had a fair idea they weren’t needed...and as it turned out, they weren’t required...what would you have done in the same set of circumstances Detective?”

He grunted as he stood, tapping a rhythm with his fingers on the windowsill of the car before walking away. I too grunted knowing they could try a second time to nail me on something...they always did!

“That went well Boss...I couldn’t have come up with that scenario at a moments notice...do you think they’ll be back?”

“As tomorrow follows to-day...yep, they will. They need something for their trouble being out of the office...and I am one of their favourite bods. They’ve tried for ages to crucify me with embarrassing results...but...they’ll keep trying to get me...”.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“What are we waiting for?” Sophie asked, getting a little bored sitting there sucking on a large latte. “We’ve got eight bodies laid out in there and we are out here twiddling our thumbs like bloody nincompoops!”

“Yes, we are...but it won’t be long. At present we have bugger all to ratify...to tell us what went down in there. Without any form of ID from both male corpses, we cannot even knock-on neighbours’ doors looking for further information...arrh, here comes our salvation riding a white horse so to speak...Bree, how are you? Have you been formally introduced to my young colleague?”

“Arrm...yes. How are you, Sophie?”

Sophie returned the smile nodding her hello.

“We’ve called in Ballistics as we don’t really know what handgun shot what person. This is only going to be verified by the results of the autopsy, ballistics, and forensic evidence. At present it’s a jig-saw puzzle. The wallets of the two male victims...and their photographic Driver’s Licenses which have been connected successfully to each victim. That gives you a starting point at least...oh...and their mobile phones. You may get something from them...if not transfer them over to the Trace team for them to run a history on each”.

“Thanks Bree...nothing else?”

“Um...not from us although we are sure all six kids were fed a drug overdose...cocaine we think. In their o.j...who-ever did that is a bloody callous bastard, eh? The guy whose body was being used as a door stop has priors...mainly drug related...cocaine being his favoured drug of use and sale...with a little ‘grass’ on the side. Forensic Trace may offer up the key to unlock the steps that have left eight deaths and a ninth in critical condition. The young copper? She stepped into a snake pit, so it seems. The person who called in the ruckus this morning we think lives next door up the street. That household your start, hmm? And yes...when you’ve finished with the phones and wallets, pass them over to the Forensic Trace Lead...don’t wipe the memories as you’ll be in everyone’s bad book...I shouldn’t need to remind you of that fact, Joe”. A smile, a wink and she turned to return to the ‘Death House’, changing into a fresh set of bio-suit and booties. The former suit chucked into a bio-bin near the front door. I thought she came out to visit us as an excuse to rid herself of her bio-gear for a while...

I nodded as I snapped on a pair of latex gloves and removed each wallet from its evidence bag. Sophie took one, I the other. I took shots of various pieces as I removed them from the wallet. I took a shot of each ‘plastic’ he had, all from different Banks. He was a spender, his trade in cocaine helping him with his spending habit so it seemed. The only cash was a fifty dollar and a one hundred dollar note folded up and slipped into an outer sleeve of the wallet...this was his ‘get-away’ money.

I had a similar cache and I guess most males did.

“Hmm...you can really get a handle on the man by what was in his wallet and how it was stored. My guy was a bit of an OCD freak with nothing superfluous in the wallet. A careful man. A man who was careful, studied. Two cards, both from a Credit Union. One was an Eftpost card, the other a Debit card. Bet he used that one for on-line transactions and only moved cash from an ‘every day’ account when he needed to...no large amount of money kept in this account...a careful man...”

“Careful, don’t paint too much of the picture without something more than the man’s wallet contents...it could lead you in the wrong direction. Sure, make assumptions but don’t anchor them in concrete...okay?”

Sophie nodded though I was unsure whether she took it as a criticism or a constructive criticism.

It was a good half-hour before we returned the wallets to each evidence bag, sealing and initialling each in turn ensuring each bag held both our signatures and personnel numbers. We had enough to work on, not the least the home address of each man. Firstly, we would canvass near neighbours to see whether we could gather further information that would help in the case.

We were lucky at the first close neighbour’s door.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“Missus Ferzi is it?” I asked as I showed her my ID card. Sophie followed my lead only to have her ID card snatched from her hand.

“You too young to be police lady...and too short too!”

“Missus Ferzi...I can assure you she is my partner. She is like an apprentice-in-training...I’m teaching her the ropes...”

“You listen good chile...he teach you well...you here to ask about next door. Christina Elban...A fine name. That her father’s name...he proud of her...much proud...not the name of the bastard that she married or the father of her chill-ren. She a good girl trying to do right thing with her three chill-ren. She a good mother trying to make sure her ex-husbane have nothing to do with his chill-ren. He is a drug dealer...he no good...”

“Do you know his name?”

“Yes...” She stood on the threshold of her front door deep in thought. I was concerned she may have turned to stone...or salt! “His name...Constantine...Con...Constantine Haddad...he bad man. He hit Christina many times, so she toll me one day. He hurt her. She divorce him and has the Court agree that an adult be with the chill-ren all the time he sees them...but that no good for the bastard. He comes when he likes to see his chill-ren...whenever he likes...he force his way inta house like he own it. He not own it...it given to Christina by the Judge...a good man...he sees how bad Con Haddad is...even when the Pol-eece are called...he try to fight them”.

“How do you know he is a drug dealer?”

“Christina toll me one day...she a fine woman...and I sees him in his car sniffing up some white powder before he goes sees his chill-ren. Christina not let him in...she sees him too...she not want her children seeing their father like that...he almost push down front door. Then the pol-eece-man come and take him away...the chill-ren scared. Crying...it terrible as the chill-ren see him fighting pol-eece-man out in front yard...they scared”.

“Has Christina Elban met another man?”

“Oh sure...he a good man. He has three chill-ren himself...all around same age as Christina’s three...they play out the backyard together...laughter and shrieks like you hear when chill-ren playing good. But him...he try to get his chill-ren when Court says...every weekend. But that not happen. His ex. wife? She treat him like dirt, use chill-ren to hurt him...it sad...he take ex-wife...they divorce before Christina and her bad husbane...he take her to Court, and Judge says his wife must obey Court Order from Judge...she ignore it all the time. He go all the way to Newcastle to get chill-ren for weekend...he not see them after driving all that way...she turn off lights in house and pretend she not home...all the time. He cry...but not get angry...as he says that is bad for his chill-ren to see...he nice man. He not see his tree chill-ren so he stop paying money to her...the Court say he bad for doing that! Why she not bad for stopping him seeing his chill-ren? She a terrible mother! Why all this...yer know...troubles wid families hurting one anudder...the only peoples hurt are the chill-ren”.

Why indeed I thought. It’s the kids who suffer all the time. I smiled at her. Leant towards her to ask in a quiet conciliatory tone.

“Would you happen to know his name?”

“Um...Barry...Barry Bright...he nice man. Her ex? Con Haddad. He bring shame on his father’s name...he a bad man”.

The two names corresponded with the two Drivers' Licenses we had. I showed both images to her on my Mobile. She identified each man from the photo we had copied from their drivers' licenses onto our phones.

We visited other addresses in the street and the two residences at the back of the crime scene house. We received little else except the sounds of kids playing or the roar of an angry man. The local police called numerous times to evict Haddad from the premises...a volcano that exploded often according to the neighbour living opposite the 'death' house.

This helped a lot, but we were still non-the-wiser about the order of events on this frightful morning. It was obvious we would have to wait for the forensic trace, ballistics, and autopsy results before we could conclude how the events unfolded.

Christina Elban was placed in an induced coma so any advice she could supply was up in the air...we would require patience and shoe leather to resolve the situation any which way!

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

"What now, Boss?" Sophie asked as we stood at the kerb line next to our Unmarked. I glanced at my watch and scratched at my neck. Me called the Boss was still grating though I didn't know how to stop her from continuing with the habit...I guess it could be better than the 'little Plains Indian with One Feather' that Shells often lumped onto me...or she often called me Tonto which confused me...I couldn't be the Lone Ranger and his 'side-kick' at the same time according to my reasoning. That didn't seem to stop her name-calling which I must admit, I missed...

"Um...both Drivers' Licenses detailed addresses around Newcastle. I presume they're current. If we leave now, we can stop at that Truck Stop up past Ourimbah on the M1 to get something to eat. We were able to net a couple of facts from our neighbourhood trawl, nothing of significant importance to the case, but it helped to fill out the background. We can interview whom-ever and if they are family, ask them to travel to Sydney to formally identify our Vics...we maybe a little late coming back to Sydney but I'll clear it with the Boss on the way up...good enough?"

"Good enough for me, Boss..." She replied as she unlocked our Unmarked.

After a quick pitstop for a sandwich and an excuse for a coffee, we continued up to Newcastle and the Bright address detailed on Barry Bright's Driver's Licence.

“Missus Bright?” I began as the woman opened the door. She was short, squat, and grey haired which gave an indication of her age, unless she was prematurely grey-haired. Looking at her, she was in her mid-seventies, so she had to be in her late thirties when she gave birth to her son.

“Arrm...I’m Detective Joe Lind and this is my colleague Detective Grasso. Is your husband at home? May we come in?”

She balked at that enquiry instead looking intently at our ID cards. She then looked up at me, a worried look seeming to further age her countenance.

“Bazza...something has happened to my son...what has happened to him? What has he done? I’ll go get my Kevin”. She closed the door quickly. Her soft footfalls receding as she moved further into the house.

I heard heavy footfalls coming towards the front door. Out of habit I stepped to one side of the door ordering Sophie to stand on the other side with her hand on her Glock. The door suddenly swung wide and a tall, stout, grey-haired man stood at the threshold, a huge beer gut that announced a large investment in its growth preceding his advance! He looked at both of us, giving Sophie a second top to bottom scrutiny.

“The missus says you are coppers. Can I see some form of ID please?”

He carefully perused our ID cards before huffing, unlocking, and opening the screen door to allow our entry. He guided us into a pleasant, airy Lounge Room, sun motes streaming in dancing on sunbeams. A panoramic view of Mereweather Beach down the hill.

“This about our son Barry, is it? Hah...he’s the one out of our five kids who has given me the greyest hair...what’s he gone and done?”

“I’m sorry to have to tell you but his body was found this morning...”

“Bloody Christ!” Mister Bright roared. Missus Bright must have been standing at the doorway as she came to sit beside her husband patting his knee. There were no show of tears as though they knew this was their son’s expected way to go. Either that or they were in a state of denial that their son was indeed dead. Could be a state of shock a better way to describe their non-committal response.

“How?” The old man asked as he fished a handkerchief from his pants pocket to blow his nose and wipe his eyes.

“There were two bullet wounds...either one could have killed him. At this stage of the investigation, we are unsure who his killer is. Would you have any idea who would want to kill him?”

“Where?” Mister Bright senior asked in a croaky voice, shaking his head as he didn’t have a clue who would want to kill his son.

“At the address of a Christina Elban...”

They both nodded.

“Is she okay?”

“Arrh...she is in ICU in an induced coma. She too had been shot twice...”

“The kids? Barry’s three young ones...and Chrissie’s?”

“Um...the six children are dead...we suspect from an overdose of some type...”

The wail lifted the ceiling. A cry of anguish like I’d never heard before. It rose and fell without a stop for air, so it seemed. The old girl buried her head into the side of her husband, the howl muffled but still loud. Suddenly, the scream stopped mid-note and the woman slumped knocking her head on the timber floor as she fell. The collision with the hardwood floorboards opened a wound on the side of her forehead. A nosebleed which streamed blood over the floor.

“Bloody Christ!” The old bloke exclaimed as he knelt quickly to turn the woman onto her side. “I’ll get a towel to try and stop the bleeding...could you ring for an ambulance? That bitch of an ex-wife of Baz’s will cry blue murder. They’s been divorced for over two years, but she keeps up the pressure on him. Baz takes the shit as he does not want to stop seeing his kids...they’re his world and he wants them to remember him in a positive light as she piles on as much shit as she can about what a bastard he is...they’ve told me that...the kids...how long for the ambulance?”

“No more than five minutes...Sophs...go keep an eye out will you...Mister Bright? It may not be the right time to ask...but do you know whether your son owns a pistol...a handgun?”

He shook his head, looking up at me with an agonised countenance.

“No...he hates guns...and he always said that if he did own one, he’d knee-cap his ex...so every time she walked, she would know who did it to her...but no...never...he was not a gun

lover! But Chrissie's ex? Con Haddad? He had a bloody arsenal so Baz said once...all hidden away in a secret cupboard somewhere".

I didn't like that response as there were three handguns in the mix this morning at the Elban's address.

"What the hell!!!" A younger version of the old man strode into the room looking for a fight. "Mum!? She all right? What happened? Who in blazes are you?"

"Settle down son...sit down, will ya!" The old man commanded. The young bloke looked from his mother to his father then to me.

"They're coppers, son. Your brother...he was found dead this morning at Chrissie's place...including the kids...they've all bin killed too...Chrissie's three as well...a terrible thing...who would kill six lovely kids who had the world at their feet...who'd do a bastard act like that?"

The young bloke looked incredulously at his father.

"Queen bitch?" He uttered. "The kids too...Bazza? Did he commit suicide taking the kids with him to finally get the better of Queen 'B'...serves her right but as always, she'll never take any of the blame...he's dead...bloody hell! Chrissie? She all right?"

The old man shook his head.

"Quiet son. They don't know yet...they need one of us to go to Sydney to formally identify Bazza...I'll go. You stay with your mother...she fainted hitting her head on the floor as she went down...an Ambulance is coming..."

Sophie flew into the room followed closely by two Amboes who immediately went into action fussing over the old girl.

"Dad...you stay with Mum. I'll go as my car has a GPS finder built in...I'll go, hear me?"

I got the impression the old bloke was relieved that someone else had taken control of the situation. He didn't seem that keen to leave his wife on her own. That was his first responsibility in his eyes.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE (Author's Note)

The current crime wave enveloping Sydney at present can be traced back to the approval of the then Federal Labour Party in power to approve immigration of Muslim Lebanese families who were displaced from Lebanon's Hezbollah controlled Bekkah Valley. These displaced persons all refugees from the Lebanese Civil War that raged from 1975 to 1990 with close to 120,000 fatalities.

Sydney has the largest group of Lebanese in the country at about three hundred thousand persons. Melbourne the largest number of Greeks outside Greece. There are thirty-odd Lebanese crime families in Sydney at present, all wanting a larger slice of the drug trade, trying to enable themselves with certain illegal motorcycles gangs or those on the second tier keeping their heads above water by low-cost drug supplies.

In Sydney at present there are two families warring, the Hamze and Alameddine families. Conducting tit-for-tat shooting murders, drive-byes and exchanging angry words.

Between 2001 and 2009 it was the Darwiches, Razzak and Fahdas families shooting at each other for a larger slice of the drug distributions network; the supply and selling of most illegal substances. It only cooled in late 2009 when the patriarch of the Darwich family was shot to death outside his home, though the three families are still involved in illegal practises and are constantly being monitored by the Australian Federal Police and the NSW Police Force Narcotics Branch.

Most Lebanese families are hard-working, law-abiding citizens who are relieved they are far away from the continued strife in their home country. Lebanon at present is a bankrupt nation with little will to stop the corruption in the highest levels of Government.

Most of the Lebanese families living in Sydney are terrified of the criminal element that are named on the nightly Newscasts for 'drive-byes', assaults, and murder of fellow countrymen. The Sydney and New South Wales drug trade are either controlled by the illegal Bikie Motorcycle gangs or that small element of Lebanese families with Lebanese hotheads infiltrating the Bikie gangs with the result you have similar acts of violence now conducted in broad daylight...them snubbing their collective noses at the Cop Force as they carry out gun 'hits' in suburbia.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Carol Yard lived the next suburb over from the Bright family...one suburb over and a world away. The Bright's elevated home on the southern headland of Merewether Beach gave them expansive views over the famous beach and kilometres out to sea. By comparison, the Carol Yard abode was a small, squat fibro dwelling that had begun its life as a 'week-ender' and was beginning to be outshone by more salubrious buildings as neighbours...the suburb was beginning to be 'gentrified'. The original old houses purchased, demolished, and cleared. The allotments were on the generous size when compared to 'quarter-acre' blocks that permitted Villas to be built adding an additional dozen persons to each block. Height restrictions did not allow buildings of more than two levels...ground plus two was it. Otherwise, a lift and fire sprinklers had to be installed throughout to comply with the stringent building codes which added significantly to the cost of construction.

I knocked on the door that urgently needed a re-paint job. My knock took time to rouse the owner. I was about to knock harder and longer when the door inched opened. An eye peering at us through the gap.

"Yeah?" She asked as she opened the door wider. A snarl her welcoming address. We showed our ID cards which she didn't seem to comprehend until she opened her mouth. The door opened wide, and she stood upright looking suspiciously at us. Hanging onto the door edge she eyed us with scorn. The whiff of 'Mary J' smoke with its acrid smell could be discerned. The woman's eyes were almost shut as though she was about to drop to the floor and go to sleep. I figured there may be a combination of other substances with alcohol ticking the whole mix along.

"What's the bastard done now...it's the school holidays and I needed a break, so I dropped the kids off at his new girlfriend's place. At the front gate...and I then pissed off quick. What? He's gone to Court again just because I set my own rules and not those handed down by some git in a silly wig...so shoot me".

"May we come inside?" Sophie pleasantly asked.

"What for? What can't you say out here that you can say inside?"

I smart-tongue woman who would argue she had the right to do what she liked when she liked with her kids. Even loading them off to her Ex's new girlfriend's joint without so much as a hello/good-bye to check whether it was okay. Because of this latest round of insulting behaviour, Barry Benton Bright thinking more about his kids than himself had lost his job

because he wanted to take the mid-year school holidays off, so his parents had told us...that was not an isolated incident...

“That’s not my fault or my problem...” She caustically advised Sophie. It was obvious she was not about to invite us in, and I could guess at the reason. When she had opened her front door at Sophie’s knock, a cloud of pungent marijuana smoke escaped.

“Um...we’re not here to give you a ticket for smoking ‘jay’...we are murder squad detectives. I’m sad to say your three children have been found dead this morning...”

I got no further, instead being drowned out by a vitriolic outburst from the lady. All to do with how her objections to the Court had now come to fruition. Nothing at all about the condition or manner of death of her three kids.

“I told the bastards...I warned them so many times that this was going to be the endgame...just to get up my nose...the bastard”.

“Arrh...excuse me missus...could you travel down to Sydney to provide positive identification of the three bodies of your children?”

“No fucking way!! I ain’t got a Driver’s license...it’s been suspended. My car is unregistered, uninsured, and unroadworthy. I’ve bin pinged before driving the thing when I’ve bin high...and pissed on Jim Beam. Let the Bright family put themselves out...they know my kids...they can identify them!”

With that she slammed the door in our faces. The Brights could identify Barry Bright and his three kids, but the identity of the Yard/Haddad three kids could only be officially identified by a family member...the Morgue people can sort it out, I thought.

As I stepped off the small Porch area, I wondered how in hell she had dropped her three kids at Christina Elban’s address. She was willing to risk the safety of her three kids as she drove them down to Sydney when it suited her, but...

“There are some nice people around like the Bright family...but there are some bastards too...she didn’t bat an eyelid when she was told her kids were dead...” I simmered as we walked towards our Unmarked. “Hopefully, every one of the Deceased will be identified this afternoon...um...I would like to be present when most of the Vics are autopsied. I think that plus the forensic and ballistic evidence will be enough for us to figure out who killed whom. That will take about a week to get to us as informal advice with the completed report taking about a week longer. You up to spending to-morrow at the morgue laboratories viewing the entire six bodies being autopsied? It could give us an idea as to the order of events in that

house. If it doesn't, we may have to wait for all the forensic, ballistic and autopsy reports to come in for a resolution".

"Either that or we wait until Christina Elban is capable of talking with us..."

"Mmm...fingers crossed for her to return to the land of the living". I added, not confident we would ever get to interview her. She had been in a bad way when the Amboes arrived with a 'Code Red' her diagnosis as they sped towards the Hospital...not good...

"Yeah...I think so...yeah...I'll be up to six hours of watching dead bodies being abused by scalpel, saw and pliers...". This said with a certain degree of sarcasm from my young colleague. That to me was a funny thing to say, especially from one who only days ago, could not look at a bloody crime scene. We had crossed over that imaginary line with Sophie being hypnotised without her realising the process. Either that or she had swallowed some concrete to stiffen up...we'll see how effective she has conquered her Achilles Heel to-morrow at the Morgue but her performance at the 'death house' this morning had astounded me. It then twigged with me that any hypnosis does not last forever...she'll need ongoing top-ups.

I dropped her home then circled back heading towards my home...earlier than I had anticipated. I drove the Unmarked in under the backyard carport, sitting there listening to the engine cool. The three dogs all sat on their haunches, their tails sweeping an arc of clean concrete waiting for me to alight.

I went to open the driver's door but thought better of it. I slumped back into the driver's seat and scrolled up the Boss's number. It was about time I included her in the loop on the Nursing Sister homicide.

"Boss? We may have a definite identity of the Perp on the 'Headless Nursing Sister' Case. Um...the only problem is that he could have flown out of Sydney that same day in company with the Samoan International Rugby Union team here for the International Pacific Rugby Cup...I've made contact with the Samoan Authorities, but they want more than a voice over the phone. Our perp...a Mister Moses A'aropode...I don't know whether I've pronounced that right..." I spelt it out for her. "An up-and-coming Forensic Trace Officer pegged him. Three things...one, I have no idea as to what false name and Passport he used to fly from Sydney to Aria which is the capital of the Samoan Islands...two...the Samoan Authorities have issued an International Arrest Warrant on him as evidence points to him being the prime suspect in two recent attempted murders in Samoa...and three...there is no evidence of him entering Australia under that name...but his history in Samoa shows the same MO as that used against the Nursing Sister Gloria Mitchell in the grounds of Westmead Hospital recently".

“He could have used the same false name and passport to enter our country as he did to leave...um...have you strong evidence to link the man with our homicide?”

“Yes...DNA trace found around the area matches that held by the Samoan Authorities...”

“That’s good enough to request an interview...um...I’ll contact Border Force and Customs to conduct a Photo Recog Test of all the Samoan travellers and ‘look-alikes’ who were on that flight. I’ll get a mug shot from the Samoan Authorities...tomorrow as I think it would be close to midnight over there right now...do you know the time difference from here to there. It’d be different again from that of New Zealand I think”.

“Boss? I haven’t a clue...”

There was something nagging at the back of my brain. Something that wouldn’t show itself right now...I’ll just have to be patient and await its emergence.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“Okay Rastas? What’s up? If you think you’re gunna drink that bottle of excellent Red by yourself, you’ve got another think coming...”

She reached across me to grab the bottle. Poured herself a glass and again, leaned back over me to place the bottle on the outdoor glass-topped table. I caught a whiff of her body scent and her favourite perfume...my favourite too...

“Okay...what’s up? Even the girls could tell you weren’t in your normal goodnight cheer...and to me you’ve been like a bear with a sore head for days now...”

I turned my head to take a sip of wine...it was indeed an excellent drop. I absentmindedly looked at the label hoping the information would stick as to the year and name of the wine. That would give you a decent indication of how I viewed things at present. I wiggled a bit to allow Tellie to comfortably fit into my armpit. Took a deep breath...I wasn’t too sure what was niggling at me...these two homicide Cases, both savagely undertaken or Billy’s flight to freedom or the fact we were unable to visit Danni in Melbourne. I was too late for a male mid-life crisis as that should have been experienced some years ago...I think I may have missed the phenomenon...

“A domestic violence homicide...hah...our bread and butter. You think you’ve seen every circumstance that could be examined in a DV Homicide...nah...until another humdinger comes along to shock the piss out of you. Sorry for the graphic detail...” My voice was a monotone.

“Mmm...the right of all males to think they have ownership over their spouses, girlfriends, or ex’s...and look out if she objects or thinks otherwise!” Tellie commented angrily.

We were laying in our ‘two-man’ banana chair ‘lounge’ out on the deck, cuddled up together as we always did...when we were twenty years younger. These days we nestled together to stay warm and not for some ulterior sexual experience...I doubt the chair could resist our gyrations as we were considerably heavier than when we were younger!

“What was bad about this one?” Tellie asked wanting me to speak about it as it was bearing down on my conscience...my mind.

“Six kids...three from one family. The other three from the new boyfriend’s side...we think. That has yet to be confirmed. The six poisoned on an overdose of Cocaine so we think. The mother in a bad way close to death. The new boyfriend shot dead. The father who administered the cocaine to the kids shot to death by a young cop lady who was also shot...we think by the ex of the lady of the house...we really don’t know and all this is conjecture...we may never know if the lady dies...the young cop? Silly girl. She should not have entered the house but should have waited for back-up. She didn’t and *may pay* with her life...and young Sophie and I entered the premises...guns drawn when we also should have waited for back-up...a terrible slaughterhouse. What type of man would administer an overdose amount of Cocaine to six kids...all between seven and ten I’d say...what type of man would do that...then shoot his ex-wife...before or after that obscene gesture to show he was in control...we don’t know the correct order of things as yet...we may never know...we don’t know as it may have been just the long term De Facto who is a cocaine addict and seller...and shoots his competitor in the love stakes out of spite because the ex. hadn’t the right to take in another lover in his eyes...” Tears were streaming down my face and I had not entered the howling sequence I normally did, unable to cry silently. Instead waking the dead with my howl...I didn’t know why I had not begun to howl.

“We’ll have to sit through all the autopsies including those of the six kids...that’ll hurt...”

Tellie rubbed my arm, kissed my cheek, and waited out my tears. I cleared my throat that had constricted which was the usual trigger for me to begin to howl...suddenly and without warning. As I got older it appeared to be more often that the tears would start, and I would begin to howl like a Banshee waking the dead.

“And Sophie? Man, she led us into that house. Didn’t think twice about it and did not...did not turn away from all the blood and gaping wounds...she was a true soldier...but she’ll pay a price as we should have waited for back-up; she removed handguns from the Coke Dealer and from the new boyfriend...why would he have a handgun on him if he was an innocent citizen...women tend to be attracted by a similar type...we need to investigate ‘the latest boyfriend’s’ background...her fingerprints would be on both handguns because neither of us had ‘gloved’ up...a bad oversight which will be emphasised by the S and E guys. They were called into the scenario because shots were heard and reported in by a close neighbour... a fellow cop was shot...and we walked into the premises instead of waiting for back-up...my call. If we hadn’t done as we did, both the young copper, and the woman of the house would surely have died...but that won’t be a fact in our favour knowing how the S and E guys think...my fault all round...and the lack of forward thinking in not instructing Sophs to snap on gloves...and preventing her from moving the handguns of the two male victims...they were both dead so it wasn’t necessary to remove the handguns from proximity...my call...I should have stopped her from doing that...”. I again moved a bit more onto my side to give Tellie more room. “I’m making mistakes...not following procedures when I knew we should have especially under the circumstances of the morning...silly mistakes!”

I was down on myself for not following the correct Policy and Procedures. What I had done was show Sophie what not to do in a similar predicament which pointed to me being a lousy teacher!! I had ignored my own beliefs in right and wrong for which I could not blame old age. This I could not confess to Tellie...which made me madder...

We finished off the bottle...well, I had seconds...then thirds which led to a peaceful sleep. Sometime during the night, Tellie climbed from my arms. Placing a light blanket over me, she went to bed.

Funny thing is we never spoke about the Case again and I never had fitful nights where the images jolted me into a groggy awakening. I say it was the wine...but somehow Tellie’s soothing silence was the tonic I needed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

I expected Sophie to be on edge before we had to arrive at the Sydney Morgue and Forensic Pathology Building at Lidcombe. A stone’s throw from our building at Parramatta. Instead, she was like a trooper as she drove our Unmarked towards Lidcombe. I felt it best to leave the subject alone and not bring anything up about the number of autopsies we would sit through this morning.

I seemed more uptight than she if I want to be honest. I was not looking forward to the next four hours even though Muscles had organised delivery of Take-away Chinese for thirteen hundred hours this afternoon for us and the three Forensic Pathologists and their three Assistants each, the Forensic Photographer and Muscles...he'd never miss out on a feast...never...along with the Boss of the Morgue precinct.

Appendix removed on four of the six kids. Tonsils removed on five. Teeth missing on one of the boys assumed the result of some schoolyard accident. The two boys showed signs of previous fractures of an arm with one of the girls displaying a slight fracture of the left femur that was never recorded in her short Medical History File.

"I can confidently propose that the six children have all died from an overdose of Cocaine. Each child showed signs of massive overdoses which more than likely was administered by Constantine Haddad. He was the only adult who had access to the large amount of cocaine required. How he administered the drug and what he told each child is open to conjecture, but it showed the nature of the bastard to even think of doing what he did to spite his ex, Christina Elban simply because she had moved on and become involved with a new boyfriend. The order of death of the two male persons and who shot whom is open to conjecture and outside the realm of these autopsies. Perhaps Ballistics evidence will shed light on that quandary". Muscles concluded. He threw off his gloves, missing the bio-bin completely which made him swear a string of expletives.

"Six kids! What a..." He didn't finish, just shook his head as the first of the two males were wheeled to the stainless-steel cutting table. Muscles' Assistant helped him into a new gown, head scarf, short wellington boots, and three pairs of latex gloves.

It was me who broke out in a cold sweat as the autopsies proceeded and I was silently wishing the whole experience to end. I must remember to complement Doctor Phelps as Sophie watched with a child-like interest as each scalpel cut was administered by Brenda Wzerlic, a new Forensic Pathologist Doctor Imran Hirsi, and Muscles. I had not seen Hirsi before at a crime scene. Muscles mentioned at our scrumptious Dinner that he had only just signed on, replacing Pogowski who was on a two-year European tour duplicating what Muscles had done years ago with Wzerlic doing the same tour after her marriage fell apart.

She wanted to be as far away as she could from her cheating Surgeon husband whose roving eyes were legendary.

There were no surprises with signs that Haddad was entering a difficult time with his cocaine dependency. Too much of tasting the product and not selling it...no-one was surprised as it was a quite common response that you saw repeatedly...sampling the product the downside of drug dealing!

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

“C’mon, out with it!” Sophie suddenly requested as we were sitting out a stubborn set of traffic lights that took for-ever to change. We were heading towards the Haddad family home at the back of Granville, not that far as the crow flies from the Morgue building. The Station Sergeant had visited the home on the afternoon after all the bodies were discovered in the Christina Elban house. We had headed north that afternoon to Newcastle to advise the families of Barry Bright and his ex-wife of their loss. A task that I hated.

I wanted ‘fill in’ information on their son Constantine ‘Con’ Haddad. I had read his charge sheet which was ‘dry’ as far as his character was concerned but looking at his ‘sheet’ he was working his way up the drug suppliers’ totem pole. He had been divorced from Chrissie Elban for...um...for years. The Family Law Court had seen him several times to do with non-payment of maintenance for his three kids. There seemed a lack of empathy and responsibility on his part so what in hell was he doing at his ex’s place rubbing shoulders with her new love? That excited my synapses as to the make-up of the home-coming threesome...okay...just my dirty mind at times.

That intrigued me though...so here we were straight after our Chinese meal was digested, heading for his parents’ place of residence. He had moved back to his parents’ home after he was evicted from the marital household. Chrissie Elban was not going to put up with her place becoming the suburb’s drug house of interest with every druggie dropping in day or night wanting their ‘fix’.

“What are you talking about?” I asked completely lost.

“You have almost been choking on the words since you hopped into the car...so come on, out with it!”

“Hah! Um...I was not only surprised but extremely pleased with the way you handled yourself at the crime scene the other day but also at the autopsies of the eight bodies this morning. In fact, I was flabbergasted! I felt sure you would not last as the six kids were cut up...I had problems during that time. I think you have grasped your problem and booted it out of your head...I was proud of you...”

She fell silent as we inched our way forward in the traffic that was becoming a peak-hour crush all day! She loudly exhaled blowing away her frustration at the nose to tail traffic before glancing at me. A frown to show she was still hurting a bit.

“Yeah...I had trouble with the kids...I won’t lie...all I will see to-night will be their images...and their skulls lifted off to expose their brains. I don’t think I’ll ever sleep a good sleep all night again...but yeah, I even surprised myself. The Shrink is doing me good I reckon. She will be pleased with my progress when I see her next week...this autopsy session was a test...yeah...I reckon I did good”. She smiled as we again inched forward about a car body length. “The Haddad family? What is it that you are digging for?”

“Some indication that may help in his sudden appearance at his ex’s home...did he stay for breakfast?”

“They’d finished and cleared up as the Dishwasher cycle had finished when I checked it...”

As she was saying this I was scrolling down to Muscle’s mobile.

“Mate...”

“Can it be a quick one? I’m about to chair a staff meeting...”

“Okay. Yeah...what was the stomach content of all the eight victims you cut apart this morning? Especially the six kids?”

“All...arrh...five of the six kids had bacon and eggs with toast. All had OJ. The other child? Weetbix with an oj drink afterwards...that’s how the cocaine was administered...in the glass of oj...anything else will have to wait mate...I’m about to start while all my afternoon staff are bright eyed and bushy-tailed...see ya”.

I relayed that information to Sophie.

“The ex...our drug dealer had been invited to breakfast...to see his kids or to take them for the holidays...or was his appearance something to do with him killing his kids...the other three were an afterthought...”

“Mmm...I don’t think so. I’d say he was there to cause more friction...Christina had again applied for a Court Order to make him pay the Child Maintenance and the amount outstanding...and he would be the number one suspect in killing the six kids with a drug overdose...he was saying I ain’t paying a cent...and with them dead, I ain’t got to...his twisted and hateful logic...purely a financial decision as he has no love for anyone except himself”.

“They calculate the child maintenance on the weekly wage he was earning...”

“I’ll lay a bet and say that he was on the Dole which would preclude any amount being taken from him to give to Christina as child support...”

“I’ll bet he was pulling in a fair amount from his drug sales...”

“...which would not show up as a regular wage thus no support amount could be paid. An absolute bugger, eh? The car he was driving? A Merc Sports worth over six figures...and he was wearing good clothes, not Big W, Lowes, or Target...that would get up Christina Elban’s nose I reckon”.

We both fell silent, both pondering the unfairness of someone like Con Haddad who would be pulling more than five hundred thou a year, paying no taxes and thumbing his nose at the general populace. The agony of druggies’ dependant on his trade would not even enter his head...all he would have seen was the dollar sign in front of his eyes. Society would not grieve his passing.

I wondered if his family would.

Sophie slowed to a stop outside a typical suburban house renovation undertaken by a Lebanese who still had ties and love to his parent country. I stood to look at the structure that did nothing for the neighbouring streetscape...how it passed Council rules and regulation had me beat...a brown paper bag to the correct Council representatives would do it...absolutely...though those days were fast disappearing! Brown paper bags were becoming too obvious to all.

“What you want?” A scowl. An unfriendly response to us identifying ourselves. The woman dressed all in black. A black lace veil over her silver hair. She was grieving...

“When I get my son’s body to burying the proper way? We must bury our loved ones within two days of their deaths...when can I have my boy...according to our Muslim beliefs he must be placed inna ground quickly...he not have autopsy...no...you kill him...we do not carry out such barbaric ways in the old country...cutting up the dead...that against Allah’s teachings”.

“Your son? Was he paying any form of child maintenance to Christina Elban for his three kids?”

“Why should he? He not see his kids. He not bring them here so we can love them as our grandkids. His bitch wife wouldn’t let that happen. He go to Court many times...but the Judge ask why he wasn’t paying any money to that bitch”. She bent and began to shake her arms.

“How can he pay when he just get Dole money from the Government? It a pittance which no-one could live on”.

“He seemed to have enough to purchase an expensive car every year. He wore expensive clothes, liked his gold chains. Where did he get the money to pay for all those things? Living at home still wouldn’t allow him enough of the dole money to finance his wants in a million years”.

“He save. He live here to save money...whart you tink?”

“Not from drug sales?”

“My son...he tell me he not selling drugs...I believe him...he wouldn’t lie to his mama...”

“Does he own a gun?”

“Sure...he have to protect himself against those who hate us Lebanese...plenty people jealous of the things he has saved for years”.

“How many guns?”

“You want to see them? I let you in as you not believe me...”

She opened wide the screen door, gesturing for us to follow her. The house in darkness with every window covered with heavy drapes. I was a little suss at her reasons for letting us in. She could never be that naïve...could she? The small rotund woman opened a bedroom door, switched on a light, and stood back.

“His bedroom. I not change a thing...”

She walked over to a walk-in dressing area that was new. You could see a toilet and shower through another door opening.

“He do this. His cousin and friends do it for him...they work hard for a year...Constantine he pay cash to his friends who work so hard...he says so not to involve the Taxman. Last year”.

She slid aside a door to expose an arsenal of quality and quantity. I glanced at Sophie, nodded my head for her to ring Ballistics, Forensic Trace, and the local lads for site control. We had been invited in...I had my phone on ‘record’ as evidence of us being invited into the house.

“Who you ring? I don’t want any more pol-eese people in my house...”

“Ma’am? You invited us in. These are all illegal guns and munitions...we are obliged to call in help when we find things like this ma’am. Is there anyone else home at present?” I asked as I walked out of the room to head for the rear of the house. It was obvious extensions had only recently been completed. “Your son pay for all this work...a new Kitchen? New bedrooms? A big garage up the back yard?”

“He so proud of all his guns...all the work you see...he pay for with a little help from his papa...he did it for his mama and papa. He have fancy cars up in the back garage. We use the carport at side of house. No-one else here to-day. They all work. My two other sons and two daughters. My husband...they all work...I ring my husband to stop anymore pol-eece coming inna my house...when we get our boy so’s we can bury him the proper way we do?”

The Dole must have increased dramatically to allow all this work to occur. I’d say close on four hundred thou...his drug dealing had increased considerably ...

CHAPTER THIRTY

Forensics arrived first, closely followed by the local lads. Ballistics people were notoriously late in arriving at crime scenes when they have been requested to attend...I sometimes wondered what workloads they might have to make this habit so obvious...there was never a simple answer.

“Do we have a Court Order to enter the property?” Dee Dee Symonds asked.

“Arrh...no...she invited us in and innocently showed us the arsenal. We have ‘due cause’ to search through the rest of the property...she seemed so proud of what her son had purchased to protect him against Lebanese haters as she put it, but there was also a naïve streak clearly demonstrated by her actions to show us the arsenal”.

Symonds looked at me then shook her head slowly.

“Joe? Have you proof of being invited in by the lady of the house? She is by herself?”

I held up my phone. The invite was clear for all to see...we were there to question her about her son’s death...and what may have been motivation for him to kill his kids...and three other kids...and proof of his involvement in the ghastly killings at his ex-wife’s property two days ago.

After Dee Dee had viewed it twice, nodded her head and gave me back my phone, I transferred the footage over to the Murder File at the Office. It now could not be deleted or erased by anyone...

I waited until the Ballistics Team arrived, taking them into the bedroom where the cache of guns and ammunition were stored in a lockable cupboard built into the back of a 'walk-in' wardrobe. They all whistled their delight when the arsenal was exposed, shaking their heads wondering how in hell these guns were brought into the country as most were illegal in every State of the Commonwealth. They began working, firstly taken photographs of the display before zooming in on each piece, loudly voicing out the make and serial numbers on all the armaments. A list that any gun lover would be proud to own...here or in the United States...

"Arrh Joe? There is another similar cupboard at the back of this 'walk-in'. I'd say it houses either drugs or more weapons...do you want to witness this as it is being opened? After all, it is your baby..."

I wasn't that keen to hold that moniker but what-ever, I would record every movement as it happened on my phone. Drugs, I thought as I nodded. The lock was picked by one of the forensic team which uncovered a full door height by width aperture filled with plastic tabs and kilo bags of white powder.

"He deal exclusively in 'coke'?" Someone asked. I shrugged as I scrolled up the Narcotics Branch. "Whatever, we need the Narc boys here...this is serious shit!" I replied, a little quiver in my voice as I invited the Narc team in as a matter of urgency. "C'mon Sophs, it's getting a little crowded in here...let's take a walk to give these guys a fair go, huh?"

I walked out the back door realising this was a double block in depth only as the back fence was the boundary line of the street behind. A large shed sat on the right-hand corner of the block, a concrete driveway from the front of the house continued up the side, under a double carport to meet this shed at the back fence line. A little mysterious I thought as I stood to take this in. Stolen cars was my first thought...then a quick disappearance of a car under the police radar.

Whatever, I slowly walked up the driveway looking at Olive Trees of dimension and a veggie patch that I was jealous of...

The rear wall of the shed was three cars wide that had three separate roller shutters with a small, locked side door. I gestured for Sophie to get the forensic person who had picked the drug safe door open. She gestured for me to step aside as she pulled a small canvas roll from an inside pocket. Unrolling it revealed a locksmith's tools of trade and within two minutes of grunts and groans and an expletive or two, she let the door swing inward. The shed thirty

metres long, around six metres deep and a roof height of around six metres at its peak. The area or at least two-thirds of it partitioned off with a hydroponic marijuana set up thriving in a fixed temperature, humidity, and artificial sunlight.

“Shit!” Was all I could say. “This has been going on for some years I reckon. You can have the weed while I’ll take the red Ferrari parked in the open bay of this shed. No? I’ll call in the Narc boys. You can stay here but don’t pick any heads...what...my honest schedule of close on a decade of undercover narc work does not impress you, young lady!?”

I could hear her giggling as I walked quickly back to the house.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

“They’ve got a bush property up the back of Wilberforce which we’ve had our eyes on for several months. We’ve been waiting to catch as many people as possible on the ground. We know the elongated hot houses are used for growing hydroponic marijuana for the Sydney and Melbourne trade...hugely successful. Those screams you can hear. The old man and his two sons have just arrived home and are screaming blue murder at the way we are treating their lovely home...all bought and extended with drug money. We found another stash of heroin...gotta be around half a mil at street value...this family was busy diversifying. At a guess we’ll be here for at least two days...love the Ferrari! Wouldn’t you love to be in their shoes...all this ready cash from the sale of all these illicit drugs but not being able to spend just a small portion of it. What could you buy? Boy, I’ll give you a bucket list...”

“I reckon the old bloke and his other sons spend a bit of time putting cash through the Poker Machines in several nearby Clubs as a way of getting rid of some of it...how the other half live, huh? I bet the Narc boys will be taking over the house lock, stock, and barrel as being constructed with the money obtained through the illegal sale of drugs...and the Ferrari too...they’ll tip the entire family...or who-ever lives here full time out on their arses and they’ll not be concerned where in hell they’ll land. I reckon they’ll all receive lengthy jail times...betcha!”

“Do you reckon Christina Elban knew about her In-Laws business?”

“Yeah...she’d have to...may be that is why she separated...this isn’t small fry drug selling. This is top notch stuff that would equal most illegal Bikie gangs’ involvement...”

“Mmm...I hope we have the chance to talk to her...I think she will shed light on several things for us...this included”.

We watched as the Lead Narcs Officer accompanied the old man and his two sons into the shed. By their carry-on you'd half believe they were ignorant of the oldest son's activity...if you were that naïve. Their wails of innocence a comedy. Both Sophs and I had to turn away so that our broad smiles were not seen...it was the best comedy I had seen in quite some time. You can always bet on the Lebanese pleads of innocence while surrounded by a marijuana crop worth close to seven figures. The comic but stupidity lost on them. The old man came over to begin roaring at me as though all this was my fault in uncovering something of which he was ignorant.

“You had no right to come into my home and begin to pull it apart...no right at all. This is a pol-eece state worse than the Lebanon we left...you should be ashamed of yourself in killing the fond memories we had of our son...they are saying he was a drug kingpin...whatever that means”.

“Your son told you he was on the Dole...how did he manage all this...a Ferrari and an Aston Martin parked close to his ex-wife's home...the extensions to your house, the building of this shed after purchasing this back property when it came up for sale...the property out Wilberforce way...where did he get all the money from?”

“He not a criminal...”

“A major drug player and now...possibly the killer of your grandkids...his ex-wife and her new boyfriend...”

The old man flew into a rage only tempered by the constant attempts of his two daughters to calm their father. Spittle and arms flying about...you could get whacked by a flaying arm or drowned in the spittle that ejected speedily from his mouth. He was helped into the house close to collapse now being assaulted by the wails of the old woman...a show so I believed. Crocodile tears and forced wails with which I was not impressed. Every question answered the same way with a high-pitched wail and accusations of the ‘pol-eece’ brutality and dishonesty in placing the drugs on the property...yer gotta be kiddin’ me...I gave up trying to get a reasonable reply to any of my questions. I beckoned Sophie to follow me as this was not a Murder Squad involvement though we'd take the kudos for discovering the cache of drugs, munitions, and expansive cars...

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

I glanced at my watch surprised at the time.

“C’mon, we’ve got bugger all to do here as its not a murder scene. Let the Narc boys have their head and finish wrecking the inside walls of the place. We’ve got enough time before knock-off to visit one of those boxing gyms. There were three around here, weren’t there? When we looked last week? What’s the one closest to us now?”

Sophie did a double take at looking at me. I could almost hear what she was going to say before she said it. Leaning against our Unmarked, she look over the roofline with a puzzled look.

“That’s to do with the Marge Hendricks attack...that’s not our scene, is it?”

“No...but she is a dear friend and my partner for over ten years so any way I can help...you’d want me to take a squiz if it was you lying on your back in hospital, wouldn’t you? And we can visit the Hospital to see if the young Constable Greta Turnbull and Christina Elban are able to answer our questions”.

She nodded before the words found her mouth.

“Yeah, but...” She opened the driver’s side door and slipped into her seat. This was her way of throwing the ‘silence dome’ over our conversation so that no-one else could hear.

“Yeah...okay...” She fiddled with the GPS thing-a-ma-jig and her smart phone at the same time. How can these young ones do that, I asked myself?

I had no hope of tying my shoelaces and carrying on a conversation at the same time so what Sophie was doing bamboozled me plus, made me a little envious!

We parked in a small parking area in front of ‘BAZZA’S BOXING GYM’ painted in large letters of the front façade of the building. A sign steered us to the rear of the property, so we walked down the side-driveway. There were two roller shutters open on the side of the building. Shouts and expletives easily heard. We walked carefully into the interior of the building via an open roller shutter door in the side wall. No one challenged us until we were standing at one of two elevated boxing rings.

“Yeah, what can I do for youze people...coppers I’ll betcha...” He walked swiftly around to where we were standing, a sullen look frozen on his face.

“Are you Barry ‘Bazza’ Ford? The former ‘A’ Grade footballer playing for The Eels back awhile now?” A smile to show we meant no harm...but then again, there were those who said it looked more like a grimace and was a show of things to come.

He nodded, the frown still etching deep wrinkles in his forehead.

I flashed my ID card which didn’t settle him any...

“Arrh...we are investigating a series of assaults and rapes that have occurred over the past twelve months on the Uni Campus and within the grounds of the Hospital close by. Eyewitness testimony indicates the Rapist wore ankle-high Boxing boots...”

He waved a finger at me several times before exploding.

“If I catch any of my ‘boyz’ walking the streets in boxing attire...especially boxing boots, I’ll tan their bloody hides for them. Boxing boots aren’t cheap and are meant for the ring, not public footpaths. Do you want an answer on any of my people walking around at three in the morning? They’re usually bugged after a hard sparring session to want to extend their day crouching silently in ambush waiting for some young Uni student or a nursing sister. Okay? You can leave the same way you came in...”

“You mentioned the University grounds and the nearby hospital. How do you know we were going to question you on incidents that occurred at those two locations over a twelve-month period?” I prodded.

The old bloke adjusted his pose hoping it mirrored a boxer about to begin a sparring episode. He then got his finger going, shaking it at me...not close enough for me to arrest him for assault but close enough for me to take a step backwards. It was a nasty mannerism that could get him into trouble...

“We ain’t all punch drunk in here...” He whispered in a menacing manner. “Coppers have already been in here asking the same questions. I’ll tell you what I told them...piss off! And make it quick. Yer standing on private property to git!”

“Do you have any...arrh...Polynesian or Islander types on your books?” Sophie asked, ignoring his demands.

The old bloke stared Sophie down before growling his reply.

“You want information like that I suggest you come back with a Court Order...get me?”

He started to walk away but turned to face us again, that finger pointed at us waving in the breeze.

“I can tell youze coppers now that none of my boyz...Islander, Kiwi, Aboriginal, Leb or Australian white male or female would want to assault anybody outside the ring. If they did and were caught doing so, they’d lose their authority to fight in the ring...and I’d tan their bloody hides before youze coppers got a go at them...and that authority to box is bloody hard to get. We got more regulations around the fight game than you can poke a stick at so no...none of my boyz would be capable of doing what you say...now...can you leave the way you came in, eh? And tell me, youze are Murder Dees so what you doing investigating a couple of assaults and rapes?”

As Sophie unlocked the Unmarked, I noticed a piece of paper under the windscreen wiper arm. I half stood and stretched to free it.

Try the West Parramatta Boxing Gym
At Holroyd
Near the Westmead Hospital
Moses A’aropode
is the man you want
spent serious jail time in Samoa
For assault and rape

I gave Sophie the note as I belted up.

“We got time?” I asked knowing if we paid this Gym a visit, we’d be knocking off late.

“Tomorrow morning first thing. I doubt sixteen hours is gunna make much difference. We knock off now and I can get an hour or two in at the Gym near my place...”

“Yeah...okay. You’ve got everything close by, by the sounds of it. You where left a gem by your Aunty...”

“For which I’ll always be in her debt...and my second project...you know, the MGA re-build from scratch? It’s on the downhill run. Another month or two and it will be finished, and my Double...almost triple Garage can be used for what it was designed for...garaging two MGAs out of the weather. Did I tell you a local Real Estate Agent approached me to sell the joint the other week? Offering me AU\$3.35M. I was blown away by the offer...that’s more than twice the amount I was offered before I commenced those renovations last year...who could afford to buy the house at those prices...has me beat”.

“Would you sell?” I asked.

I had toured slowly through her house several times surprised at what she had achieved. She now had river views and a look downriver under the Gladesville Bridge. Four Bedrooms. Two and a half Bathrooms. A Study with views. A large Lounge area, a large Family Room and an expansive Kitchen and separate Pantry. Too big a house for one person and two dogs but you never knew what was around the corner.

I rang the Boss telling her we were knocking off and that we would not be straight into the Office tomorrow morning as we wanted to interview a chap in connection with one of our Cases. A little fib but that was okay as I had my legs and fingers crossed.

“Arrh...Boss? A piece of paper left under the windscreen wiper arm...tells us Moses A’aropode may be the person we are looking for...”

“For what? The Gloria Mitchell Nursing Sister homicide at Westmead Hospital...or Marge Hendricks Attacker at the nearby University Campus. One at around three in the morning the other when Marge was walking to her vehicle at around nine fifteen several nights before Mitchell was killed. The one case you should not be pursuing...but if I were Marge lying flat on my back, I’d want you to do a little digging, alright? Do not think that allows you free access to the case as it doesn’t. Hear me? Joe, never underestimate my stretch...and never try to pull the wool over my eyes. To bring you up to date, I have written a request on NSW Police Force Letterhead with the Commissioner’s Signature asking for approval to interview the chap in question over the Mitchell Homicide Case. If approval is granted, I’m afraid you will not be the Officer travelling to Samoa to question the Perp. I doubt very much that the Samoan Authorities will allow him to be arrested and charged over the crime by Australian Officers *before* they have him on their Warrant...that’s if he can be located...there can’t be too many hiding places on a small Pacific Island. Can there? The other thing? Border Force and Customs have been asked to check out every person associated with the Samoan Rugby side who flew out from Sydney the other afternoon...they’ll get back to me...anything else?”

“Two islands Boss...and numerous smaller islands. Have you heard of the raid on the Haddad’s family home at the back of Granville? A Number One drug dealer...a big supply of Cocaine, heroin, and cultivation of a commercial size of marijuana...”

“No...what are you doing getting mixed up in a Narc’s raid?”

“Arrh...we went there after the autopsies of all persons found dead in that Death House...all deceased persons were autopsied this morning...and I had more trouble than Sophs on staying the distance...”

“Well...she’s turned a corner. Good for her!”

“Um...yeah. I was looking more for background stuff on the ex. partner of Christina Elban, Constantine Haddad...just to fill the picture in a bit...Haddad’s elderly mother invited both of us into her home to view Haddad’s illegal assortment of guns...”

“You were invited in? C’mon Joe, I’m not that gullible...”

“True Boss. I had my Mobile recording the conversation and invite...I’ve attached it to the Murder Book...you can check it out on the Murder Book...and the rest is history as they say”.

“Mmm...” She didn’t sound convinced. “Joe? Arrh...even if you were greeted with open arms and invited into the premises by the only person at home, and you have proof of that invite...it’s still a little ‘iffy’ in terms of rightful entry...arm...I’ll check with the DPP but if it goes against ya, you could be facing embarrassing questions...and everything you seize during that process, may be inadmissible in Court...I’ll let you know...you could be hanging by the short and curlies ma man. Be in touch”.

As Sophie drove the Unmarked to her place, she asked me who the person named in the note was. I shrugged my shoulders knowing about as much as she.

“When we get to your place, I’ll borrow your computer for a bit”.

I was not keen to head for home as I would be joining the peak hour crawl going the same way. And tomorrow morning the same to get from my joint back here to Sophie’s joint...

While we waited for the coffee which was always beautiful, having a mixture of beans that Sophs said was a secret, I booted up her computer.

I googled in the name...Moses A’aropode. Nothing came up which I thought was strange. I checked the spelling and tried again. This time a flag came up attached to the Samoan Public Defenders Office. An International Arrest Warrant had been issued for the guy’s immediate arrest. A mug shot of the man was attached to the Official Warrant. I copied the photograph and sent it across to my phone. I thought it may come in handy...

I was now looking forward to visiting the Boxing Gym at Holroyd/West Parramatta tomorrow morning.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

I had tried every morning and evening to contact Bill to no avail.

The latest news was that the Victorian Government was hinting at lifting border closures with NSW within a week. That was brilliant as it would permit me to head down into East Gippsland looking for him...if only to see that he was alright...

I'd had a word with the Boss about taking five days off to try and locate my errant son. She would permit any number of days off as long as our Cases were not affected. Being off for five days would affect them with no-one picking them up for whatever period I was hoping to get off. A weekend before the five working days and a weekend after effectively gave me nine full days...the only trouble was being nabbed in Victoria if they again closed the borders suddenly...it was happening often though it was the Queensland Government who were the worst in closing the border between NSW and Queensland in an off and on manner!

“What's up?”

“What do you mean?”

“Something is worrying you...want to talk about it?”

I felt foolish. Here my partner was a Murder Squad Detective-in-training. Old enough to be my eldest daughter though she was younger than my Bill. Could I be open and honest with such a person about personal stuff that she has no right to know about? I didn't know but the way I was feeling right now, I was willing to break one of my steadfast rules...

“C'mon, spill it!”

I swiped my brow letting my fingers comb through my thinning hair...another reason why I should not open up with this child...I continually came back to the same old thing...she was of an age to be my daughter...would you confide your inner secrets especially when you know you had not touched on the subject with the wife yet. I took I deep breath, still unsure whether I should unload my worries onto the girl...

“The Boss has approved a period of five days off for me to chase down my son...arrh...when I decide to take it. He's in Victoria. East Gippsland his last port of call. I have a name of a chap that he was going to see. I am concerned with all this stuff about Covid and the sudden closing of borders I could be stuck in Victoria for who knows how long...and I am concerned at leaving our Cases up in the air...I've never done that before...”

“What happens to me if you go?”

“Um...you’ll be paired with either a Grade Three two-man team or a Grade Four team. There’s only two other Grade Four teams so the picking is...you know...light on. And it depends on their workload whether they pick up our cases for such a short period...hopefully no more than a five-day working week”.

“You shouldn’t concern yourself with that. Your first responsibility is to your son...not to me or the job...”

“Nah...yeah...nah. I’m not too sure about that and with border closures going off and on like a swinging dunny door in a storm, it’s a risk...”

“We’ve only got the House of Horrors Case which can’t progress further until Christina Elban regains consciousness and that could be...phhtt...know what I mean? And the forensic trace, ballistics, and autopsy results could be at least another ten working days away...”

“And the Assault and rape cases...”

“Which we shouldn’t be touching...it’s not a homicide case...”

“...yet...”

She finished off her coffee and offered me a top-up which I refused. I wanted to get to sleep sometime tonight. My Mobile commenced its chirping. I glanced at the time. Almost five. Someone was cutting it fine.

“Joseph Lind...” I answered.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

“You should have rung Joe, when you knew you were going to be late...that’s all I ask. You used to...I’ve kept your meal warm in the oven, but it may have dried out a bit...Joe!? You listening to me?”

That started off an argument that had a power all its own and it escalated wildly when I mentioned something about menopause. This resulted in Tellie being almost speechless before she gathered herself to call me all the names under the sun including that I was a...

Typical. Fucking. Male. Her last effort was to take the meal meant for me to shove it in the Kitchen Bin...plate and all!

With that she stormed from the kitchen to slam the Bedroom door almost off its hinges...I guess I would be sleeping alone tonight...out in the Van...

This was without doubt the worse fight we had ever had, including the name-calling like kids in the school playground bit. I checked out our wine collection, picking one of the cheap 'clean skins' as I did not want to spoil a good quality Red on me getting drunk. I must say my three dogs followed me out into the backyard, climbing the Caravan steps before I did. They positioned themselves as they always did, equally spaced around the double bed. It was a warm night, so I flung the doona and blankets off to have only a light blanket and sheet covering me.

I polished off the bottle saying it wasn't a bad drop...causing me to wake after Tellie had left for work dropping off the two girls at the School gate on the way...I didn't hear her reverse her car out of the side-gate.

I rang into work complaining of headaches...which I had...and muscle pain...which I didn't have.

"You picked up a twenty-four-hour wog the same as Sophie. She called in about ten minutes ago..." Hendo informed me, which gave my hangover some credibility! Though there was a tinge of guilt attached.

I walked around like a bear with a sore head, slept some and did a bit of work on my computer. Computing in rape, attempted rape, and homicide. That would cast a bloody wide net I thought. Moses A'Aropode's name came up quickly if the net included Pacific Island Nations. He had a string of charges as long as my arm. He was jailed in Samoa for six years for assault, assault with a dangerous weapon, attempted rape, and multiple charges of rape with battery. The man doing less than four years before he was released on parole with a list of requirements he had to abide by. Then nothing...an International Arrest Warrant was issued by the Samoan Judiciary in twenty-eighteen because of his failure to abide by Parole provisions with nothing to show for the paperwork. There was no mention of the man turning up in Australia or what and how he had entered the country...or even if he had left the country.

He must have a false passport and name, I muttered to myself. For all we know, he could still be in Australia and itching to continue his insane habits

He was a man to chase out, that was for sure especially with his prior criminal history. I knew I was duplicating any work the Boss had done on the man...but I wanted in on the chase.

Tellie came home that afternoon with the girls all sweet and smiling. When we had a moment after the girls had gone to bed, I tried to start the conversation wondering why we had just survived in our most acrimonious argument to date.

“I don’t want to talk about it, Joe”. As though that solved the problems.

“We’ve always said that we should talk through a problem as it is no good allowing the thing to fester...”

“Who’s festering? I’m not...and I do not wish to talk about it!” End of story.

My slowly building anger was tempered by the phone ringing.

“Joe? Denny...” The Boss. “Arm...Sophie is in Hospital...pretty bad...kicked and punched to an inch of her life. Several busted ribs. Punctured lung. Her face is a swollen, bruised mess. Bruises and welts all over her upper body...she was on sick leave the same as you, so I have no idea where and how she suffered this terrible treatment, but she was picked up by Ambulance at an address near Holroyd...any guesses what she was doing there? Holroyd? A stone’s throw from the Office...and she was on sick leave with that wog that you’ve got...”

I was shaking my head wondering if she had gone off on her own trying to solve Marge’s Attacker problem to impress me, instead she walked right into the Lion’s Den.

“Boss...no...not a clue. Could be she was looking for parts for her MGA restoration...there’s a few Spare Parts stores out around that way...I don’t really know. What is the prognosis?”

“She’ll be in Hospital for a while until at least her lung has healed...they’re talking about her reproductive organs in strife...”

“Was she raped?”

“They’re running some tests to see if that is the case...more than likely according to the Doctor looking after her. She has severe bruising down there. She’s unconscious and will be for a while...days not weeks”.

“Westmead?”

“Yeah...Emergency. She could have walked there she was that close...a bad joke. You in tomorrow?”

“I’ll see how I wake up...I think so...yeah”.

I hung up feeling low. What Sophie had done was try to help me and to show me how good she was in solving this Case that we were not supposed to even touch...

I poured a coffee and walked out onto the deck having simply ignored Tellie's presence. She mine...things had not improved.

I heard her tidy up putting dirty plates in the dishwasher, cleaning off the kitchen tops as she hated to see a dirty Kitchen with things not put away the following morning. All this activity a little louder than normal...she was making a point to her way at looking at things. I heard her pour a wine, swearing I suspect because she spilt wine on her clean bench top. I was hard pushed not to smile...or chuckle...that really would have lit Mount Vesuvius with me unable to survive the onslaught...me suffering the same fate as the poor bastards in Pompei...covered in shit inches thick!

"Joseph Lind? Get your arse in here to talk things out..." She ordered angrily.

I obeyed! What else could I do...I did not want to mention my several attempts at clearing the air that she had rejected out of hand...when the eagle shits you better have a strong umbrella, so I skedaddled inside to sit my backside on one of the Kitchen Stools facing her. Looked up at her...the most beautiful face I've ever seen...even when she was angry...which made her angrier when I mentioned it!

Bloody Hell!

"Right!" She said forcefully...we talked for over three hours with her doing most of the talking.

"The Victoria border into NSW will be opening later this month. The first time in close on two years for us to see Danni down in Melbourne and all you talk about is Bill! Joe, he's over thirty and quite capable of looking after himself...what's he been doing for the past couple of years? And doing it very successfully...while Dan is missing us terribly...and she's only fourteen. And all you can talk about is driving down to Melbourne...or East Gippsland or where-ever he is supposed to be while our daughter is fretting for us...you haven't mentioned her once!"

If I had been in a spiteful mood I may have mentioned that Bill was at least of my blood...the thought never merged itself into words thank God!

We spoke to Danni at least twice a week...all of us having fifteen minutes each talking with her on the laptop...then a combined zoom period where we all could at times, talk over one

another I spoke to Bill...I tried at least once a week which wasn't as regimented as our combined talks with Dan...

I went to open my mouth, my mind tripping over words before they were more than noises in the 'um' and 'arrh' region. Maybe it was best this way...letting her slowly run out of steam. I finished off the word fest with a couple of conciliatory apologies, taking the blame for what had transpired over the past couple of days...buggered if I know what all the strife was about...but I kept silent as all good husbands should when their spouses are diving off into the deep end.

"He's in Hospital".

"What...who? Bill!? When were you going to tell me?"

"When I had the chance..."

That knocked the wind out of her sail, and she seemed to deflate standing in front of me.

"What's happened?"

"He was in Bairnsdale in East Gippsland when he collapsed. He...um...he was walking along the street which is the shopping precinct when he just collapsed like a sack of potatoes. He hit his head on the brick paving which opened his head up....and that could be a major problem. They moved him to the local Hospital and then transferred him as a red alert patient to Royal Melbourne by helicopter...something in his brain has disconnected...prognosis not good...and yes, I want to get down there as quickly as possible which is not on as there is a State-wide Covid Shutdown...he's not good...I've gotta tell Mel...um...the prognosis is not good at the moment...they'll wait until he regains consciousness before saying anything else...he and Mel have split...she's looking at an overseas posting with the AFP..."

Tellie knew of the split long before I did. Jumping up and down and demanding when she was going to tell me would not have gained anything...she assumed I would know eventually...in good time so telling me was not going to help matters the way they were over the past couple of days...we spluttered to a stop with both of us apologising...

We slept soundly that night...comfortable in each other's arms though I silently got up around three in the morning and de-capped a stubby of beer. I sat out on the deck and watched the sun come up...not feeling anything. I was completely numb...Mel came out to sit with me. She was sucking on one of those mixed drink bottles which didn't help her. She slumped into my chest and began to cry...

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

I eased out of the Unmarked and stretched. I felt that I had not slept a wink last night. It was a warm day, but I still struggled into my suit coat to hide my belt holster and Glock in the small of my back. Okay, so I'm a little vain, as I did not want the gun to spoil the fall of the coat...and that position was the best until you tried to sit in a straight-backed chair. The holster under the arm was the most comfortable for me but the chest strap gave the game away if your coat buttons were undone and flapping around in the breeze.

"The Boss?" I asked a chap who was mopping the floor, showing him my ID Card.

"Dat's me! Whart you want, copper? To-day I'm busy". He kept on mopping. I had a sudden rush that it was a dried blood stain that he was mopping up.

I looked around at the large empty factory-type building that had similarities to Bazza's Boxing Gym at Pendle Hill that we had visited the other day. This establishment had three rings all situated at roller shutter openings. By the loud music, thumps and steady tempo coming through the ceiling there was a regular Gym upstairs. At least there were Clients by the sounds as this ground floor area was deserted of patrons.

I thrust a 'mug shot' of Moses A'Aropode at the man.

"You know this man?" I asked softly. "And I would suggest you stop that mopping up of blood".

He stood there leaning against the mop nodding like a dashboard dummy.

"I could...so whart? Dis is a Boxing Gym and somma times it get ugly with blood flying about. I gotta mop it up udderwise it get onto the canvas up dare onta rink and it spoils it...so I keep onna mopping". He glanced at the 'mug shot' that I had pulled off the Samoan Police Files. "Whart's he done that interest youze coppers so much. You'ze the second copper who asks me in two days...whart's he done?"

"Stop mopping!" I commanded as I speed dialled Forensic Trace to have a team at this address immediately. With that I continued with the old man. "Who was the Detective that asked after the man yesterday?"

"I don't know...she too young to be a copper. I tell you whart I tol her. Don't know the man personally but I'm sure he flew out of Sydney with the Samoan Rugby side yesterday

afternoon...here comes some more coppers...bloody jeezuz...whart's he supposed done? He one popular man, I tells youze".

"I want to question him about the assault on that young Detective you spoke of...she was severely injured in the attack...and she was raped...in broad daylight by a thug who has no respect for women...I suspect here..." I pointed to the area where we were standing. "Around this raised boxing rink".

"Now, now. C'mon Detective. You gotta be jokin'. Where? Not around here! Maybe he done it...maybe he didn't...it too late as he flew home with the Samoan Rugby team yes'dee afternoon..."

If that were the case, he could not have assaulted Sophie later that afternoon...that left the attackers in the dark. As I was thinking this, two thickset Islander types walked menacingly into the area through the farthest of the open roller shutters. That got me a little nervous and I wiggled a bit to feel the comfort of my Glock in the small of my back. As if on cue, four Uniforms walked confidently into the Gym through another of the open roller shutters.

"Detective...a good afternoon". The Senior Constable commented dryly as he walked up to me. A smile and a nod his greeting. "If you are here for what I suspect, you're not wanted. It is way outside your sphere of responsibility..." We both noticed the two Islanders starting to step backwards away from us. The Senior Constable held up an arm and fiddled with his Glock strapped in a holster on his upper leg like some cowboy from the movie Gunfight at OK Corral.

"That's far enough gentlemen..."

Four more Uniforms appeared through the farthest roller shutter opening behind the two sulking men. The one that the two Islanders had appeared from some minutes before. Their appearance meant to intimidate me...before the eight Uniforms appeared.

Two Uniforms came up to me asking me quietly what I was doing. This was not a murder investigation...

"Not yet, no...but she has been given the rounds of the kitchen and is in a bad way...and she is my partner..."

"Maybe...and yes, I can sympathise with you but leave it with us Detective, eh? You're a Murder Dee not a regular copper that this case calls for...understand?"

I was right out on that proverbial limb slowly cutting it away with a saw. I nodded, smiled, and said good morning, Constables. I turned back, pointing at the discolouration on the floor. From the smell, it would seem the old bloke was using a cleaning solution with a high level of bleach in the liquid. He tried to roll the cleaning bucket away before the Senior Sergeant stopped him.

“That blood pool I suspect is from my Partner who I think was bashed to an inch of her life and then while semi-conscious, was raped by one...or maybe two of her attackers. I have requested a Forensic Team for the blood and to look for any DNA or tissue left around here...make sure when they arrived that they take a sample from those two clowns for comparison DNA samples”.

“Thank you, Detective...your advice acted upon but your presence is no longer required. Your presence will not be mentioned in any report on this attendance. We will take it from here but out of respect will keep you in the loop. A good morning to you”. He walked closer to me to whisper softly into my ear.

“I understand your former partner Marge Hendricks was attacked in the Uni grounds some days ago...now this. You’re sure a danger to your partners, aren’t you?”

“That’s out of line, Senior Constable!” I glanced at his name tag. Colin Collins.

I nodded.

“The old bloke? He should be on a charge of before and after the event...he knows about the attack even if he didn’t witness it”.

“Thanks for that, Detective...she maybe your partner but she is also one of us...we’ll look after it, okay”. The Senior Constable turned and began to walk towards the two Islanders. I noticed both had bruising, scratches, and contusions on both of their faces. One had a black eye, and I suspected a broken eye socket...Sophie had got a couple of beauties in before she was over-powered...I suspected by more than just those two oafs.

“Um...these two should also be checked against DNA and forensic trace taken from the various victims who suffered rape, attempted rape, and assault within the grounds of the University Campus and the nearby Hospital grounds...I think you maybe able to close up multiple cases...”

“Thanks for that Detective...we have it in hand, okay? We are not just a bunch of Uniform clods who weren’t smart enough to become Murder Dees. On the contrary, most of us would never think of becoming Homicide Dees...not because we are clods but because we are too

smart to even think of the Murder Squad being an option for us. A good morning, Detective. As I stated before, your presence here will not be noted in any official report so you don't have to worry about answering embarrassing questions about your presence".

I nodded at several of the uniforms before turning to head for the nearest roller shutter opening. I felt like a dog with its tail between its legs...not a good feeling at all, but yeah, I was way out of line for even being in proximity...as the man said, it was not a homicide investigation, so I had no jurisdiction for being here...just a sense of loyalty to my young partner which was enough for me to justify my actions...and make myself feel good...bugger what he said...

I slumped into the driver's seat of my Unmarked and dialled in Denny Turner, the Boss's number.

"You away from the area?" Was her opening gambit which took me by surprise.

"Arrh...I'm about to leave. What. You got a '*where are u*' device on the Unmarked? Or did one of the Constables let you know?"

"Neither...but I know my gun Investigator. I could have taken money on where you would be this morning. Um...Tellie also rang me this morning...about your son Bill. An absolute bugger you can't get down there to be with him...I'm sorry for you. You rang me, Joe. What for?"

"What time did that plane leave yesterday afternoon to fly out to Samoa?"

"It was a charter flight...um...it took off at four-fifteen..."

"Which means our Number One suspect in the attack of Sophie could not have done the deed. He would need to have been at the Airport to book in at least an hour-and-a-half before ETD. She was attacked around three-thirty...three-forty-five...by the two who showed signs of Sophs getting in quite a few good jabs...she went down fighting at least two of the bastards..."

I wanted to check with the Liverpool Station Sergeant whether they had arrested the two goons who showed signs they had been in a recent scuffle and not caused by a bout in the 'ring'.

I signed off and rang the Area Command officer at Liverpool Police Station. I wanted to keep the kettle simmering...with me waiting patiently for it to reach boiling point.

“Yes...arrested and charged Detective, over the assault and rape of your young partner. Mika Fapuleai aged twenty-two and Isaia Fruean his mate aged twenty-four. We’ve sent both their DNA samples over to Forensic Science to see if there is a match to any crime, especially those committed at the Uni Campus and Hospital grounds in the last twelve months...we’re going to let them stew for a while before we commence grilling them...they’ve already independently confessed to assaulting and raping your partner and I am confident we will get them on every assault and rape at the Uni and the Hospital. Both came over here on Rugby Union Scholarships some eighteen months ago. I’m confident we’ll nail the two bastards. Thanks for your help, Detective...we’ll keep you advised of any further developments...I would want to be on top of things if it had been my partner...”

I thought the last bit was a little sarcastic, but just maybe he had grounds!

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

I slumped into the driver’s seat of the Unmarked, glancing at my watch as I did so. It had just gone 0800 hours. Either I was early or the raid by the local Uniforms had been planned since Sophs had been viciously assaulted and raped the day before. I then remembered I usually commenced my day with a forty-five-minute regime in the Sub-Basement Gym which would put me warming my seat up on the Murder Squad floor at the normal start time for me...at eight or on the half hour. The Uniform guys were on the ball, attacking the problem while it was still hot!

I wasn’t enthusiastic about heading for the Office, but options were slim. A check of the Hospital as I left home still had Sophie in a coma. Christina Elban had still not joined the living...I decided to head for Marge Hendricks home address as she had been released from the Hospital on the weekend just gone.

An ‘All Points’ from Comcentral came over the Police airwaves. *‘All vehicles in proximity to the Parramatta Dam swimming area. Shots fired. Several victims. Perp walking around the area quoting scriptures from the Qu’ran. Possibly armed with an automatic assault rifle and several handguns. All Officers to keep a safe distance until the Riot Squad and the Anti-Terrorist Team arrive on site. Repeat...all units in proximity respond to incident at Parramatta Beach. The Perp armed and dangerous. Number of victims unknown...repeat...all units...’*

That gave me an alternative and with siren and lights blinking I headed over that way. I was in proximity...well...close enough!

I knew how to get to Parramatta Lake as some years ago a body had been discovered in the picnic grounds when I was in my first year as a Murder Dee and temporarily partnered with Marge Hendricks...that partnership with Marge lasted a dozen years. The body dropped out of a vehicle and left to die. The victim shot in the head. This had been an incident early in my career as a Murder Dee. For two days I tramped around the nearby bush looking for another body as people thought the perp had committed suicide after he killed his girlfriend who had wanted out of the relationship...yep, I knew the short-cut under the Parramatta By-Pass Road, James Ruse Drive and had joined a convoy of four other Police vehicles heading towards the ruckus. We instructed to turn off our sirens and lights as we headed down the hill to the lake's shoreline. Instead of circling around the centre of the fracas, we were directed away from the area towards a rear Parking Area that was full to overflowing. An Officer of some rank having a star apiece on each shoulder-board instructed us quietly to put on our vests and helmets before we joined a perimeter line well back from the small beach and grassy picnic area. The offender had not walked from a circular pattern that he tamped down. He had not ventured towards any cop who he could see...all standing some distance from the man. That was a good thing as it showed he was not about to unleash on every copper in range. Still, they were within the effective kill range of the Assault Rifle.

I had received a new vest fitted to my size unlike the older vest that hung off me. This new version fitted better back and front and had other panels that covered your body down to your crutch and bum. It was lighter, more comfortable, and twice the impact resistant of the older model. I had to take my Glock from its holster in the small of my back to slide into a soft cloth holster on the chest pad. An extra two full magazines clipped into a neighbouring 'pocket'. I doubted...or at least hoped that I was not positioned where my Glock was in an effective range as the guy had a mean automatic Assault Rifle. Even with the Kevlar protection, at that range I was a dead duck.

I could hear negotiations going on...noticeably a one-way discussion.

"What's the guy done?" I asked a fellow Plainclothes Detective who was standing beside me.

"Um...from what I can gathered, he has killed three scantily clad models, their make-up person, the lighting guy, and the photographer. Seems he thinks such scantily clad females are Jezebels and should not expose that much skin in public...those around the models do not have the right to cast their eyes on the girls so they also had to be punished. Stones were a rare material around here so a couple of shots to each person would have to do...he was planning on being exalted as he joined Allah. Shooting to death these infidels will rid the world of such sinful people. The...arrh...the Shoot is for some Woman's Magazine..."

"I got the impression he was being labelled a fundamentalist terrorist..."

“Yeah...that’s right. What right has the guy got to try and enforce his beliefs onto situations like this. Demanding that all women in Australia be covered head to toe whenever they venture outside the marital home...you know...is it a hijab?”

“No...” I replied quietly. “I think that is a burqa...it covers the entire body and head. The hijab just covers the hair, I think...I could stand corrected”.

I turned at the sound of a heavy vehicle coming down the slope into the picnic area. It stopped in a central position with a direct line of sight to the shooter who was still shouting out his beliefs on what Australian women should wear when out in public.

“Those he has shot. Are they dead?”

“They haven’t moved and there has been no negotiations between the idiot and the Police Negotiator to retrieve the bodies...in which case they are dead”.

The rear doors of the matt black, mean-looking truck flung open and some dozen black-clad persons leapt out yelling at the top of their voices. A loud hailer also had commenced making demands for the shooter to drop his weapon...which he refused to do. I noticed that the Officers broke off into two-man teams all heading in different directions with the purpose of surrounding the man as much as the water’s edge would allow. One carried a mean looking weapon, the SR 98 sniper rifle with its bulbous muzzle while his mate carried the standard issue F88Austeyr Assault rifle that is the standard issue Australian Army model. He more than likely was the Sniper’s lookout and defence man.

“Now we’re getting serious...that’s the ATT”.

“The Police Riot Squad?”

“No...the Anti-Terrorist Team...they’ll shoot first and ask questions later...”

“The ATT...never heard of them...” I responded now wondering if we were far removed enough if the thing developed into a shoot-fest. I looked around for something to hide behind as we were too close to the shooter to be comfortable. The bloke beside me was taller and wider than me...that made me smile...a queer response under the circumstance...blame my sick sense of humour...

A conversation between the shooter and who-ever was still in the matt black truck produced little. The guy continued to ramble on about the ‘looseness’ of Australian women. My colleague grunted as he shook his head.

“What makes guys like him think they can expect his fundamentalist views to be adopted in a country like ours? I reckon they’ve got a bloody hide...surely they must realise that as a world-wide phenomenon, the ultra-fundamentalist Muslim believers are *so* in the minority. I betcha when he goes home, he hooks his computer up to ‘skin shows’...betcha...and wanks off...”

Just then, there was a volley of bullets as the ‘shooter’ began to bring his weapon to bear onto a two-man team of ATT people. The impact of at least five bullets slamming into his body flung his body backwards into the shallow water of the lake. There was a volley of shots from his weapon as a muscle reaction which forced the lot of us to hit the dirt...

It was over...I didn’t stay for the clean-up of the bodies or that of the shooter. To me there was far too much killing in the name of a man’s right over his spouse, girlfriend, or ex...I saw too much of it!

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

I slumped into my desk chair after placing my ID Card and Glock in its lockable drawer. I was locking it as Denny came to sit one cheek on the corner of my desk.

“You bin to see Sophie? How is she?”

“Still in an induced coma as her head took a belting getting kicked from A to Zee. They’ve done a rape check on her and transferred the material to our Forensic Lab...ditto the material under her fingernails. All standard procedures...” This reported as a monotone indicating I was down...for several reasons and most not dealing with the condition of my young partner.

The Boss nodded her understanding.

“You weren’t anywhere where you shouldn’t have been...like investigating possible areas that may have been the site of her assault?”

“Okay...yeah. You already know. I did call into a Boxing Gym that was high on the list sheltering goons who may have been responsible not only for Sophy’s assault but also Marge Hendricks attack...but then I got involved in that terrorist attack at the Parramatta Dam Swimming hole...which may have seemed a wow factor, but was bloody scary...”

“Jeezuz Joe...how do you do it!? I understand your motive Joe but leave it to those better suited to investigate those assaults. And to those trained to deal with such things. How is Marge by the way?”

“Um...it was like...fifteen minutes and it was over. It took me longer to put my vest on...and off. They didn’t muck around and really, I have my doubts the guy acted in a threatening way that ended his life...with about four bullets in his body...” I took a deep breath before looking up at her. “Marge? She’s good. She’s at home and not affected by the attack except to say she is spitting chips at her perceived thoughts of inaction by the Uniforms involved...I’ll have to ring her to tell her the latest”.

“You do that...then leave it alone Joe. That is a friendly warning...and advice. You continue in any manner, and I’ll have to think carefully how I will reprimand you. Understand Joe? Leave it be. There are others as good as you who will wrap up the whole thing in a neat package”. She stood and began to turn. Thinking better of it she turned back to me, her finger shaking dangerously. “That thought you had on that shooter not threatening any one...keep it to yourself. There’ll be bigger buggers than you scrutinising the entire episode...hear me!?”

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

“If you could be not too long with the Patient. She is a lucky lady as one of the bullets missed her kidneys by a millimetre. It left a torn exit wound which will take time to heal. A bullet grazed her upper arm which will leave a nasty scar for life. She has only come back amongst the living this morning, so Detective, be gentle with her. I’ll allow ten minutes...and no longer Detective”.

I nodded as I was directed to the alcove of the ICU Ward where the young Constable Greta ‘Gabby’ Turnbull was lying.

“Detective...” She copped me first thing. “An S and E guy, huh?” She asked quietly.

I smiled as I grabbed a chair, shaking my head.

“No...arrh...I am the Lead Detective on the multiple homicide of a couple of days ago. Joseph Lind. Homicide Squad. You up to answering a few questions?”

“Yeah...I’m tired but yeah, I’ll give it a go...”

“I’d like to hear your version of what you remember of that morning...a shocking series of events...scary...um...do you mind if I record this meeting?”.

Constable Gabby Turnbull looked at the phone then nodded her approval, the movement hitting a raw nerve as she winced in pain.

“Sorry...but I don’t remember much...I know his first shot struck my comm-alert button before skewing off into the wall behind me. The effect of it made me hit the wall behind me and his second shot got me in the side. That made me slide down the wall...I still had my gun out as he fired again. The bullet grazing my upper arm which still hurts like blazes. I had my Glock resting on my drawn-up knee. Yeah, I got two... three quick shots off. I heard the thwack of bullets hitting a body and him swearing...then he disappeared. The bullet that had hit my comm-alert button took out the comm-mike so I couldn’t contact anyone. I hoped that in hitting the comm-button it had placed an ‘All Points’ Emergency Alert out across the airwaves...I hoped in any case...I don’t remember much else...not even the Amboes or the ride to Hospital...sorry...I know you wanted more, but...”

“No, that’s more information than we had. I needed you and the Resident of the house, Christina Elban to fill in the many gaps...arrh...why did you enter the house?”

“Hah-ha...” She winced in pain. Laughter not recommended. “Oh, that hurt! Um...I know I broke protocol and should have called in reinforcements before I even got out of the Patrol Wagon, but...I told Comcentral where I was and what I intended to do. There had been reports called in of shots fired but it was silent as I crept up the front path. The front door was wide open, and I could hear someone crying softly and whispering for some-one to help her...that was...what was her name?”

“Christina Elban...”

“A pretty name...is she alright?”

“I intend seeing her after we finish here...she has regained consciousness, so the Doctor informed us, but she is in a worse state than you...”

“Oh, dear. I hope she pulls through...I suppose the guy who shot me also shot her...”

“We don’t know. Um...you understand you will have the S and E guys on your back as soon as they learn you have regained consciousness yourself...”

“What for?”

“Um...it’s not for me to say...but you fired you Glock killing some-one...that’s for starters. That’s the normal response for them being involved...I’ll leave you to get some rest, but we will want to speak to you again...okay?”

“Yes Detective...um...am I in the shit for not waiting for back-up?”

“Let’s put it this way young lady, if you had waited, the Elban lady would have died...understand...and you also...for that you should be complemented...not criticised”.

As I walked out of the Alcove I wondered if I had gone too far...or not far enough. She’ll hurt once the S and E guys get their fangs into her. Until then, she could be a ball of nerves and anxiety...too late now I thought to myself...you’ve gone and done it again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Christina Elban was in and out of consciousness which made any questions asked a little hard to obtain a reasonable answer. A Sister came in and checked her vitals before asking me to leave not that long after I sat in a visitor’s chair beside her bed...we would get a chance to question her in a week or two I would imagine.

I couldn’t settle...I couldn’t relax.

I drove up to Manly Beach which was a fair detour from Westmead Hospital. Bought a multi-flavoured ice-cream to sit on one of those hard bench style seats that are as uncomfortable as all hell to sit in for any length of time. I watched grommets cutting up the small waves enjoying the truancy from school...what I was doing was something similar...copping out of work.

I tried to list what was worrying me now...Bill...Danni...not able to see either one because of the Covid shutdown of the entire Victorian State...Marge though she was doing okay. She was at home...Sophie who was not doing okay...Tellie and my relationship...and the normal weight of work which was a constant. I wasn’t accepting concern or sorrow...just relief!

My Mobile rang its boring chimes.

“Yeah...” I answered disinterestedly. I heard the officious tone of voice that was some-one who I had spoken to recently.

“Good morning, Detective”. I was surprised it still was! “Tracy Hurley Senior Forensic Trace Officer. As suggested, we completed a scrutinization of all the available seating arrangements from the Westmead Hospital Staff Entranceway up to the Staff Carpark. Half of Sydney is represented along with a couple of surprises. A Mister Isaia Fruean...has priors...assault with a weapon. Did time back in Samoa. Suspended sentence with a twelve-month community service requirement. What was interesting was that at every location...no...at most positions, another person’s DNA was present though we do not have a match to any known felon. Arrh...as you requested, we did a comparison study with Trace taken from the University Campus area where there has been a dozen attacks on young women in the past twelve months. There was no trace from our Mister Fruean but his close associate’s trace which we could not identify was present at several locations”.

“That’s tremendous work. Could I suggest you have a word with the Station Sergeant at Liverpool Local Area Command? I am unaware of the Officer in charge of those historic attacks, but I am sure he is also in charge of the recent attacks on my former partner Marjory Hendricks and my present partner Sophie Grasso brutally assaulted and raped quite recently...”

“Liverpool LAC, you say? Western Sydney Area Command?”

“Yes...”

“You seem to be quite a dangerous fellow...people should watch themselves around you...”

“Hah...one could suggest that. Good work Officer. I think you have just cracked every attack, attempted attack, rape, and attempted rape attack at both the Uni and the Hospital in the last twelve months about. Good work. Thank you...”

Even when I was at the bottom of the well, I could still draw some pleasure and confidence from a throw away suggestion of mine having results...big results...but it didn’t keep me warm at night, if you get my drift.

CHAPTER FORTY

I took two days off and saw my GP...and Doctor Ellen Phelps, the Force’s Shrink who good naturedly informed me I was overdue...in re-acquainting myself with the good Doctor.

“You go in cycles ma’ man. About every fourteen months you fall in a hole. You’re as predictable as tomorrow...now, what’s hurting you this time?”

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

With the two workdays and a long weekend, I rested for five days. The following Tuesday I was back at work with an appointment to see Phelps at nine that morning. That time making me miss the normal Staff Meeting usually convened first thing on the Monday morning. I was sorry I missed the re-allocated meeting to the Tuesday morning as I had wished to discuss the ‘Death House’ Case and the ‘Nursing Sister Decapitation’ Case which I felt would never be closed...unless one of the goons arrested in that raid of last week confessed to the crime. That was never going to happen as it wasn’t either man’s style or MO.

Phelps complained bitterly of the chlorine aftershave I was wearing.

“I either do the time every morning and afternoon as you prescribed smelling of chlorine and watching what little hair I have left slowly turning green or I see you smelling of under-arm deodorant and nothing else. What’s it to be?”

“Arrh Joe...forever the comeback king! Now, how are you feeling this morning?”

The normal appointment time is fifty minutes. We spent close on two hours discussing the weather and an odd assortment of worries that were causing me to near climb that proverbial wall. Did it do some good? I suppose so...and I felt that she had hypnotized me for some minutes. Whatever, the result was I was as relaxed as I have ever been, looking forward to the day and whatever it may bring. She also wrote another Script for sleeping pills and a mild sedative that would help with my flying phobia...it will not be tested until late next month when the whispers say the Victorian shutdown will end...I certainly hoped it would be so!

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

“Oh! I’m sorry. How long have you been sitting there?”

“Mmm...a while. It’s a gorgeous day and there’s a good view out the window...”

“Mmph...that hurt. Could you lift me up and put another pillow behind me, please?”

“I’ll do that...” A Nursing Sister admonished as she rushed into the room at just the right time. They’ve gotta know when the patient wakes from their blacked-out period. “You should not be moving about, Christina. You could re-open your wounds...”

“Yeah, yeah. I reckon you lot have drugged me for what...a week! Gee, how time flies when you know nothing of it!”

After the Sister left the room we chatted for a while, mostly about the Covid crisis hitting every country in the world. Australia had not escaped its deathly crawling status as new variants emerged every month...so it seemed.

“The US has hit a million fatalities. That’s because they are not receiving the vaccine shots as they reckon it’s their right to object...until it kills them...”

“As a collective nation, they’re totally bonkers. It’s like their hold on the Second Amendment and the right to bear arms...if they continue to have the right to walk into a Gun Shop and purchase a semi-automatic assault weapon...for what cause no-one knows...they’ll continue to have multi-fatality shootings in Schools and Supermarkets...where-ever...and they cannot figure out the connection...bloody mad they are”.

She nodded. She flinched again as it hurt her.

“I couldn’t sleep last night so stupidly, I switched on the TV...I rarely if ever do that. There was this Yank Picture on...Tom Hanks...something like that...”

“Castaway...” She replied quickly.

“No...um...I’ll think of it in a bit...gratuitous violence where he single-handedly kills most of the Russian Mafia in the States...Tom Dick...no, that’s not it...it made me think why Yanks so willing rush out and buy guns to protect themselves. They have lost sense of reality and live in Hollywood-land! You look at all the Yank Police TV shows and at some time in every episode there is a gunfight, a murder by gunshot or something to do with guns. Compare that with most Pommy Police Shows and there is rarely a gun used, mentioned, or shown. Midsummer Murders had the victim having her fingers cut off with a pair of garden sheers in one episode which meant she bled out and died...terrible stuff. The government the following day suggested a ban on the sale of garden sheers nation-wide...”

“Did they?”

“Not quite...” I chuckled as I had her believing me. “Tim Wicks!” I suddenly exclaimed.

“No ...John Wick...yeah, I turned that off when it was on a while ago...a repeat several times”.

I looked over at her thinking I had introduced the subject to get her to think of what went down that tragic morning in her life.

“Can you talk about that morning?” I asked as I fiddled with my phone to begin recording.

“Yeah...I think...where do I start?”

“Where it’s easiest...”

She smiled then fell silent for some moments.

“My mum...she...she arrh...she always said that daughters fall in love with men who remind them of their fathers. *‘Don’t you two dare!’* she’d say to me and my older sister. Dad never touched me or my sister...or my younger brother...but...yeah...he’d hoe into Mum on occasions, especially if he had a skinful on the way home from work...he never touched us but we called the cops over him when we got older...around ten my sister was...you know, when he flayed into mum...”

Again, she fell silent...

“Don’t you two dare...” She began quietly. A soft titter to accompany her memories. “Hah...she took the shit because she wanted to have a roof over her head...for me and me sister and brother...there was no alternative back then. Like Halfway Women’s Shelters and other stuff...legal advice and stuff. Constantine Haddad. I don’t remember where I meet him...but he swept me off my feet with flowers and gifts, and stuff. It never occurred to me at the time how he could afford it as his employment history was terribly lean...even after three kids I was still wondering. When he paid off the loan for the house in seven years, I started wondering seriously...and when people used to knock on our door any time day or night the penny dropped...and the fact he had a new car...an overseas import...and gold chains that must have cost a fortune...yeah...he used to shower me with expensive clothes and jewellery and stuff which made me kind of accept it. But he hit out a couple of times with me ending up in Hospital. I knew then enough was enough. Mum had warned against me getting serious with Con...but I couldn’t see it...yeah...I knew better than Mum...silly of me, huh?”

Again, she went quiet before she glanced up, surprised at seeing us there.

“The divorce...the whole thing...I’ve forgotten how many AVOs I took out on the man. I changed all the locks on the place. That didn’t stop him...he just kicked the door in or broke in through a window...he had this attitude that he could just call in any time to see the kids...mostly when he was cooked on coke...”

She chuckled, held a smile as though she was viewing the film of her life. It was good that there were periods which made her smile...made her feel good. Every person needed those memories that made them smile...

“I met Baz...Barry Bright at a Petrol Station one afternoon. Hah...I didn’t know how to check the engine oil...the oil light lit up red on the Dashboard...we went for coffee straight after and as they say, the rest is history. He had three kids around my three ages. They got on well...like a bloody house on fire...the Brady Bunch the kids used to say. My three used to spend holidays up at Baz’s parents place...really gentle, nice people who loved having the six...lived a stone’s throw from Merewether Beach...a ten-minute walk down the hill...but while the kids were away, he was very...attentive...but with so many strings attached. I don’t know how else to describe it...he was cunning...conniving but in a way you would hardly notice unless you concentrated...know what I mean? Things had to be done his way and no other way...meals bang on when he got home from work...he made his lunch to take to work every day as I fucked it up on too many occasions so he said...if we went out as a family which we would with the six kids, we went in my car not his because he said my kids were always messy...no messier than his but that was a rule...he only drank socially which was a tick I suppose...but if he had a night on the turps at a party or some-one’s place, he’d get real argumentative...and demanding...every time he was like that he would be cruel...I guess it was close to rape...every time...” She shook her head. “Rough sex...is that permitted in a De Facto relationship? Or a marriage?”

She tried to move a bit but gave up when the pain hit her.

“He became very restrictive, and it was bound to happen, he became my protector in his eyes. Haddad in his normal ad hoc approach to have time with the kids caused Baz and he to exchange blows...it could get quite savage. The kids, the six of them...they would become terribly upset. My eldest daughter would be the worst affected. She was eleven at the time. Stupidly I tried to break them up one day which earnt me a fractured jaw. After that I had had enough, ordering Baz out of the house and out of my life. The last straw was when Baz and Haddad were toe to toe ready for a blue. I was screaming at both to get out...Haddad pulled a gun out and was on the verge of shooting Baz...Baz was urging him on...to shoot, can you believe! He almost stood on Haddad’s toes whispering he didn’t have the guts...and if he did, he would never see his kids again as he’d be spending the next twenty years in jail...the best part of his life...huh! Men’s bravado and silly logic...bloody stupid!”

She swiped tears away that were streaming down her cheeks.

“I asked Baz later wasn’t he worried about being shot which made him laugh...shaking his head. I explained that would mean he’d never see his kids again. He answered he hadn’t thought about that...can you believe it. That was the last time he slept in my bed...and then I met Ian”. A beaming smile that took away all pain. “Ian isn’t his real first name. I think it could be Kloss...or something. He was born in East Germany...well, what was East Germany back in time. He was thoughtful, kind, generous and loving. His one fault was that he didn’t like violence...he’d run a mile to get out of a fight leaving me trying to separate Haddad and Brighty several times when they both thought they could drop their kids off...or come and see them whenever they felt like it...there was constant fear in my home because of their want to use me to mind the kids...I was still the wise woman for their kids...and as I had my three most of the time...you know...”

The tears began again. Her crying silent not even affecting her speech...how can women do that?

“That terrible morning...” I urged.

She nodded, blew her nose, and wiped her eyes before dropping the spent tissue into a wastebin beside her bed.

“Yes...when it all fell apart as I knew it would eventually. I woke to see Ian standing at the front window naked. *‘What are you doing?’* I asked. *‘Brighty’s ex has just dropped her kids off at the front gate. A backpack each. They look so sad...so forlorn. That car of hers shouldn’t be on the road...it’s a death-trap’*. He replied. He went to have a shower and get ready for work. I rang Barry to tell him to come get his kids. I wasn’t their babysitter. He informed me if he took anymore time off work because of the kids, he’d lose his job...he started in, calling me all the names under the sun as though it was my fault. I hung up on him, put on a wrap and called the kids in...I organised their backpacks and was going to ring Baz’s parents up Newcastle way to see if they wouldn’t mind taking their grandkids. I knew they would offer to take mine as well...they were like that...suddenly Haddad appears at the back door saying he would organise the kids’ breakfast. Ian came out to see Haddad. That was enough for Haddad. *‘Another man sleeping in this house’* he yelled. *‘You’re a bitch. A slut...’* and so on. Haddad threatened Ian...as was his style, he was out of my house quick-smart. Haddad started in on me, following me into my bedroom...he raped me, leaving me curled up on my bed crying...”

Again, she reefed a tissue from the box to dry her eyes and stop the sniffles.

“Sometime later I hears Baz’s voice going ten to the dozen accusing Haddad of being responsible for all the sins of the world. He slams my bedroom door wide open, storms into the bedroom ignoring me as though I wasn’t there and takes a gun from my bedside chest of drawers...”

“Where did you get the gun from?”

She shook her head, tried hard to shrug her shoulders. That failed...

“Haddad...he was paranoid about the general populace hating Lebanese. He said it was for my own protection. I’d forgotten it was there but Baz musta seen it when he was living with me. He stormed out cursing and swearing...um...at the door he turned and fired at me...I fell onto the floor from my bed by the force of the shots...I hears Haddad and Bright going hammer and tong at each other...accusing each other of killing the kids. I tried to get up...even crawl to get to the kids...I couldn’t move. I hears a volley of shots then nothing. I don’t know how long I lay on the floor beside my bed...I heard someone...a woman yell out for the AO to drop the gun...she sounded mighty angry...then there was a volley of shots...the woman cursed...it was Haddad who let out a mighty roar before he was gone...that is about right. I’m not too sure...”

“You did good, Missus Elban. Exceptionally well...”

A light knock on the door, Christina turned her head to see a bunch of flowers held at arm’s length in the door opening. She smiled that glorious smile.

“Ian...this is Detective Joe...”

“Lind...”

“German or Polish?” He asked as he walked into the room to shake my hand.

“Neither...I think southern Ukraine or that was where my great grandfather and his family fled ahead of the advancing Nazis...they lived out the war in the Crimea...I think there are still Lindz in southern Crimea...I’ll do a search on it one day...”

“Mmm...my grandfather may well have been in that advancing front...”

I nodded, not sure how I should respond so I remained silent, a quizzical grin to indicate my uncertainty. I stood, telling Christina I would like to speak to her again. Her testimony would more than likely be verified by the Ballistic analysis. The Report due on my desk in days.

I took my leave, getting lost in the sprawling multi-level hospital trying to find the Lift Lobby. I eventually stumbled over it and as I waited for the Lift, I quietly contemplated on my life until I retired in twelve to fifteen years' time. It was a sad fact that I would be Lead Dee for those years where two out of every three homicide deaths would be female...the dying breed as death stalks her continuously!

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

I sat beside Bill's bed, he hooked up to a plethora of tubes, wires, and machines. His life in the balance. The Supervising Doctor sitting beside me.

"Um...Mister Lind?" That sounded quite strange as it was a moniker I rarely heard. "Your son? We are unsure as to what damage has been caused but his brain is so close to brain dead we may want your approval to turn off the machines. I'm sorry that I must mention this at this time but could you sign the 'Release Papers'. If the decision is made, he could survive for...or he could die...we don't know".

I nodded as I returned his pen. He stood, holding my shoulder for some moments before exiting the Wardroom. I felt tears rolling down my cheeks as I placed my hand in his...I walked out into an adjacent Wardroom being used as a waiting area for relatives of this Ward.

I slumped down beside Tellie to feel her arms around me.

"I signed the papers...they're turning the machines off shortly. Could we all stand around the bed and hold hands so that Bill knows we're here..."

We did this...as Bill seemed to drift off slowly. One last breath, a tear in his eye and he was gone.

I stayed in Melbourne as everyone else returned to Sydney. His body needed relocation back home and a funeral organised...a lot of stuff I really didn't want to do but it needed my attention. Mel offered to stay with me which was a big help. Three days and we were back in Sydney...Tellie had arranged the funeral service on my behalf...it was a beautiful service that had us in tears, in laughter and in a contemplative mood about life and how we all lived with an ounce of luck that ensured a long and fruitful journey.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

“You okay?” Denny Turner asked as I sat in her Office for the first time in...I had two weeks off work which was enough in anyone’s opinion. I wanted to know the latest on Marge Hendricks’ Attacker...ditto Sophie’s...the result on the ‘Death House’ saga, and the result of the Nursing Sister’s ‘Decap’ Murder in the hospital grounds.

“Jeez you’re an impatient man, Joe. You haven’t even warmed your desk chair yet...” She looked across at me with a smile. “Um...yes, I looked after all your Cases while you were off and organised Sophie’s discharge from Hospital. Her mother and Uncle ‘Dad’ are staying with her at her place. Love the joint. She did well with all the work she put into the renovations. Um...She should be on deck within this month...on light duties only. She was disappointed that she could not attend your son’s funeral service. I was impressed with the Service...and surprised at who attended...some of your enemies...and a lot of your allies...”

“Tellie and Mel...um...Bill’s former De facto. They looked after the funeral process. We’ve organised a plot as a family thing...can take six burials and two dozen cremations. Bill is starting it off. Um...Mel? She’s off to Seoul South Korea for a two-year stint at the AFP Offices over there. I hope we stay in touch...”

“Okay...you know what occurred in the Death House that dreadful morning. Wrapped up with only a Report to the Coroner required. You can begin writing that up in the coming days...um... Moses A’Aropode. He’s been arrested and charged over in Samoa facing multiple charges. They doubt he’ll ever be freed...parole or not. His DNA found in sweat nodules and other trace in the area around where Nursing Sister Gloria Mitchell was brutally attacked and decapitated. According to the Samoan Official I spoke with it is doubtful that their man will ever be tried and sentenced to the grisly attack here in Sydney. They are saying that DNA evidence taken from the area yes, shows his appearance there, but the manner of death is not consistent with his previous attacks, both in Samoa or over here. His appearance at the scene could have resulted in him lurking in that area waiting for a victim to either assault or rape. The beheading attack is not his MO...they’re right but I would still like to see him stand trial over here for the ghastly attack...I doubt that will ever occur”.

I shook my head disappointed at that conclusion. The man showed intent by entering and departing from the country under an assumed name and Passport. He came over here to try out his latest ‘dream’ certain in the knowledge that his presence in Australia would never be ascertained...but DNA doesn’t lie.

“Yeah...a bitch I know...Marge Hendrick’s Attacker? Sophie Grasso’s Attacker? And several attacks on the University Campus and the nearby Hospital grounds. Either Mika

Fapuleai or Isaia Fruean or both were responsible for the attacks and attempted rape cases at the Uni and Hospital grounds. Their DNA places them singularly or together at certain crime scenes. Both charged with the assault and rape on our young Sophie Grasso...they'll go down for quite a few years as their list of attempted rapes, attempted assaults, rapes, and assaults is a long one..."

I nodded pleased with the result.

"Marge Hendricks? Her Attacker?"

"Arrh... Mika Fapuleai has confessed to the assault...just adds to his list of victims. What makes these men *think* they have the right to take what they want? They are responsible for so many attacks that have life-long consequences for the victims...what gives them that right to overpower and have their way...doesn't a normal sexual act fulfill them? Or can't they have normal sex?"

I didn't know the answer to that question...and I doubt those offenders would know either. Like me who loves that stalking process to identify a suspect and then the gathering of evidence as we sneak around their lives...then the final arrest and charge sequences that please me no end...like that sudden surge in the sex act...I prevail and complete the final act...

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