

MURDER SQUAD DETECTIVES JOSEPH LIND and MARJORY HENDRICKS



**NO
WHITE
FLAG**

A
Crime
Novella
by

PETER C BYRNES

HOMICIDE DETECTIVES JOE LIND
AND
MARJORY HENDRICKS

NO WHITE FLAG

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CHAPTER ONE

It was a Saturday night.

After midnight and 'The Strip' was alive with activity.

The usual stream of people who walked both footpaths along 'The Strip' to turn around and do it all over again.

The gawkers.

The inquisitive.

Those looking for a good time.

Perhaps hoping to score.

If lucky enough, perhaps a double.

No-body took any notice of the vehicle as it made its way slowly along The Strip's crowded roadway. At crawl speed hemmed in by the long line of barely moving traffic.

At this time of night at a snail's pace.

It was faster to walk the length of The Strip than to drive it, if it was a good night.

It was a good night!

It turned off onto a side street that almost immediately dog-legged to the right. The vehicle, a nondescript 4WD with blacked out windows crawled to a stop. Double parking so that its length was only partly visible from the bright lights of a steep staircase entryway into a Strip Joint and Night Club on the main glittering road of The Strip.

Bouncers and Spruikers shouting with enthusiasm the delights that awaited within dimly heard. Trying to snag disinterested passers-by. The entertainment of most these Saturday night 'movers and groovers' so it seemed, maybe a couple of drinks at a trendy bar than the usual walk back and forth along the length of 'The Strip' eyeing off the sights. The working girls. The 'Characters' who were always there.

Until that got boring.

And tiring.

Then the hassle of trying to snag a Cab home. Maybe the last train out.

A rear side window of the vehicle slid gently open. Perhaps only a 7-centimetre-wide gap. Just enough to give an unobstructed view through the large Scope and clear passage for a bullet.

It was dark enough at this spot just off the bright lights of The Strip for people not to notice.

The engine cut.

The slow tick of the engine cooling, the only noise except for the usual thrum from the lighted 'Strip'.

Nothing seemed to stir from within the vehicle although a chap repositioned himself slightly. Adjusting his lounge against the upright back of the rolled up rear seats giving him ample room to seat himself comfortably in the enlarged cargo bay.

It could be a long wait.

Or it could be over in minutes.

He casually held a mean mother of a rifle. Giant scope. He flipped the rifle up into the firing position, the gun held steady with his elbow resting just below a slightly raised knee. The barrel of the rifle at no time poking out through the window or touching the metal side of the vehicle.

One bullet in the breach. The safety on.

He had confidence in his ability. He'd done it many times before. In Afghanistan and Iraq. Now? Only on Roos and feral dogs and cats, but he was still an excellent shot.

The sniper adjusted the scope distance and re-checked the calibrations.

One hundred metres if an inch.

An easy kill.

He gently placed the rifle back into his lap.

Waited.

Didn't stir.

Didn't speak to the driver at all.

Slowly chewed gum while watching intently the garish, brightly illuminated entryway into the well-known Kings Cross night club. Peering through the slightly opened rear side sliding window of the 4WD.

They had 'dry run' this exercise on three separate occasions over the past month or two.

No-one even noticing the vehicle as they double parked at this precise position at the dog-leg of the street.

A police vehicle had cruised past on one night not even stopping to instruct the vehicle to move on. On each occasion, they had rehearsed the get-away plan. The engine start up, the casual, slow acceleration. The drive down the street lined with Victorian double storey terrace houses to the end of the Avenue.

A dead-end.

A well-known set of stairs dug into the sandstone rock face that gave access to a short Cul-de-sac at a lower level. Another dead end that the ancient stone steps emptied onto. Their mate waiting with three bikes. Helmets. Their intended route up to the mouth of the Dead-end where the dead-end intersected with the main arterial road out of the district.

From this dead-end street beginning, the bikes would split up to travel in three separate directions.

A timer exploding the stolen vehicle fitted with stolen plates into a ball of flame. The rifle along with any evidence and DNA trace erased in the fire-storm.

By then, they had left the area. Remaining within the speed limits on the Motorways that led out of the Central Business District of Sydney

One going west.

Another north and the last south, all easily done as the feeder roads onto the various Motorway and Bridge approach tunnels were within spitting distance.

Of course, these practise runs did not involve the burning of the vehicle but every other element of the operation rehearsed.

Every man knew their job.

Fifteen minutes. That's all.

Fifteen minutes. If the target didn't show within that period, then the exercise would be aborted.

Another night.

A week.

A month away.

It didn't matter.

They'd get him soon enough.

Their benefactor also a very patient person, so it seemed.

CHAPTER TWO

Marcus Illack was a well-known Kings Cross identity.

Regularly seen on the TV.

Featured in the Print News.

A tall, leggy beauty usually hanging off his arm.

He was small. The runt of the family. The youngest of six. Three brothers and two sisters.

His parents had immigrated to Australia in the late fifties or early sixties when the flood of immigrants had been mainly British, Italian and Greek. The wave of Lebanese immigrants didn't occur until around the time of the Lebanese Civil War.

Moses Illack was if not, one enterprising and enthusiastic young Lebanese back in those days. Seeing the need to provide protection to the small Lebanese community then in existence, constantly threatened, menaced and occasional hit on by Greek and/or Italian gangs of marauding youths, he started up an enterprising business. To protect his fellow countrymen from the riff-raff that they let into Australia.

The protection came at a price of course!

Thus, began the foetal beginnings of what some decades later, became the burgeoning enterprise controlled by the children of Moses Illack.

Protection money still formed a part of the enterprise that now included Restaurants, Night

Clubs, several suburban Hotels, prostitution and the big money spinner, Drugs!

The eldest brother, the accepted leader who had taken over the reins from their Papa, killed by a single sniper bullet as he stepped from his luxury Mercedes at the front of his home in a leafy North Shore suburb. The second eldest was still in prison for returning fire on that night. Killing the driver and wounding the assailant who had died under mysterious circumstances some years later in prison.

The next brother had lost his nerve. He permanently walked with a limp and a habit of constantly peering behind as he walked.... anywhere! This the result of a botched attempt on his life several months after the elder brother died at the side of his beloved Mercedes.

This attempt on the man's life never solved though there were several 'Persons of Interest' in the files of the Major Crime and Gang Related crime files.

The Police accused of dragging the chain in their investigations on the case. That was not the case how-ever, as the full resources of the Force had considered the failed attempt. A series of 'payback' killings would occur after the incident. As did happen. Tit for tat payback was a regular occurrence even though the instigators of the original incident never identified or even known by those avengers. Pot luck would do. If the rightful instigator of the attempt died, then all the better!

It didn't matter.

There were no white flags flown in this part of town.

Or by these people!

The suburbs were alight with the flash of gunfire for some months after that. Drive-byes were common. Bullet holes in fibro and timber sheeting of homes as common as salt! Again, no-one arrested. The body toll was three. The injured in the low teens. All of Lebanese extraction belonging to opposing gangs who had control of various parts of the suburbs.

No-one would dare attack the seat of power though.

The Illack family were immune, so most thought even with the outrageous attack on the senior Illack being successful.

The Strip divorced from all these bloody and absurd carry-ons in the suburbs.

The two Illack sisters' places of residences had been the regular target of drive-by shootings. It was rumoured, strongly rumoured that the houses filled to bursting with drug caches, assorted guns and pistols, enough ammunition to blow up the entire suburb if the houses ever caught fire and enough cash to finance Obama's next fling at Presidency, that was

supposedly sneakily concealed.

The Police had raided both houses twice to walk away with very little for their labour.

Intelligence seemed to indicate that the two sisters were the brains of the family. They along with their husbands controlled the vast proportion of the finances illegally obtained by all the siblings. Except perhaps the runt of the family. Using it to invest in high rise and Industrial property portfolios, hotels, restaurants, a vehicle hire service firm, several taxicabs, and a string of holiday units up and down the coast.

The entire family could have, if they so wanted, lived quite extraordinarily on the profits of the legitimate side of the enterprise. Like so many before them, the brothers especially, preferred the pull, the infamy, and the danger that walking on the wild side produced.

Or maybe they just didn't have the brains to get out of the business. It was in their blood!

It also shortened their lives considerably.

Through all this, the runt of the family sailed supremely by. Completely unfazed, so it seemed, by the goings-on of the rest of his siblings.

He alone controlled over 70% of The Strip. The drug trade. The prostitution and brothels. The entertainment establishments both legit and questionable.

The other 30% fought over by two opposing gang 'families'. While they continually fought over that portion to gain the upper hand, they knew that if they ever tried to muscle in on the young Marcus Illack's portion, they would be dead in a most painful way within a matter of hours.

That fact whispered about with substantiated evidence that he was as good as his word.

Illack was cunning enough, had enough nous to know that in providing the crumbs for others to fight over, they tended to leave his enterprises alone. It was no fluke that since the young Marcus Illack had risen to the top of the heap after serving a suitable apprenticeship with one of the well-known racing identities and good time guys, the crime rate around The Strip had reduced to an acceptable level.

Where the Police tended to ignore the 'minor' incidents within the Cross area.

CHAPTER THREE

"One of these days he's going to surprise us, you know." The man muttered as he looked

through a pair of Binoculars.

"How so?" His mate asked as he turned from the window.

"He'll show up wearing something else!"

Both men laughed.

They were a three-man surveillance team under the umbrella of the NSW Police Force Intelligence Unit that had a permanent surveillance spot in a one bedroom second floor apartment opposite but three down from the stairway entry into the Nightclub.

This the 'overt' covert location.

Another existed further down The Strip with a much more elaborate display of electronic surveillance equipment. This was the 'covert' covert position.

"Yeah...and he'll also surprise us by altering his nightly habit of emerging from his cave after the end of the second and the third show of the night. To get a breather. To get a couple of lungs full of clean air before he charges back inside. He's either bloody stupid, which I doubt, or he is supremely confident that he is unbreakable.... You ever been over there during one of the shows? I thought smoking in confined areas or even indoors that are frequented by members of the public is a total no-no."

"He and people like him have their own set of rules and fuck the plebs, the bogans and us coppers."

"Yeah. I guess so."

"What's it like?" Said the third member of the team as he glanced up at his colleague. Turning away from the binoculars held on a tripod. A camera on a similar tripod beside his head. A cable remote hanging from the camera body. They were sick and tired of the number of shots that they took each night and had done for umpteen months now.

They all looked the same.

"What?" His mate asked.

"Inside the Club?"

"Oh that! Same as all of them. You see one you see them all. The same entertainment. The same guy with a guitar and a passable voice. The same dancers who get down to nothing and show the same style of tits and slash, if you know what I mean...I can't understand how people can go to shows like that night after bloody night. Week after week. It must get so bloody boring..."

"Yeah, well...it seems to be the go for a lot of people because they keep coming back for more..."

"Drugs?"

"There must be in that Club, though we've raided it.... what? Four? Five times? They've got a good early warning system and a bloody quick response time to hide the stuff is all I'll say..."

"Yeah....."

The little man emerged, standing momentarily in the entryway to his Club. At the foot of the steep set of stairs that led to Nirvana if you were willing to believe the garish, blinking signage and the words of the spruikers either side of the doorway on the council footpath.

The little man clamped his hand on the back of both Spruikers as though they were long lost brothers. Did the fist-dance. The shoulder tap.

Marcus always dressed the same.

A freshly pressed pair of light grey Chinos, the crease straight, true, and decisive. A lightweight lemon knitted golf shirt that belonged to a bygone era, a pair of polished loafers, white socks, and enough gold hanging from his wrist and from around his neck to suspect that was why he stood only 150 centimetres tall. From the combined weight of all the bling! Clean shaven. His hair expertly cut with not a strand out of place. His physique clearly displayed by the cut of the golf shirt. The sleeves tight around the upper arm muscles. Time in the Gym. In the solarium.

He nodded his awareness of the four goons that lounged in a Mercedes limousine parked at the kerbside directly at the front of the Club entry door. In a one hour parking spot! How they managed to do that night after night was the subject of a book held by the surveillance cops. The vehicle and its occupants would remain there for as long as the little bloke was inside the Club.

Then mysteriously disappear when the little bloke left the premises.

He then waved towards the clandestine surveillance apartment. The 'overt', covert den.

Gave a broad smile.

Turned his head either way mockingly, giving a profile for the benefit of the Police photographer that he knew was there in the one bedroom unit!

"You bloody, little smart-arse. You'll get your comeuppance one of these days. Your type

always does!" The Surveillance guy on duty said angrily as he looked through the binoculars and took a string of digital shots.

The little bloke nodded at the guy almost opposite and another further up the road.

These were his Cockatoos.

The early warning system.

Two others further up, he did not acknowledge. No-one knew of their existence. Not even the goons in the car!

Careful was Marcus's middle name.

A wide smile to several girls who lounged against a shopfront some metres away. Again, to several others in the opposite direction.

The girls in front of their brothel entrances owned by 'the man'.

No-one referred to him as the 'little man' if he valued his balls or his life.

The smile displaying white capped, perfect teeth that were an Orthodontist's dream. The whole package giving you the impression of an innocent, friendly, little boy next door who took very good care of himself and his clothes instead of the cold-blooded killer that he was. He didn't smoke as he knew that would yellow his teeth. Not a good sight according to him. Instead, he chewed dental gum that continuously cleaned his teeth, so he had been told.

He was vain enough to believe it!

A megalomaniac psychopath of major proportions! Hitler would have welcomed him into his inner sanctum.

"Look at him. No girl would give second thoughts about taking him home to introduce to their Mum, now would they?" One of the cops retorted.

"Makes you sick, doesn't it? How come they're always the bastards who are rolling in it? A hit with the women too?" The other added. "You know? Those little guys so full of themselves? Like a little Hitler, they are! Over-achievers because of their small stature.... I reckon."

"Fair dinkum...or is that just the gospel according to Gazza?"

A cut off harrumph, the reply.

A big man followed the little bloke down the brightly lit stairs. The muscle bulges thought to be the product of steroids and not a manic regime of exercise. Though he had participated in the practice in his younger years. The guy had to be over 190 tall, almost as wide. A shiny, bald head. Puffy face. A crooked nose. His eyes sunken into the swollen cheek line though they were constantly dancing around. Alert. His arms didn't fall easy by his side. To the educated, that would indicate that he was packing. Packing heavy. A black silk shirt undone at the neck to show hints of gold chains. A buffed, hairless chest. A shiny charcoal grey Sharkskin suit that needed letting out. The pants crumpled, looking too long in the leg. Black loafers.

He crossed the footpath at a slow duck waddle. Walked to the Mercedes, had trouble bending over as the rear window slid down. Said some words. Listened to the latest report. Nothing to report that was the order of the night and had been for some time now. A boring, monotonous job. But well paid. The big bloke stood. Walked slowly back to the little guy to report...nothing to report, Boss.

It was rather farcical if it didn't appear to be so serious.

But then, the big guy was famous for his lack of humour. His sullen look. Never a smile on his face. The opposite of his little boss, who was gregarious and demonstrable in the extreme. Always had a smile on his face. A friendly wave. An impish wink.

The big bloke then went to stand near the Club entrance. The little bloke walked up to him to get his prescribed dose of dental gum for that part of the evening...

CHAPTER FOUR

"OK." The Shooter murmured as he slid the ear-muffs over his ears.

He already had ear plugs inserted.

The driver did the same and slouched as far as he could down in the driver's seat.

The shooter carefully picked up the rifle, cradled it lovingly for a moment before he wrapped the sling tightly around his right arm, resting his left on his partially raised left knee. All actions slow and deliberate. He brought the sight up to his eye never allowing any part of the muzzle to protrude out of the window or any part to rest on the vehicle.

He had one shot.

The bullet he had loaded himself.

He wanted a through and through, hoping to also hit the Second-in-Charge, the Lieutenant who ordered the killing and knee-capping of rivals without a moment's thought. On the orders, of course, of his little, for-ever smiling, psychopathic Boss!

He waited.

Patiently.

Looking easily and relaxed over the top of the scope. Hoping to align the little bloke with the big bloke. An initial head shot that would then enter the chest of the big bloke.

They'd get a bonus twenty if they took out the big bloke as well.

Hopefully.

The big bloke stood slowly from his bent position at the dark Mercedes limousine. He seemed to waddled over to the little guy lost from view by the bulk of the man. With a nod of his head the guy then went to stand near the entrance opening of the club effectively blocking egress and ingress to the stairs by his sheer size.

Why is any-one's guess.

Marcus Illack strutted over to the man in a somewhat comical parody of a Hollywood superstar of days gone by.

James Cagney, he wasn't!

Holding his hand out to obtain his quota of dental gum for that time of the night.

He wouldn't carry it himself as that would spoil the clean cut and fall of his pants.

Things then seemed to go a little haywire.... into slow motion....

The little guy flew violently forward towards the big bloke as a mist of red and grey exploded across the entire entryway. Marcus Illack's face disappeared into that mist. Simultaneously, or close enough to it, the big bloke flew backwards onto the base of the stairs. Blood oozing from a mighty gash in his chest.

The little man crumpled on top of him. Final death throes giving the impression to some, of coitus between the two.

Then the somewhat muffled crack of the single shot seemed to take some time to echo up onto the street. The reverberation not as pronounced as one would have expected within the relatively narrow streets and straight, blank facades facing the roadway.

A scream almost on top of the crack of the rifle shot was the first indication that something wasn't right.

The traffic seemed to take some moments to slow. To comprehend.

The pedestrian traffic only momentarily more aware. Reacting to the scene that had suddenly and unexpectedly unfolded.

A sudden running of pedestrians in complete disorder.

Women screaming.

Men yelling out for every-one to get the fuck out of the way.

The black Mercedes doors flew open and dark suited, Islander or Maori types on too many years of steroid taking, leapt out. Dark sunglasses still on, even though it was now past 2 AM on a Sunday morning.

Sub-machine guns.

Cut-down AK 47's.

Cut-off shotguns, under and over pump actions clearly at the ready.

Several shots fired towards the surveillance Apartment.

More screams now. In a concerted cacophony of sound.

Bellowed orders.

Sirens coming fast.

Foot Patrol Officers running along the footpaths from both directions yelling out for everyone to get down.

The words lost in the general cacophony that was rapidly unfolding.

One of the Cockatoos vaulting a slow-moving vehicle.

His hand gun out.

He turned towards the surveillance Apartment firing several times.

Hitting the facade and breaking the glass of the windows facing the street. Wrecking the camera and flinging it across the room.

Several shots from handguns spurted from the broken window in reply before the training kicked in stopping them from firing haphazardly as there were too many members of the public about.

The tinkling sound of flying glass clearly heard as shopfront windows disintegrated from stray bullets.

A scrambled message of 'Shots Fired. Immediate response to the Blue Lady. Middle of The Strip. Several victims. I repeat. Immediate response. On duty Police taking fire. Returning fire. Officer down. Immediate response all units! I repeat. Emergency situation. All Units respond immediately.

CHAPTER FIVE

The report of the rifle shot reverberated around the inside of the vehicle.

Ear-drum splitting noise.

The smell of gunpowder overpowering. The muzzle flash brighter than the shooter had anticipated. Temporarily blinding him in fact. Spots danced before his eyes even as he felt the vehicle slowly take off.

Perhaps he had put too much powder in the shell, he thought to himself in a rather disjointed fashion. That was bloody loud. Ouch!

Even before the sound had dissipated so it seemed, the engine quietly turned over and the vehicle slowly accelerated away from its parked position.

No-one seemed to notice its departure.

It continued slowly down the dead-end street to its termination at below the prescribed speed limit for the area.

The vehicle turned slowly at the end of the street, coming to a stop close into the rock wall that formed the abrupt end of the Avenue and its turning circle. Opposite and well away from the renown, ancient, sandstone stairway.

The front driver's door opened.

A dark leather clad figure emerged, tossing a set of ear muffs back into the vehicle.

Closed the door quietly.

A rear door opened.

Another dark leather clad person emerged.

He too, tossed a set of ear muffs back into the vehicle, pointed something into the interior of the 4WD before tossing what-ever it was back inside.

Closed the rear door quietly and joined the other figure who was sprinting down the sandstone staircase to the lower Cul-de-sac.

They were both handed helmets and leather gloves by a comrade who had waited patiently with three bikes. The Honda motor-bikes were burbling at idle speed as they mounted, kicked up the stands and slowly accelerated away towards the mouth of that lower dead-end lane-way.

They entered the traffic of the main arterial road. Going easy so as not to draw attention to themselves.

On the corner of the intersection of the Cul-de-sac and the main arterial ring-road was a Pub that had existed in that location from the times that Woolloomooloo Bay had been a busy ship berthing area. Now Yuppies sat out in the cool night air under the stars sipping their Cab Sav and enjoying the Cordon Blue Chef prepared meals. Fancy names and even fancier prices for what were just hamburgers and chicken burgers! A side salad bathed in a lovely tasting sauce to impress.

There was an explosion that seemed to come from the end of the Cul-de-sac. A ball of flame seemed to climb up the sandstone cliff-line, licking at the sandstone surface as though there was something edible on the surface.

Those patrons seated outside all stood to look back at the lick of flame as it enlarged then slowly collapsed on itself, consuming everything that was ignitable in the vehicle.

Sirens, countless sirens heard by these patrons coming from the direction of the Strip. Up on the ridge-line.

No-one at the Pub bothered to ring the Cops, thinking that the matter well in hand!

Under control.

CHAPTER SIX

There was absolute pandemonium at the site of the shooting on the brightly lit main drag.

At the sight of four burly Islanders armed to the teeth quickly erupting from a black vehicle parked at the kerb-line, two vehicles in the stream of traffic and close to being abreast of the dark vehicle, endeavoured to vacate the area quick smart. This caused minor bingles and horn blasts from indignant drivers. It also caused the hoods to swing their armament around to level at the two vehicles making a desperate attempt to flee.

These hoods not hired for their intelligence or a mentality to quickly scope out a situation and react accordingly. They had never been involved in any military training that engaged in any sort of discipline or concerted fire-power....and had scant exercises with the weapons that they now held. Their training, if termed that, was watching re-runs of gangster Movies like The Godfather series and The Goodfellas. And the entire selection of The Sopranos TV series.

Shoot first and if you think it necessary which wasn't often the case, ask questions after the smoke and noise had died down.

Consequently, the two vehicles causing the major share of troubles nearby were peppered with bullets.

One of them had to be the Shooter's vehicle.

It was only simple logic!

Otherwise, why were they in a hurry to get away?

The first vehicle held four youths out for a normal Saturday night cruise.

Every one of them ended up looking like mincemeat. The horn permanently sounding as a dying youth pressed against the steering wheel. The constant sound of the horn only adding to the confusion and mayhem. The other vehicle obsessed with a quick get-away according to the steroid fuelled muscle-men, driven by a single Mum who was a Nursing Sister having just ended her shift at the major hospital nearby. She was cruising the strip looking for a parking spot so that she could snag a bite to eat and a decent coffee before heading home. She critically injured. She managed to survive the fusillade by diving to the floor of her car.

The two Cockatoos and the two who were not known to any member of the Illack security band, were running full pelt towards the area. Handguns drawn. The Islanders thought that they too represented a threat and turned their attention to the running figures. One went down. Dead before he hit the pavement. The other, the closest to the hoods, the one who had vaulted over the bonnet of the Nursing Sister's car, managed to get off several rounds before

he too died in a hail of bullets.

Pedestrians were screaming. Laying where-ever they could behind what-ever they could.

Cars going every which way.

People spilling from them, trying to take cover.

Behind what? No-one had a clue!

One of the bulky Islander guys sank to the footpath and slowly bled to death. Wedged between the wheels of the Mercedes and the gutter step.

The others kept on firing as they thought that they could hear sound of shots whizzing past their position behind the Mercedes now peppered itself with bullet holes itself. Its resale value severely decreased!

The running figure of a Police Officer seemed to trip on something, cartwheeling to the roadway. Blood oozing from a shoulder wound.

There were screams by Police Officers identifying themselves, ordering the shooting to stop.

Sirens filled the air.

There were more red and blue flashes from Police car bar lights than seen on New Year's Eve Fireworks displays on Sydney Harbour.

Eventually, quietness returned to the area.

Except for more sirens and a couple of car horns.

The hoods still alive and standing, looked dazed.

Not comprehending that it was they who had caused the bulk of the damage now spread out like a two-day old battlefield after the fighting had stopped. People were groaning. Others shouting. Screaming. Crying. Some still trying to hide. To get away. To escape.

The entire half kilometre that made up the greater portion of the Strip back to the park and the fountain quickly sealed off.

Nothing entered or left.

Every-one forced to stay where they were even though a great majority suddenly had other important business elsewhere.

Every available Police Officer called in to help.
A large fleet of Ambulances and Emergency staff only added to the look of a battlefield.

Which for a very few short moments, it was.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I let out a low whistle.

"Check this out, will you! A bloody arsenal. It's surprising that they haven't got a Grenade launcher amongst this lot."

The boot of the limousine opened by the remote as I stood at the rear of Mercedes, unveiling a veritable treasure trove of weapons.

"Where do these dudes get these guns?" I asked no-one in particular.

"If you want something bad enough, and are willing to pay the right price, there's always a way!" Mar muttered. Shaking her head at the arsenal.

I stood, shaking my head in amazement. Looked around at the street scene that now resembled a battle field with a white flag flying.

"Christ! Everybody in the Murder Squad called out. Night and Day. G'day, Santa. Long time, no see. How's things hanging?"

Santa was tall and just as round. A bushy grey-white beard. With a few beers under his belt, he could spin a good yarn. Bellow a belly laugh heard for miles. Barry Bellamy. The midnight to dawn shift Duty Sergeant-in-Charge. A nice bloke given a stacked deck so many thought. He fell in love with the wrong women. Every time. Repeatedly. Yet he continually bounced back to have his balls scraped clean again. Still had his sense of humour though his opinion of women was somewhat jaded. Until the next time, that is.

When Santa fell head over heels, he fell hard and he was but a pussy-cat!

"How's it going, Joe? Tell me that those things are useless replicas, will you." He commented after he had ducked his head into the boot of the limousine to examine the contents himself.

Both he and I had worked Vice at the same time. Both earning our Detective gradings to apply for the Murder Squad at the same time. Because Bellamy opted for permanent night

duty rotation, he had climbed the promotion ladder a little faster than me.

"We got what? Nine? Ten dead. Four seriously injured by gunshot including two Officers. Another sixteen with fragmentary injuries. Three with broken bones who were trying to get out of the area in a hurry and so many scraped knees, elbows, and other parts, it's not worth worrying over... lucky it wasn't a darn sight worse, knowing how those guys sprayed their toys about...and unbelievably, not one vehicle set alight by all those shots tearing through them. Hollywood, this ain't. That would have been a bloody fiasco then, no doubt. Also, bloody Hoons set alight a stolen 4WD down the end of Mountbatten near the cliff. That topped off a good night, that did! And we also got, apart from the main actors in this wonderful little cameo... we also got over one hundred arrests on drug charges, concealed weapons, carrying without a license, drunk and disorderly, failing to assist a police officer in his duties, failing to obey a Police Officer, etc. etc. We could open up a field hospital and a temporary jail right here...and now!"

He laughed at his own joke.

"I hear you got teamed up with Marge Hendricks." He continued. A smirk on his face. "The best female Dick we got. We had a book running for a while that the partnership wouldn't last past four weeks..."

"There you go, you all lost! It took me a bit of doing, Santa, but I tamed her in the end."

That earned me a strong jab on the arm. More would be forthcoming, I knew. Mar walked away to look at the two bodies that had started this fiasco. She'd heard enough sexist stuff to last a life-time, though this usually went with a similar comment on her being highly respected and admired as one of the best!

Still, it stung occasionally. What do you do? In a male dominated atmosphere, it was hard to break the habits of old, and to be truthful, there were few male Officers who wanted to. Secure in their own little world. Satisfied about the ways things were, political correctness be buggered!

But time was catching up with that sentiment, and more forceful women were invading the rank and file, voicing their disgust at sexist and demeaning comments. Still, it was common knowledge who were the females who earned the respect of every one, and it was usually due to their demeanour and work ethic.

"So! What's the state of the nation?"

Us boys conversed on another sine-wave when women weren't around.

Santa, as the Officer-in-charge of the crime scene due to him being the Night Shift Boss, had total control of close on one hundred and fifty Police Officers now on the scene. From the Dog Squad, up to and including the Swat guys and the Riot Squad.

"One hell of a payback period is about to commence. That you can bet your house on. The

original victims that started this whole shemozzle....one Crime Lord extraordinaire, pretty boy, little boy Marcus Illack and his personal bodyguard, Bag-man, 2IC and all round funny guy, Omart Kavcar. Marcus's first cousin. Through and through shot. Took pretty boy's face clean off. Nothing of value left that would give you an inkling that it was once a human face. A cute one at that. Omart collected it and slowed the bullet down somewhat as it entered his lower chest. Blasting out beside his shoulder blade. Taking half of that as well. Again, not a pretty sight. Professional. Very professional except that it was possibly an over-strong charge. Possibly a .222 steel jacketed. Handmade. Position of the shooter yet to be determined but we think could have been down there in one of those houses at the dog-leg of Mountbatten Avenue. We've got a squad going through each Apartment and house as we speak. Rooftops too. Who? Christ! Don't even think about every Biekie gang in Australia. Every Chapter. Take your pick of quite a few Crime families in this City, Melbourne and Brisbane who felt that Marcus had too much wealth, too much influence and too large a monopoly on the Strip's illegal and semi-legal sides. Legit businesses also."

He scratched his hairy chin and looked about him. Nodded at a colleague walking past. It looked as though he had aged in the last couple of hours. Perhaps knowing what may come because this related to more dead bodies in the future as payback hits in our area of influence.

"Our runt Marcus, was something of a business genius, not just a plain everyday psychopath! He had good business advice from some-one who had brains, that's for sure. Rumour is, his two brothers-in-law." He scratched his chin again. Threw his arm at the surrounding left-over mayhem. "The series of events then gets somewhat cloudy after both men go down. Parts of their bodies blown away. We'll have a better understanding when we collate all the witnesses accounts...which is quite a long list...and view all the available video footage that is at our disposal. From both the private sector such as the Banks nearby, shops, the Clubs and a couple of the Pubs and two...I repeat...two covert surveillance positions that we had on the Club and its entry doorway. When I say two, one was the overt den so that suspicion lessened on there being a second...a more covert position.... the Intelligence Boys are getting crafty, eh?"

A snort, his thoughts on the matter. He shook his head at the absurdity of the arrangement.

"You'll need help from us day shift teams, won't you?"

"Nah... I don't think so; but I can always use you and Marge."

A smile as he gave me a sideways glance. About the level of positive feedback that the man would ever give.

"Nah... we'll be right once we have collated what every cop in the Force so it seems, has managed to pull together after to-day. You two are not the only ace team that we've got...but thanks for the offer. You'd be about done in by now, wouldn't you? You'd be working the arse-end of a double shift, almost. Go get yourself some breakfast, the best joint for that is up near the fountain alongside the park. Cafe Continental. Then go home. You've e-mailed

through all your stuff through?"

We nodded our heads in unison. From afar it would have looked like two performing heads.

We dismissed for the day. Our eternal thanks. Our night shift had finished.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Bloody hell Joe. We're just filling up space, I reckon." Mar commented as we had a coffee and breakfast at the Cafe recommended to us by 'Santa' Bellamy.

It was close on 8 in the morning. Sunday morning. The Strip was still in lock-down with the main drag cordoned off with marked cars and crime scene tape at both its ends. And across four cross streets in its length.

It would remain like this for some time to come. The locals and the Business people wouldn't like that one iota!

Every location where an injury occurred or where a bullet traced its trajectory, the position tabulated, isolated, coded, identified, photographed and collated. Just about every Forensic Technician and Scientist on the Force called out to lend a hand. They were still scouring the area in clean, white scrubs.

We had interviewed, identified, photographed and video-taped close on 50 persons who did or might have seen something. Anything. Most were cooperative, friendly, though shook up at what they had witnessed. Members of the public and wannabe crooks can act tough at times but when confronted with a scenario that they had just lived through, where their lives were in mortal danger, they all acted the same.

Scared and shocked!

We'd also made around twenty arrests for drug usage or possession, concealed weapons charges, and drunken and disorderly claims just to get up the noses of a few miscreants!

We had had it. Bugged. Ready for bed.

It had been a while since we had done a double, so our stamina was a little down. Unused to the long hours.

We'd finished our breakfast and was on the dregs of our coffee. Abbey ducked under the crime scene tape and walked down to our table. Sat down. Exhaled a volume of air that

denoted despair and frustration.

"How'd you find us, Boss?"

"Superior detective work." He replied with a smirk. "Peta Daniels saw you heading this way and knew where you were going."

"Coffee?"

"Thought you'd never ask."

I waved at the young girl for a fresh one for Abbey and top-ups for Mar and I.

Abbey continued.

"I've just spent some 90 brief minutes with the powers of the State and the Police Bureaucracy. Not a happy meeting, I'm afraid. The Murder Squad will not be steering this investigation. Santa was fuming when I just told him. The Deputy Commissioner, Major Crimes will hold the reins with all the investigatory work being undertaken by the Gang Related Crimes Unit...they think it may be a rival gang according to their intelligence..."

"Bullshit..." Mar blurted out. "That AO DC will do anything to get his face on the nightly News and front page of the paper...If it wasn't for us, he would have had egg all over his face and everyone knew it...that recent case of the killing of Billy Wilkes...the Mistaken Identity Case where he was shot as he was putting out his neighbour's garbage bins as a favour...those silly sods were barking up the wrong tree...it was us who put them back on the straight and narrow and they still ignored the facts. We solved that case for the silly twits..."

"Yep...you could be right on that one, but it won't help matters..." Abbey bowed his head. His coffee came and as he placed a precise quarter spoon of sugar into the coffee, asked, "You sent all your recorded interviews and photos back to the Office? Good. I'll get Hendo and Makra Anu to transcribe and prepare the reports for your perusal and sign off when you come back to the Office on Wednesday...."

"Wednesday?"

We both turned to him with surprise.

"Why Wednesday?"

"You've just done almost a double shift. Saturday night until now. No overtime, remember? Time off in lieu. Remember? Hendo can do the normal search procedure in both your absences...under my signature."

It had been a few years now since the Bible, The Policy and Procedures Book had been altered. To negate the automatic 'search' protocol. Prior to the uproar instigated by the Civil Liberty Faction, any person interviewed, whether involved in the crime or not, during a major crime or murder or attempted murder investigation, was cross-referenced back through Missing Persons, Crimes against person cases and even speeding and parking infringement records. It was surprising what fell out of the tree when given a shake. Not that often, but often enough to warrant the practise some plausibility. But the policy was curtailed though Murder and Major Crime dicks still adhered to the practise. Unofficially of course. If pressed, they would deny still being involved in the practise. With Face Recognition Technology, License details were checked, even Centrelink and passport details cross-referenced against the person interviewed in a major case. And yes, the apples continued to fall from the tree.

Often, quite choice, juicy apples!

All Police Forces were at odds with the practise. The average Blow Joe who had nought to fear and had never broken the law, was completely divorced from this procedure. It was only those that had committed a crime, had a warrant outstanding against them, falsified documentation, passports, or Centrelink documentation that should show concerned about the continuing practise.

And now with DNA becoming cheaper and faster to process, the day was near when even that would be checked against every major unsolved crime in the nation. And others besides.

But the Civil Liberty faction had won the day against the bully, big brother Government and its cohorts.

"You got much else to do?" Abbey asked, after taking a gingerly sip of his coffee. "The rest of the Squad are packing it in. Those that can, are going home. The rest, on duty back at the Office. Just a normal day. I'll pass all the paperwork and information that you all have done onto the GRC Group by Wednesday COB. They'll be snowed under with reports and facts. That should stymie them no end. OK? Mmm....that was good. I needed that. You two. Go home when you think you've had enough. Keep me up to date on anything else that you may find out. Immediately. That's an order. See you in the middle of the week."

He stood, tossed a twenty onto the table and walked away.

Ignoring our opposition to him shouting the round.

"What do you want to do?" I asked Mar.

"Go down that side street where they say that the Shooter positioned himself. Just to have a look. You?"

She turned to me as she drank the dregs of her coffee.

I scratched my head. Felt my chin to ensure that the buzz was indeed there. An indication that I was still alive.

"Me? I could do with a bloody smoke right now. I just got the taste of it...Maybe a quick nap."

I looked away.

Warm memories of days and nights hereabouts swarmed through my brain. It is marvellous how the brain works, filtering out, really censoring the lousy times, the dangerous times that I had spent here. Just memorising those warm, fuzzy moments.

"When I was in Undercover Narcs, this area was a big part of my life." I replied. "Up around here.... Up here on The Strip. One of the quickest, easiest get-away routes from the cops was down that street, Mountbatten Avenue, down a set of stairs built into the sandstone cliff, into a car that they'd have parked in the Dead-end lane below...and away. All the drug suppliers apparently had at least one of their cars parked down there. In Bishops Lane, I think it's called, from memory. Maybe one or two parked elsewhere. Actually, you've got to see that staircase. It's hewn out of the rock face...It took us a while to learn. To coordinate a raid so that that lower dead-end which had a Pub on the corner, was cordoned off at the time of the raid, effectively blocking the back door get-away. Took a while though! I'd like to take a gander around there. There maybe one or two people who are still living there that may have seen something...that I knew from that time...a long time ago, huh?"

"What? How long ago was that.... you're pushing your luck. You reckon that would be their route to get away? The Shooter?" Mar looked doubtful.

"They had to have a plan of escape. There is no way that they'd want to stay around...or even to go back up onto The Strip. You know what the traffic is like on a normal Saturday night. As Professionals, they would have known what the absurd reaction would have been from the 'Goon Gang.' That means that there were very few options left for them in terms of escape routes. If it were me planning this hit, that's the way I would have planned to go...as my line of retreat."

"You've continually said *they*. You think more than a lone shooter?"

"Bloody oath...some-one with him as his eyes, as he is concentrating through the rifle scope. The bloody SAS Snipers even have a Spotter mate. You lose all sense of your surroundings while you're looking through that scope. A driver perhaps *if* ...a big *if*...they were in a vehicle. Some-one else somewhere with the quick transport getaway vehicle...and even another party completely divorced from that just in case things went pear shaped. I'd say at least a minimum number of six persons involved in the shoot...this was carefully thought out, more than likely well-rehearsed, professionally executed and cunningly ended while The Strip was in turmoil...just look at it somewhat? Seven hours later. It's still in turmoil!"

"OK. You want to walk down or take the car?"

"It's a nice crisp morning. Let's walk. It's not that far down there, then back again. OK?"

CHAPTER NINE

"A vehicle?"

"Yeah. We've kind of hinted at that before. Just because I now bring it up, you go all doubtful on your bloody own theory...but...that's the only way they could do it. They're not going to go running down a street with a bloody big rifle, now are they? And I reckon that even if they holed up in one of those three houses that would give a clear view of their target, they'd still use a vehicle to get away.... they wouldn't sit there waiting to be discovered. They'd be outa there quick smart."

"Down the street...a dead-end street!?"

"Yeah...in a vehicle. A van. A 4WD. Something like that. It still was a bloody good shot though. With all the traffic on The Strip. All he needed was a 4WD or a light truck to go by on the main drag at that moment, when the two were standing one in front of the other, and the whole night would have been a waste..."

"You reckon that was intentional? The through and through...and not just a lucky shot?"
Mar was questioning my logic.

She didn't sound convinced.

"Yeah." I nodded my head vigorously. "Bloody oath!"

I looked at her, disbelief in my voice that she couldn't see what I could see.

"That's my theory. The shot supercharged. Maybe 150 metres. Maybe 100. Straight over the top of the Goon Gang's Mercedes. We're on about the same level here. The bullet was powdered for a distance of a lot longer than that. Nah... he knew what he was doing...maybe he over-estimated on the powder charge, but... the traffic at that time of night crawls down The Strip...it wouldn't have been that lucky a shot. I don't reckon. He would've just waited to line both guys up...like shooting ducks at the Penny Arcade."

Mar wandered off down the road past the dog-leg in the street. Walked back again. Did the same thing several times hoping to get under my skin, I reckon!

"Hello Lover. I thought that The Gang Related Crime Squad were now looking after this show? What are you doing here? How are you? No return phone call, I notice. Not to your liking?"

It was that pert Forensic Technician Carmine Lee. Standing behind one of three Forensic

Crime Scene Vans parked haphazardly right at the corner of the dogleg in the street. Wrestling something from the dim interior of one.

Two Uniforms stood watch over the open vans.

In this area, things tended to walk pretty quickly if they weren't tied down. Or under armed guard.

"Carmie...arrh...um...yo...Hi girl!"

I lost for words.

A first for me!

We had gone out during the Mistaken ID Case. The Billy Wilkes murder. Had a great night. An even better morning. I had thought we agreed on the night to make the arrangements loose and casual. A telephone call when-ever. When the urge hit. I didn't want to seem like a louse, or worse, too eager, even though it had been some months now since that night.

She gave me her most seductive grin. A jut of her hips. It was a well-practised action. Even in white forensic scrubs, she got my blood moving. I moved in closer to her.

"Nothing better than seeing the man squirm. Lost for words? The tongue in a knot?" She laughed out loud. "I want that tongue limbered up and operational before I see you again. When are you, your body shower wash and the long-handled shower brush inviting me over for an encore, lover? I'll bring the ice this time!"

Mar had walked up to enlighten me on something. Hearing the tone of the conversation, she retreated.

"Don't get all proprietary on me now, ma man. As I told you back then, when my itch needs scratching, I'll call you on over. And I can feel it coming on." Murmured in a southern black drawl. She gave a laugh as she walked across the street and into a block of Victorian slum terraces that looked unoccupied. Squatters more than likely called it home.

Dismal squats for drug addled brains.

I turned around hoping that Mar was out of earshot, otherwise she was likely to give me hell for weeks. She had been talking to one of the young Uniforms. When she saw me looking, she made her fingers into a gun, put them to her mouth, blew, then pretended to holster them. The message was clear! Even the young Uniform laughed.

Mar sashayed her way over to me.

"Oh massa, please kind sir, can yo all please scratch ma itch for this li'le honkey chile woman?"

"Cut it out, Marjory Hendricks!" I looked around hoping that Carmine Lee was no-where in sight. Thankfully she wasn't. Mar had that smart smirk on her face.

"They found an OD body in that Squat this morning. Another young bloke almost dead in the front yard. Reckon it was a bad batch. They haven't found any evidence of the Shooter's position yet. They won't though. I agree with your supposition. He was in a vehicle. Firing out through the side rear window. Parked right here. Double parked is my bet. The vehicle half obscured by the dogleg corner of the street. I'll bet my virginity that the driver didn't even put his foot on the brakes when he slowed to a stop. Used the hand brake so as not to draw attention to himself. I'll bet the same thing when they took off. Nice and easy like. No lights to start with. As soon as the shot fired, he took off slow like. Quick enough so that who-ever may have heard the shot and looked out to sticky beak, which is truly highly unlikely around here in any case, the vehicle was well down the Avenue by then...you'll have to get your own Web Page ma man. Gigolo for Hire. Will wear an authentic Police Uniform upon request! It'd still fit you wouldn't it, Joe? After all those years, undercover. Now plain-clothes?"

"Shit...cut it out, Mar."

CHAPTER TEN

"That's it, don't you reckon?"

"Yep. That's it. A right royal mess. No trace will be pulled from that wreck, that's for sure. As we've said a few times now, they knew what that were doing."

We walked around the severely burnt out metal carcass several times.

"That's some sort of accelerant that we can smell, isn't it? Not a bloody thing left to burn. Just a rust coloured metal can.... would the fuel tank have blown up?"

"Nope. Even if they took the filler cap off, it usually doesn't go up like in Hollywood Movies. There would have been a lick of flame sprouting from the filler pipe burning off the vapour. Once that was gone there was nothing else left to burn...that's a rifle barrel in there...and I reckon the remains of a scope."

I took my mobile out and rang Crime Stoppers. Reporting anonymously that there was a burnt-out wreck, a 4WD possibly used in the murders last night at The Strip. A rifle and

scope still visible inside the wreck. Extreme northern end of Mountbatten Avenue, Potts Point. Yeah...at the rock face dead-end. I hung up quickly.

"What do we do now? Wait?"

"Nah, we get the hell out of here. Hold on a tick...."

I scampered down the staircase.

The old sandstone treads worn down by countless pairs of shoes. Days of water dripping down the steps. I ducked back around to an overhang section where the steps became a concrete section right at the bottom of the staircase. The sandstone long removed due to bad weathering. A large garbage container on wheels pushed up to hide the spot under that part of the steps. I pushed this out of the way just enough to squeeze past it.

There was a pile of papers, rags, and other stuff hard up under the lowest part the underside of the steps. A shopping trolley full of an assortment of junk and rubbish beside it. It too hard up onto the underside of the concrete of the steps. This left a nice little alcove. It looked as though the rubbish had overflowed from the shopping cart.

It smelt.

I kicked gently into the pile.

Again.

The pile moved. Moved again. Grumbles. A deep rasping cough.

"Get out of it, ya bastard. Ya bloody mongrels. I'm trying ta bloody sleep. Leave me in peace, ya bastard...."

"Sorry, mate. Doris don't live here no more?"

A face not washed for some time. A scraggly light beard that would suit an adolescent. A beanie pulled well down. Grubby. Dirty. A scabby nose. A mouth with no teeth. His skin a pockmarked road map of wrinkles. He looked up at me. Squinting. I doubted that he could see who it was, the gesture an automatic reaction.

"Who's asking?" The old man rasped.

"An old friend."

"Bullshit. If'n you were a friend, you'd know that she died a while back. I got her spot. I was next in line. Ya can't take it away from me."

"No worries, old man. I'm sorry to hear that Doris didn't make it. Did you see anything happen here, earlier to-night?"

"Didn't see nuttin'....."

"Doris would have...."

"Yeah, well. Doris don't see nuttin' no more. I seen nuttin' neither....."

They rarely do.

I gave him a fiver and edged back out, returning the small wheeled Dumpster to its original position. Headed for the base of the staircase.

"No, Joe!" Mar cried out. "Because of your Crimestopper call, it will be crawling with GRC guys and Forensics personnel pretty soon. Let's walk to the end of this lane and catch a cab back around to the car."

I was quiet as we walked towards Wharf Road.

"You OK?" Mar asked. "What? Doris was one of your 'Squeals' during your Undercover Narc days, was she?"

I nodded my head.

She had been more than a squeal at times. A friend in a funny sort of way. She had history. A life before the streets. It went sour. She went a bit funny not being able to grasp the reality of the situation. Most of us can. She couldn't. That wasn't to belittle her in any way. I often wondered how I would react, how my mind would take what her kids did to her. Her brain just gave up, that's all.

"You OK?" Mar asked again. "Maybe it's time we called it a day and went home for some much-needed sleep..."

"Nah....I'm okay...Doris was a good old stick actually. She wasn't an out and out alcoholic...though she liked her Gin. She was more a bag-lady...pushed a shopping trolley around the place. You know, one of those people that was there but no-one noticed them. She had had a rough time. Quite intelligent. By all accounts, pretty well off. Her two worthless kids bled her dry...she snapped. Went a little crazy, I think...Just walked out of something like a mansion to live on the street. She always said that if they wanted it that bad enough, then they could have the lot. Never saw them again. They didn't bother to chase her up. Never even reported her as a Missing Person. Sad, eh?"

We walked towards the mouth of the lane and the main arterial ring road. Wharf Road that even on a Sunday morning was heavy with traffic.

"She was quite clean compared to a lot of them. Used to go up to the Salvos in Surrey Hills

twice a week. Have a shower. A change of clean clothes. A decent meal. But that place under the stairs was her place. Used to remind her of her home. Water views, she used to say." I chuckled at the recollection. Looked over at the bay, Woolloomooloo and its finger wharf now accommodating a raft of rich people.

"Quiet. Yeah....she used to give me information for a couple quid. A few bucks. Some of it useful. A lot of it not. The son went to prison for distribution and selling. Had a commercial amount of 'weed' found in the boot of his car...he always reckoned that he knew nothing about it. People don't realise how easy it is to pop a trunk! The daughter, she did time for uttering false cheques. Small time fraud. Complained bitterly about her innocence...didn't do her no good neither. I used to be able to copy every one of my teachers' signatures..."

I shook my head. Gave a sort of laugh, though it ended in a choking sort of way.

"They'd both be out by now. I should chase them up. Tell them about their mother passing. Peacefully, like."

I stopped for some moments trying to remember the events.

"I never told Doris. About her kids' bad fortune. I doubt that it mattered either way to her any more what those two louses got up to.... We operated down here...around about...the undercover Narc boys...huh...here's the Pub. Jeez, been done up a bit since I last held up the Bar. Narcs used to have a surveillance location up on the top floor for quite some time. The sailors, the Navy Boys, they had a good thing going. Used to bring in drugs from their overseas ports of call and sell them here. Small time stuff...nothing major like tonnes of the stuff. At the Pub. In the lane. I was a bit of a regular for a time...not worrying about the Navy boys so much as the guys who bought off them. They used to cut it down, make ten times as much as they bought it for...on the streets. They were the real parasites...putting shit into their tabs...Look at that will ya..."

I pointed to a sandwich board still out on the footpath.

"\$17.50 for a bloody Hamburger. That's daylight robbery!"

"You get chips and a side salad dish and a Cleanskin bottle of Red for that too. That's not bad. That'd keep you going most of the night. I doubt that I could get through it!" Mar countered.

"I guess...yeah...maybe I'll come down here one night for old times' sake...maybe there could be a few faces that would still be recognisable from the old days...I wonder if Narcs still has a permanent booking upstairs...I doubt it, looking at all those camera locations...it's worse than a bloody bank...either that or they're all decoy bubbles!"

We hailed down a Cab and headed back up around to The Strip to collect our Unmarked.

It was still within the perimeter of Crime tape.
Unmarked and still in one piece!

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I was resting my head back against the head rest. My eyes closed. Mar had started the engine. The A/C on, though it wasn't that hot.

She was a city girl after all.

I must have dozed off as the sound and motion of the Unmarked not occurring, slowly bought me out of my slumber.

I looked about bleary-eyed.

"What are we doing back here? At the Pub. Christ! It used to be an early opener with blood on the floor by 8. In the morning! It's not even open yet and its almost 10. Gone all upmarket on me. Yupsville. What're we doing here, Mar?"

"I been thinking. Mulling over what Santa said. And what you and I have been talking about."

She opened the door. Went to swivel out. Thought better of it. Settled back into the driver's seat. Closed the door again. Started up the motor. Turned on the A/C. Kept the car in 'Park'.

"You OK. You sure you know what you're doing? I have my doubts, Mar!" I remarked. A grin on my face.

She glanced over at me. An icy look that I have come to admire and love.

"Bugger off, Joe Lind. Just watch this woman work, keep your gob closed and learn. You may become a better investigator for it."

"Poo, to you to!" That sounded childish, even to me.

She said as much also. Shaking her head, uttering quietly what did she do to ever deserve this cretin.

She scrolled through the internal Police Directory on the Car computer. Pressed a number.

"Police, Stolen Vehicle Impoundment Lot. Sergeant Winkle. How can I help?" The high-pitched voice loud over the speaker phone.

"Squeak? How are you?" Mar replied.

The conversation then drifted along as a 'long time no hear' kind of conversation with excuses and apologies not heart-felt. One could tell. How both missed the presence of 'Bull' Winkle, Marge's old partner and 'Squeak' Winkle's Uncle. They had not crossed paths since Bull's funeral.

That was some years back now.

Eventually the niceties scaled down.

"OK...." Squeak said. "This ain't a catch-up kinda call. How can I help you, Marge?"

"A 4WD. Possibly dark coloured. More than likely a LWB Nissan Patrol. Possibly trayed into your yard last week. Later than last week-end in any case. More than likely mid-week. Another one in similar circumstances, a week, possibly longer, weeks before that. Both trayed from Mountbatten near The Strip. What's the odds?"

"Hang on...." Came the reply.

A sound of a keyboard hit with sufficient force to kill the bloody thing.

"Yep...you some sort of Channeller? Fortune Teller? Medium or something?"

A laugh at his own joke that many a woman could relate to. More feminine than masculine.

"Just as you say. One came in last Wednesday. Another two weeks previously. Abandoned at the same spot as you say. Mountbatten up near the dead-end part. No damage. Another, a week before that...close on a month ago."

"The last one...the one last Wednesday, did it have false plates. Should they have been JET 7275? To comply with the VIN number?"

"You're good, Marge. The vehicle reported stolen a week prior to us getting it. From the Warringah Mall Shopping Centre. By its Owner. One Jarryd Eric Thornton. Pittwater Road, Manly Vale. Coming by later this afternoon to pick it up. We've put temporary plates on it. He'll have to organise another set through the Motor Registry...."

"Hold it Squeak. Impound it. Isolate it. Lock it up and don't touch any surface. We're pretty sure that it could be of value to an ongoing murder investigation. Up on The Strip. Early this morning. Can you get it trayed to the Forensics Workshop and Vehicle Pound? A sap..."

"This morning's riot you mean? But it was here all the time. What are you trying to pull, Marge?"

"Squeak...listen. The hit was professional. We're convinced that there were several 'dry runs', one of which involved the vehicle that I want you to transport over to the Forensic Vehicle Inspection Team. The vehicle used early this morning reduced to a burnt out can, no more than 10 minutes after the hit. No trace. Nothing. I'll guarantee that the number plates on the one in your Pound are off this burnt-out hulk and vice versa. A Rego check by a passing Police Car would not have raised any queries as both vehicles are the same vehicle type, colour, etcetera. We're hoping, no, I'm betting, that with the 'dry run' vehicle, they left something behind that will help to identify them...you want my authorisation codes?"

"Yeah....But I thought the GRC Group were taking over the case? You know, the whole Case."

"They are. But we're working with them until Wednesday when we turn everything over to them...COB Wednesday. Can you tray that vehicle for me...as quick as you can? I'll let Forensics know it's on its way. OK, Squeak?"

"For you Marge, anything. I don't think the registered Owner will be happy about a further delay though... Don't wait so long between chats, OK?"

The phone call ended.

"C'mon, Mar!!!" I exclaimed. "You'll have us crutch deep in poo..."

She held up her hand to stop my tirade.

Dialled another number, identified herself, gave the authorisation code, Case Number, and the Murder Squad Case authorisation code, informing who-ever that a 4WD vehicle would soon arrive at the Forensic Workshop. A full trace. Inside and outside. The registered owner approached for exemplar DNA samples and finger prints. All other trace taken from the vehicle passed through the relevant national data bases. High Emergency Priority as it may have implications to the gun battle, deaths, and riot conditions early this morning up on The Strip.

She ended the call, turned to me, gave me her most patronising smile, and as though talking to a slight imbecile, informed me that we should perhaps go and talk to the Manager and Owner of the Pub across the street to view their video replays especially of a period between 12 midnight to just past Half past Two this morning. OK?

As she swivelled from the Unmarked, she spoke over her shoulder to me.

"Motor bikes. They used motor bikes. That is what we're looking for. Two with pillion riders or three or four with one pillion passenger or all single riders, I'll bet a shout for Dinner to-night, on it."

With that, she strode across the street.
I caught up with her before we had stepped up onto the footpath.

I swung her around.

"Mar, hold it. Just hold on. I understand the mind-set. The simple logic that got you to this point. I've no doubt on its plausibility. Its veracity and I'll go with you on that...I believe that you're on the right track...but...that's not the problem, Mar. Remember with the Billy Wilkes murder case? We almost got ourselves into deep shit. It was Abbey who handed us the shovel. We cannot, so soon after that episode, do the same thing. We're ordered off this case. It's not the Murder Squad's priority or responsibility..."

"Joe...read between the lines. Abbey gave us until COB on Wednesday to hand over all our paperwork on this case."

We were standing just off the middle of the lane way, toe to toe. Looking for all the world like a quarrelling, married couple.

"He was quite explicit on that point, Joe." She continued. Jabbing her finger towards my chest.

"You touch me with that little bloody finger of yours once more and I'll hit you with an assault charge, Huey!"

"Huey!?"

She turned her head to the side. Cracked a smile. A genuine smile.

"Now that would really enhance your reputation within the Force, now wouldn't it? Reporting your partner for assault because she hit you in the chest with her little finger...did it hurt, big boy? Huh? Have you got a bruise from it? Huh?" She said between little giggles.

We both couldn't help but laugh.

"Where in fuck did you come up with Huey...c'mon Joe...I'm just as worried for your skin as mine...but Abbey knew what we would do until then...chase out what-ever we could. Make the GRC boys look like amateurs again...No... arrh...that's not right. He's not after the GRC guys, just that dickhead Deputy Commissioner. I reckon that the bad feeling may go back to around Abbey's 6-month sabbatical a year or two ago...Come on, Joe. Abbey is playing a little bit dirty. We have the rest of to-day, then three more days to wrap this up or at least show the GRC guys how much better we are to them..."

"You're reading too much into it, Mar. I didn't hear any such thing...and besides, there may come a day when Abbey can't keep us out of the firing line. For that matter, he'll be long gone with our career still requiring another 20 years before our retirement date...we keep

this up and we ain't going to make that date. Mark my words. People in power have long memories. That is one of their strengths..."

I may as well have kept quiet. She totally ignored my wise words. Almost speaking over the top of me.

"COB Wednesday. He stressed that. Under his signature. He stressed that. Have you ever heard him say those things before? Give that type of instruction before. Take time off in lieu? We extended our shift by what? Less than twelve hours...yet he is telling us that we are not to go into the office to clean up all the paperwork on the case until Wednesday. COB Wednesday. That's three days off for a 12-hour extension of our working day...c'mon, he knew exactly what he was doing. Remember, every-one else, he said, was going back to the office or going home...but us...what did he say to us?"

"Mar, if you are right, give him a tingle. Now. Before we take another step. Lay it all out for him. OK?"

She gave me a look that could kill. I reckon that I may have called her bluff. Got her to see reason before too much damage was done.

Instead, she heaved a sigh and strode back to our Unmarked with an angry look on her face. Flung open the door. Slumped down in the seat and had dialled in Abbey's Office phone number before I had even opened the passenger door.

Abbey answered.

She laid it out.

All of it.

The why's and wherefores.

Where we were at. What had transpired up to this point.

What we thought and what we intended to do.

The transfer of the 4WD. The Forensic search request. Explaining why we were outside the Pub wanting to take possession of any useful video footage.

He did not interrupt her story until she had finished.

"How does Joe feel about it, Marge?"

"I'm cool." I called across into the car-phone speaker. I didn't want Mar standing under the shit bucket by herself.

"No, he's not, Abbey. He thinks we're sitting ourselves...and you...out on the proverbial limb...or as he correctly said...crutch deep in poo!"

"Mar. You are. But excellent work. I knew that I could rely on you. Both of you. Keep with it but make sure you keep a handle on it. Cross your 't's' and dot your 'i's'. Don't rile the GRC guys. If you come across them during your investigations, and they start to get toey, ask to hold a conference meeting where you can detail what you have just told me...make sure though, that I am present! I'll back you if you keep me across it. If you need any Orders or paperwork to back up any of your requests, give us a call. OK? Every step of the way keep me informed, OK?"

"Yeah Boss." We both said in unison. "Thanks Boss." Mar added.

"Remember what I said. COB on Wednesday, we turn it over."

I felt but for a moment as if we were but puppets on a string artfully controlled with Abbey having some sort of ulterior reason that was well outside our Detective level and influence.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"Sorry people. You're a bit early. We don't open until 11 for Lunch. The Chef's not even here yet!"

We flashed our ID cards.

He looked at them carefully. Gave me a twice over.

"We ever meet?" He asked, looking intently at me. "I never forget a face."

I shrugged my shoulders.

"I may have popped in here for a quiet one a couple of times. Late, if I had. A long time ago."

"Mmm...Yeah...OK..." He not convinced. "OK! Arrh...what's happened? Another roll. A bashing last night. It was a night for it, so it seems. The TV's full of it this morning. It's non-stop on the radio. 8, 9 killed. The joint still cordoned off, so I understand...bullets flying everywhere...that would've been scary, I bet. If it's about that, there's not much I can help you with, I'm afraid."

"What did you mean by another roll?" Mar asked pointedly.

The guy was hosing down the outdoor seating area. He shook his head. Turned off the hose. Wiped his hands down the side of his dirty coveralls. Shook our hands. Introduced himself.

"Stan Butler. I'm the 'live-in' Manager here. Have been since Cook weighed anchor hereabouts...so it seems, in any case."

A smile that showed a couple of gaps where teeth had been knocked out. That was my estimation in any case. He was tall with a slight stoop. Rangy in a word. Open, friendly face. Tired eyes. Thinning hair that stuck up all over the place as though he had just got out of bed. More than likely had! Long thin arms. Looked more like a distance runner than a 'spoiler'.

"Before we became all genteel and gentrified, this was an early opener and a blood bath. Now? We open late. Close late. Usually around 3, sometimes 4 in the morning. Depends on the crowd, the Bar Staff and how it's travelling on the night. A lot of the girls, not the slags or bogans if you get my drift, come down here for a quiet knock-off drink. The sailors come in on their way back to the Island. You work it out..."

Some of the rooms upstairs let on a short-term lease, was my guess.

"We had a series of bashings. Right ugly, with some shitty injuries. The Sailors. Pissed. Going back to Quarters. Hoods, tough young guys used to take them up the Dead-end lane up there and roll them. Not for a while, though there's been a couple lately. Installing the CCTV outside has restricted it a lot..."

"That's why we are here..."

"Was there a bashing last night? Some-one rolled? It wasn't a full moon, was it?" He cracked a gappy smile at his own joke.

We explained briefly what we were looking for. A 4WD. Several bikes maybe. There may be a connection with the incident up on The Strip early this morning.

"Oh? You think? OK. Yeah. No worries. The cameras should have picked that up OK. Come inside. You can view the multi-screen, split screen in my Office."

"How long do you keep the tapes?" I asked.

"A month usually. You want to view all the tapes going back that long? Christ! You'll be here for a month of Sundays!"

My heart stepped up a beat. Mar looked at me as though she was entering that zone. I expected a gasp very shortly!

We followed the guy into the Pub. Behind the Bar. Through a doorway into a hallway. A set of stairs led up to the next level at the end of the hall. He unlocked a door that led in under the stairs and beckoned us into his Office. The door clearly marked as the Cleaners Closet. It was under the staircase. We had to stoop as we walked under the steps. A Cleaners bucket. Mops and other assorted cleaning equipment to one side.

Another door.

He unlocked that door.

"Fools them all the time..." He said by way of explanation. "This room has never been touched. Stupid really, when you think about."

The room wasn't poky or small, which surprised me. It was quite large. Airy. There was a desk under a window. Hardly a thing on its surface. An 'In' and 'Out' tray. A 'Pending' tray that was partially full of what looked like Invoices. This guy was organised! A lounge with an assortment of brightly coloured pillows, several locked, steel 4-drawer filing cabinets, several file books on top, a big old safe securely bolted to the floor that Fort Knox would be envious of, another desk with a large DVD filing system bolted to the wall above. Above that, three flat TV screens.

An impressive, private area, I thought to myself.

"No... we won't need to view all the tapes." Mar answered his question. "We only want to view a very small window of time...Just last night from say midnight until 2:30 AM. The same for that time last week. The Saturday night. Ditto..." She turned and looked at me. "When did the Sergeant say that other 4WD was trayed into the Stolen Vehicle Impoundment Lot? Three weeks ago? Or two weeks ago?"

"Three weeks ago, from this morning." I answered, not sure of the time myself.

"OK. That'll be the twenty-eighth. To-day's date. The twenty-first and the seventh." Butler responded.

He peered up at the elaborate DVD holder for some time, pulling out three DVD's in their sleeves from the neatly arranged wall hung unit. The flat screen monitors, three of them, above this collection of DVDs. The DVD sleeves all clearly marked with the date. Previous dates cleared with highlighter across the figures.

This guy had a problem.

In our line of work, we always wished that more people were like him though!

Stan looked at us rather apologetically. "I'm anal retentive!" Smiled at his own joke. "That's what the missus says. Me? I say a borderline OCD sufferer. It pays to keep on top of the

paperwork. These DVD's? They've saved me heaps in insurance claims also. There's always a silly bugger wanting to give it a tug. Know what I mean?"

Again, that toothless smile. A bit of a laugh.

He popped one DVD into the player and fast-forwarded to the time.

"Just press the fast forward twice for 2X, thrice for 4X. four times for 8X and so on up to 32 times fast. Press play if you want to bring it back to real time taken at 10 second shot intervals. The DVDs marked 'Outside Eating Area' will be the best. That's that pile." He indicated one vertical section of the DVD Holder.

"Or hopefully should be." He added. "They pick up the roadway as well, going up the lane towards the dead-end. One DVD for each 24-hour period. This is the Seventh...fifteen past midnight. That's a 4WD. A Toyota Landcruiser. Man... two Duke Panigale Superbikes and a Kawasaki ZX...these guys are into their bikes. This year's models too!"

"You know your bikes, man." I enviously remarked.

"Yeah. Love them, but I learnt the hard way. The city is no place for them. Pins in my ankle. My femur. Both arms. My left elbow and shoulder blade. My missus reckons that her wide arse she got from sitting on a Duke for too many years in her younger days. She's got a busted pelvis. Walks with a limp. We lost our first unborn because of some silly motorist who felt that bikes shouldn't be on the road but in a gutter instead. You never lose it though. You ride?" He turned to me.

"Yeah. Got a Duke myself. A 950. Though my boy reckons that he owns it now. I haven't had a ride on it for...bloody hell...nigh on for-ever. I know what you mean though. It gets in the blood!"

"Yeah, well...you should be retiring yourself and letting yer lad have the bike. The older yer get, the more brittle the bones get...and yer don't bounce like ya usta. Know what I mean?"

I nodded my head.

"I had been having the same conversation with myself for years now. Thinking of selling the bike on...it is almost vintage class! Should be able to get a bit for it... no....I'll keep it a while longer, as it's handy to have, just in case."

We both smiled.

"While you two boys talk the talk about your little toys, I've got the license plate of the 4WD and one of the bikes. Can we have a copy of that period...let's say just the two-hour window. And then can you put up the disc for last week?"

While this procedure unfolded, Mar rang Motor Vehicle Records. Wrote some squiggles down in her Case Note book.

"A rental, so you say? Lower North Shore. Brookvale. You don't have a number by any chance?"

She repeated back the number.

"Thanks. That's great! Thanks again."

She pocketed her mobile.

A smile that the Cheshire cat would be proud of, crossed her dial.

We watched the screen jitter-bug forward. This time it was the Nissan Patrol Long Wheel base 4WD destined to be burnt to a cinder. Two of the latest Honda street bikes and a Suzuki.

"A little screamer." Stan muttered as he watched the bikes head up into the Cul-de-sac followed shortly after by the Nissan.

"Christ! They change their bikes more'n I change my underdaks..."

"Them's the same guys, you reckon?"

"Yeah. I'll bet the Pub on it. See the way the lead guy sits on that bike. Like when he was on the Kawasaki. The other guy, he's a little unsure on a bike. Possibly hasn't ridden for very long. The last guy's OK too. They seem to shepherd the middle guy a bit."

When I re-ran the tapes, I could see what he was talking about.

"Stolen?" I asked no-one in particular.

"Nah... they're brand new bikes. This year's models. I'll bet they're from one of those Bike hire places. You can hire them for an hour, a day, a week-end. And it's made easier if you kinda drop that ya interested in buying one perhaps. Just taking a bike for a test run for the week-end...I'd love to do that just one more time...the missus would kill me though...even if she heard me suggest it!"

He laughed.

"You need to provide ID. Have that checked out as genuine, don't you?" Mar chimed in. It really wasn't a question, more a statement. Her voice an octave higher. It climbed when she got excited or could smell the prey.

We replayed the scene from early this morning with the camera even capturing the fire-ball as it seemed to climb up the cliff-face. The bikes had only just disappeared out of the camera range onto the main road. Wharf Road was bumper to bumper at that time of night. We couldn't get the number plates of the bikes on both those occasions but felt that Forensics could enhance the images to be able to obtain partials at least.

That would help enormously.

We gave the OCD effected Stanley Butler a signed piece of paper detailing the times, dates, and number of copies that he gave us, knowing that this would be filed and not forgotten for as long as he lived.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

We sat in the car for some moments, really thinking of nothing.

The motor on.

The A/C turned up high. Ridding the car of the built-up heat.

Mar booted up the car computer getting into the Stolen Vehicle Impoundment Lot's records again. What on earth did we do before the Unmarks looked like a travelling Office.

With a handful of aerials that made Truckies envious.

The only thing missing was the mini-skirted, blonde Receptionist in a low-cut dress and several desks!

She bought up the Toyota Landcruiser's details.

It had been trayed into the Lot three days after the incident captured on video. It reported stolen the week before. On a Friday night in one of the streets surrounding Brookvale Oval. The Sea Eagles were playing a home game.

The Owner of the vehicle was Brendan Julian Bainbridge of an address in Seaforth.

Obviously, a rabid Sea Eagles supporter.

Obviously with no brains! To be a Sea Eagles fan required such a situation!

After printing out that information, she pulled up the Yellow Pages for Motor Bike Rental Hiring Firms.

In particular, firms situated around Brookvale, Manly Vale up to DeeWhy.

Two caught her attention. One corresponded with the firm that Motor Vehicle Records had supplied to her.

"They live close by. In the area." She muttered to herself.

"Looks like it, for sure. A bit sloppy though, after we were impressed with the way they undertook the hit." I sleepily added.

Mar didn't reply, just nodded her head in agreement.

"That was their forte. Organising that type of operation. The actual shoot. Getting a handle around the details preceding the event, the planning involved in the preliminaries, that's a bit amateurish...but then even the brightest hood is not as bright as he thinks he is...that's a given in our line of work, eh?"

Through all this, I had my head back against the head-rest. Drifting into and out of a light slumber. Only vaguely taking note of what she was doing. Saying. When she was like this, with that look on her face, I let her run.

You were never too sure where it would lead.

What would eventuate.

But it usually bought results.

By the time that she turned the Unmarked onto Wharf Road to head through the east-west City tunnel towards the Office, she had already identified the Outlet that had hired three bikes to a group of friends who were trialling the bikes with intention of purchase. And yes, they had indeed tried out a couple of Ducati and a Kawasaki bike on a week-end prior to this, so the helpful Sales-person offered. Only too willing to help the Police. In fact, they were due to return the three bikes no later than around 4 this afternoon. They had hinted at a purchase.

The local Area Command was informed of the situation.

The SWAT team bought up to speed before we had even crossed the Anzac Bridge.

They'd take it from here.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

We sped back to the Office in Parramatta, dropping off the DVD copies with instructions to identify the number plates of all the vehicles, especially the Motor Bikes in the time frames detailed. An urgent order with the Crime Scene Authorisation code of the multiple murders of that morning to get the job at the highest priority level.

We then went via Abbey's office to fill him in.

He was in a meeting with the hierarchy on this morning's incident and how the DC should approach the Media.

We left a message on his desk and headed towards Brookvale.

The largest Motor Bike Retail outlet was located there.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"Harold Arthur Branes. Pronounced brains? Also, known as Harry 'Scatter' Branes. Do you know why you have been kept overnight?"

"Yeah. To let you two, go home and get some sleep." No deviation. A dead voice. A Bushie by all accounts. "Or perhaps you thought that you could provide better accommodation for me...you didn't!" Deadpan.

He had several addresses.

One out of Broken Hill.

Another in Lightning Ridge.

A third in Cobar.

"Were you read your rights? Were you informed why you have been arrested?"

"Absolute bollocks. Utter BS...."

"Where were you between the hours of midnight Saturday night last and 3 O'clock AM on the following Sunday morning? 21 January. You do remember, don't you? It was only a day

ago, my friend."

"Asleep in bed, at my mate's joint."

"Witnesses?"

"Me mate, 'Skinny' Bridges. Helmut Pallus. Me ex. Suzanne Grisholme and Stan. Well, hopefully. I was asleep so I can only assume they seen me."

"Is that Peter Stanley Talbot of 18 Tascott Drive Brookvale Heights? His place?"

"Yep. If'n ya already know that, why ask me the question?"

It was all about tempo. That and continually having the guy off-balance. Out of his comfort zone...but friendly like at the same time. Mar was one of the best that I had seen in that regard but Peta Daniels, another female D2 in the Office, had the game sown up. She was good to watch. Had the chatter, the innuendo, the questions from left field and the correct order and tone down pat. Beautiful to watch.

"Three witnesses say that you, along with three others on motor bikes, with you driving a stolen 4WD with incorrect number plates attached, left those premises on or about 11:00-11:15 PM on the Saturday night. Returned home without the 4WD around 3 O'clock the next morning. You a pillion passenger on one of the bikes. Anything to say about that?"

"Utter BS..."

Yeah, well...Mar silently agreed with him. She just put that in there to try and rattle the guy. To give him some indication on the depth of knowledge that we had. He looked at her with steely eyes.

He was going to be difficult to rattle, I thought to myself.

"The bikes and the motor vehicle were captured on Transport Surveillance cameras on The Spit Bridge at 11:45 PM. Heading south. On the Warringah Expressway going onto the Harbour Bridge at 12:10 AM. The automatic Toll Charge indicator has the registration plates photographed as none of the bikes or the 4WD registered. This on the Sunday morning. Entering Bishops Lane, Potts Point passing the Sailors Rest Hotel at 12:25 AM. The motor vehicle then driven out of Bishops Lane at 1:25AM, seen next at the Top of The Strip at 1:55AM. The vehicle video-taped by a Police surveillance unit turning into Mountbatten Avenue at 1:58 AM. At close to 2:22 AM, set on fire at the most northern extremity of the dead-end section of Mountbatten Avenue. Accelerant used to reduce the vehicle to a charred wreck. Anything to say about that?"

We hadn't secured all the footage from those cameras yet. The urgent request was in the system though, we confident that all these incidents would be captured on tape.

'Scatter' Branes wasn't to know that.

"Fucking no privacy here in the city. No wonder a man craves for the open spaces back of Bourke." Again, no inflection. No emotion in his voice or manner. Cool. Very cool. Either that, or a picnic short of a sandwich.

"Why are you here in the City, in any case?"

"To see me ex., Suzanne. We get along fine. Me annual holidays. We generally come down here to the city."

"Kids?"

"Nah. They just get in the way and cost money. It's easier and cheaper to buy a packet of condoms."

Not even a smile at his own joke. Deadpan.

"The whole episode was well planned. Like a military exercise. You were in Iraq?"

"If'n you already know, why ask?"

A nod of the head, his reply.

"You must answer the question Sir. For the audio recording..."

"Yeah...I was in Iraq with the Australia Defence Force Team..."

"Unfortunately, living out the back o' Bourke, no-one is watching you." I continued, wanting to keep the tempo, the rhythm going. "Here in the city, you forget to allow for a multitude of traffic cameras, private and public sector security cameras and a bloody lot of people watching your every move."

"I couldn't have been spotted, 'because I weren't there or where you say I was..."

I tossed two grainy and out of focus A4 photos across to him. One taken as he sat in the 4WD tootling towards the Harbour Bridge. The other taken at the top of The Strip. It was the only two that we had and we were lucky to have got them when we did. We were still waiting on others that would give us a direct route from Brookvale to the Harbour Bridge.

"Recognise yourself?"

"Must be my twin. Mum always says that there were two of me." He hardly glanced at the offered shots.

"What did you do in Iraq?" Mar asked quietly.

"Foot slogged mostly. I was always point."

"Good shot?"

"Reasonable, though not good enough for the SAS."

"You would have rubbed shoulders with members of the SAS while you were over there. Wouldn't you?"

"Suppose."

"Kept in contact with any of them?"

"Nah."

"What would you say about the fact that a great deal of GSR was found on your mate? Keith Bridges. With trace on you also?"

"Skinny? Gun Shot Residue? He's a kangaroo shooter. I'm his driver. Off-sider. Spotter. Skinner. We practically bath in gunshot residue. Have done all our lives."

"Bridges was SAS over there, wasn't he?"

"Coulda been. Don't know. He doesn't talk much about his time over there. Don't know."

"Why were you trying out all those different bikes? Weeks apart?"

"We were thinking about buying one for each of us."

"The type that you were trying out wouldn't be much use out on those back roads. Miles of corrugations. Bull dust..." I put in.

His head bounding from Mar to I as we took turns at questions.
A shrug of his shoulders. The first sign of an emotional response.

"In fact, you can't even ride a bike. That was why you drove the vehicle and was a pillion passenger out of there, after the shoot."

He looked passively at Mar.

It took some time for eye contact to be broken. Mar lost. The first time that I had seen that happen.

"Can I go now?"

"Nope. You are being charge with being an accessory before and after the fact in the homicide of nine people, attempted homicide of five others and grievous bodily harm to twenty-five others....and a list as long as your arm of other charges. You're not going anywhere."

We stood, opening the door to leave.

"I didn't shoot no-body." He said. This time with a bit more emotion.

"You'll never see those wide, open spaces again. You'll be in a 3 metre by 2 metre cell for the rest of your life..."

A sense of panic drifted across his face as we closed the door behind us.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"You knew 'Scatter' Branes from your Army days? In Iraq, together?"

We were still awaiting the Army records to come through to confirm the association.

"Yeah. He was the patrol's point guard, out in Indian country."

"He tells me that he's a better shot than you...."

"In his dreams. He's not bad...not half as good as me, though."

"Where does Helmut Pallus fit into the group? Was he in the Army with you?"

"Pally? Hell no! He's Suzanne's defacto. Been around for-ever."

"Doesn't Scatter come down to the city to see Suzanne? His ex? Nice and friendly like...wink, wink. Nudge, nudge?"

"Yeah...it's a bit queer, ain't it. None of them mind it. There's be threesomes at times. I'm not into that, but what-ever. If they don't mind it, then what can I say."

"Where does Peter Stanley Talbot fit into the group?"

"He owns the joint. Where Pally and Suzanne hole up. Live. Where we always set up digs when we are here in the City. He's Pally's sister's ex-husband. Pally's ex brother-in-law. He

was always a friend of Pally's, even before he married his sister. He was in the Army at one stage too, though we never ran across him. He helps me out when-ever. He's a good pig shooter. No nerves. He's a better shot than 'Scatter'. Bloody hell! Anybody's a better shot than Scatter will ever be!"

He laughed.

"And he was your point? Scatter?"

"That's the Army for you. The point guy had the best eyes. Was the best shot. That's what we always thought. We always thought that he was thought of as the most expendable one...that's why he was always on point...but he grew into the position. You could always rely on him, though at times you wondered if he had his mind on the job."

He shook his head at memories that only he could see.

This guy was obviously the leader.

The gel that kept the group together.

The one who gave the orders.

But he didn't mind a natter.

"How long you been down in the City?"

"Almost four weeks now. We'll be heading bush middle of this week. Had enough."

"Do much surfing while ya been down?"

"Yeah. Nearly every day. Helmut, Pally, he was born on a board. He's been trying to teach us. Hell, I nearly speared myself with the bloody thing the other day." He laughed at the memory.

"Don't you find the water a bit cold?"

"Nah. Not really. A darn sight warmer than the River Darling this time of year."

"All of you been going surfing nearly every day?"

"Yeah. Good fun."

"How do you explain the amount of GSR on you when we tested you yesterday?"

"Umm...." You could see it in his face. He had just fucked up. "Umm....I been shooting all

my life. Then the Army. Roo shooting...it's in my bloody pores..."

"It doesn't work that way...You know that as the shooter, you're looking at life. In a small cell where you see the sky during exercises for 90 minutes each day. A bloke like you.... who loves the wide-open spaces. The fresh air. Sleeping under the stars. That's going to bring you down something awful, don't you reckon?"

"Who's gunna look after me dogs. The best pointers and runters in the world. They'll miss me terribly. Who's gunna look after them."

"Dogs like that, they're one man dogs, aren't they? They won't go gladly to the idea that you're not around, I reckon. I had a Rhodesian Ridgeback like that. When I was down at the Police Academy for just 6 months, she went a bit crazy. They had to put her down. She was inconsolable about my absence. Do you reckon that your Roo dogs will be the same?"

I glanced over at Mar. She never had a bloody dog in her life! She scared shitless of dogs! Her eye-lids fluttered. She read my mind.

He didn't answer. His eyes welled up with tears. He brushed away the tears angrily with a shirt sleeve.

"Life...." He muttered.

We let the silence drag on.

"Me dogs. Ya can't do that to 'em. Any way they can come in here with me?"

We solemnly, slowly shook our heads. Expressed our sorrow, showing empathy for the plight of his dogs.

Marge let the moments slip by. Judging by experience when the guy would divulge more information. His concern over his dogs' futures was the litmus.

"Why the hit?"

He shook his head. Lent backwards. Looked up at the ceiling. Blinking away the tears.

"She didn't say."

"She? Who's she?"

"Don't know. She contacted me twice. On my mobile. Said she heard that I was a good shot. Needed some bread 'cause it had been a bad season. It had and yeah, I could do with some extra coin.... always, no matter whether it'd been a good season or not. I told her that."

"How much?"

"Sixty. Ninety if I could get the two of them. 45 down. The rest on satisfactory completion."

"Ninety thousand?" I exclaimed. "That is big money for two lives...well nine really. That's top dollar. A hit is usually around twenty. A bit more if the subject is well-known, security conscious or connected, if you know what I mean. Ninety big ones. Money for jam really, don't you think? How was the deposit made?"

"An envelope just dropped off on the front veranda of Peter's place. Must have been late, I reckon. Same manner when the contract completed. In the mail box. We're waiting for it. Then we'll be off. Back bush."

"Do you reckon that she 's gunna pay the balance?"

"Huh....why wouldn't she. We did the job...I'm not stupid.... that's why I wanted the 45 straight up. It was still good money. She said that I could just take off with it and not adhere to the contract. I told her that she had it over me.... she could always get to me...she knew my mobile number. I didn't have a clue who she was. She thought about that and then agreed with me. 45 large. Even if she didn't come through with the rest, we were still 45 richer!"

"How was it going to be divvied up between the lot of you?"

"Um...I was taking 25 as I was the leader. The Shooter. The other 20 was to be divided equally between Stan, Pally, Scatter and Suzanne..."

"That's only 5 each for the rest of them...with you getting 25...a bit rich don't you think?"

"Nah. Not really. All the expenses came out of my 25. I knocked off the 4WDs. When the other 45 came through, that was to be divided equally between the five of us. 9 large each. That takes their share each up to 14 thou..."

"And yours to 34 less expenses.... not bad for a couple of hours' work." Mar stated.

"Coupla hours work be buggered! We did three practise runs. Watched the habits of the two night after night, but yeah...beats shooting Roos for a season. Or two. But we'd still do it. Love it out there. The City is for idiots."

He seemed unable to get his head around being nabbed.

Done and dusted.

That he wasn't going anywhere in a hurry for the next 25 years.

"How'd she know about you?"

"I asked her that. We were on a TV show about a year back. Roo Shooting. On the ABC...."

There was a knock on the door.

Peta Daniels stuck her head in.

Gestured me outside.

I nodded at Mar.

Excused myself for the sake of the recording and slipped quickly out of the room. A young uniform Constable slipped in at my departure to keep company with Mar.

"Yeah, Peta?"

"The raid on the house that they all shared? Proved fruitful. A couple of wads of 100 \$100 notes found at the place in Brookvale Heights? New notes. In a batch given to one Greta Lavska...Marcus Illack's older, married sister...she received the crisp new bills over the counter from the CBA Lakemba Branch on June 3, 2010. Bank records clearly indicate that one Greta Lavska was the rightful recipient. Another wad traced as an over the counter transaction of replacement old for new to one Greta Lavska at the Westpac Branch in Burwood on September 25, 2012. Confirming signatures are on their way, as we speak."

I let out a low whistle.

"There was some rumour when Nick Illack was shot, that it was an inside job. Remember that?"

"Yeah. Conspiracy theorists abounded. Don't you love this penchant for certain criminals to have some type of addiction for crisp, new bank notes! She and her sister raided on numerous occasions for nil result...or very little. I wonder where she stores the stuff?"

"In one of those long-term storage units more than likely. Nearby. They lack any sort of real imagination that lot...what do you want to do?"

"We better see Abbey before we do anything."

Holy shit, I thought to myself.

Holy shit!

Mar will be gobsmacked over this development!

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Greta Lavska lived in a two-storey mansion crammed onto a standard quarter acre block. Her sister had lived next door in a similar dwelling for many years before selling up and buying a mansion on acreage out Dural way.

Abbey accompanied Mar and I along with Peta Daniels and several Uniforms from the Local Area Command.

The door chimes rang a Vivaldi tune. Very chic!

The door swung open wide.

"Yes?"

Greta Lavska dressed in upmarket expensive clothes. She stood in the middle of the double door opening allowing the entire neighbourhood to see her from behind their curtain windows, I thought to myself.

She was on her way out for a day of shopping, so it looked.

Butter wouldn't melt in her mouth, so it would appear.

That is until she started yelling at the top of her voice after realising that we were cops and had a Court Order to search her house and take her in for questioning!

"Coppers! Haven't you got anything better to do than annoy law abiding citizens?"

"Mrs. Lavska? Missus Greta Lavska? Are you the older sister of Marcus Illack who was gunned down last Sunday morning at Kings Cross?"

Abbey identified himself. Gave her an eye full of his warrant card.

"You know who the fuck I am without asking the question. Otherwise you're a pack of dumb bastards...."

"Missus Lavska, we would like you accompany us to the station. We are hoping that you may be able to help in our enquiries into the recent shooting death of Marcus Illack and his associate Omart Kavcar...your younger brother and your cousin."

"Fuck off, coppers. I know my rights..."

"As you are not willing to accompany us on your own volition, Missus Greta Lavska, you are under arrest for conspiring to murder one Marcus Illack and Omart Kavcar and for homicide murder after the fact of seven other persons. Anything you may say....."

The rest drowned out by an endless display of how to string every known expletive in the book into a reasonable series of sentences.

I was bloody-well impressed!

She was swung around and cuffed before she could slam her front door.

No-one else was at home at that early hour in the over-large dwelling.

I was sure that several close neighbours came out to their front gates to sticky-beak at the scene unfolding.

As we drove away, there appeared to be several who actually clapped!

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

At 10 AM on the following day, Wednesday morning, Missus Greta Lavska was formerly charged with conspiring to murder her younger brother and her cousin and with knowingly, after the fact, being responsible for the homicide murders of seven other persons and knowingly, after the fact, of maliciously injuring another ten persons with intent to murder.

All the inhabitants taken from Number 18 Tascott Drive, Brookvale Heights charged with a string of offences commencing with multiple homicide down to discharging an illegal fire-arm in a Public place and causing affray. And knowingly being involved, before and after the fact, of the homicides.

The Deputy Commissioner Major and Gang Related Crimes headed a media conference where the details of the arrests were broadcast.

He seemed very pleased with himself.

More so as this difficult case wrapped up in an extremely short period of time where the investigating Officers worked tirelessly for over 36 hours straight.

The pride, the enthusiasm and the expertise of the Force and every member who aided in the investigation amply displayed.

What the hierarchy feared the most after this episode was the after-effects of this void being

left by the disassembly of the entire Crime family. Every two-bit outfit would now be willing to flex their muscles and possibly spray bullets about for a portion of the business now left in a vacuum. The DC asked for calm and reason to reign supreme, knowing full well that his plea would be totally ignored.

There was no such thing as a white flag in the criminal world.

The stakes were too high. The profit margins too high to ignore.

Some-one in the media throng asked the DC whether it was true that in fact, members of the Murder Squad were responsible for cracking the case and arresting all the suspects involved.

The question somewhat rattled the Deputy Commissioner, and when pressed, admitted that it was true that Murder Squad Officers had broken the case.

The same person then asked whether the credentials and professionalism of the GRC team was as exemplary as stated, as the case involving the wrongful murder of one William 'Billy' Wilkes only months previously had also been solved by the same Murder Squad team while members of the GRC Team were running around like chooks with their heads chopped off, trying to climb up the wrong tree.

The Deputy Commissioner Major and Gang Related Crimes seemed to ignore the question entirely although his well-rehearsed spiel was temporarily effected.

Abbey turned off the small flat screen TV in his office that had a direct channel feed into the Police HQ Media Conference Room.

A smile split his face.

A warm chuckle followed.
He shook hands with me.

Hugged Marge and Peta.

Clicked glasses filled with ice cold beer, even though alcohol in any form not permitted on any of the floors of the Parramatta Police Building.

"Oh, how I enjoyed that. Very much enjoyed that! I know that won't be included in the five second sound byte on the evening News to-night but who cares...I thoroughly enjoyed that. We owe that Reporter big time.... did you know that she went to Uni with my son? They were an item for about 18 months. You didn't know that, did you?"

A belly laugh erupted from him.

I had never known Abbey to be a political person.

In some ways, he wasn't, but when push came to shove, he was one of the best!

pcb

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