



A TOUGH LIFE

A DETECTIVE JOSEPH LIND CRIME NOVELLA BY
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HOMICIDE DETECTIVES JOE LIND AND MARJORY HENDRICKS

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CHAPTER ONE

It was going to be a beautiful day.

You could tell just by the way that the sun peeked carefully from behind the cloud bank on the horizon, and by the way that the energetic flock of Rainbow Lorikeets screeched their appearance in counterpoint to the gull cries. The high-speed kamikaze flight of the colourful birds through and around the foliage of the large trees that lined the Esplanade thrilled me every time that I witnessed the event.

Their high-pitched screeches seemed to indicate their excitement in the practise also.

Their derring-do exciting them to chatter stridently and incessantly.

I'd driven the short distance down to my favourite beach for a surf just on sun-up. The waves were small but perfectly formed. Fast smooth curlers that still challenged my resurrected morning practise.

This was my 'Patch' and had been since I had moved into the house not that far away with my new bride. Little did I know that I would have only ten short years with her before she died. Working undercover for one last time for the AFP in some forgettable hole in South Australia. Watching a break-away Bikie gang that was interesting the AFP with its embryonic drug distribution network.

The empty time after her death not helped by my favourite past-time.

Now of course, this 'patch' of mine held sad memories of a later time. Falling head of heels for Penelope Pinicello, the estranged daughter of a Melbourne Underworld figure. It was never going to amount to much because of the garbage that we both had...and the fact that her family roots would for-ever stand between us. She had begged that I relocate to another Patch, as the occasional sighting by both of us, I surfing, she jogging the length of the Esplanade, continually opened the wounds for both of us.

So, I did remove myself for a whole winter, informed through the grapevine that she had sold up and moved to somewhere in southern, coastal Queensland.

So here I was!

Again, enjoying each early morning having that surf.

Back on familiar and much-loved territory. A mix of bitter-sweet memories and recollections of riding well-shaped tubes. The hotchpotch of emotion giving the beach a special place in my heart and in my mind

I'd overheard it said in my teenage years that if I was willing to put in the hours, then the world surfing title could be mine.

The mind had me there.

Unfortunately, the body and the disappearing years always let me down!

Just on sunrise, you had to jostle for a good ride with the other bald, paunchy, middle-aged men who had similar dreams to me. Catching that moment of youth before donning the business suit to inhale the air-conditioned air of a stuffy office for eight to ten hours a day.

All of us, legends in our own minds as we rode the small sets into the sand.

I struggled out of my steamers, towelled down, donned my over-sized singlet top, safely stowed my board in the car and was licking on an ice-cream, lazily watching the world go by. Appreciating the antics of the dwindling number of surfers pulled away by time demanding they head to jobs and responsibilities. Thinking as they would have thought; just one better ride...just one more!

I was seated on one of those curved metal bench seats that never seemed to fit your shape. Uncomfortable as all hell! Maybe that was the reason for that particular design...not wanting middle-aged spectators stubbornly claiming it as his seat as he paid Local Rates so he had a genuine claim on the uncomfortable thing...cold as Penguins' feet into the bargain as well!

The waves now more crowded with pre-teen grommets wanting to grab a few before the school bell sounded.

The paunchy, balding brigade having quickly disappeared giving up the waves for another day.

Me?

I had a fifteen day lay-off care of the Doctor who felt that the latest assault to my body needed a little R and R. A knife blade that slipped across the side of my chest to end up under my arm pit. Thirty-two stitches removed some days ago. The scar healing well under a yellowish covering of 'Second skin' that seemed to be five layers thick. Applied because of my early morning habit that I wasn't willing to forgo, regardless of what the Medical advice was! The incident stopping my plans in mid-stride. A two-week sojourn up to Coffs Harbour. The cousin of my partner who owned a beautiful property in the hinterland behind the large coastal town. My partner and I had planned the sojourn to help out the remodelling of one of the houses on the property. To eventually be used as a B&B...those plans for me at least, in abeyance caused by the incident that had left this latest scar to an already battered and scarred body.

“That looks nasty.” Was her opening gambit. “Wear with pride, a macho thing, eh?”

A cheeky grin on her face.

She could see the slash and its healing balm through the gaping arm-hole of my oversized singlet top.

She glanced at the furrow in the side of my scalp. The notch out of the top of my ear lobe. I had given away the shiny scalp look as it was difficult to maintain. Even with a Number 2 Buzz cut, the path of an errant bullet still seen along the side of my scalp.

Another near miss of not that long ago that eventually involved a very delicate operation to relieve a miniscule tear in the brain membrane that had gone undetected.

I seemed to be having more time off work than on, of late! Me a magnet for flaying knives or erratically aimed bullets!

I hadn't even noticed that she had sat at the end of the bench seat.

It wasn't because my Hollywood looks always attracted a bevy of beauties like bees to a honey pot. On the contrary, I'd describe myself as a rough interpretation of that late Film Actor Charles Bronson. And there were those who thought that was being too kind as my son and his partner would often say I looked like the dirty backside of a bus...and that was being kind according to them...and it wasn't my fashion sense either!

Some would say that a hat full of arse-holes looked better...

Me?

When-ever I looked in the mirror, I still saw a ruggedly handsome bloke who had a couple of battle scars.

She had beautiful blue eyes. A strong nose that on another shaped face may look out of place. A smile that wiped away tears. A couple of freckles that spattered the bridge of her nose and the tops of her cheeks. An outside girl. Dark blonde hair pulled back tightly into a pony tail. A hat that gave shade. Long slender arms. A top that hid her frame.

She looked away, embarrassed.

A look that may have asked, why did I just say that?

She hesitated before again jumping into the fray.

Turning to me with a quizzical look on her face.

“A dangerous occupation...or a bad night at the Pub...” That smile again.

Not as a question, more a statement.

The pretty smile never leaving her face.

She thought she was being clever. Or funny.

Sure, I had learnt the hard way to laugh at myself, as there really wasn't that much to love. I was feeling melancholic this morning and full of self-loathing. I had had enough of being off work, wanting desperately to get back into the grind.

It was the Police Department Doctor who was my enemy.

I nodded my head in agreement.

Cops rarely readily confessed their profession, especially to strangers.

“Security....” I offered as a way of explanation.

“Private Detective?”

“Some may say that, but I consider myself quite gregarious...”

She looked at me sideways. Not sure of the information, or how it should be digested. At first, I felt sure that she thought I was having a go at her. Then she started to giggle.

“You're trying to be funny...” She stated between the fits of the giggles. She placed her hand over her mouth as though she was self-conscious of the act.

She was quite attractive when she smiled.

The giggle infectious.

“Not really. No. Not trying that is...by the sounds of your giggling, I was successful.”
We shared our opinion of the day.

The good fortune of living hereabouts.

I offered to buy coffee.

This seemed to worry her somewhat...extending the relationship very quickly from the inane chatter of two strangers sharing the same uncomfortable seat facing the ocean. An air of uncertainty, perhaps insecurity, shrouded her once open and friendly countenance. I

gestured towards the outdoor Coffee Shop a little distance away where I had purchased my Ice-cream. Explaining that to suddenly pick her up and rush to my vehicle with her under my arm, with her screaming her lungs out was out of the question, what with the mending scar, the hundreds of people about and well.... because that wasn't me! She looked at me sideways again before she began another giggling outburst. Arrh...I had an appreciative audience at last, to my sense of humour! She took some moments to accept my offer as though this was the most important decision that she may make for the rest of the day. Perhaps convincing herself that I was not indeed Jack the Ripper resurrected. Incarnated. Though it was hinted that I could play the part most convincingly, with my horror countenance.

"Um...yes. Why not." She replied after some moments.

She offered me her hand.

"We perhaps should introduce ourselves if we are going to share a coffee."

I had this sudden urge of laying her across one of the small outdoor tables and having my way with her. That had never happened before. I was shocked at the image projected.

"Penelope Catt." She stated pleasantly. Completely ignorant of the visions flashing across my mind's eye. Thank God. I'm not usually a leech like that, though it had been some time, I had to admit to myself. Possibly that was it!

"Penelope Kathleen Catt. My middle name after my mother. I'm a Primary School Teacher on a pupil free day."

I looked around at our surroundings.

"What is it with this place? The streets are not lined with gold, but apparently pennies."

She looked at me, a frown spoiling her natural good looks.

I waved away her doubt.

"A too long a story..."

She lifted her chin as though she was willing to listen to it. I wasn't in that type of mood to start carrying on about former lovers...and I thought it was crass to open up like that.

"Joseph Lind. My father's name was Frank.... I seem to recall...so I'm glad that I do not have that name as a middle name. Then again, Frank may have been all right. My mother's name was Sue...that wouldn't have done at all."

I didn't know either one as fact. Only finding out their existence and history after my Grandmother had died. It was she who had reared me. I had always known her as my Mum.

"I don't think I need to go any further." I continued deadpan. A blank look on my face. "I'm a Grade 3 Detective with the Murder Squad of the NSW Police Department on enforced Sick Leave. Pleased to meet you, Penny Catt."

We gently shook hands.

CHAPTER TWO

"My brother died here...on the beach... five years ago to-night."

"Oh!? I'm sorry...have I intruded? You know....do you want some time alone...you know..."

I felt awkward, unsure what I should do or say.

She lazily waved her hand, brushing away my attempt at commiserations.

Our coffees placed on the table along with a mountain of Raisin Toast as we sat in silence. She shook her head as though clearing it.

"The Death Notice said that he drowned...he was my twin...identical twin actually. He was hit savagely on the back of the head...rendered unconscious...with a beer bottle...he was surf fishing...always caught something for tea the next night...it happened after last drinks at the Pub. A guy took a liking to his mobile, his sneakers and his fishing gear...so it was stated at the Trial. Me? Looking at the guy in Court, I got the impression he just felt like bashing some-one's head in that night. It's amazing really, when you think about it...the beach quite well-lit nearly all night...there was at least half a dozen people who saw it happen but by the time that one or two got to my brother, it was too late. The guy got five years with a non-parole period of three. He'd be out by now. Earlier this year. More'n likely having forgotten the episode, if he remembered it at all as he was that drunk...I come here every year on this day just to sit...it's a life sentence for me...I still miss him every day."

I felt that I knew the next bit, being a Cop and hearing it all the time...how the perpetrator never got his just desserts while the victim and the family faced a life sentence.

You can sympathise with the feeling, but no matter what the sentence of the guilty party, even death, it never seems enough when the emotional ties are so savagely severed. Fractured emotions can play havoc on fair-mindedness and intelligent thinking.

I felt that silence was the better course at this point in time.

Who am I to belittle the sorrow of some-one losing some-one close? I'd been through the same thing. I've never truly gotten over the loss of my wife even when retribution was repaid in full. By my unlawful actions and manipulation. My actions didn't really temper or lessen the feelings for the loss that I felt at my wife's death. Perhaps it would with some people. Not me!

Her next statement, I didn't see coming at all.

"Do you, as a Cop, think it a good idea for me to try and contact the guy...to let him know that I hold no grudges...he paid the price and really, he wasn't to know that my brother, like me, has a very brittle skull. Like an egg shell. It's a family genetic trait apparently. My parents let me know after his murder. It came out in the Post-mortem report. I had some tests done after that which confirmed the diagnosis. My mother was distraught over Billy's death. It near killed her according to Dad. They're both still alive. They've learnt to live with the sorrow. Took them some time though. Getting on with life as best they can. Both still work. They haven't reached retirement age yet and I doubt that will slow them down when they do..."

She smiled warmly at an image that only she could see.

I shook my head solemnly.

"I'm sorry. What else can I say? I can't advise you either way. About getting in contact with the Perp, that is. The only thing that you should think of, is your own reasons for wanting to do such a thing."

I took a sip of coffee. A bite of toast.

"Prison does strange things to those interned, and as you mentioned, you have written to him on several occasions without once receiving any reply. That should tell you something, surely."

We spent the morning together enjoying each other's company.

Penny had a slightly off-centre if somewhat dulled sense of humour. She was apt to giggle uncontrollably at my attempts of humour. That was something comforting as my cop partner, Detective Grade Two Marjory Hendricks, seemed more annoyed then appreciative of my many attempts at humour. That's a little unfair as both our senses of humour seemed to dove-tail together. I could get out of line occasionally that sometimes soured my partner. And my son had long ago given up trying to teach me about an educated sense of humour.

What-ever that meant!

We parted having agreed to meet the following Friday night for a meal at a local Restaurant. I would pick her up at her address in Curl Curl at 6:30 sharp.

I was already looking forward to the date.

Already a little nervous at the thought.

Something that I hadn't felt for such a long time.

CHAPTER THREE

"Mar? Do you miss me?"

"Like a wet week-end, my love. The Office 'feel' has elevated in its atmosphere by your absence. How's that scratch healing?"

"Bloody scratch be buggered! Enough! I near had a fatal mastectomy if that is possible for us men!"

"Oh...you men are such babies! C'mon Joe, a slight scratch across your chest to under your right armpit you'll wear with pride for all the bikini clad beach babes to ogle over...I'll bet that you are down on the sand right now, exposing your latest battle scar...am I right?"

"Well...yeah...I'm down on the beach, but I'm not parading about as though I'm on a catwalk...and... thank you for your drop of sympathy. I didn't expect it, really! I had the stitches removed last week. I reckon that I should be OK for work in a couple of days but the Doc seems to be a little conservative...which is starting to grate..."

"Take your time. There's bugger all going on in here, Joe. A couple of open and shut cases but nothing interesting. Stay away.... tell the Doc that you're having flash-backs and nightmares...that'll give you another month or two at least...I'll tell you where I missed you...up at the cousin's place out of Coffs...we were one short in painting out the other Queenslander...gawd, my shoulders and arms were sore. I was glad to get back to work..."

"You poor dear...I can't do that Mar. Painting I reckon will stretch that part of my body that is bisected by this enormous great scar! But...I'm already climbing the walls going slowly mad. And to be honest, I miss your smiling face and sympathetic ear. Do me a favour, will you? Five years ago, to-day. One William 'Billy' Catt. With a double 'Tee'. Murdered as he surf-fished on Manly Beach late at night. The Perp got only five for his trouble with a non-parole period of three. Got out maybe in the last twelve months...or maybe around now after completing the three-year non-parole period. The trial was about 12 months after the

offence. Open and shut case. One Andrew James Parker. Dig up all you can on him including his time inside. Associates. The Parole Board Report if you can get it. Priors...you know the drill..."

"Yeah, I *do* know the drill. After only getting back to work after jeopardising those same rules that you want me to breach...Jeezuz, Joe! Okay, I'll bite. Why?"

"As a favour...I'm interested, that's all. Can you drop the stuff off at my place to-morrow night? Ta...I'll owe you one. A big one!"

"To-morrow night!? Bloody hell, Joe, you're not asking much of me. Good to talk to you, Joe. Pop over and see me when you can start jogging again...how about a lap or two? And I'm going okay too, thanks for asking! I'm here at your disposal, my man. All you have to do is just ask as I am at your disposal."

CHAPTER FOUR

"Chinese or a Pizza?"

"How about we go to that Pizza joint at the back of the Club? We can sit in a corner and I can eat to my heart's delight while you skim what I've uncovered on the Perp. Your shout."

"How about the Pizza joint near my place that Knackers and I go to...it's close to your place too..."

"Yeah, okay. Whatever..."

There had to be a catch that involved me putting my hand in my pocket to repay the favour. That of course, did not automatically delete the debt owed, as Mar's way of looking at things meant that interest on the favour usually accrued! Monthly!

We ordered.

She then fished a thick file out of her over-large bag, laying it momentarily on her side of the Restaurant table.

"You know Joe..." She looked earnestly at me. "You are one lucky arse-hole. I don't know how you do it. Really! You ask me to dig this shit out on a known felon knowing that if it did not involve a current or an 'unsolved' case that we had on our books, then it was possibly against just about every law and protocol that exists in our profession. You know that don't you, Joe? That you asked me to put my arse in the firing line as a favour..."

She held up her hand when I opened my mouth to interrupt.

“Shut the fuck up...I have no idea why you asked for this information, out of the blue...we have what? Two ‘Unsolves’ on our desks. Like most of the other teams in the Office, at the moment. When I read back the felon's name to you over the phone...Andrew James Parker, Scotty was standing beside my desk. He’d come to tell me that our illustrious and much-loved leader wanted to organise an Office Conference for that afternoon to again discuss all the ‘Unsolves’ that we had gathering dust on our desks. You know he does this when things get a bit slow. The entire Office between us has only seven on-going murder investigations with three of them ready for the DPP...we’re really light on. Thank God! Who’s to know how long that will last.... until the next full moon, I suspect.”

Our ordered Garlic Bread, water and Beer deposited onto the table. The young Waitress informed us that the Pizzas would be about another ten minutes before rushing to another table.

Once the Waitress had disappeared, Mar took up the thread again.

“Scotty asked what our...yours and mine, interest was in one Andrew James Parker. Apparently, one of Scotty and Daniels unsolved bashing murder cases had the man listed as a ‘Person of Interest’ in the case as he had been seen in the area some hours before the crime was committed. The M/O was like others attributable to the Perp and to one that he had spent time for. Five with a three-year non-parole period. He is a repeat offender. A nasty and cruel bastard. I parried him away, saying that one of our ‘Unsolves’ was also a bashing murder and we were casting the net wider so to speak...as we were running out of puff, at the moment.... that seemed good enough for him and the Boss when I brought the matter up at the afternoon Staff meeting. Abbey approved the various searches for me to carry out on the perp...so here we are...I’m still in the shit as this stuff should not have been removed from the Police Building, now should it?”

She had the tone of speaking to an errant child.

“Now...before I give this little dossier to you, fill me in on why this guy’s name came in unexpectedly...and again Joe...you are one uncanny bastard.”

Mar sipped slowly on a glass of water as I filled her in on the morning of the day before yesterday.

Of my meeting with Penelope Catt. Her twin brother’s murder as he stood at the water’s edge around two on a cold winter’s morning with a fishing rod in his hands. Minding his own business. Penelope’s attitude towards the Perp. That of not holding a grudge. Wanting to contact the man to tell him that she held no anger or vengeful thoughts against him. That she forgave him. He’d done the time so there was a clean slate as far as her thoughts on him were concerned. She had already sent several letters to him while he was in Prison for nil

result. The guy appeared to be ignoring her. How this troubled me knowing the minds of most criminals, especially after they did time.

I wanted to know what type of guy this Parker chap was.

That's all.

She shook her head slowly, unable to get her mind around what I had just conveyed to her.

"You met this chick on the beach. You shared a coffee with her and now you have entered her life...yer gotta be kidding me! I could lose my job...you too, Joe! Do you realise that!?"

I leant back in my chair, unable to think of anything to say. Maybe that was the right strategy...I really didn't know. Marge again shook her head in disbelief. She flipped through the pages of the Dossier she had prepared. In the end she moved it across the table towards me. A black expression accompanied the action meant to do me harm, I was sure.

"In one word, Joe...dangerous. He's one mean bugger...his Juvenile file I couldn't get, but speaking to several Court Reporters, Court Bailiffs, and a Court Sheriff or two in Juvenile Court, he has been in trouble with the Cops since he was about ten years of age. His adult offences reflect his juvenile actions; just more severe. Assault. Assault with intent. Assault with a deadly weapon. GBH. Repeat, repeat, repeat. Only two jail sentences. One you seem to know about. The other while still a minor but treated as an adult as the crime was disgusting. Savage. He was seventeen at the time. Again, assault..." She again took several sips of water, dabbed at her chin with her napkin. "It appears that once he starts punching into some-one, he just loses it and can't stop. Described in one report that it is not the victim that he is punching...punishing...but some-one in his family...in his early life, this some-one possibly sexually molested him. An interesting fact is that he is the nephew of one Ralph Justin Parker. The local District Magistrate around here for for-ever, who only retired last year. That would explain the number of times that bonds, fines, and community service were issued instead of real prison time for such a habitual repeater! There are unconfirmed rumours that His Honour, RJ Parker has had several paedophilia events against him through the time that he has sat in Court in the area. Nothing proven. How-ever, your new friend should stay away from the man...RJ Parker's nephew...well away...you sleeping with her yet?"

"Jesus, Mar!"

"Yep. You are. Or you'd very much like to. Just be careful, Joe. OK? You are so open to pain. You seem to like it somehow. Just be careful, OK?"

I moved to open the dossier. I was surprised at its thickness.

I skimmed through it quickly. It did not make for good reading and only made the worm wiggle more in the pit of my guts.

“An interesting thing about this Joe, is that there may be a chance that Parker could be involved in our unsolved bashing death! Illogical? Fortuitous? Ironic? I’ve given up trying to second guess you.”

"What-ever..." I gave her my best smile. As I skimmed through the Dossier, I wasn't geed by what I was learning.

“I must say Mar...you did more than a good job on this...ta much...”

“Joe? Even though it commenced as a favour to you, the more I uncovered, the more I was convinced the man maybe our Bashing Perp...so I finished the task completely persuaded that he is our man and most probably, was Scotty’s man as well. I intend sharing this with him...we may work together which will cover more ground than us working as separate teams. I’m going to put it to Abbey next week...at the Monday Staff meeting.”

I nodded my head not really taking in her words. If I had, I would have advised her to hold off for a while until more concrete evidence revealed itself.

Two pizzas came out smelling absolutely scrumptious.

I didn't feel hungry any more, after quickly perusing the Dossier.

I read it again as I mechanically ate. I cannot describe the emotions that welled up inside me. Anger. Frustration. Pity. So many other emotions that I couldn't describe.

“Christ....his Uncle. The esteem Chief Magistrate Parker. Can you imagine it!? The kid was about five. Six when it started. The mother and father just as guilty of the crime...Christ...don't these people ever think what their hideous actions can do to the life of an individual? Of a child? What happens to so many victims of child abuse? Don't these people think? Or are they so self-absorbed that these thoughts are well beyond them? In a way, you've got to feel sorry for the guy...plus what happened while he was in prison. Seventeen. A juvenile placed in an adult prison...we...and the system are just as guilty too, for every crime that AJ Parker has ever committed....”

“Joe...Joe. Don't take on the world and its problems. That's how you go downhill. A murderer doesn't stop and think before the act whether the death penalty will apply. Or how many family members and relatives and friends will be affected by his one act of violence or selfishness...or greed...that's just how it is...and that's why we became Cops...to help those left behind. At the time of the act, they are not thinking like normal, logical people...some say that people in love are the same. An intense form of selfishness for want of a better expression...”

“You trying to say something, Mar? If so, spit it out!”

“Bloody hell, Joe...C’mon...lighten up. Don’t get so defensive. I was trying to lighten it up a bit...and I’m jealous of your new-found happiness. Good onya!”

“OK...” I simmered back to a controllable level.

She was right of course. I do allow the World and its problems to affect me, way too much. And if the truth be known, even though the empathetic gland works way over the top at times, I realise no matter how hard a life a crim has experienced, there comes a time when every action they take, it is their choice.... they must take responsibility for their criminal behaviour at some stage! If not, they go through life as serial offenders like our Parker here.

We ate in silence for some time. Took sips of our beers. Never looking at one another.

“Do you think AJ Parker is in the frame for those ‘Unsolves’?”

“Yeah. Scotty and Daniel have a more solid case for his involvement in their ‘Unsolved’ then ours...but.... from what I can find out so far, the man was in the vicinity...of our bashing murder...which matters little, I guess. Like their case, we need to place him at the spot which is something that we cannot do...nearby is not good enough...even a similarity in his style of bashing just doesn’t hold water...it would never enjoy a win in the Courts.”

“Haul him in for questioning!”

“On what grounds? We’ve got nothing concrete, is all...and the guy is a practised crim. He could lie his way out of prison, almost....and he’d cry police harassment, until the cows come home.”

“Mmm...wouldn’t be the first time that we hauled some-one in by the arse on bugger all...this is nice.”

I was tasting it for the first time. Two-thirds of the pizza had disappeared before the taste buds got to work!

CHAPTER FIVE

For the first time in my life and most certainly the first time in my career as a Police Officer, I over-emphasised the effect of the knife slash wound across my chest and the degree and severity of night trauma, nightmares and night-sweats that awoke me, seemingly every

night. Only days ago, I couldn't wait to get back into the grind. Now...I was trying my darnedest to extend the sick leave!

Thrice weekly visits to the Cop Psychiatrist were organised and the time off work extended by another four weeks.

It took just a week for me to commence spending the week-ends at her place or vice-versa. Quickly we were seeing each other nearly every day and memories flooded back into my brain about Helene, my first wife who at the time of meeting her, was an undercover AFP Cop. Within six months we married and never regretted the rush at all. She murdered some ten years later leaving me alone and broken with a stalled career, a stalled attitude and a ten-year-old son needing to be cuddled. Desperately not wanting to lose his father too, as that is what it looked like to him. If it wasn't for my mother, who, as it turns out was my maternal grandmother, my mother-in-law and my good mate Bazza Holtz and his wife Cynthia, I think that my son would have grown up without a mother or father.

The quickness of the relationship paralleled that of Helene and I, but I was hesitant about marrying again.

Maybe it was just me. When I fell, I fell hard and quick. No reservations. No qualms. My mind made up very quickly indeed.

Penny and I seemed headed down that same path. Neither of us wanting to apply the brakes at all. If I'd stopped and thought about it, it may have scared the bejesus out of me, but times of happiness as far as I am concerned, are too rare to mull over and be anxious about.

Savour every moment, is my motto!

You haven't a clue what's around the corner.

My engineered return to work corresponded with the end of the Winter School holidays.

Penny expected a busy semester ahead as she was being loaded with the responsibility of two classes where one class was a hand full. This would herald the end of the 'honeymoon era' of our relationship and with my expected return to full time duties, the usual maddening and unstructured hours of a Murder Detective would place further restraints on our relationship.

We hired one of those large Campervans for the last week, except for the last week-end of the holidays, and drove out to the Warrumbungle National Park. Both Penny and I had warm memories of the area, holidaying there with family and friends when we were both nippers.

It rained solid for the first two full days after we pitched camp at one of the secluded Camping Areas. The grounds well looked after with enough timber to have a roaring fire

each evening. Both of us huddled under golf umbrellas hoping that the fabric wouldn't melt from the heat of the fire. There was a clean but small Amenities block that had solar hot showers and clean toots. The most enjoyable part was that it was completely devoid of any other Campers who possibly were more deterred than us by the freezing weather, low clouds, and constant rain storms!

A shared shower stall became the norm!

Our shared love of bush-walking not deterred by the weather and after each day's trip we spent some time watching the engorged Leaches drop from our legs. Leaving patterns of blood and lesions behind.

The last two days were gloriously fine, clear weather albeit freezing!

It didn't seem to faze either one of us and the whole experience looked back on with nothing but warm memories.

CHAPTER SIX

He leant his head back against the car's hard head-rest and closed his eyes.

He was not the type to philosophise over his existence and the reasons why.

He did feel how-ever, as though his world was on a never-ending spiral that would soon grind to a halt.

He felt it in his very bones. His death close, so he thought. It neither scared or excited him though the "what if" question seemed to pop into his head more often these days.

What if he had had a normal childhood?

A normal family life.

A loving mother who protected him.

A loving father who truly wanted him and was truly proud of him.

An Uncle who was famous...and normal.

A life where he didn't feel guilty of allowing filthy things to happen to him. That made him angry every time he asked himself that question. Why should I feel guilty, he would often

reply...he couldn't give himself a logical answer that satisfied his own conscience? How could he as he had lost the selection of right and wrong a long time ago.

He wondered what a life like that would feel like...a normal one like you see on TV with everyone happy and loving. Not a swear word or explosion of anger anywhere. No bruises or broken bones received in bouts of sheer rage.

He could see his Uncle's smarmy smile as he placed his large, feminine shaped hand on the eight-year-old boy's head, forcing it down into the man's crutch and smelly 'thing'. Pulling his hair then applying pressure downward as the youth rode the man's penis. Peering sideways through squinted, tearful eyes as he spat the remains of spunk from his mouth. Watching hatefully as the man left a \$20 note beside his head on the soiled bedsheets. Running to the Bathroom to down almost a bottle of mouth-wash before the taste was gone. Peering through the crack in the door as his Uncle gave his father a \$50 note.

Watching as his mother glanced sideways at the transaction with tears and sadness in her eyes.

He had no idea how long this once a week practise continued, but in his mind, it seemed to last for-ever. And a \$20 note to an 8-year-old meant precious little. Its true value not appreciated or understood. All he did was to take the note and stick it under a corner of the worn linoleum in his bedroom. He was around 15 years of age before his curiosity forced him to count the money. He felt like a millionaire once he appreciated the amount that had accumulated though it didn't dull the disgust that he felt for himself, his parents, or his uncle.

He remembered coming across a group of boys in the Toilet Block at School when he had just turned twelve years of age. His first year in High School. The four boys were having a competition on who could spurt their rocks off the highest. He was expelled from School for bashing the group up. The boys' habit scarcely causing a lifted eye-brow. When he thought back to the incident, he couldn't remember who he had bashed up as all he saw was his Uncle's smarmy smile, his father, and his tearful mother. That was the beginning of young Andrew James 'AJ' Parker's downward spiral. After that he earned a reputation, dutifully earned, as a little thug. A bully. A boy expelled from every School that he attended in the district.

Usually for fighting.

He never completed his schooling.

At seventeen he bashed a boy to an inch of his life. The teenager had 'hit' on AJ. No one could help him or keep him out of prison and because of the severity of the bashing, the seventeen-year-old was sentenced as an adult.

It took three days for the first rape to occur. After that he was 'the boy' for at least four of the 'Heavies' who subjected him to at least some form of sodomy or sexual exercise each day for the entire time he was imprisoned. Nine long months with AJ having trouble walking and talking for the entire period. Mouth wash was not available in prison and lubricant rarely used.

For the entire time, he had no visitors. No-one asked after him. The Prison Admin staff were as guilty, due to their supposed ignorance of what was occurring.

Every day.

Every night.

If he objected to the practise, the rape was worse. More brutal. If he complained to one of the Screws, he was laughed at and the rape would be worse the next time.

So, he suffered in silence, promising himself that all the bastards would pay one day.

Once he finished his nine-month stretch, he had a successful business although it was illegal. Providing boys for the pleasure of those men who required it. He now had his Uncle where he wanted him. A well-known and respected District Magistrate who was willing to pay top money for the boys and to keep AJ's mouth closed. A handy ally when one of the boys got himself into trouble...otherwise Uncle, if you don't help out, then your little secret will not be a secret for very long. That never said, but clearly understood between he and his Uncle!

That is how Andrew James 'AJ' Parker stayed out of prison for several bashings that he regularly served out, seeming unable to resist the urge. Each time trying to exorcise the images of The Uncle, the father, and the mother from his mind. It didn't work. Not even with a larger and larger intake of alcohol and a cocktail of drugs. Then the assault on William Catt. Just sheer bad luck according to AJ, although he had trouble bringing the events of that night into focus. He'd been drinking at the nearby Hotel for most of the afternoon and the night. To One O'clock closing time. Why he staggered down onto the beach he had no idea. Perhaps to have a piss. What's a bloody fool doing wading in the shallows of the surf at about one in the morning? On a bloody freezing night to boot. Fishing, be buggered. He was one of those...poofs...waiting for a pick-up! Who would have known just looking at him that he had some sort of thin skull...the bone eggshell delicate?

Bloody bad luck all round. That's what he thought.

Five with a three-year non-parole period. His useless Uncle couldn't help. The useless sod! Though he knew that his Uncle had worked hard on his behalf as a three year stretch with his history was a bloody good outcome, to say the least. His 'Priors' not listed in Court

which was a Godsend. But he'd never thank the bastard as he was the sod who started AJ down this road in the first place!

While in Prison for this second stint, he stayed out of trouble. Didn't have one bad experience which was just as well. He'd still be in there, he reckoned, serving a second murder charge if something had happened. The other inmates seemed to sense the coiled-up anger within him and knew to stay well clear. For the most part he was left to his own devices. Never abusive nor friendly. No incidents to report either way.

When he got out, his 'boys' had scattered. The business kaput. No-one interested in working for a psychopath as that was what his reputation was becoming. A sadistic psychopath. A mean mother who thought nothing of being bashed about as long as the last punch was his!

And now this sheila, this 'do-gooder' sister of the guy whom he killed on the beach, wanted to show mercy. Express her understanding and forgiveness towards him. What a bitch. A silly bitch. What right did she have of walking heavy-footed through his life? Saying she did not hold any anger or thoughts of vengeance against him?

He slowly opened his eyes.

It was after midnight.

That dark coloured Ford was up the street again. A bloke slouched down low in the driver's seat. Smoking a cigarette which shone like a beacon in the dark of night. Got to be a copper. No-one else would be that stupid. They're got to be watching him. Maybe they've got him pegged somehow for the couple of bashing murders that he had committed since his release. Nah....they had nothing on him, that's why they were shadowing him.

He'll cool it for a while.

He sat up, turned the motor over and slowly drove up the street past the dark coloured Ford. It was an early model. Undercover cops throwing off the scent, he thought as he slowly passed. The guy didn't even register him driving by. Didn't turn his head. That was bloody obvious. Silly coppers for sure.

He'll cool it for a while.

The woman will have to wait for his appearance. As sure as hell, if he got out of his car to walk to her front door, he'd be gang tackled by half a dozen coppers! And he'd have to make sure that the boyfriend wasn't about as he was a mean looking bugger....as ugly as a hat full of arse-holes. Makes you wonder what a good looking broad like that sees in such an ugly bastard...it meant that he had a chance, as he reckoned that he was better looking than the current guy! That was for sure...

CHAPTER SEVEN

It amazed me how hard that first week back at work was not seeing Penny for an entire five days! I moped around the Squad Room like a love-sick puppy. I knew that on the Friday night I would need to fill her in on the background of Parker and try to deter her feelings of wanting to approach the man to talk benevolently to him.

He was just not going to listen to that type of emotion and logic.

There seemed to be a hiatus in the number of violent murders occurring in the City. As such, the 'Unsolves' took up most of our attention. Along with Trial time appearances, Juvenile Court, and conferences with the DPP Office on an up and coming Coronal Inquest of a murder/suicide, our time was otherwise our own.

The Coronal Inquest concerning a sad and emotionally sapping case in the extreme, where two young kids were involved. Losing their young lives at the hands of a father who had lost it completely. Making his estranged wife watch the spectacle before killing her...and then himself.

As is always the case with investigations like this, the common comment by neighbours, family and friends was how could he do such a thing? He was always happy, a smile on his face and a word to all those he knew...such a terrible tragedy. Everyone missing...or ignoring the pointers that a head of steam was occurring and storm clouds were brewing.

No one in the Murder Squad Room wanted cases like this plopped onto their desks, but if you were the team rostered to take the call, then there was little you could do about it. Domestic Violence homicide cases were percentage wise, our bread and butter, regardless of whether we enjoyed them or not.

My mobile skipped across the desk and I feared that a child murder was about to become Mar and my latest case as we were heads up, first on the queue.

Instead it was Pen.

We normally spoke to one another at least twice a day and for long hours at night.

She sounded rattled.

"Joe? I know that you'll think I'm crazy, but some-one has been inside my place."

"How do you know? Is there stuff moved about? Something that you know that you left in one spot moved? Anything missing? What are you doing at home? Are you OK? You sick?"

“No. No. Slow down, Joe. I’m OK.” She gave a little nervous giggle. “That project on Australian Birds that I wanted to start with the kids this afternoon. I forgot to take that Bird Book with me this morning. The one you gave me last week-end I slept in over at your place. I was running late and just plain forgot it. I’ve come home during my pupil free period to get it, that’s all...”

“Pen, how do you know some-one’s been in the house?”

“Um...you’ll think I’m crazy...um...there’s a difference...the air pressure...a slight stale smell...a smell of evil...”

“You can smell some-one’s body odour? Their scent? Cigarette smoke?”

“Um...no... yes... not cigarette smoke but it was a smoker...the air...um...it’s hard to explain...you don’t believe me, do you? That I can feel when an evil person has invaded my space... there’s a difference in the molecules of the air...”

“A difference in the molecules of the air...” I raised my eye-brows. “Pen, I believe you. What I’ve seen over the years only reinforces my belief that some people have this knack...this sixth sense... the person? They’re not there now? Are you sure?”

“Yeah...yes, I think. No. They’re not here now.”

“Grab what you came back for and get out of there. Come over to my place when you knock off for the day. I’ll knock off early and meet you there and we’ll go back to your place and go through the joint with a fine-tooth comb. OK?”

“OK. Loves ya. Miss ya.”

“Me you too.”

It’s not that I believed or disbelieved her...I just didn’t want her to take a risk with her life. It was way too precious to me.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Everything all right?” Mar asked.

She would have heard most of the conversation.

I filled her in as I ran my fingers over my buzz cut. Followed the groove in my scalp where a bullet had gouged out its trajectory. Way too close. The action was becoming a habit. When-ever I was thinking. Or worried.

“C’mon. Let’s go.” She commanded as she stood, unlocking her gun drawer to grab her Glock and ID badge before swinging her large bag onto her shoulder.

I looked up at her like Simple Simon not comprehending the situation.

“Where to?” I asked stupidly.

“Never under-estimate the intuitive powers of a woman. You’ve got a key, right? To get in? Her house? Then let’s go.”

After hurriedly grabbing my gun and badge and flinging my coat over my shoulder, I followed her lamely out of the Squad Room after filling in the ‘WHEREABOUTS’ Board. Abbey almost bumped into us as we headed for the Lift Lobby.

“Hot?”

“Don't know, boss. We may have a lead on one of our Unsolves...”

This was the usual bullshit sprouted by all of us when-ever we were doing a ‘Personal’, as we called them.

“Mmm...” Was his only response. He had been there too, at one stage!

Penny’s street, Seaview Drive ran off the main arterial road for the Peninsular at an acute angle. At this intersection was an expansive Petrol Station that never closed. It also encompassed a large Mini-supermarket and did a roaring trade night and day. The local beach crowd usually hung out there after dark, laying over their ‘rides’ as though they were lounge suites. The Kebabs and Pizzas were a local delicacy and available 24/7. The kids loved them. The coffee was cheap yet passable. The local coppers did a regular ‘drive-by’ and an occasional pat down looking for drugs. They rarely found any of substance.

These kids were into surfing and a clean life-style. Good kids, Pen would say when-ever we drove past. The parking bays full.

On the coast side of the main road, row after row of low-rise Unit blocks hugged each other for the two blocks to the coast. On Pen's side of the road, leafy suburbia existed. Seaview Drive dipped down off the highway. Then in a series of wild curves climbed up onto the ridge-line. The Heights. A far superior class of person supposed to inhabit the ridge-line. The views magnificent of the Ocean and several sweeping sandy beaches nestled between their own solid, craggy, sandstone headlands.

Penny's place was some ten houses from the corner. About 200 metres off the intersection down in the dip.

We had to park a couple of houses up from the front of Pen's house. Street parking was at a premium around these parts. I climbed out slowly from our 'Unmarked' as the knife slash scar still pulled whenever I twisted in a certain way.

"Hang on..." Mar muttered as she began to walk away.

She stopped by a bloke who was lounging against his car smoking his head off, several houses up from us. The air so still it seemed that a cloud of cigarette smoke engulfed his head.

"You been here long?" Mar asked in her most officious voice.

"Um...what? Who? Me?" The guy appeared frazzled, hurriedly blinking as though he had just been rudely awakened!

Mar showed the chap her ID card.

"Oh! Coppers!" He seemed to relax taking another gulp of smoke. "Have I been here long? No. Not really..." He gestured his nicotine stained fingers at a house on the high side of the street. "I'm waiting for my sister. Taking her to the Doc's. She makes me wait. Says it so's I can have a couple of smokes before she gets in me car..."

Mar leaned against his vehicle. Gave the guy the once over. Scanned the street in both directions.

"OK...we received a report that some-one was lurking about. Checking out houses. Haven't seen anything? Anybody acting suspiciously? You got any ID?"

She looked up and down the street again. The guy did the same, expecting so it seemed, a villain to suddenly run out the front gate of some dwelling. Easily identifiable by his striped prison garb and black eye mask!

"Uh...no. As I said, I ain't been here long. Waitin' for me sister." He handed her his wallet. A Queensland License in a front pocket that had a clear plastic pane so that you could see details.

"Queenslander....just visiting, huh?" Mar asked as she handed back his wallet.

“Yeah. Down here staying at me sister’s place for a bit...a few old mates before I go back home. Next week. She won’t allow me to smoke in her house...so’s I’m having a few smokes and warming the car up before she comes down.... taking her to the Doc’s.”

“A good sister.”

“Depends where ya standing, I guess. Up or down wind, if’n ya get me drift. For a sister she’s not too bad. She’s done her first lot of Chemotherapy...it muddles up...breast cancer.”

Mar nodded her head in understanding.

“That can be a bugger.”

She shoved herself off from the side of the car and walked back to me as I was opening the front gate to Penny’s place.

“What was that all about?”

“Nothing really. Thought it wouldn’t hurt. A Queenslander. He’s only been there for a one cigarette duration. Warming his car up waiting for his sister. Seen nothing.”

She bent down to examine the lock, the keyway, and the timber door jamb near the lock position.

“The keyway has been scratched. Recently too...no indications of weathering...”

“Arrh...hard to tell I guess, but that could have been us...it’s hard...you know...in a clinch wanting desperately to get inside as quickly as possible trying to find the hole...the keyhole...when you’re otherwise occupied...”

“Enough, Lover boy. Enough. Too much information...you’re acting like a couple of love-sick teenagers.... bloody hell! I really don’t want to know!”

She walked along the length of the front veranda peering at the windows as she did so. She straightened up and suddenly turned to me.

“I haven’t said this before to you, but I’m happy for you, Joe. You deserve a little sunshine...and she is a very nice lady!”

She looked sheepish. Almost embarrassed in saying what she had just said.

“A good looker, a nice figure. Looks after herself and really...too good for you.....!”

She couldn't help herself, but I was touched by her candour. I said as much. We stood there like two little kids who had just told each other their innermost secrets.

I opened the front door.

A small hallway. Timber polished floorboards that Penny had sanded and polished herself.

The far wall directly opposite the door displayed a montage of photographs in a higgledy-piggledy style that still showed balance and thought.

Mar peered at all the shots.

"Her parents? That's the brother? They were...jeez...put a dress on him and you couldn't tell them apart...he was a surfer...she too?"

She turned to me for confirmation.

"Yeah...she beats me by a fair country mile on the bigger surf days. She's bloody good, actually. She shows no fear on the days that the surf is really pounding. She carves them up beautifully...even at her age now! She shouldn't really be surfing at all, because of her skull, but...They did it a couple of times when they were teenagers. Went to school Martha and Arthur a couple of times, so she says, with even their close friends none the wiser. They did a couple of parties the same way. No-one was the wiser, so says she and her mother. They thought it was a hoot. I'd be a little concerned to say the least. Her brother appeared to enjoy it a little too much for my way of thinking. From what they said."

"You can be a bloody prude, Joe. At times. I wish my brother could show a more feminine side than his boring macho, over the top, bullshit all the time..."

"You don't have anything to do with him anymore, do you? So, it shouldn't be any skin off your nose, now should it?"

I shrugged my shoulders. I had never met the man but I had a good idea what he was like from Mar's various descriptions of him over the years. To me, he sounded as though he was one or two steps away from Jail time. I picked up the dregs and continued.

".... Her Mum and Dad are still alive. Live up Avalon Heights. Been there or thereabouts all their lives."

We ambled through the cottage not touching a thing. Looking into cupboards or anywhere that we thought some-one may be able to hide. Checked every window. Double checked every lock on each window. I continued, just wanting to make conversation. To be truthful, I was a little embarrassed searching through the house without Penny's presence.

I wasn't too sure what I may find. Shows my insecurity and suspicious mind, huh?

"She and her brother, Billy? They bought this house. Their Dad gave them the deposit. The two of them have done it up. It originally only had two small bedrooms apparently. They extended it, turning the two bedrooms into one large bedroom and an Ensuite Bathroom and Walk-in Robe with extensions mirror reflected with a similar set-up for Billy's side on the other side of the house. Plus, a third bedroom that they both used as a Study. A good job, don't you reckon? They did most of the work themselves. Their Dad and their Uncle helped them out. Built a large elevated deck between the two legs of the 'U' straight off the Lounge. Good view eh? Then Penny got married..."

"Oh? That's the first time that you have told me that!"

"Yeah...well. It was disastrous. Billy stayed here for a couple of months before the marriage until he could find something decent to buy...his parents helped him out with that...he couldn't bear seeing Penny reduced to tears nearly every day...the hubby was an overbearing bully by all accounts. Had a short-fuse temper that wasn't noticeable that much before the marriage but came to the fore regularly, quite quickly after the marriage ceremony. It lasted less than a year. The marriage. He hit her once which was enough for Penny. In the stomach, thank God. If he had got her on the chin, she doubts that she'd be here. Still put her in hospital. A family friend and a couple of his mates made the guy see the error of his ways and escorted him from this property, threatening him with dire consequences if he ever returned. The usual AVO in place that really isn't worth the paper or effort...An acrimonious split by all accounts where the guy tried to take possession of this place and everything else that Penny had before the nuptials...Penny has no idea why she agreed to the marriage in the first place..."

"When did that occur?"

"The divorce? Around the time that Billy died. I'm not sure. It was a rough time for her for a while."

"Were all the locks changed?"

"Knowing Penny, she would have organised that from her hospital bed. She doesn't muck around when she makes up her mind."

"Women...when love hits, we can be so bloody blind. Go figure...it's almost as though the more intelligent and fuller of life one is, the better chance there is of you falling for a prick!"

"Men too, Mar. We're not immune to stupidity either. Remember Penelope Pinicello? The amazing thing to my way of thinking, is that females usually fall for some-one who reminds them of their fathers. Nothing could be further from the truth in this case. Mr. Catt is an

absolute gentle man and a gentleman. A real bonzer bloke. Down to earth Aussie who absolutely adores Penny's Mum and dotes on Penny."

"Don't generalise, Joe Lind. Does he still work? Penny's father?"

"Yeah. He's a Qantas pilot. We'll be able to get cheap overseas flights through him when we get married."

Mar spun around.

"Whoa boy. Slow down. No need to rush. Don't tell me the two of you are thinking along those lines already?"

"Well...no. Not really." I looked slightly nonplussed. Embarrassed. "Arrh....umm.... We haven't spoken about it...but Pen is almost thirty-six...well...next year and not getting any younger if you know what I mean...she loves kids and would love a couple of her own."

"Don't use that as an excuse...a basis for marriage, Joe...."

"Yes'm, Mar."

Mar had this silly little grin on her face as we walked into the bedroom.

Obviously, Penny's.

Several drawers were slightly pulled open.

Underwear drawers.

I closed them with my knee, thinking that was not like Penny to have them like that. She could be accused of having OCD as she was overly neat and tidy. Clean. A place for everything and everything in its place.

Then again, I was similar, and would never accuse myself of being an OCD sufferer. Just a neat guy, that's all. My joint was not over-clean. Spotless, though Billy and Malisa may not agree with that assessment.

We checked all the windows throughout the house again finding none forced.... or even open for that matter. The house locked as tight as Fort Knox gold. Even the large picture sliding glass wall out onto the expansive deck was triple locked and bolted with timber lengths inserted into the runner grooves providing extra security.

"No sign of forced entry. Anywhere. It may be worthwhile her fitting an additional dead bolt to the front door. I know that may make it more difficult for the two of you when the

‘clinch’ situation occurs, but it may be prudent. And she should change the key-way cylinder on the existing lock and put those spare keys out of sight and not have them hanging on key hooks that has a sign saying ‘Spare Keys’ for every man and his dog to notice!”

I gave a cut-off harrumph.

“I’ve never noticed that. Fair dinkum!”

“You, Lover boy, have always been too busy looking and doing other things!”

“C’mon Mar! Enough!”

CHAPTER NINE

“Do you want a coffee? The Petrol Station has a good brew. And it’s cheap.”

“Yeah. OK.” Mar replied. “Could do with a bite as well. Anything that you can recommend? Though why you would stop there for a bite to eat when you’re a stone’s throw from Penny’s has me beat.”

“Yeah...well. Penny sometimes gets a take-away when she doesn’t feel like cooking. The kebabs aren’t half bad if you are so inclined. They’re better after midnight after you’ve been out to the Club or somewhere though. Just a coffee for me. Penny’s got me eating good now... well, thinking about it in any case.”

Mar drove into the Service Station and parked in one of the many parking bays. I went to get out. Mar beat me to it, yelling over her shoulder that she’d get it as she swivelled out of the ‘Unmarked’.

While I waited, I looked down the row of cars parked beside us.

I gave a double take when I spied him. I recognised him from several photos included in the dossier that Mar had collated for me. I slowly stood from the car and ambled past several parked vehicles before coming to the rear of a white Holden Commodore. Fancy wheels. I slipped quickly down the side of the car, flung open the driver’s door and grabbed the guy by the front of his shirt and hauled him out of the car. All in one motion.

The scar tissue across my chest hurt like hell.

I put my face into his. Spoke softly through my teeth like Clint Eastwood's Detective Callahan on a bad day.

“What the fuck you doing around here, arse-hole?”

There was a momentary look of uncertainty. A flash of anger. Then came the smart-arse look. Insolence. Stubbornness. He was up for a fight.

“Hear me, Andrew Parker? What the fuck you doing around here?”

“What’s it to you? You a Cop? Yeah. You are. You’re the new boyfriend, right? Of the chick who wants to save my soul. Forgive me for my sins. Don’t like her chances much though...do you, Copper?”

He thrust his jaw out wanting me to give it a right royal jab.

I’d seen the type before. There was nothing new in his behaviour...behaviour that doesn’t save his arse from Prison.

Waiting, wanting that first blow to land. Not really feeling it as the adrenalin flowed fast and easy. Winding up to unleash a furious bout of his own. I let go his shirt to circle the front of his neck with my hand. Digging fingers into the underside of the back of the jaw on either side. It hurts like hell so’s I’ve been told, though his expression didn’t convey that. I lifted him onto his tippy-toes by this hold and forced him back onto the side of the car. Bending him backwards. He had no leverage from his feet. He couldn’t swing back his arm and follow through with his body to get a decent punch in.

“Answer me, arse-hole. What are you doing around here?”

“I live two suburbs up and they serve nice coffee here, Copper. The same reason you’re here.”

There was no fear on his face or in his speech. This guy was as cool as a cucumber. Usually the cretins would be shaking in their boots by now. Pissing themselves and writhing in pain from my fingers digging in deeply into that hollow spot between neck and jawline.

This guy wasn’t blinking an eye-lid.

“Easy Joe. Easy.” Mar whispered in my ear. “Put him down gentle like, and come and have your coffee. OK, Joe? Let him down easy like, Joe. Let him be.”

I stood rigid for some moments before I eased him back down onto his feet. Released my hold from under his jaw, took a step backwards and swung my left straight into his bread-basket. Up under his rib cage. He doubled over some before standing erect. Wheezed a bit

before taking a couple of deep breathes. His fists bunched up. He'd opened his stance, standing slightly to one side.

There was the slight sound of a safety being released. Mar's service pistol appeared close to the guy's forehead.

"Step down, AJ. Loosen up before you make the biggest mistake of your life. Remember? Once you start you find it hard to stop. The difference is that we're cops and you'll be over your head in shit. Understand? Loosen up, AJ. Just cool it, OK? Take a deep breath...understand? Chill out, Dude. OK?"

Parker glanced sideways over at Mar who had a double hand grip on her revolver. She had moved the pistol to just out of arm's reach from the guy.

He looked back at me.

Grinned malevolently.

"Seems like I gotta change Coffee Shops, huh? Ya squeeze is right safe with so many of ya's looking after her. I'm not a stupid mug, ya know? I wouldn't try nuttin' with her with so many cops' eyes about."

He let out this little laugh.

"You should be thankful actually. With me about, no other bastard would be game to harm her either, I reckon...and if she was, I know that I'd be uno numero fitted up for the job by you guys, so's I'd be bloody stupid to let anyone touch her, like. Pity that one-legged guy didn't have the same amount of security around him." He smiled. A smile that didn't reach his eyes. It was more of a grimace, I thought. "...Or her bloody brother. No telling what I'd be doing now."

He brushed himself down, wormed passed me to sit swiftly back in his vehicle. He turned the motor over, revving it as he grabbed the door to close it.

I leaned down to again get into his face.

The movement sent stabs of pain across my chest.

"I see you around here again, Sport, I'll arrest you for harassment and any other thing I can think of. Now piss off, arse-hole!"

I stepped back and slammed his door shut.

Without looking, he reversed with a screech of tyres out of the parking bay narrowly missing my toes with the front wheel of his vehicle. Slapped the car into first and sent a plume of grey smoke to envelope us as he skidded the rear of the car around. The car then screamed across the concrete pavement area of the Service Station out onto the main drag. Narrowly missing several cars in his haste.

CHAPTER TEN

“Jesus, Joe! You’ll be up before the Integrity Commission if you’re not careful. You can’t afford another brush with them so soon after the last lot. Settle down Joe. I know that you’re worried about Penny and the position she finds herself in, but there are ways and then, there are ways. You’re starting to pick the wrong way on too many occasions, dear boy. It didn’t look good from where I was standing. Cool it, partner. Come and have your coffee. It’ll be getting cold.”

“You were the one who unclipped your gun from its holster, Mar. Not me. That was my best shot you realise. He didn’t even flinch. He’s one cool customer.”

“Don't worry, Joe. I reckon he’d be dry-reaching by now and examining the bruise...”

“Yeah, well. He didn’t flinch at the time. That’s the first time that’s ever happened.”

“You’re still getting discomfort from that cut, aren’t you?”

“It catches at times, that’s all.”

“It’s more than that, Joe. It should have settled down by now. You should go back to see the Doc...”

“Christ Mar... here we go again. Ya did the same thing with me head wound...”

“And just as bloody well, you bloody mug. You wouldn’t be here except for my nagging you about it...you’d be six feet under, my boy...what do you think he meant by those comments...about all these people keeping an eye on Penny and the thing about the one-legged bloke?”

“Beats me. Nothing as far as I can see. Just a rave by an unravelling mind.”

“Mmm.....strange.”

We returned to the 'Unmarked'. The paper coffee mugs sitting on the bonnet, possibly leaving a mark in the duco...how do you explain that to the Boss?

I slowly sank down into the passenger seat and took a couple of sips of the lukewarm beverage.

"A strange thing to say, don't you think?"

"Mmm...what? Yeah. I guess so. You've already commented on that, Mar. When we finish here you can drive me home. Penny should get there about 4, maybe 4:30 if she has a Teachers' meeting after school. Can you stay as a favour? I think that she may believe you more than I about Parker....a favour!"

"Christ...I feel like I'm handing those out like Football Cards, at the moment. Favours, you know? Yeah, OK. But you have a go first, all right?"

"Thanks, Mar. I owe you again...and you were right in what you said that that was a strange thing for him to say...any victims of his have only one leg? And are the local Police tailing him for some reason. We better check in with Abbey."

"He also had you pegged as Penny's squeeze...isn't that what he called you? How'd he know unless he has been keeping a close eye on her...betcha it was him who fiddled with the lock and roamed around inside her place..." She glanced over at me as I was trying to get onto Abbey. "Creepy, eh? Real creepy."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"His psychological profile suggests that he is a repeat criminal and will kill again...."

"Then why let him out?" Penny asked.

A question that any sane person would want to know the answer to.

"Because that's the law...and you cannot put the Crim away based on the knowledge that he will strike again...it doesn't work that way. If it did, half the population would be in prison...for thinking about breaking the law. He has served his sentence without causing any problems while in prison. These guys know the system. They're calculating. Full of street smarts that would leave you standing. Know how to use the system and how to get around it. They don't think like sane and reasonable persons. He is a career criminal who will break the law repeatedly until the weight of repetition forces a sentence for life to be handed down, hopefully. Sure, certain impulses can be tempered with drugs, but it still

requires the felon to cooperate to take those drugs when required. They need to want to change. This type of person is incapable of even thinking that there is a need to change, let alone a will to do so. Offering him mercy and understanding to him, empathy, forgiving him for murdering your twin brother shows a weakness, not a human strength to that type of person. I'm sorry Penny...that's the reality of the situation. I think for a while that it would be in your best interest to stay here at Joe's...for your own safety. I suggest this while not wanting to in any way support you living in sin!"

This bought the giggles from both women.

"Half your luck," Mar whispered into Pen's ear as they hugged.

For a moment, Penny thought that the comment conveyed a certain jealousy. That Mar wanted to be the recipient of Joe's bountiful degrees of love and affection. She pushed the momentary thought away as the women continued to embrace.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Penelope spent almost two glorious weeks at my place.

The place was a bloody nightmare, according to her sensibilities. A den of loud activity. A complete uproar. What with Mar coming and going every couple of days so it seemed. Shared meals. Raucous laughter. The kitchen always full of people competing for cooking space, ideas, jokes and light banter, there wasn't a moment of peace and quiet.

My son, Billy still lived at home.

Now established in the guest's accommodation, well...the self-contained Grannie Flat, would be a more descriptive term. The accommodation built originally for my mother and mother-in-law. They taking turns to be the live-in Nanny for young William after the death of my wife, Helene.

William's girlfriend, Malisa was now a permanent fixture.

I still hadn't met her parents, though I'd had several conversations with them over the phone.

The subject mainly to do with my thoughts on her taking up permanent residence with my son under my roof. Living in sin. They sounded like prudes. Malisa's explanation was that they were devout Baptists. They had acreage, as Malisa called it out of Gilgandra. 15,000 hectares of it!

A bloody understatement, which she was apt to utter regularly.

It was the subject of much laughter at times.

Pen and she got on famously and would often leave the boys to their own devices to shop, visit the Gym, then secretly visit the Chocolate Shop. They had become firm friends even though there was a difference of age of around 10 years.

It didn't seem to matter.

William's mate, Ben, and his latest squeeze, were a regular fixture, especially on week-ends when they would take over William's former bedroom and attached Ensuite Bathroom on the first floor of the house. The design and construction of the first-floor additions all Helene's work not long after we bought the house some months after our marriage. She had had definite design ideas on what she wanted for the master bedroom, Ensuite Bathroom, and Walk-in Robe. I must admit that I still liked the arrangement. Warm within its walls knowing that it had been her dream that had seen the reality of the day and still existed. Perhaps that is why I could empathise with Penny on her oft said remark about feeling her brother in her place.

Though her time spent here had been wonderful, clearing Pen's mind of Stalkers and harassment, she did miss the solitude and quietness of her place. Where she could sit, and think out on the large deck, looking out at the distant and faint line of where the sea met the sky. Where she reckoned that she could feel her brother watching over her.

At Joe's place at times, she could not even hear herself think such was the noise, the laughter, the conversation sounding at times like a babble of noise with not a word discernible.

She had been back home for just over a week.

Now missing the constant activity of my place...go figure!

She laughed at the silliness of the situation knowing that most of her frustration was caused by her missing me.

I had become her reason for living...and she, mine.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It was her first shopping trip to replace all those perishables while she had stayed with Joe. She smiled to herself at the recent time that was filled with laughter, love and comradery with so many people around with everyone enjoying each other's company. It reminded her of the times before she and her brother had moved out of home. Love and laughter was always there with them.

It had started to sprinkle.

She swore under her breath, breaking the spell of her reminiscences.

She turned the wipers onto intermittent.

She was tired.

Feeling drained.

Wishing Joe could come over and cook a meal for her.

He would she surmised, a smile drifting across her dial as she thought of him.

He would jump at the chance, in fact.

Sometimes he reminded her of a little boy with a new toy.

He'd cook up a delicious meal, in fact.

She felt lucky that she had met him.

A sheer fluke.

She looked back at the memory of their first meeting, still shocked and amazed that she had made the opening gambit. It still embarrassed her when-ever she thought of the moment. She'd scold herself and call herself 'that little hussy'. But that was momentary as she knew that that moment was the best moment in her life. She could never think of a life that now didn't include Joe in it.

The lights turned green and she accelerated with the stream of vehicles.

You hussy, she thought to herself. A warm smile at the memory lit her face.

The slight sprinkle became heavier. She turned on the wipers. Thankfully she didn't have that many groceries to carry inside. She hated driving in the rain...

Now that was something that she needed to address as it happened with monotonous regularity. Having to run from the shelter of the Carport to the front veranda. She needed to spend some money on the plan that Billy had suggested when he was alive. When they first started the extensions. When they had planned the extensions to add the second bedroom suite and Study cum third bedroom, they realised that there was sufficient space under to create a large garage in the void. Enough really to house more than two cars easily. It only required a dig out of about a foot or two. A staircase from under the house up beside the Hallway would mean that there would be no more unloading of stuff out of the car and scurrying for the front veranda during inclement weather. That was one good thing, she thought. Though climbing stairs after a hard day teaching little brats was not a comforting thought. They had compromised and built the covered front veranda instead. It helped soften the front of the house as she thought it would...that's the trouble with compromises, there's always that failing somehow.

It wouldn't take much. She could picture it in her brain. It would mean demolishing the carport and putting a driveway down beside the house with a turn in under. The driveway would be a bit steep...yeah, a bit steep but so what?

She turned into the driveway and slowly moved forward under the carport. She turned the engine off. For some moments, she sat there listening to the slow tick of the cooling motor. The hammer of rain on the carport roof.

The smile on Billy's face after he said that there would be deficiencies in just providing the carport instead of going the extra mile to dig out under the house extension. He was right, of course. There were deficiencies...like on days like to-day!

Her mind swung back to Joe and how lucky she was in meeting him. Her first and only association with a member of the opposite sex since Billy died and her arse-hole short-lived husband Alex was banished from the home.

Funny how she could never say to herself that Billy had been murdered...not even when it happened. It was as if the brain still would not accept the fact but quite readily recognised that he died that day....it was getting on now.

The best thing that had ever happened to her in divorcing that AO. When she looked at Joe, she wondered how she had been so stupid in seeing anything good in that AO. Stupid, that's what she had been! Totally stupid!

Joe Lind was the best thing that had ever happened to her.

She smiled at the thought. Snapped the hatch release and got out of the car. Wind driven rain wet her feet. Up her legs to the hem of her dress. She swore to herself. Billy was right again. As usual. He had said something about the prevailing weather and how there would be times when the carport would offer only minimal protection from wind driven rain.

She'll broached the subject with Joe. About digging out under the house for a garage. Not covered in but just a concrete pad under the house that would really, allow up to four cars to park there...out of all the weather conditions.

He'll know if could be done, now that the extensions were completed to her liking. Maybe they would need to remove several brick piers to allow for the width of the garage. All that required was some steel beams to bridge the distance...easy as! She gave a cut-off laugh, remembering the many times Billy had suggested something...always ending it with the '*easy as*' statement.

She thanked God it was finished. It had taken a little longer than anticipated, it being hard work.

She thought back to the times that both she and Billy had toiled hard on those bloody extensions. Working to dark and beyond after they had had a full working day besides. Her Dad always joyfully helping whenever he was not overseas. Her Mum in that ratty little excuse of a Kitchen standing happily cooking Dinner...a temporary Kitchen it was. The new Kitchen, which she designed, was an absolute pleasure to cook in. The best room of the house, she would confess to all and sundry.

It had been hard work. But fun. That's what you could say now, but at the time, she would swear her head off especially on days where it had been a bastard of a day with the little bloody mongrels!

Joe would know whether it was now possible. To dig out underneath. She again repeated to herself. She'd ask him and then confer with her Dad to see if he concurred. Just to double check. To include the two most important men in her life...she'd ask Billy too, in her thoughts, though she knew his thoughts on the scheme already.

She swung the four or five plastic bags out of the boot. She wasn't going to make a second trip, that's for sure. With the keys held tightly between her lips, she swivelled, closing the hatch first with her elbow then with her hip. She took a breather, then headed for the shelter of the veranda. She hadn't realised how hard the rain was coming down. She felt wet through. She placed the groceries on the veranda tiled surface to take the large set of keys from her mouth. She exhaled loudly. She needed to start jogging again. She felt that she was getting out of condition.

More time at the Gym, she thought as she turned the key in the lock.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

She pushed open the front door, picked up the array of heavy plastic bags and stepped over the threshold. Slipped out of her shoes. They could be slippery when wet on the polished timber floor. Especially the tiled floor of the kitchen, she thought. She continued to walk slowly down the hallway, leaving the front door ajar. The sound of the heavy rain on the metal roof of the house was deafening. She found comfort in the noise though. Even as a little girl, she loved that sound.

She struggled with the combined weight of the groceries as she waddled slowly down the Hallway and turned into the Lounge heading for the Kitchen.

She suddenly felt the presence...that chill of evil lurking.

A smell of cigarettes. Nicotine. Only slight though.

Things happened in a rush.
Simultaneously.

Almost in slow motion as the horror replayed in her brain many times over.

She released her grasp on the plastic bags that were digging into the palms of her hands. Before the heavy bags had even hit the floor, she was half turning to face her adversary. A bag. A pillow-case or something similar thrust over her head and she felt a cord wound loosely around her neck. Tying the bag over her head. Not tight enough to choke her, but tight enough to inhibit the bag from being removed from over her head. That point came clearly into her mind. By now, she was facing her assailant. She swung out both her arms and managed to feel the hem of his Shirt sleeves. She grabbed these with all her might, pulling him into her.

This was a complete surprise to her attacker.

Something that he had least expected.

She wanted him flashed into his brain! A sneer of wanton desire as he relinquished any thought of fighting the action...she wanted me, he shouted in his mind.

A cruel smirk crossed his face. He had known all along that she wanted him!

Feeling him close into her body, she swung her leg with all her might, bending her knee as she did so. It landed where she had hoped it would. There was an agonising cry, an exhalation of wind, a keening moan as she felt the man slowly relax then begin to collapse

to the floor. She grabbed for a fistful of hair, pressing his head downwards as she again brought her knee up. It missed its mark glancing off the side of the man's head.

It was a man. She was sure of it. The moan. The low keen. The short greasy hair.

She felt him starting to roll away from her. She lashed out with the heel of her foot. Another painful moan meant that she had connected somewhere on his body.

He scrambled to his feet and staggered for the front door. She heard him bounce through the opening as he raced out into the rain.

The air returned to its static state. Imminent danger banished. Again, it was cool, calm and inviting.

Her twin brother was there. She could feel him.

She stood there for some moments not able to move. Every muscle of her body frozen. It seemed that her lungs had also stopped functioning. Then the pain slowly etched its way into her consciousness.

Her knee throbbed.

Her ankle pulsed.

She slowly undid the cord from around her neck. Pulled the bag off her head, breathed deeply a couple of times and limped slowly towards the front door.

She did not close it, but instead stepped gingerly onto the veranda and then out into the rain to stand at the open front gate in the pouring rain.

The deluge sweeping away the shock of the last minute or two. Completely wetting her through. The bag she still grasped tightly. It was quickly saturated from the deluge.

She began to scream.

To fling strings of expletives into the sodden air. At the fast disappearing tail-lights that sped towards the main drag. Continuing the tirade even when her next-door neighbour ushered her into their Lounge Room. Wrapping a blanket around her shoulders. Holding her until the screams gave way to heavy sobbing.

The neighbour's husband rang for an Ambulance. The Police.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"Shit!"

I yelled at the driver.

It was bloody bucketing down and this goon was speeding across the vastness of the concrete expanse of the Service Station. He did not even slow down as he shot out onto the main drag.

I was lucky that I wasn't 30 seconds earlier otherwise I would have collided with him as I came around the corner. Silly idiot!

"Fucking idiot!" I exclaimed as though these expletives would find their mark. Educating the bloody hoon. Showing him what an idiot driver he was. I had just turned off the main drag into Penny's street. I propped as I looked towards the fading image of the vehicle in question. Hoping to get a glimpse of his number plate. He was too quick. It was raining too heavily. All I saw was a dark, early model Ford Falcon Sedan. Not enough information to give to the local boys. I momentarily thought that the Service Station Security camera system would have picked up the vehicle enough to be able to read the Number plates.

I turned the wheel and slowly entered the brightly lit property.

I'd flash my card and ask to view their security video of the last minute or so.

The cameras would have picked up the License Plates for sure.

A scratchy voice came over my Police Radio Scanner.

"Any car in the vicinity of Seaview Drive and Northern Road, Deewhy. Possible home invasion. Assault. Resident injured. Ambulance called. Assist. 22 Seaview Drive, Curl Curl. Any car in the vicinity respond."

"Fuck!"

I knew immediately that the address given was Penny's home.

I swung the steering wheel as fast as I could. Stamped on the accelerator. The back of my 4WD swung around in a neat execution. I corrected. The tyres bit and I found myself gunning up Penny's street way too fast. A Cop Car with its roof bar alight came around the corner at that moment to tail me up the street. I slewed into Penny's drive. Flung open the door before my car was fully stationary. I grabbed my gun from its ankle holster and was sprinting towards the front door as two coppers came sprinting down the front path.

“Hold it, arse-hole! Stop! Police! Gun! Gun! Put The gun down, arse-hole! Now! Do it!”

I looked at them as though they were stark raving mad!

These two young Constables standing some metres apart, crouched in the orthodox two-handed firing position with guns in their hands. Aimed at my chest.

“What the.....?”

I was out of the rain standing on the veranda by this stage. The young guys were getting wet through.

“Arse-hole? Place the gun on the ground. Now! Do it?”

A loud, shrill voice that was on the edge of panic, so I thought. Not filled with authority that was for sure.

I at last came to my senses, starting to appreciate the seriousness of the situation. These guys were serious. They didn't have their Tasers out. They had their guns out. Aimed and cocked, so to speak. The manual stated that an Officer only unclipped his service pistol if he intended to shoot. They were at that stage.

Both aimed at me. At my chest!

“Officers. Officers. Take it easy. I'm a Police Officer. Detective 3 Joe Lind with the Murder Squad under DI Church...better known as Abbey. Take it easy. Loosen up, boys. OK?”

I slowly bent down to place my pistol on the tiled surface of the veranda.

I slowly stood. Everything in slow motion. No jerking or unexplained actions. Stepped back slowly away from where I had placed my gun and raised my hands, clasping them behind my head.

I knew the procedure.

Certain steps, well-choreographed and detailed in the Police Manuals and practised at the Police Academy, were to be followed exactly. No short changing of that protocol. They would take their time. Ever alert. No matter who the subject claimed to be.

It was all wasting time, I angrily thought to myself.

Penny was possibly inside bleeding to death. Unconscious. Her head split open. It didn't matter. The immediate threat dealt with first. That was their priority. To these two young Cops, that was me!

“Come out of the rain, boys, before you get much wetter.”

That was truly impossible, as by this stage, they were wet through.

I stepped back further and leant my hands against the front wall of Penny's home. Standing there with my legs spread, not moving a muscle.

“Detective Grade 3 Joe Lind. Murder Squad out of the Police Building at Parramatta. Badge Number C 06535. Home address 55 Bathurst Road, North Manly Heights. This is 22 Seaview Crescent, Curl Curl. Ms. Penelope Catt resides here. A Primary School Teacher. My girlfriend. She has had a series of home invasion incidents occur over the past couple of months. I was worried. Something was off. I was coming over at this time of night, to make sure that she was OK...stand down guys. Stand down. Put those things away, eh?”

Talk to them matter-of-factly. Smooth. Unhurried. No sudden movements or increase in pitch or speed of speech. Give them as much information as possible that helps with the bona fides. Keep it going.

They loosened up as they came to stand on the veranda. Still alert but not as jittery. Out of the rain. Both re-holstered but the furthest from me took out his Taser to stand at right angles to me as his partner patted me down.

I thought that they were on the ball.

I must remember to compliment them on their careful pro-active procedures, I thought to myself.

An Ambulance came up the street. The strobe lights seeming to bounce off every raindrop. A spotlight settled on the three of us. The Ambulance swung into the driveway and stopped up close to the rear of my car. Its rear still out over the kerb line. Penny's driveway getting somewhat crowded with vehicles. She needed to address that, I thought obliquely. I had not closed the front driver's door of my 4WD. The inside of my 'beast' would be saturated, I thought to myself as the young Cop took out my wallet and ID Card from the inside pocket of my old leather Bomber jacket.

“Joe? Joe? What's going on? What's happening?”

Penny looked like a drowned rat. She flew into my arms nearly knocking the young Cop off his feet. She nestled into me sobbing quietly. She still wrapped in her neighbour's blanket.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Penny could be as stubborn as all hell.

It took some doing with the Paramedic fussing over her and the quiet words of wisdom from her father before she relented. A Detective had shown up and a two-man Crime Scene team was applying grey powder to just about every surface inside the house. The front door, its jamb and architrave inside and out looked as though a painter was splashing grey paint about randomly. The grey smudges in the Lounge Room and Kitchen seemed to add to Penny's sense of violation.

For the umpteenth time, Penny related the proceedings to the middle-aged LAC Detective who took voluminous notes laboriously into his Case Note-book of the monotone description, so it seemed. He also spoke in a slow monotone himself, giving you the impression that he preferred to be miles away from here. Possibly on a deserted tropical island! Or catching up on sleep that he had missed out on to be at work.

“Arrm...look...I’m sorry. It’s a busy night. What with the rain and all, you know? A lot of bad road accidents. If Ms. Catt is going to agree to an overnight stay in hospital, we’d...arrh...better get going. Young lady? If you could just walk with us to the Ambulance?”

The Paramedic gave you the same impression. This was not an incident that required their elevated degree of skill. It was not worth fussing over.

I was losing patience. I could not reconcile this opinion with the fact that I thought that this incident was the most serious crime since the Dingo disappeared holding something in its mouth.

Penny's mother and father had arrived quickly, summoned by a phone call requested by Penny. Dave Catt seemed superbly calm under the circumstances. A lot more in charge of his emotions than I seemed to be.

In a quiet manner, he suggested that Penny might be better in hospital overnight under observation. Just in case. More than likely, she'd be released the next morning so what's the fuss...hey, sweetie?

Penny did not resist being placed on the gurney. She was an awful colour and her ankle was swollen and throbbing. She had badly sprained it. Penny's parents agreed to accompany her to the hospital. Upon her release, she would stay at their place until she was well enough to return to work.

I promised to pop in to see her later that night.

“We're not going to get much really.” The young Crime Scene Technician glumly stated. “She was pretty bloody brave all right but, in a way, bloody dumb. Standing out in this rain getting soaking wet only washed away any trace that may have been present on her clothes. That corded bag. And there's been too much cross-contamination from that blanket also. We think that we may have a good set of prints lifted off the front door architrave. We've got every-one else for comparison elimination tests. If he's in the system, it will spit it out quick smart... if he's not in the system, we may have to sit on our hands until the next attack...sorry.”

“What about that dark Ford?”

“Yeah...well. That's a long shot. We'll drop in to the Petrol Station on our way out. I'm sure they'll co-operate with us without an Order obtained. We may get lucky and get the Number Plates off their security cameras. Detective Swanson has already issued a 'look-out' for the car to all Patrol vehicles...you never know your luck in a big city.”

Christ! I thought to myself. That bloke really fills one with a confident air for the Police to get their man. I must have relayed as much by the expression on my face, as his parting comment as the two packed up their things was that they were confident of getting the bastard. ‘It may take a little time’ was his parting shot as he disappeared out the door.

Here's hoping.

Thanks for nothing, I wanted to yell out at their retreating backs.

That jolted me.

I realised that perhaps people may very well have the same emotional response when me and my partner leave a house full of family members whose loved one had just been removed in a body bag!

It was bloody hard being on the other side. Feeling a sense of ambivalence by all the Police present, as though they were just filling in the hours to knock-off time.

The guys had done their best under the circumstances.

I wanted to apologise to them. Too late, as I heard their vehicle start up and drive away.

I was left standing on the veranda, waving weakly to the two young Constables as they drove away. They headed straight back to the Station for a hot shower and a dry set of clothes. The LAC Detective had slipped out almost apologetically after offering very little to the investigation. No wonder he is still a LAC ‘Dee’ at his age.

He's just warming a seat, I thought sarcastically to myself.

To be fair, my hackles were still up and even if Superman had appeared with the alleged culprit tucked under his arm, I would have found fault with the way he was carrying the bastard!

Such was the anger, frustration and worry for Penny that was whirling around inside my head.

I walked back inside.

The place was a bloody mess.

I cleaned up, took out all the perishables from the fridge and the fruit bowl to dump them in the garbage wheelie bin that I then deposited at the kerb line. I really didn't know when the garbage was collected but it was better in the bin than spoiling in the Fridge. I didn't know when Penny would be back here. As sure as hell, if she got sick and tired of her parent's joint, she was staying with me and not coming back here until the Perp was identified and under arrest.

I knew in my veins that it was AJ Parker playing with her.

He'd think that he was being very clever.

The only thing that didn't fit was the dark car...and his reaction from being kneed in the balls. That was not him at all...or the fact that he didn't retaliate, instead running for the front door and his escape. The guy I had a thick Dossier on would not have run...and most definitely would not have displayed being hurt...

I scratched my head.

If it wasn't him...or his white Commodore, who the bloody hell was it? Maybe AJ could have two vehicles, perhaps. Maybe a mate's, as he knew that I could identify his car in a heart-beat...but there was something not right...

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I stripped off as I too, had been wet to the skin. Had a shower as my clothes spun around in Penny's Dryer.

Made myself a cup of coffee as I leafed through my case Note Book. I was sure that I had dotted down Parker's home address at some stage.

Finding it, I headed out bent on some strong-arm stuff.

It was a two storey, blond brick set of Home Units on the wrong side of Pittwater Road at Deewhy North, not far north of Penny's place at Curl Curl.

I drove into the tight residents' parking area, doing a three-point turn at the far end. Parker's vehicle was not there.

'Maybe he borrowed a mate's? Left his car at the mate's place.' I muttered to myself. I got out and wandered up to Unit Number 2. Pounded on the door. No answer. I pounded again, the adrenalin and anger mounting dangerously.

Maybe it was just as well that he wasn't answering his door. We would have either killed one another, or one of us would have been in real hot water!

I stood around for some time, stewing in my boots, before I became impatient and left, visiting the Hospital on my way home.

She was doing OK. A case of delayed shock. A badly twisted ankle and a bruised knee. Chances were good that she'd be released the next morning.

I went with Kathleen Catt, Penny's mother, to pick Penny up from the hospital the next morning.

I drove them back to Avalon Heights. We went via the house at Curl Curl to pick up some clothes and other things that Penny wanted. She hobbled around on a set of crutches and a knee brace refusing all offers of help.

I laid the law down to her.

She was not going home to Curl Curl until the attacker, AJ Parker was behind bars.

I arrived back in the Office around Lunch time.

I immediately checked the status of the 'All Car Alert' for AJ Parker's vehicle. I again highlighted the 'Alert' by saying that the driver of said vehicle was to be approached with extreme caution. The driver could be armed and considered dangerous with a volatile and unpredictable nature. He was only to be approached by numbers of Officers with extreme care.

I checked the Motor Registry to enquire whether AJ Parker had another vehicle registered under his name.

There was no record of this.

I looked up his 'Rap Sheet' to try and get a couple of 'Known Associates'. I was not surprised that the list didn't exist. He was a 'Loner', a man whose shadow kept him

company. He even lived alone according to the information on his 'Rap Sheet'...and his Parole Officer who seemed more than bored in talking about his 'charge' confirmed his living arrangements. I wondered aloud how the man could afford the Digs he was renting out, living by himself. I could feel the indifference relayed by the Officer...you have to wonder on the future of some of these Crims when you have unenthusiastic behaviour shown by their Parole Officer!

I rang the aging LAC plain-clothes guy, Detective Swanson, to ask about the status of the security camera system used at the Service Station and whether anything useful such as the Registration Number of the dark Ford could be ascertained. Whether the sample fingerprints had thrown up a match.

He hadn't yet checked with the Lab.

I got the impression that it had slipped his mind.

I maybe being a little hard on the fellow, but I wanted answers. Now!

He rang me back.

The Crime Scene guys were 'snowed' under and even though they had a digital copy of the tape in question, it would be some days before they were able to examine the recording. Priorities. Fingerprint comparisons conducted as we spoke. Also, blood smears were located on the front door jamb and bottled for DNA testing, which would take several weeks...but it too, would be scheduled according to priorities.

I was aware of priorities, wasn't I?

He seemed to take delight in frustrating me! Being a smart-arse!

Mar suggested we sit with D2 Peta Daniels and her new partner D1 Jason Swartz.

Scotty as he was known as for some obscure reason. He'd started his Murder Squad association with D4 'Sonny' Liston.

Sonny now considered the father figure of the Squad Room who usually broke in the fresh young recruits who had shown aptitude and a desire to be Murder Dicks. If they passed muster, they were paired with a character in the room who hopefully, would form a successful and indomitable relationship.

I had first come across Scotty when I had a bullet scour a farrow across the side of the scalp. He had stood in full view of the Shooter to attract his attention away from my and Mar's direction. Sonny Liston had felled the Shooter by shooting the guy in the thigh as he was swinging around to concentrate on Scotty. I impressed with Scotty's action on that day. He

had been awarded a Citation for bravery for the incident. Over the following months, he had shown initiative and aptitude. Enough to confidently predict that he would make a bloody good Murder Dick.

Abbey's skill in pairing up Officers was beyond reproach and unquestionable. His only failure within the Murder Room that both Mar and I could ascertain was our own partnership! So, we would often say at times, just to keep things rolling along nicely! Allowing us to share a laugh during those times that required some levity to keep us going.

The four of us sat around a small oval table in one of the small Conference Rooms comparing notes on the similarities of one of each 'Unsolved' that we had. I was convinced of the connections with the Perp already identified. Andrew James 'AJ' Parker.

Mar was halfway there to being with me.

"Where did you get all that psychiatric stuff on him?" Daniels asked as she flipped through the Report.

"Through the Parole Report Committee..." Mar stated matter-of-factly.

"They don't usually release stuff like that, do they?" Daniels countered, a surprised look as she raised her head to focus on Hendricks.

"If the inmate has committed another murder, or a crime of a major and/or of a violent nature, you can request all documentation on him. Including his Prison report. They don't have to provide it and nine times out of ten, they refuse the request, or provide a precis that's worth jack shit for its content. But sometimes it's worth knowing some-one in a nice way. And asking the right way..." Mar smiled her most conniving and convincing smile. "The only records that are sealed usually, is a Juvenile Apprehension list, supposedly...and that normally takes a Court Order to seal or unseal...but as you can see, if you ask the right questions of the right people, then a precis of the juvenile's arrest history can be obtained also, how-ever sketchy."

"Jeees-sus, Mar. You're with me on the next murder case that we get." Exclaimed Peta in a raised voice. Full of admiration for the only other female Detective in the Murder Squad Room at present.

There had been several others at one stage in our ranks. Two young ones straight from the Academy had requested transfers, saying they were not cut out to be Murder Dees. The other, Sharon McKelly, showed enormous aptitude and promise.... then she went and became pregnant. This a prime example of why females should not be in certain jobs, so the "Old Brigade" was heard to mumbled. There were way too many complications as the Squad reacted to their resignations with a shuffling of personnel to once again settle into productive units...and the amount of money spent on their training and such was not commiserate with their service before they left the job...usually within a ten year cycle.

Very few returned to their vacant position after the allotted time off...again causing headaches as their position had to be held over in case of their return. Who-ever filled that position was on a temporary 'roster'. When the errant Officer didn't return, a further shuffling of staff was required as you never left a nominated position vacant. If you did, then the Bean Counters would argue successfully that you did not need that position.

It was something that every Officer had a view on, depending on whether they regained that peaceful equilibrium that had occurred with a new partner in tow. Many would complain that such an arrangement was not achieved no matter how hard they tried.

Daniels and Hendricks were regarded as above average Murder Dicks who ran rings around most of the male Dees in the Room. Yet the two women were still only D2's, something that irked them both and Abbey. He felt and often declared that they were worth D3 or above. While they wore skirts, the progress up the promotion ladder would be onerous and slow, even in to-day's climate of supposed equality!

The Police Force, regardless of its oft heard rejection of the fact, was still the male bastion of discrimination within the rank and file numbers.

"Over my fucking, dead body." I retorted quickly to Peta's comment.

"Can be arranged. Can be arranged." Peta replied. A smirk on her face. "What additional murders?" She added. A laugh as she spoke.

"Your Unsolved and ours, of course. Blind Freddy could see the similarities." There was a smugness in Mar's words.

"That's a bit of a leap of reality...." Peta replied.

"By any means possible, if it helps in an investigation. Especially one like this, where the Perp seems to be escalating his attacks."

Peta Daniels nodded her head in agreement. Nothing was against protocols or procedures so it seemed, if the result was a successful arrest and imprisonment.

Scotty cleared his throat. He had been skimming through Mar's collated Dossier paying scant regard to the conversation as it bounced around the table. That was one thing that was obvious...he was not into small talk or smart repartee.

"Arrm....yeah. Yer gotta ask the question of the guy all right. But we're still at the same point...we cannot place him at the scene of the crime or attach him to the victims. He was seen in the area, sure. In both cases...Recorded on Pub security cameras, but that still isn't enough...there's nothing that shows the Perp and the victims, either victim, together, which

would give us something to haul the guy in on...perhaps we need to look at other establishments that may have video surveillance...you know, like that case in Melbourne...”

“Scotty, I like your thought patterns...but it’s a little long in the tooth to expect firms to keep their surveillance records for so long. Besides...we went pretty thoroughly down that track...you weren’t here for the initial investigation...” Somewhat of an easy put-down, so it seemed to me. There appeared to be a little abrasiveness between the two. Mar glanced my way. She too, had picked it up.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The door opened and Abbey stepped through without knocking.

“Heads up. We’ve got a messy one. And the Vic is well known. The former Chief Magistrate of the Northern Beaches and The Peninsular. His Former Honour, one Ralph Justin Parker. Bludgeoned to death in his Retirement Apartment on the Central Coast. Discovered and reported in by the victim’s House-keeper cum Cleaner about half an hour ago. The locals want our involvement...partly due the victim’s pedigree and partly due to the ferocity of the attack...I seem to remember a cloud over him for a while. Parker? No? A while back. Something about kiddie-porn.... some sort of shenanigans like that...no-one remembers the whispers that were rife? No? Okay...he retired not that long ago...”

“AJ Parker. A tenner on the nose.”

“Sorry?” Abbey replied.

We filled him in on our assumptions for the two 'Unsolves' that we had. He listened intently as we gave up all our information. He was most impressed with the Psychiatric Assessment Report on the early sexual abuse of the young Andrew James Parker by his Magistrate Uncle. I filled him in on my suspicions concerning Penny and how I thought that he was responsible for the home invasion.

“That’s not in his priors, is it? That’s not his style.” Abbey concluded, looking across at me. “I can understand your concern Joe, but that should not be dovetailed into your investigations on this Perp...or into your thought processes on these two cases...hmm?”

“Neither is having a woman write to him in prison wanting to forgive him...” Mar added succinctly.

“Mmm...a salient point Marge...” He nodded his head thinking about Mar’s point. “Where did you get so much information on him that is supposed to be sealed...or shouldn’t I ask?”

“When we saw the similarities after our Staff meeting the other day, I started to trawl through the normal channels. The information was offered freely and without strings once I described our feelings that AJ was our Number One POI in several new cases since the guy’s release date from prison....” Mar stated matter-of-factly.

“I’ll say this once to the four of you and I expect you to obey this direction. If we ever get this Parker bloke up for murder, then that entire dossier is to be shredded. Understand? If the DPP saw this detail, they’d have you out of here quicker than a lightning strike. And we’d possibly lose any hope of pinning anything bigger than a parking ticket on the guy...OK...if we have it when it hits the Courts, then the Defence should have it...and it’s something that we shouldn’t have, understand? It could be construed that such evidence has skewed our suspicion of the lad. Understand? Get rid of it. Seeing as how the four of you are crossing paths and you seem to think you know who the Perp is even before you have looked at the crime scene, the four of you can skedaddle up to the Central Coast quick smart. The place will be crawling with media very quickly, so four of youse will impress not only the Media but the hierarchy too. They especially, do not like this type of crime against the Law elite. Get going though keep me in the loop...I have a feeling that this one may turn uglier than what it is at present.”

I glanced at my watch. It was just past 3:30 PM. It was going to be a long day. There goes my night with Penny and her parents. I picked up my mobile to call as the other three gathered up all the paperwork and returned to the Squad Room.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

We agreed that Daniels and Scotty should drop their car off at the LAC Hornsby yard. The two of us getting there at breakneck speed with siren and all lights flashing. We could then all share the one car up to the Central Coast.

We hadn’t even hit the Motorway when Scotty, sitting in the back seat, was skimming through the Dossier again that Mar had collated on Parker.

“I just can’t get it straight in my head how a man can be so bad; even considering his past. He bludgeoned Harry Wallace to death with his own prosthetic leg...what type of bastard would do that?” He shook his head as both Mar and I let out an unbelieving cry.

“Whaaat!?” We both said in unison. “Your ‘Unsolved’ Victim had only one leg?” We both yelled out in unison.

“Yeah. Didn’t you know that? That and the fact that he was gay, was never released to the Media. But it’s detailed in the Murder Book notes...you haven’t read our Murder Book details, have you? Umm...in that Case, we felt it wasn’t relative to the scheme of things and

may sully the Vic's reputation. It'll come out in Court if we ever get the case that far. But...." He let it hang.

The case of A.J.Parker and his victims clearly upset the young Detective. He had yet to settle into a slightly cynical nature with all Perps capable of the cruellest actions possible against people whom they didn't know...or even in Domestic Violence Homicides where the Husband, the Ex or the acquaintance issued out punishment too cruel to comprehend! On former Loved Ones!

We didn't know it as yet, but the savagery displayed by the young A.J. Parker would set new boundaries for the four of us.

"He was a former soldier who served in Iraq and then in Afghanistan. That's where he lost his leg. A Container or something, a vehicle roll-over, one of those heavy APC vehicles squashed the bejesus out of it. They amputated his leg there and then otherwise he would have lost his life. Bled out apparently...."

"Bloody hell!" Exclaimed Mar above the siren that she had just switched on.

The afternoon traffic was building up with the afternoon peak traffic with every one starting for home. The M1 became a stream of molten metal so it seemed snaking its way north.

"He admitted more or less to Joe and I, that he had committed your 'Unsolved Case'"

Hendricks switched on the radiator flashing lights, the blue bubble that we used up Pennant Hills Road and the high beam also as flashing lights as she started to accelerated down the long on-ramp onto the Motorway.

Half turning and yelling out between the front seat backs, I filled in Peta Daniels and Jason 'Scotty' Swartz on the run-in that I had with Parker at the Servo up near Penny's place.

"Shut up, Joe. For a minute...something is happening..."

She turned up the 2-way and doused the siren so that we could hear ourselves think. The headlights and bar-lights continued to flash. Occasionally she whooped the siren to dislodge some cretin driver who was oblivious to our fast approach up behind him.

It appeared to be a major pursuit involving around half a dozen Police cars. Speeding down the Motorway towards us from the Central Coast.

The Police helicopter hovering above, pacing the vehicle!

We heard sirens behind us and knew that a convoy of Highway Patrol and Unmarks were speeding up behind us, all heading north. A strategy of tossing road spikes out to stop the Felon would be employed though at speed, this could cause the speeding motorist to lose

control and flip...possibly taking out one or two vehicles belonging to innocent persons just wanting to get home for tea! An alternative to the above would be several of the cars behind us crossing over to the south bound lanes to form a boxed plan around the Felon to slow him to a stop. The fact that it was the afternoon peak hour with north and south bound lanes chockers not in our favour.

'Funnel him off the Motorway at the Hawkesbury onto the old Pacific Highway bridge. We can isolate him on the middle of the bridge.....see if you can get a couple of semis to form that funnel.....reduce the southern motorway lanes to one lane.....when you see him coming down the Hawkesbury decline, stop all traffic so that he is forced off the motorway onto the old bridge.....can you do that?.....if he keeps on going at this pace down the Motorway, he is bound to kill himself and several other people at the speed he is doing....yeah.....should be able.....what about some tyre spikes?.....second thoughts, let's see if we can divert him first.....with so much traffic about he could slew into some-one else.....he just hit 140 going through Mt. White.....almost stacked into a couple of vehicles.....he'll kill himself and take some-one with him.....get some-one on the southern approach of the old bridge blocking traffic.....' The conversations were coming thick and fast. *'He's just hit 160.....we're backing off. Is there some-one ahead to funnel him off the Motorway?'*

'CC37 and CC212. Two cars positioned on the southern shoulder of the old bridge. All traffic stopped and re-routed. We have about four semis forming the funnel.....all traffic stopped with the inside lane left open.....'

'Police Air wing patrol. Copy? One subject White Commodore on an 'All Alert Watch'. Two cars can squeeze him onto the exit shoulder off the Motorway onto the old Pacific Highway.....there's several clear spots around there if you need to land.....keep us across the situation. You're in the best position to tell us what's going down.....'

"That's Parker..." We almost said in unison. "Mar, can we get off the Motorway at the Hawkesbury? Lend a hand?"

"We've got a murder to investigate, Joe. We can't bulldoze our way into a Highway Patrol exercise. Bloody hell, Joe! Keep ya bloody nose out of it!"

"Mar, he knows me. As sure as hell, with so many Cops milling about, we could have one who is a little too quick with the gun. We'll never get him for anything, then! If they corner him on the bridge, then let me out. You lot can continue up the coast. I can pick up a lift from one of the Patrol lads. There must be at least 6 from the Gosford LAC. C'mon Mar, it would be better if one of us was there when they nab him."

She knew that I was right.

After crossing over the river, she swung down the Motorway exit ramp, back under the Motorway and onto the old highway.

A Patrol Car stopped us. Skewed across the road before the approach road to the old highway bridge.

We identified ourselves and why we were heading north. To investigate the murder of the former Chief Magistrate. We believe that the vehicle and the person driving said vehicle can help with our enquiries. We believed in fact, that he is the assailant who bludgeoned the Magistrate to death. The Highway Patrol Officer returned to his vehicle and had a conversation over his two-way to the Officer who was obviously in control of the situation. We could hear every word spoken on our two-way. We doubted that the Officer was aware of this fact when he referred to us as 'Four thick dicks.'

After obtaining approval, he ambled back to our car, leant down to get into Mar's space to inform her that she could drive around his vehicle up to the road-block on the northern approach to the old highway bridge. There we were to contact a Sergeant Harry Pines who was in charge.

That point stressed.

"From a few thick dicks to another thick prick, we thank you." Mar sarcastically commented as she put the car into gear and began to roll, almost decapitating the Patrol Officer still bent over with his head half in Mar's fast closing window.

At the blockade, Mar swung the vehicle around. As I swivelled out of the vehicle, the cut across my chest caught again.

I winced.

Mar shook her head.

"Joe?" She called after me, "Don't do anything stupid...or daring, OK?"

She drove off after Peta Daniels had taken command of the front passenger seat.

I identified myself to a balding giant of a man.

"Sergeant Harry Pines. Joe Lind? This your guy, you reckon?"

His hand shake was bone crushing.

I filled him in on some of the history. As quickly as possible.

Parker's car was sideways across the road almost slap-bang in the middle of the bridge. If he stepped on the accelerator, he would crash through the puny side fencing of the bridge structure straight into the water below. The car and body would possibly never be found. It

was deep water with metres of fine silt on the bed of the river. The car would just sink straight into the stuff. Gone.

I didn't want that to happen.

Any combined charge towards the car could set off that scenario.

The Police helicopter hovered overhead while several news choppers risked their licenses with hovering attempts considered far too close by most of us coppers. They were a bloody nuisance, adding to the cacophony and down-draft wind on the bridge.

"Do you want a word with him? We've gotta bullhorn if you do."

"I doubt that he'd be able to hear, what with all those choppers about. I've got a lift back to the crime scene at Terrigal when I need it? Good. We may take him there too, as he is our main suspect for the homicide."

"No worries. I understand you guys have priority over the guy when it's suspected that he may be your Perp on the murder. We can go in my vehicle. It's an Unmarked out of Gosford. That's if he decides to come quietly."

"Yeah, well...here's hoping. OK. Have you got a vest?"

"You are not walking up to him. Not yet in any case. Until we know whether he is armed or not..."

"It's OK."

"Detective, I respect your need to try and take this guy alive, but as the Cop in charge of this little incident, I must inform you that I am not in favour of anyone approaching him..."

"So, what are we going to do? Wait until he starves to death? Nah...I'm sure that even if he has a gun...which I doubt, but he may have a knife, he will only be too glad for my appearance. At the moment you've got a stand off with the guy out there as scared as a rabbit caught in the spotlight...I've got to give it a go before you have all your guys rush in to over-power him. Okay?"

The man scratched his chin, turned away and spoke into a radio mike. He nodded several times. I was unable to hear the conversation. At last he ended the call to walk around his Unmarked to lift the boot-lid. He showed me a vest, apologising saying it was one of his.

I scrambled into a vest that was obviously one of Pines' spares it was that bloody big, adjusting the straps to tighten it around my torso as much as I could. I stepped behind a vehicle and checked my gun. My back-up piece from its ankle holster. The throwing knife that I now kept in my knapsack. I hadn't worn it between my shoulder blades for years so it

seemed. It felt uncomfortable as I slid it into place. I doubted that I could retrieve and throw it like in the old days of undercover vice and narcotics...but there was no time for practise...

Pines looked aghast at my arsenal. Wondering perhaps, what style of cowboy stood before him!

“OK. I won’t be long. Could you let your boys know what’s going down? I intend to talk him out of his car, cuff him and walk him slowly towards this position. No funny business unless he tries to take a swing at me. OK....arrh...or shoots me, okay?”

The big man nodded his head as he started to talk softly into his radio mike.

I walked casually towards the white Commodore. My hands out wide. Parker popped his head up above the driver’s window sill line as I drew level with the driver’s door.

He recognised me.

"Well, well. The fucking shit who likes to get in a sucker punch. Nice day? What, you now playing hero?" That ‘off, smart-arse’ smirk on his face.

“You’re not armed are you. Never been your style. You’re in a pickle though, cock! Very few ways out of this one, I’m afraid. Do you know what serendipity is, Parker? No? My partner and I were heading north up the Motorway on our way to the Central Coast. Can you hazard a guess as to why we were heading that way? No? To investigate a particularly brutal murder so we’ve been told. The Vic’s name is Ralph Justin Parker. Former Chief Magistrate of the Peninsular area. Recently retired. Know him, AJ? Yeah? Your favourite Uncle, isn’t he? Got a small weenie, so I’m led to believe. Yeah? That blood on your clothes? I would have thought that you should have changed before you drove away. If that is the Chief Magistrate’s blood, then I think that you’ve got a bit of explaining to do. How about you accompany me back up to the scene of the crime and run through the particulars. OK?” I smiled down at the man who was slouched down in the driver’s seat of his Commodore. He seemed to have a permanently branded smirk no matter what danger he found himself in. “Now this serendipity...it means fortuitous, lucky, lucky break...if we hadn’t been heading up the Motorway as you were screaming down it, I’d say that you would be dead right now. See...every one of those Cops has a gun and the ‘All Alert’ on you said you’re armed and dangerous...and unpredictable with a violent and unmanageable temper...so you’d be dead now if it wasn’t for me heading up the Motorway as you were heading down it...By the way, I have been trying to locate your mother and father. It’s as if they just plain fell off the planet.... a week or two after you got out from Prison, as it turns out. No-one’s seen hide nor hair of them. Anything you can tell me about their disappearance? The name Harry Wallace mean anything to you? A former soldier who served in Iraq and Afghanistan. A hero who happened to be gay... pummelled to death with his prosthetic leg and chucked into Sydney Harbour near the Manly Aquarium. His body not found for two days. You ever seen a body

bashed to death then left in the water for two days? Not a pretty sight, AJ. Not a pretty sight at all. Yucky in fact. Make you spew...Donald Patterson? Bashed to death some two weeks after your release...on St. Leonards Railway Station. Apparently, he was sleeping it off. Had too much to drink on a boy's night out. Maybe it was a Buck's night. I'm not too sure on that fact. Missed the last train. Fell asleep on one of those hard railway bench type seats. Remember him? C'mon lad. I think that we need to talk...one thing...and if you don't answer this right, you're going to have a bullet between the eyes as I'm walking away from here to leave you to the jackals.... why are you stalking my girlfriend? Think about it, lad...ya got a change of clothes in that backpack? Yeah? We'll need you out of that shirt at least...and your shoes too...they're covered in dried blood...you haven't been fishing lately, have you? Nah? Good! But you haven't answered my question about my girlfriend...you know where she lives, huh?"

I pulled him out of the car by his shirt as I had done previously at the all-night Service Station.

"A piece of advice, AJ. Keep your seat-belt on even when you're just lounging in your car. It makes it almost impossible for me to lift you out so easily. Understand? Though I think your driving days and sitting lounging in your car days are now over, son. What do you reckon? Eh?"

He didn't resist. I spun him around. Kicked his legs apart. Cuffed his hands behind his back. Patted him down. As I did this, I read him his rights. He agreed that he understood the content and the reason for his arrest and charge.

"Now, before you're surrounded by a million coppers who want a piece of you, you thought about my question? Why are you stalking my woman?"

He half turned his head and looked up at me. There were tears in his eyes.

"She was willing to forgive me...I wanted to know how that felt...and why she would forgive me... know what I mean?"

That left me gobsmacked!

CHAPTER TWENTY

It was a Media scrum around the 'gated' community that housed Ralph Justin Parker's Apartment.

Local Constables had herded the flock of camera and microphone wielding predators to the opposite side of the road away from the large sliding security gates of the complex. This milling throng at one stage, had blocked all traffic along the only road in and out of the beach-side suburb. That was completely unacceptable. Not only to the local Cops, but also to the residents trying to get home for tea-time.

One chap with the Media twits had several toes broken by an irate driver. The News hound refusing to take any notice of horns and cars crawling towards him. That added to the mayhem and circus atmosphere...and the acerbic comments and questions flung in our direction as we crawled past them to turn into the driveway of the Apartment building.

We were waved through by several Constables, amid screamed questions from the gathered multitude.

Andrew Parker bent over double with his body covered by a blanket.

I sat glumly staring straight ahead, blinking at the battery of camera flashes that would have blinded me if I had looked in that direction.

The residential complex made up of double and triple storey buildings with a narrow-cobbled lane-way that led to a double garage at each Apartment. Each block looked as though it contained at least four separate Apartments. The over-all style was mock Californian Bungalow or a loose copy of that vintage. Not bad to my way of thinking. The narrow road curved around an inside perimeter skirting what I supposed, was meant to be a Village Green type lawn of very small dimensions as a one-way route to join the entry way with a defined, separate exit gate.

All rather smashing.

The former Magistrate's Apartment was towards the rear.

As we crawled around the complex, I was astounded and surprised to see very few of the residents leaning over their expansive Balconies stickybeaking. There appeared to be no forms shirking behind curtained windows either. Our presence enough to give the neighbours cause to spread ghastly rumours. That would have been the normal reaction from most living in such a complex. They either didn't want to know or were troubled by exposing themselves, I thought to myself. Guilt by association now severed from their little minds by their non-appearance.

The Double Garage of Parker's Apartment was open, reminding me of an enormous cavern. It was at least double length deep. Crime scene tape stretched across the opening. Two vehicles dimly seen in the gloom of its depth.

A new, white Range Rover and a 5 Series BMW sedan.

If I had of been AJ Parker, I, as sure as shitting, would have grabbed either vehicle as my get-away car in lieu of the crappy old Holden Commodore of his! The boy wasn't thinking...or perhaps didn't know his vehicles. Maybe he couldn't find the keys for either vehicle, but thinking about it, I found that hard to believe!

There were several Police Patrol vehicles, several Unmarked police cars, several Crime Scene vans and station-wagons and a Morgue van haphazardly parked on the driveway and the bowling green turf area at the front of the Apartment. The number of official vehicles effectively blocked the exit lane-way.

We pulled in beside the Morgue van.

AJ manacled sitting glumly in the back seat beside Harry Pines. He was on a tight leash. I opened the rear window for him.

'Considerate' my middle name.

I started towards the open front door of the Apartment as Mar came out.

I paused. Something was bothering me. That little bee was buzzing around inside my head. I doubled back to the car and bent to the open window.

"You smoke?" I asked AJ.

"Why? You offering me one? What a bloody trooper you are!"

"Yeah, if I can bludge one from some-one who does..."

"Don't matter. I don't smoke."

"Mmm...." I stood looking towards Mar as she walked quickly toward me. A blank look on my face. I was slapping my thigh, a frown across my brow. She glanced up at me.

"Houston, we have a problem. Have we life in this figure?" She muttered in a smart-arse manner as she twisted and pinched my ear.

"Hello, AJ. We meet again. Here's a bottle of chilled water for you." She pleasantly said. She passed a plastic bottle of water through the window.

"Fuck youse people are kind to a bloody no-body." He muttered sarcastically.

"I wouldn't say that you are a no-body, at the moment. In fact, you will get your five seconds of fame in the spotlight before you're forgotten. Locked away for your natural life, I reckon." Mar replied. She turned to me. "They want to remove the body. Do you want to

take a gander before they do? I warn you, everyone who has seen it has either lost their last meal or been forced off food for a week, I reckon...”

I nodded my head.

I looked back up to the front door, that frown still wrinkling my brow.

It consisted of two half glass, panelled doors in the ‘Old Colonial’ style. The glass lead-lights of each door depicted Rainbow Lorikeets on tree branches. A flash-back of the morning that I met Penny crossed my mind. Silly really! Rainbow Lorikeets zooming kamikaze-like through and around the large Norfolk Island Pines that bordered the length of the beach promenade. Screeching their delight at their dangerous flight. I recalled her opening gambit to me. I smiled at the memory.

“You OK?” Mar had a worried look on her face.

“Yeah...” I replied. “I was just thinking...”

One of the Morgue guys and my old friend Dominique Sherbaverst who was now the Lead Crime Scene Pathologist for the State, skipped down the couple of steps and came towards me. The old guy Professor Bernie Ford reported to be over seventy and a book was on him being dragged out by his boots from the Autopsy Room at the Morgue in Sydney. Dom had been a shoe-in for old Bernie’s job since Bernie Ford’s forced retirement. It seems he was offered a temporary post as the Chief Pathologist for the UN Crime Commission...triple his existing salary and a nine to five job! For a three-year tenure.

How could he refuse!?

The book now was on the same thing except his Morgue Office was in Brussels, Belgium.

He himself had a \$400 mark in the book against the odds, that he had deposited himself!

“Joe...” Dominique whispered. “You look like a man in love. Are the rumours correct?” She smiled up at me as she tippy-toed to kiss me on the cheek.

“You have washed down, I hope.” I said deadpan.

“For-ever the comic, huh Joe? We need to move the old bloke. Would you like to see? A warning...”

I looked back in AJ Parker’s direction. He was looking intently out of the open side window of the Unmarked. Completely ignoring us, so it seemed. He appeared to be intently studying the inside of the open garage. Perhaps wondering what would have been his fate if he had swiped one of those vehicles. A little late for that.

“Um...I think we should take our No.1 suspect in for a gander...he may volunteer his actions.”

“Not a good idea Joe.” Mar warned. “Not SOP.”

I ignored her warning. Something was bothering me but I could not put a finger on it.

“We’ll tell him that we are taping the ‘walk-through’. Can you organise that, Dom? With some-one from the Forensic Trace Team? AJ is not a good SOP with ‘Pee’ standing for Perpetrator and not Procedure. I have my doubts that he could fabricate a plausible lie...” I turned to Sergeant Pines. “Can you keep his handcuffs on, but also put leg manacles on him?”

“Yeah...we can rig up something with a couple pair of Hand-cuffs. You sure, Detective?”

“Yep. I’m sure...”

“You’re out on a limb here, Joe....”

“Arrh...look...we need to get the body to Sydney quick smart. We’ve already delayed by at least an hour waiting for your arrival. Make it quick otherwise I’ll move him now. I can get our Photographer to run with a new memory chip in the camera.... OK? Now, Joe.” Dominique ordered in her most officious voice.

She was getting impatient.

I sauntered over to the car.

“AJ? We’d like you to give us a run through...help us out, OK? It will go down well with your defence.”

“You want me to give a running talk on what I did to the bastard...yeah, all right. I’ll be the star...I reckon I’ll enjoy that!”

I looked at him...he did not have a guilty bone in his body. What was done as far as he was concerned, was warranted and a payback for past actions that had basically destroyed the young man. I turned to Mar who had her mobile phone out and was recording the proceedings. I nodded my thanks to her.

“OK...let’s do it.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Sergeant Harry Pines kept a firm grip on the handcuffs that held AJ's arms behind his back. I noticed the friendly features of the Crime Scene Photographer in one corner. The camera up to his eye. The camera being stabilised by one leg of a camera tripod.

I nodded my thanks in his direction.

That metallic tang of blood was very noticeable. It seemed to hang in the air. The body of the late Ralph Justin Parker was slouched over a low Coffee Table positioned between an enormous flat screen TV and an array of top-quality bulky leather sofa chairs.

A light cream.

Very tasteful. Very expensive. Very much destroyed by the dried smears of blood that was on the them.

The top of the coffee table was awash with congealing blood. A long-haired white rug that the table was centrally located on stained red in parts where streams of blood had flowed from the table surface. The old bloke was naked. His knees on the floor. His arms stretched hard under the table from opposite sides tied tightly together with a cord going around the back of his knees and then back to his wrists. A beautiful example of a hog tied human! His arse at the height of the top of the low table. The bottom of a wine bottle was standing erect out of his anus. If the bottle was intact it had been pushed up a long way! His head was turned, looking for all the world as though he was watching the TV. Except he couldn't, as his eye sockets were vacant of eye balls. The side of his face that you could see was bashed in. The remnants of his own penis hanging from his gaping mouth. His back a mass of welts, deep cuts and bruises.

He had been flayed to an inch of his life. Presumably while still alive and conscious. He had suffered terribly.

I had to swallow hard. Clench my teeth for some moments. Pinched my nostrils shut hoping that would keep the bile down.

"Was he alive for most of this?" I asked Dominique.

Before she could answer, AJ chimed in. I'd forgotten his presence.

"For most of it...I think I hurt my right wrist on the bastard...he didn't like the bottle up his arse. Now he knows what it's like to be arse-fucked in a big way...I had it for most of my young life when every week he thought he had a right to buy the service...admittedly, he only had a small cock....and I had it when I was seventeen in jail...including a broom handle

as far as it would go...those arse-holes from those days are next on my list...he didn't like it one bit especially when I forced it up so far. He squealed like a bloody pig..." He snorted a soft laugh. "And when I gouged out his eyes. They came out bloody easy, like..." He sounded surprised. "He whined for me to stop...pleaded with me...as I had pleaded each time that he fucked me. My tears only made him hungrier, he once said...I know what he means now."

"Where are they? His eyes?" I turned to him. No expression at all on my face although I felt at that very moment like leaping for his throat and squeezing out what little life he had in him. He looked satisfied, smug as he scanned his handiwork. Not effected at all at the bloody display before him. A ghastly, heinous crime of a sadistic monster.

"They'll never see the light of day again...I flushed the right eye-ball down the toilet." He giggled. "...and... arrh...the other? It had a good view of his arse being pushed along by the bottle stem...I wish that I could have done the same thing to my Mum and Dad. They looked on while the bastard forced me to do dirty things. They especially, deserve to have their eyes gouged out...I didn't think of that at the time...Dad even took money from this...his bloody older brother...to abuse me...his son...so he...me Dad....so's he could afford to go to the football each week...you know what the last thing was, that he said to me? As I sailed away...he was drowning, but he still managed to yell out that I was one sick bastard...me? Me? Can you believe that!? He was the sick bastard..." This was spat out. Anger made him shake.

Mar sidled up to me. Whispered in my ear.

"Keep him talking, Joe. He seems to want to unload on you. I think he is trying to shock you with the details. Try not to react...."

"You said that you thought that this was a bad idea, a moment ago. What? You for it now? And I'm having my doubts. It seems to indicate his insanity to me...not good if we want a conviction." I whispered back into her ear.

"I disagree, Joe. I reckon that it shows that he is as sane as you or I. This whole set-up? Thought out. Staged. It just highlights that he has no compunction. No remorse. No guilt for the acts as though he has done the world a favour by ridding it of rodents...he's acting as though he thinks of himself as a hero..."

"Yeah. I suppose..." I was not convinced.

"Do you think...that by killing your mother, your father and your uncle, that that would free you from the nightmares...the images that you even see when you're awake? When you're pummelling some-one to a bloody pulp...say Harry Wallace for example."

Scotty surprised me with the question. It got to the crux of the matter but I didn't know whether Parker would respond as candidly as when I asked the questions.

Parker looked away then looked over at him.

"That scum bag deserved all he got. War hero or not. He hit on me. He wanted to fuck me...he said I had a nice arse...what a scum bag...it made me near throw up."

He looked young Scotty in the eye, almost daring the young Detective to react, to comment on what he had just conveyed. There had been a hint of anger in his words. The whole thing was getting under his skin. Not good. I needed to recommend that he see the Force Shrink after this was put to bed. To help him come down. To thicken his skin a bit as this would have been the first murder scene that he possibly has seen.... or at least, the goriest!

"How do you know what the fuck I see?" Parker continued, jutting his chin towards the young Detective. "How do you know what my nights are full of...how would you know that?"

A scornful look on his face.

Anger bubbling just below the surface.

Sergeant Pines seemed to sense it and tightened his grip on the manacles.

For the first time that I had noticed, AJ winced from the pain.

Still, he continued. The scornful look returning.

"Yeah, I reckon that I'm now free of them. You glad at that, huh? Scumballs?" He muttered forcefully at Scotty.

He didn't sound convinced of his own assessment.

"I can live my life without their smart-arse smiles...their bloody cruelty to their only son. Yeah. I'll be able to sleep proper now. Now that they're drowned...that bastard..." He jutted his jaw out at the naked man now in rigor. "...he made me suffer for years coming around every week...he conked out after only about a couple of hours...yesterday."

"It doesn't work like that, AJ...from what I know...the nightmares never really go away...you should know that." Mar commented softly.
She gasped.

"You worked on him all day...yesterday? About what time did he kark it?"

A look of concern was etched on her face. She turned to the Head Pathologist.

AJ Parker butted in.

“Don’t know exactly. Before the news last night, I think. I watched the news. He was dead by then. It’s a great TV, ain’t it? As big as a Picture Theatre almost. Man, I’d love one of them...can’t afford it, I suppose. They gotta be worth a zillion.... Had to move one of those lounges so’s to see the screen. He’s body was in the road. I fell asleep. Me feet up on his back. Really relaxing...though me shoes got blood on them...”

He thought that was funny. The ultimate insult with him lounging, asleep with his feet up on the old man’s bloody back.

“...It was bloody hard work. Slept like a baby till around lunch to-day. Not one bad dream. See? Ya bloody dick, yer don’t know everything...” He looked pointedly at Scotty. “...Had a snack from his frig before I started to drive home...then I had a convoy of Cops up my arse...”

He seemed to think that he had said something funny as he giggled away like a school girl.

“You were up here the whole time...” Mar turned to face me. She had gone white. “The car. The bonnet was cold, Joe. That guy said that he had only just got there...had one cigarette...was warming up his car while he waited for his sister...the bonnet was cold...shit!”

Mar grabbed her mobile to scroll through the contact numbers.

“AJ doesn’t smoke...” I swallowed hard. A sense of doom swept over me. “We...arrh...we finished here? The Crime Scene lads will be half the night yet. You guys seen all you want to see? How about we get this arse-hole back to the Office Holding pens. We can hold him overnight and arrange legal representation for him before we start in on him to-morrow morning. OK?”

Our sudden shift confused every-one else in the room including AJ.

Suddenly he wasn’t the centre of attention. The ‘star’ in the middle of the room. Pines bundled him out to the car sensing our sudden desire for urgency.

I nodded to Dominique Sherbaverst who gave the Morgue guys the permission to bag and remove the body.

I handed over the bloodied shirt, board shorts and shoes to Dominique that AJ had been wearing during the crime as we stood beside our car. As per protocol, I had bagged each item as AJ had removed them. Signed them and had them countersigned by Pines as head of that little caper on the bridge.

It was a tight squeeze in the back of our car. AJ crammed in between Scotty and myself. The two girls in the front.

We covered AJ's head with a towel from the Apartment. It was thick and fluffy. Top of the range Bath Towel.

An electrical storm of some magnitude assaulted us with camera flashes as we left the premises and headed towards Sydney.

My mind was in top gear as I could not contact Penny or Dave and Kath Catt.

I feared the worse, which was not that unusual for me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“Maybe we should put out an ‘All Car Alert’ on that dark Ford...”

“We haven’t enough information on it...every bloody dark coloured Ford will be pulled over with Cops surrounding it with guns drawn...now that would be good publicity...” Mar stated.

She was right of course. Going off half-cocked was worse than not doing anything at all.

“What was his name, Mar? You saw his License details. A Queensland Driver’s License. That’s right, isn’t it? Can you remember?”

“Shit...his name? Shit.... I’ve lost it!” Hendricks hit the steering wheel out of frustration. Mar left the narrow street behind. Put on the bar flashing lights with the headlights on high beam. She held off on the siren. The road was relatively clear of traffic by this stage. It was close to 11 at night.

“What was the name of that Dee from the LAC who was at the house yesterday?”

I was starting to panic with no definite line of action opened to me.

Mar’s mobile rang.

She handed it to Peta Daniels who was sitting in the front passenger seat beside her.

“Detective 2, Marge Hendricks phone. This is D2 Peta Daniels. Can I help?”

She listened for some moments. Made notes into her Notebook.

“Yeah.....got it. Let me repeat it to make sure I got it right? S.A.V.A.R.V.I.C.H. Alex. Got it. Czech? A 2002 Ford Falcon sedan. Oscar. Tango. Bravo. 339...metallic midnight blue colour...Registered in his name...thought so.”

There was silence as she listened intently. Nodded her head. An occasional ha-huh. The pen going a million miles an hour across the page of her note-book. I peered over her shoulder. Impatient. Nervous. Wanting to do something. Anything. She gave a sideways look at Mar. The notes were in shorthand scribble. I couldn't decipher.

“...Ha-huh...yeah. I'm pretty sure that I got it all...Do you need to speak to Detective Joe Lind?... OK. I'll let him know. Thanks for that Detective Swanson. One thing...have you put out an 'All Points' on the vehicle and its driver? You have? Well done...thanks for that.”

His respect for me was equal of mine for him. Very low!

Oh, Well! You can't win them all!

She glanced across to Mar.

I didn't like the look.

She signed off.

“What? What was that all about, Daniels? That was the Dee from the LAC, wasn't it? The old bloke. Needed a rocket up his arse before he would fart...what did he say. Any good? Helpful?”

I needed to take a deep breath.

Mar said as much.

“Umm....” Daniels seemed lost for words. “Yeah, that was Detective Swanson. Southern Zone Peninsular LAC. You met him yesterday. The 'Dee' at Penny's place. They've ID'ed the intruder...umm...Go to the Hornsby Station so that we can pick up our vehicle...”

Mar jolted her head around to look at the woman.

“Um...We'll take AJ Parker here to the Holding Pen at the Office. You and Joe should head for Royal North Shore Hospital. Accident and Emergency...”

“Fuck...what's happened? It's Penny, isn't it?”

I leaned over towards the front seat. My heart rate peaked.

“Umm...yeah. And Malisa Burbidge. Apparently Malisa...she lives at your place, Joe? Right? She’s AFP? Cyber-crime? Took half a day off to go and see Penelope Catt. They’re good friends so Swanson informed me...Malisa drove Penelope down to her place in Curl Curl. To get some CD’s. Some DVD’s...something like that...they sprang an intruder inside the house. In his haste to get away, he careened into Penelope sending her flying. Malisa says it was deliberate...she...Penelope, was on crutches. She hit her head. Fractured skull. They’re operating as we speak. Bleeding of the brain. The brain has swollen. They’ve had to remove sections of the skull to relief the pressure...there’s fragments lodged in her brain...they will keep her in an induced coma until the brain settles down.”

“Shit...and Mal?” I asked. My voice croaky and tremulous.

“Broken wrist. She knocked the guy unconscious...apparently, it took a few punches...and a couple of swings with one of Penny’s crutches. Alex Savarvich. His fingerprints are right through the place. He has had access to Penelope’s house for quite some time. By key. There is an open warrant against him for failing to appear in the Southport Court in Queensland. To answer charges of assault, assault with intent and GBH...to a live-in girlfriend of some 6 months...it appears that he has been stalking Penelope for close on a year...perhaps longer than that...contrary to an AVO taken out by Penny against him some years back...He is Penny’s ex-husband.”

“The bloody dark coloured Ford. Shit...you spoke to him Mar... shit...shit...put the siren on. Put your foot down, Mar before I climb over the seat to take over.”

We made Hornsby in record time.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I wanted to stay as long as possible. Comforting Dave and Kath. Malisa. Mar. Each other.

Enormous parts of her shattered skull removed. Shards of bone dangerously close to piercing the brain membrane delicately removed. She was in surgery for close on five hours, transferred to ICU in an induced coma. Temporary plates holding her brain in place.

I slept by her bed waking every couple of hours to talk to her for a while, just to let her know that I was close by.

Alex Savarvich appeared in Court the following morning. To be formally charged. He applied for bail. There had been heated words between myself and the Police Prosecutor over the severity of the charges. I wanted ‘Attempted Murder’ included in the list. That suggestion summarily rejected. The perp not even charged with ‘Home Invasion’ but the lesser ‘Unlawful Entry’ and ‘Illegal Entry’.

I wanted bail refused as he showed a propensity to piss off and not obey any Court instructions.

The offences were long including Assault, GBH, Illegal Entry, Unlawful Entry, Stalking, holding a Person against her Will, ignoring an AVO on the victim's house and place of employment and several charges relating to his actions on Malisa. His record of not appearing before the Court in Queensland on similar charges read to the Court. The Magistrate in her wisdom, granted bail on the condition that he appear each afternoon at the local Police Station until his required Court Appearance to question the charges.

It's thought that he may be in the Northern Territory.

Or perhaps the wilds of Tasmania!

Maybe Western Australia. Working at some remote Mining operation.

I felt better served by the refusal of bail for one Andrew James Parker for the murder of one Ralph Justin Parker. The esteemed and respected member of the Local Court. Also, the murder of one Harry Wallace and one Donald Patterson. His mother and father's disappearance not mentioned. The DPP was hoping that their disappearance and the reasons why, would come out in Court under examination.

The ire of the Magistrate who summarily refused bail was due to the first offence read out to my way of thinking. I wondered if there would have been a similar reaction if Penny had been known to the Court or been a member of the elite.

In the scheme of things, I guess it doesn't matter much.

AJ Parker would never see the light of day again and Alex Savarvich would eventually be chased down to spend additional time in prison for his truancy against what he would have spent if he hadn't absconded.

What you lose on the round-a-bouts, I guess you pick up on the merry-go-rounds.

Life has a way of creating equilibrium!

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

That basic tenet of life, so I believed was sorely questioned as I sat beside Penny's bed for several hours each night.

Dave and Kath took turns during the day on a similar vigilance. Reading her favourite books, and poetry that she adored. Even the daily newspaper. I even read her favourite

songs to her. Not breaking out in tune thinking that would cause some form of regression!
An emergency evacuation of the entire ICU floor.

After ten weeks, she slowly returned to the land of the living...

The look on her Doctor's face told the story if one could have seen it.

The prognosis was not encouraging.

Unless she showed signs of reaction to certain stimuli, her future was in the lap of the Gods.
What would they know? Doctors and in general, the medical fraternity proven wrong every day, I angrily commented.

Like Weathermen who are wrong on most occasions!

After another week, she opened her eyes.

One wondered sadly what she could see as there was no life, no action in the stare. A 1000-yard stare that focused at something that no other person could see. There was no animation in her face. Her once familiar gestures no longer visible. That self-conscious little giggle did not echo down the hallways. She couldn't eat so was permanently connected to a drip that fed her the required nutrients. She shuffled her feet where once an energetic gait was hard to keep up with. She was led not having the will or the know-how to adventurously find her own way. The happy chatter gone, replaced by silence. The warm repartee between her father and herself no more. Her only conscious action noticeable to the outside world was the fixed stare that occasionally found your eyes...but there was nothing there!

I had heard about the creeping paralysis of Alzheimer's Disease and sympathised with those who had contracted the ghastly sentence. And empathised with those who had to deal with their loved ones not knowing them. Becoming a shadow of their former selves to eventually fade away.

Penny didn't have Alzheimer's but her symptoms were very similar. Her brain had suffered too much trauma. Only time would tell whether any form of improvement would be noticeable. Hours of forced movement, physiotherapy and massage was carried out.

To no avail.

A series of additional innovative brain surgery attempts undertaken.

To no avail.

Penny remained immune to every effort. She was slowly going downhill towards that inevitable ending.

I would not allow my thoughts to wander down that path.

Of a world without Penny in it.

In my life.

I continued to visit. Admittedly the frequency dwindled and became haphazard.

It was hard seeing the person whom you love more than life itself, slowly but surely dying before your eyes.

I would stand at the window near her bed and describe the night. The brightness of a full moon. The sky full of stars on a cloudless sky. The heavy, bulbous storm clouds rolling in from the south-west to blanket the city in grey. The heavy rain with streams of tears patterned on the window pane. The life of the city and the continuous stream of vehicle lights on the highway. An occasional bird that dared to fly as high as the ICU floor.

The news from friends.

Family.

Even the latest murder case hoping that the gory details may shock her into existence.

Instead, she continued to slowly head towards the inevitable darkness of non-existence... perhaps it was for the best, I thought to myself. This stupor that had been her life for close on six months was no existence for such a vibrant and beautiful person that she once was.

I kissed her on the forehead for the last time and silently said my good-byes to her.

I wasn't up to continuing with this vigil.

I didn't have the strength. The mettle. Selfish? I didn't know but I knew that my heart would not take much more of this vigil, knowing that her life would end slowly...in the very near future...life can be cruel in the way it gives...and then inexplicitly, takes it away like a spoilt child ranting, wanting to take back the one thing that it cannot have.

I would prefer to remember her as that cheeky person who had sat at the end of the hard bench. Me not even noticing her existence until she cheekily spoke. A ray of sunshine that had entered my life. For just precious months.

Now clouds and sad thoughts were the norm.

Even the weather obliged!

It began to bucket down as I ran towards my car parked in the ‘Official Car Parking Only’ area. The cop card ‘On Official Business’ clearly displayed through the windscreen, my parking price.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The phone rang at 3:30 the next morning.

I groggily swore at the incessant ringing, thinking it was Mar waking me because we had a ‘heads up’ on another murder case.

Then my foggy brain clicked into gear. We were not next in line! Or even on ‘Slip Team’ duties.

Penny!

I picked up the phone apprehensively. Not wanting to hear, desperately wanting it to be something else.

“Joe? Dave...umm...I’m sorry, son. Penny slipped away a little while ago. They just rang me. I’m sorry, son.”

“Yeah...ta...um...I’m sorry for you and Kath. Anything I can do...um...don’t hesitate...thanks for letting me know so soon...”

I was dribbling. I continued to dribble.

“Thanks...I’ll...arrh...I’ll come by sometime to-morrow...to-day.” I continued to run off at the mouth. “...OK? I’m sorry. You okay? Do you think that you’ll be home?”

Where else would a father be at a time like this?

Superior detective work. Brilliant deductive reasoning.

“Yeah...I don’t think that I’ll go to work...um...flying a plane would be out of the question...actually, I been thinking what with everything with Penny...I’ve talked it over with Kath...I think that I may retire...until then...”

“Dave...it’s the wrong time to make major decisions like that, at this point in time...let things settle...”

“Yeah...I guess...you’re right of course...but...after Billy...now Penny...Kath and I have only each other. The kids were our world...” There was sounds of him sniffing. A loud blow of his nose. “...sorry, Joe...um...we’ll see you sometime to-day? Yes?”

“Yeah...I’ll drop by...see you then.”

I put the phone down slowly.

I felt the same. That I had had enough.

Something made me stop.

To concentrate.

I thought that I could hear some-one giggling.

No. Two kids giggling. Their laughter very similar. Like twins. Then it slowly faded.

The pit of my stomach grew heavy.

The stomach muscles constricted.

My chest tightened.

My throat constricted to the point of pain. I rolled out of bed and went to stand in the shower as I let out a wail that a Bedouin tribe would be proud of. I wailed like a three-month-old baby. No. Like triplets in unison. My body stiff, my arms akimbo. The tears flowing freely with the warm water spray. By the continuous sound, it appeared that I did not take a breath.

Billy and Malisa came running in knowing immediately the reason for the banshee wail.

I had wailed like this on only four occasions in my life and vowed each time that I would never, ever cry again, such was the hurt within my body.

My very soul.

The first time was when I was about 10 years of age. My best mate died. From what, I do not know. I do not even know where he’s buried. Even to this day.

Then the three most important women in my life taken from me.

Helene.

Then my grandmother who I had thought right up to her death, was my mother.

Now Penny.

Life was too tough...life was too cruel....

I doubted that I would survive.

Then a thought dashed across my tortured brain. *'Who are you to wallow about in self-pity. Life is too short. You never know what is around the next corner. Stop this and have sympathy for Dave and Kathleen. They have now lost both of their children.....that's not the way it should be!'*

I swear that it was Penny scolding me.

I looked around the room.

It was my bedroom.

Nothing had changed.

Bill and Malisa had led me back to my bed. Towelled me down roughly and then laid beside me as they hugged me.

My tears were still flowing.

Silently.

I still had my boy. And Malisa was like a daughter to me.

Life would go on and yes, I would wake up tomorrow morning to greet another day, still thinking though, that life can be cruel.

pcb

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