

SMOKING KILLS

A MURDER SQUAD DETECTIVE JOSEPH LIND STORY



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This is the 69th story concerning Detective Joseph Lind of the Murder Squad: his homicide cases and his partners...some of many years, others but weeks or months duration.

Again he is mentoring two young female Officers. Detective-in-Training Catalina 'Tally' Evans who impressed all her Tutors at the Police Academy and Detective 2 Angelica 'Angie' De Longo who was an adult-in-training Detective transferring from White Collar Crime...she required more reasons to remain a copper than what White Collar Crime gave her.

There was little activity at this time causing many of the Detective Teams to transfer to other areas of the Force with remaining partners given 'Cold Cases' to investigate. Detective Lind was handed a Case which was one of the first he shared with his then Boss Senior Detective Inspector John Church aka 'Abbey'. For some reason the man could see something genuine in Joe Lind. He had over the years given his Boss great satisfaction for his initial suspicion that the young man would make an excellent Murder Dee...one day. The pair becoming more than a boss and subordinate; more of a father figure and son.

This first Case Detective Lind did not remember with fond memories...it was his first 'failure to solve' Homicide case!

Precis:

The importation of illegal cigarettes is approaching epidemic proportions especially in the eastern States of Australia in Victoria and New South Wales...the most populated States of Australia.

The Federal Government of Australia in nineteen eighty-three in their wisdom passed legislation to increase the retail excise tax twice a year in line with the CPI increase for all tobacco products and some imported liquor brands. This was supposedly going to discourage smokers from smoking

more and as the retail price increased, the numbers of habitual smokers would decrease.

The Government of the time could not have known the ‘head-ache’ they were creating by passing this legislation. Australia now some forty years later has the highest price per packet of cigarettes in the entire world. The situation they achieved was the escalating gap between the retail price of tobacco products and the price of the illegally imported tobacco products mainly shipped in from mainland China. The price differential will continue to rise which will only enhance the profit margin of the ‘under-the-counter’ illegal cigarettes causing this black market system to control the sale of all tobacco products in NSW. This will ensure more criminal elements endeavour to heavy-handedly bully their way into the trade. National and international.

As more bodies pile up Detective Lind and his two young partners find themselves overwhelmed with who are the guilty parties as it would appear every known criminal ‘family’ in Australia and some from overseas are involved in this illegal practise.

Most of the Law Enforcement Agencies in Australia are struggling with the number of illegal drugs swamping this country but with this new avenue of contraband, those Agencies are more than stretched...is that an intended outcome by those watching and being protected by the Chinese Communist Party? And is it a sign that certain Chinese Communist Government Officials are ‘lining their pockets’?

Whatever, it is the people of Australia who are suffering the loss of billions of dollars of tax revenue by the importation of these contraband products. Does the normal ‘smoker’ on the street give a damn?

No! He is more interested in saving a quid when purchasing his smokes and the death or two of foreign named citizens means little to him...so why do the cops care?

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A MURDER SQUAD DETECTIVE JOSEPH LIND STORY

WITH DETECTIVE-IN-TRAINING CATALINA ‘TALLY’ EVANS

and

DETECTIVE TWO ANGELICA ‘ANGIE’ DE LONGO

as his young protégés and partners.

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CHAPTER ONE

I casually swiped at a few flies who had decided that the corners of my mouth were hiding a delectable feast of some sort! Here it was in the middle of Winter in the New England High Country when flies should not be so prevalent...unless it was cattle country. I didn't have a clue either way to it being cattle country or not but to my way of thinking it was too cold for me, so flies had to be wearing heated thermalwear under their puffer jackets!

Unfortunately, I wasn't! From my waist down I had to be suffering from frost bite...either that or the blood flow had iced up from the waist down...and I could be expected to suffer the humiliation of being sliced in half to prevent the frostbite from spreading further up my torso.

I pointed down off the shoulder of the road. The bottom of the ditch was some one point five metres below the road surface. I looked around me to make sure I was right...yep, those two tall Gums were still beautiful noble trees, another closer to the road having long ago died but failing in its duty to fall across the road or across the nearby boundary fence. Closer to our position but on the other side of the property line, a grove of healthy gum stood tall where cattle snoozed out of the summer heat...when it was summer, and you could then complain about the heat...not the cold!

“That's where his body was found. At seven-thirty on a cloudy, grey morning. June ten, Nineteen Ninety-four...by a local Cockie...heading into town. He lost his breakfast but managed to phone it into the local Armidale cops”.

“That's almost thirty years to the day!” My young partner murmured, rugged up to the eyeballs in two puffer-jackets and a woollen beanie with an enormous pom-pom on top pulled well over her forehead. Only young females could get away with the outfit.

She scratched her chin unaware of my thoughts.

“Why was the body transported out here some sixty kilometres south of Armidale on a secondary dirt road to be dumped in plain sight. Anyone driving past would be able to see the body immediately...what!? They were in too much of a hurry to bury the body...never to be discovered. Is this dirt road considered a rarely used route only used by the occasional Cockie heading into town?”.

I had been thinking the same thing.

“Mmm...the case went cold straight away”. I murmured, still embarrassed that it was my first ‘Unsolved’. “No identification on the victim. No reason why the victim was pummelled so badly his internal organs couldn’t take it...his face also disfigured to such an extent he could not be identified by visual means...it was some four weeks later that a photo-copied example of a Chinese Diplomatic Passport was passed from the AFP to the Murder Squad identifying our Vic as a Chinese National of some middle management importance. Lan Soo. DoB 15/08/1980. Age 44. Height 176 centimetres. Weight 81 kilos. Place of birth. Phuc Tow province. Employment. Diplomatic Corp specialising in overseas positions for Chinese Nationals and Students wishing to study at a University in Australia...his first time in the country according to his Passport”. I rubbed my hands together before burying them deep into my pants pockets. “Arrh...let’s get back into the car where we are at least warm with the motor ticking over”.

I settled into the front passenger seat as Tally executed a three point turn on the narrow dirt road to head back towards Armidale. I was unsure whether I should show her the on-site forensic photographs or not...what the heck, she needed to see them or similar sooner or later. I asked her to veer over to the shoulder of the dirt road and pull up. I lifted the Murder File from my briefcase and not confidently, handed it to her. I had no idea what her reaction to some of the more graphic on-site photographs would be.

“A bit graphic. A bit bloody. Not sure whether I should have shown you the Murder File on-site photographs or not...”

“No reason not to...” She replied as she flipped through the photographic evidence. “I ask again, why was his body transported and dumped out here?”

I shook my head. Pinched my nose. It was blocking up...a cold coming on I self-diagnosed. Ten to one I was wrong as my diagnostic skills on my health were so far out as to be non-believable.

Doctor Google I am not! A hypochondriac a distinct possibility the older I get...

“No idea...at a guess I reckon he was dying from the internal injuries he received...or was dead from the bashing he took...a little too enthusiastic on the part of our Perp. Perhaps it started out as a warning for the Asian guy to back off and got a little out of hand. The primary murder scene may have directly pointed to our Perp, and this was their way to throw us off the scent...I really don't know with that being an educated guess...but illegal Bikie Gang members were all over it according to the Forensic Pathologist who visited the site for some hours...he'd seen similar before in his travels”.

“As good as any conclusion I guess...I'll go along with it”. Tally mused as she read the Autopsy notes. “A right royal sadistic bastard who did this...”

I nodded.

“When the body was found and the media got hold of it, the man's colleagues high-tailed it back to China quick smart. Of course, we didn't know this until the Vic was identified and we were able to identify the man's colleagues. A twelve-man contingent from China supposedly to assess the suitability of the Armidale University's tutorials in Agricultural Science and Animal Husbandry for Chinese National students. An initial investigation failed to show how much that legation appraised the University's role in supplying those tutorials. As the gentlemen had flown back to China, we couldn't interview any of them...and the Chinese Embassy refused to comment taking the body without so much as a thank you. Those we did interview at the University, such as the Tutorial Professors who did interview the Chinese panel weren't impressed with the legation's questions and research into the subjects they were supposedly learned in. They appeared to be less than experienced in those two fields leaving us wondering what their real role was...”.

“So that brick wall has not been breached with no chance of advancement...” Tally concluded. “As long as those involved do not return to our shores”.

“Yep...and that is where it stands...has stood for those thirty-odd years. A cold case that will never thaw I’m afraid unless the Chinese Government becomes more co-operative...don’t bet your house on it though”. I pinched my nose. “The Boss at the time, Detective Sergeant John Church was also walking with me through the Case as it was one of my first since joining the Murder Squad...one of my failures...the first of a few...” I gave a slight smile and a cut-off harrumph more out of embarrassment as the list wasn’t anything to be proud of...I pacified myself by saying there wasn’t a Murder Dee worth his salt who didn’t have a couple of Unsolves. The longer he served in the Murder Squad the more he had...either by bad management, loose investigative skills, lack of forensic evidence, lack of any credible witnesses or plain bad luck!

CHAPTER TWO

“A shame what happened to that family last night...it was on the News last night”. Tally opened with this statement that meant little to me. We had a three and a half thousand-dollar flatscreen TV fixed professionally to the wall at home which was rarely on...not even the girls missed it if it wasn’t turned on.

“...and a good morning to you Tally...we hardly if ever have the TV on and I don’t listen to the car radio of a morning as I drive the Unmarked into work. What happened?” I should at least show a modicum of interest.

“That little Tobacconist? At the Harris Park shops near the Railway Station? Know it? It was ‘torched’ last night...well, early this morning. It’s in a line of four...five shops that all went up including an Indian Restaurant that was well known right around Sydney...you had to book at least two weeks in advance to get a table. Good food. Interesting menu. Happy, friendly staff. There’s two floors of small Home Units on top of all the shops. Most people made it out but a family of Indians I think they were, were trapped in their Unit. Ten of the same family perished...”

“Bloody Hell! The whole fucking family...shit! That’s terrible. Are they sure the Smoke Shop was the target?” I responded angrily. “These bastards who go around torching buildings should all be shot in my opinion, especially when their actions cause deaths like that! Was that family involved in the Smoke Mart business or the Restaurant?”

“Um...it wasn't mentioned either way”. Tally replied

“Yeah...well...rough justice but I bloody-well agree with you Poncho...well, that's what they're saying. CCTV coverage shows two persons tossing petrol onto the front of the shop...the Smoke Mart around three this morning...one almost got himself engulfed in flames. They should be checking local Hospitals and Burns Units for a patient who suffered burns to his arms and upper body”. Suggested Angie standing at my desk with both her hands around her coffee container.

“Bound to have happened sooner or later...this is what? The third fire-bombing of a Smoke Shop in Sydney this year...they've mostly been in the southwest suburbs. Out around the Campbelltown and Camden way. Illegal Bikie Gangs upset by another party opening Smoke Shops in opposition to them. They're flexing their muscles against an opposition they know little off...who got the case?”

“The Gang Related Crime Mob I think...they say the deaths were a peripheral result of an illegal act carried out by an illegal Sydney Bikie Gang...the shop had been operating for several years...successfully run by Indians all related to those who perished...a bad deal all round, I reckon”.

“Convenient...I'll bet you a lunch we end up with it after the coals have gone cold...that's usually the way”. Tally offered sarcastically. Not knowing either way as she was a recent recruit. A Detective-in-training who impressed several Tutors at the Academy with her quick brain and athletic skills. It was a done deal that she would find her way into the Murder Squad.

“McDonalds?”

“I was hoping for a little better than that. The last time I ate there I promised myself that would be the last time they got my business ...”

“Yeah”. I chuckled. “Mine too. I've never taken either one of you to my favourite Vietnamese Restaurant out Cabramatta way, have I? I must remedy that one of these days...or my favourite Chinese in Eastwood which is closer to the Office here...it can be a pleasant interlude to a bad morning...making for a brilliant afternoon. You never feel like returning to work with a full stomach that that Restaurant ensures you have”.

“Halley's Comet comes around every seventy...eighty years or so. I reckon I'll be waiting that long to warm a seat in either of those eating joints as a win on a bet with you...” Angie mused. A laugh to go with the stir.

“You never know”. I chuckled. “You never know”.

CHAPTER THREE

We were still on the Cold Case regime where to look busy was harder to do than being out there investigating warm, bloodied bodies. There was a hiatus in homicide murder cases...the reason? This situation came around regular-like in an almost cyclic pattern.

Moon cycles? Who's to know but any Murder Detective and cop will tell you there is a spike in crimes against persons, domestic violence numbers, and homicide cases when the full moon comes around...and the number of persons who go slightly silly increases also.

Tally and I spent an inordinate amount of time going over the investigative notes on the National Chinese male assault death for nil forward movement. Lan Soo would remain a Cold Case was my honest opinion, and I was wasting my time on a Case that would never resolve itself as we would never be able to interview any Chinese National involved. That angered me on several levels not the least was knowing the Case had us beat!

We were driving around just to waste time when Karl Webber our new Lead Clerk rang in on the Car-phone. I wondered how long it would be before the Squad floor 'wit' began calling him 'BBQ'. Soo 'Sue' Ping Loo was off on maternity leave for twelve months. She was almost six months gone and hadn't realised she was pregnant! I didn't think that was possible until my young partner claimed it was a common misread...I found that hard to believe especially after living through my Tellie's two pregnancies...I knew every day from inception that she was pregnant...she wanted it that bad!

“Joe? Where are you? I've got a Case that won't take much brain power to solve...just a Report to the Coroner is all...”

“How are you, Karl? I'm well, thanks for asking...how many coffees have you had so far this morning?” I replied caustically. He too would be staring at the four walls of the Office unable to escape...at least that was something we could do...driving around looking at suburbia with no journey's end in mind...what the heck, it was a nice day!

“Bored shitless if you must know, Detective Joe...a suburban house fire early this morning. Penhurst. Out around those semi-rural blocks of land of minimum size of five acres...which is just over 2 hectares so I’ve been told. The Forensic Fire Officers went in this morning. Found two bodies badly burnt...they think the fire was deliberately lit...leave you with it. I’ll SMS the address and the name of the Lead FFO on site across to you. Have a good one”.

Always cheerful. Always helpful, something in the ilk of our long-running, much loved Head Clerk ‘Hendo’ Henderson who had for years controlled the Murder Squad floor with an iron fist wrapped in kitten fur. Hendo had retired with big plans on what he was going to do in retirement. An extra-large Super package would ensure that he could live out those wishes. A cruise or two each year would make him happy. He had sold his house out Girraween way, building a Grannie Flat on the back of his son’s property in Pennant Hills. He collapsed and died six weeks after having colon and prostate cancer diagnosed some three years into his planned retirement...organising a round-the-world Cruise for him and his missus now forgotten.

His funeral was well attended by every Murder Dee and others besides. A swag of former Murder Squad Detectives who never looked healthier in retirement were also in attendance. We drank him out where one of the major talking points was Hendo and his quips...his bent sense of humour and his unwillingness to join us in the Basement Gym no matter how hard we tried...I doubted it would have made an ounce of difference...when your time is up...it’s up!

Webber lacked the backhanded comedy that Hendo had down to a tee. A way of being nice, with a comedic tinge edged with a hint of sarcasm.

I smiled as I remembered the old bloke. A tinge of sadness swelled over me...

We took our time arriving at the death scene. No lights or siren as the Forensic Fire Officers were more finicky than our Forensic Trace Units. They could scabble about a burnt-out house for days before broadcasting their findings...fire deliberately lit with an accelerant...that was about it!

This time however, there were two bodies...both entwined with each other in an eternal embrace. I would always say they knew their time was up and they were both shot as they lay together in bed. Both were male...that was about it.

We stopped at the Police tape that cordoned off the street at the first intersection...the only intersection...repeated at the next intersection some kilometres down the country road. We produced our ID Cards and signed into the On-site Personnel Register before

the tape was lifted to permit our entry. About halfway down the cordoned off section of street our progress was stopped by a Fire tender with its outrigger stabiliser arms extended which prevented any further advance.

“Boss? You hop out and I’ll reverse back to find a parking spot in the next street...or wherever”.

“Oh! You sure? I don’t think there is a next street. Is there? Okay...see you here in a while”.

I hopped out of our Unmarked and walked slowly to the figure lounging against the Fire Tender. The Leading Forensic Fire Officer whom I vaguely recognised.

“James? James Coburn? It’s been a while I reckon. Several years in fact...” I held out my hand.

“Detective Lind, isn’t it? Yeah...I’d say about ten years”. He turned to take my hand in a warm handshake. “That fire in North Parramatta where all those illegals were killed in that furniture manufacturing business run by a husband-and-wife Indian couple. I reckon they’d still be in prison...”

“Or shipped back to India...that was a bloody mess...I still see those charred remains occasionally that wake me in the middle of the night”.

“Yeah...well, me too if I want to be honest with ya. This property...the address...according to the mail in his letterbox, he is not that regular in emptying it...arrh...it’s owned by a Mister Douglas Bera...”

My heart skipped a beat, and I held my breath for some moments. I must have paled as Coburn turned to look at me.

“You okay?” He asked, concern wrinkling his brow. “Looks like you’ve seen a ghost”.

“Yeah...a name from my past. I haven’t thought of him for bloody hell...years. I guess he was my first snitch when I was flying solo undercover in my early twenties. He was only a low-grade snitch, but he was kept in beer money regular-like by my regular payouts...yeah...hah! Yeah...shit...I haven’t thought about him for ages. Shit! Not a good way to go for the old bloke...he would have been in his early to late seventies by now. Built like a brick shithouse...but yeah, he had a quick mind...a hell of a way to sign out...” I turned around several times not sure what I should do next...you never

think you're getting to an age where persons you know, famous people who you grew up, singers who you followed on the dance circuit way back, film stars who will never age and even extended family members are karking it around you...you think of your used-by date. Obtusely as though you don't believe your time is closing, but you know it is if you want to be honest with yourself.

For some reason I was upset by the knowledge of his death. Don't know why...maybe the sentimental factor of him being my first snitch. I don't know. I smiled to myself at some of the things we had done together...a real team that failed to nab anything of much value.

"Did he have form?"

"Hah! Yeah. A long list! My first nab...he was an enforcer with the Comancheros, the Rebels, the Mongols, the Tainted Angels, and the White Skulls. Worked free-lance for the right price...he was good at his job. Allegedly killed over a dozen punters which I have my doubts about...a suburban myth to my way of thinking as I knew the guy...and bashed twice that many to an inch of their lives...never got screwed for the murders though...it could have been a myth for all I know".

"...and he was your snitch! You keep him out of prison, huh?"

"Hell no...as I said he was good at his job...methodical, clean, and quick...but there was another side to him...hah...it was my first assignment and our intel had the business where he worked as the centre for the transportation of grass from the Coffs Harbour and Gold Coast Hinterland into Brisbane, Newcastle, and Sydney. Planned and arranged through that Boxing Gym in Redfern. I went once or twice to scope out the joint and gradually increased my patronage to twice a week. Began to spar with Doug Bera...or as he was known back then by his Passport name Dagma Berazowski. He was good and I learnt a lot about the art of boxing from him. On one occasion I put him on his arse which surprised both of us..." I shook my head, pursed my lips, and harrumphed at the foggy memory. A chill ran through me as I vividly remembered that time...no one did that to Doug Bera...no-one! Shit! I thought my days were well and truly numbered! Done before I had really begun...

I remembered that the flee mode kicked in but there was no way out. The entire Gym and its members who saw the incident stood transfixed and agog as Doug bounced back up on his feet. I had seen the efforts of his rage, and they weren't pretty. This feeling I had felt several times before and repeated several more times which caused me my 'meltdown' and discharge from any further undercover work. I spent twelve months

sitting at a desk like a stunned mullet before I was selected to join the Murder Squad...but that's another story.

I had stood stock still awaiting my final moments. Pummelled to an inch of my life by the famous Doug Bera could be my epitaph. Instead, he bounced back onto his feet and gave me the biggest bearhug, a smile a mile wide, a chuckle as he whispered in my ear *'Officer, that was a lucky one'*.

He'd had me pegged from the beginning and although it was another two years before he became my low-grade snitch, he never again mentioned that I was an undercover cop...him knowing it...and from that day on he always called me 'Lucky'...and we had many an afternoon sparring with each other...he wanting me to concentrate on his blind side that gave me the advantage with that one lucky one...he never did have a blind side but it was a joke between the two of us for years...a joke between the two of us...yeah. I shook my head as I looked at the ground around my feet still seeing that boxing ring with him and I trading blows...fair dinkum like...

CHAPTER FOUR

"Detective...Detective? You with us, Joe?"

The spell was broken, and I joltingly returned to the present. These brain-teasing, dreamy forays into the past were increasing so I thought, and I wondered not for the first time what they really meant.

"Yeah, sorry James. I slipped out the door for a bit..." A worried look his response. Me? A blank look that conveyed heaps to the FFO. A Detective is supposed to be on his toes all the time, he thought. Not drifting away with the fairies at the drop of a hat. He waved at someone behind me...nodded several times at that person before telling me...

"They want to move the bodies out of the charred mess. Do you want a squiz before they do?"

I shook my head. I'd prefer to remember the guy as he bounced back up off the canvass to embrace me in his man hug instead of a blackened lump entwined forever with his lover. It hadn't surprised me when I learnt the guy was gay at some point in the past...it kind of fitted.

I easily slipped out that door again...it was some five or six years ago that I ran into him and agreed to share a coffee with him at a nearby coffee joint. He was happy in retirement, so he said, having given the game away some years before. The whispers on the street told a different story of an aging man getting soft but I felt obliged to believe his take on things.

"Never been happier 'Lucky'. Found the love of my life and he is good for me. We live on acreage...twenty acres out Kenthurst way among other acreages...life's good and wholesome...have a couple of horses and run a Riding School...life's good".

I'd never seen him look more healthier, more at ease with himself and I told him so, which brought a wide smile and a two-handed shake as he engulfed my hands.

"One thing, Joe". Coburn again interrupted my meandering thoughts. "Both show signs of being shot to death. There's evidence of accelerant inside and outside the dwelling so some-one sure wanted them gone...and was sending messages as well..."

I shook my head as I didn't think so. He'd been out of the business for at least a dozen years, so he had confided in me over that coffee break. That lifestyle he had let go a while ago he had whispered to me, but some-one was sending a message...who? To whom? What for? I didn't have a bloody clue. I saw Tally my young partner walking towards me. I leant away from the Fire Tender wishing James Coburn all the best until our next meeting and began to stroll towards her asking her had she caught a bloody train!

"Just about!" She complained. "I'm parked a couple of hundred metres outside the police tape. I reckon our Unmarked will have slipped into the nearby ditch by the time we get back".

"Bloody hell, I hope not. If it has slipped into the ditch, guess who will be pushing".

CHAPTER FIVE

I beckoned for Tally to hold on as I returned to my ladder-step chair on the Fire Tender. I speed-dialled in the Boss knowing that I should excuse me and my partner from the Case...I had known Doug Bera in another life...but I had known him none-the-less.

“Are you sure he is a character from your undercover days?” He asked succinctly.

“Not certain at this stage Boss. We’ll know for sure after their autopsy and DNA cross-checks. If it is my old snitch, his DNA will be in the system. He’s spent multiple times in the clink. Initial examination of both bodies indicates both may have been shot before the house was set ablaze...”

“Hmmm...a double homicide. A targeted exercise. Some-one was looking for payback in a big way. You and Tally have nothing else on...neither have most of the Homicide teams so we’re all in the same boat. Stay on the Case until identification confirmation is received and we’ll re-assess it again at that stage”.

I stood awkwardly with my back not pleased with the process. I must see my doctor as it has been getting progressively worse...soon, I promised myself. Soon.

“Seems we have the Case for at least the next ten to twenty-one days or until the victims are formally identified...so let’s think of something we can do that will progress the Case in a positive manner, eh?” I alerted Tally who had come to stand beside me. She frowned.

“You knew the guy?” She asked as she glanced at me.

“If it’s Doug Bera than yes. He was my first snitch during my undercover days...going back jeez...a while now...”. I scratched my skull and smiled to myself as I looked over at the panorama of a burnt-out mansion. “Mmm...not a high-grade one who gave me excellent information, but I was not looking for that at the time. I was looking for an ‘in’ to a Boxing Gym that our Intel indicated was the centre of the distribution and selling of the cannabis trade between the North Coast and Sydney...a lucrative network

at the time. Doug...he was the Contract Enforcer for several of the well-known illegal Bikie gangs back awhile...though they weren't illegal in those days, but we all knew where they stood in the trade...the number one kingpins of that era having complete control over the trade. The growing, distributing and selling of their product...they controlled it from whoa to go even back then”.

I was rambling, unsure as to why. I straightened up and stretched my back causing it to complain louder.

“Yer gotta see about that Joe. It's been getting worse...Doug Bera? You stayed in contact?”

“No...hell no! I lost contact with him once I became a Murder Dee. I ran into him accidentally about oh...five...maybe six years ago. We had a coffee together to mull over old times. He used to call me ‘Lucky’ as I put him on his bum. ‘A lucky punch’ he said as he bounced back off the canvass...I was fretting waiting for that big KO punch as retaliation. Instead, he encircled me with his huge arms as he laughed. The entire Gym had stopped waiting for his reaction. They didn't expect that...he reckoned I had found his blind spot and asked me to concentrate on that area as we sparred together...he didn't like having a blind spot...hah!” I shook my head at the memories. “It could be selective memory I suppose, but I don't ever think he put me on the canvas. I always suspected he pulled his punches whenever I let my guard down...hah!” I again shook my head at the memories.

“He had a reputation?” Tally responded wanting to hear more of the story.

“Too right...he was the Number One Enforcer used by all the Gangs back then...and for a lot of years he was their Number One man to go to for that type of thing. Could belt the dickens outa yer. He could pummel you to pulp and not think a thing about it five minutes later...but he had another side”. I glanced into the middle distance bringing back memories that had laid half-hidden in my memory banks. “When I shared a coffee with him, he was a different person. He was at ease with himself. Content within himself and by his own admission, he had left those early days behind...some twenty years ago. ‘*He was retired*’ he boastfully and happily proclaimed; his arms akimbo. A smile a mile wide which you never saw in his younger days. ‘*I'm in love*’ he happily admitted ‘...and

he is the best thing that has ever happened to me for some fifteen years' he explained...bloody hell...I keep forgetting his lover's name".

I finished off my coffee as he described his life now. A successful Riding School with Ribbons and Certificates won by his young charges. A twenty-acre plot that was divided up into a two-storey mansion, practise fields, yards, training rinks and stables which he shared with several other like-minded neighbours who it was obvious were not aware of his past life...I wondered how he gained permission to work with minors...I never asked and he never elaborated...but the change in him was dramatic and pleasing though there had never been any hint of him being a horse lover...yeah, on the track as an occasional flutter on the big races but living with them!? Training them? I didn't know about that...

Love can do strange things to you, I guess...

We promised to catch up again as we parted...but that was some five...six years ago and neither of us had made the effort to make that second contact wanting bygones to be bygones perhaps...our previous close contacts an embarrassment in today's climate...

I wondered what he had done to deserve such an end...it would not be for sins committed twenty...thirty years ago as that side of the fence couldn't hold a grudge for that long. His appearance and candid admission of leaving that life behind I believed so that leaves very little left...unless it was a warning...an act to scare away certain cretins from inserting themselves into territory that did not belong to them...which leaves the number of suspects in a wider and deeper pool...

Could I intimate myself back into that world that I had left thirty-odd years ago and would someone that I knew of back then still be alive? To do me harm? I doubted it! But you never knew for sure...just look at Bera's demise...someone sure wanted him dead and I doubt he was the peripheral damage with his mate being the target...

CHAPTER SIX

A group of us without a word spoken began to walk around the perimeter of the remains of the two-storey house. Stopping to look at something that may have resembled an important part of the dwelling in another time. All that stood was the twisted steel portal frames that would have supported the upper floor and several brick walls. A large stone double-sided fireplace stood as an epitaph to what once was a palatial home. The smell was eye-watering, a mixture of burnt timber, dirty water, smoke and charred remains...that unmistakeable smell of a home destroyed.

I shook my head several times convincing myself that this wasn't a payback act for some slight committed by Doug Bera in recent or in historical times but a signal to those unknowns that whoever did this was capable of always reaching you, no matter where you hid or however you changed your life! I wondered if there would be any payback action from the Bikie Gangs and if there was, it would come swiftly as it always did...their victims? Whose to know...they'd have to have had an idea.

I had never wondered how big twenty acres was...it had never crossed my mind...about eight hectares I think until we began to walk around the horse paddocks, open areas, and groves of trees until we eventually stumbled onto the substantial Stables structure hidden by dense bush and trees in a far corner of the property.

"He didn't shirk on dollars when it came to positioning 'privacy cameras' around the place". I uttered to no-one. Looking around at the various camera positions.

"Yer right! It didn't do him much good though as every camera you see is either hard cabled or blue tooth connected back to his central security room on the ground floor at the back of the house...everything back there has been burnt to ash with not one photo or video that we can use..." The Forensic Fire Officer replied glumly. "A whole lot of bloody nothing for his investment and nothing for us to act on. Here's hoping the neighbours might have something for us". He glanced towards the front of the property and the near neighbours who he hoped had decent surveillance cameras that had caught something positive.

“Yeah...here’s hoping”. But my mood stated otherwise...

CHAPTER SEVEN

Gabriel Douglas was a talkative bloke, giving us plenty of hot air and little else. Several times he stopped to wipe his eyes and clear his throat before continuing as if a pause had not occurred. He as Doug’s nearest neighbour ran the Equestrian Training facilities as a loose business arrangement which was sealed with a handshake. Dollars changed hands which only the two men kept in check with no records that the Taxman could concentrate on if a search by them was ever made...so far, touch wood, they’ve never appeared. A smile his victory but they’d catch him eventually...well, so I hoped.

‘Gabby’ as he was known, was the major player in the business. He loved horses where Doug was more ambivalent, hiding in the shadows as one witness stated. This went along with my recollections of him...he wasn’t an animal lover preferring to kick shit out of them than to love them! Then again, love has funny ways...but ‘Gabby’ Douglas never mentioned Doug’s friend and lover Darryl Holding who we would learn was the major player with the horses...and the Trading Firm was in his name thus avoiding the embarrassment of losing the license if Doug’s past ever came out.

He seemed to sense when I was about to end the conversation and walk away. On one of those occasions, he began...

“There’s a rumour Doug was a bad boy in his youth. A Bkie gang member...he used to kill people with his bare hands...a real mean mother...”

I turned back to him to step into his personal space ready to headbutt him but thought better of it...Marge Hendricks’ timely advice bounced around in my grey matter. *‘You’ll be in heaps of trouble if you do what you what to do, Joe. Step back. Take a deep breath and walk away...hear me, Joe!? He’s not worth the trouble your reaction will cause’.* For once...well...for the thousandth time I took her advice, spinning away from him to

step down off his palatial Portico to catch up with the mob who were halfway to the elaborate front gate....

American west ostentatiousness in all regards...says something about the man!

You know, there are those who immediately strike you the wrong way...the second they open their mouths. Not for the first time I thought I was becoming less tolerant of those types of sods as the years went by...Marge Hendricks and Shelley Shields after her would agree wholeheartedly with that self-assessment I felt sure.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Bernard Holding was the exact opposite of his neighbour...if you count a close neighbour as being some ten thousand steps away!

“Arrh...good morning, Detective”. He addressed me immediately. He turned to my colleagues. “Gentlemen...arrh...young lady”. He obviously knew authority by looking at the mob milling around on his covered porch. “We’ve been waiting for you to knock on our door. If you hadn’t, we’d’ve gone looking for you. I suggest we have something that could be of use to you...”

“ADF?” I asked. He nodded his agreement.

“Air Force. Twenty-five years. Supervising Engineer. I could teach you a thing or two about F111 jet engines...even a thing or two about F16 jet engines. The Yanks can make a fine jet engine even if they can’t elect a decent president since Obama. Since I retired, I’ve been Captain of our local Volunteer Bushfire Brigade...mmm...for some dozen years or so. It’s getting a bit much so’s I’m retiring from their grasp next month...”

“You weren’t called out last night...on the house fire? Doug’s place?” I enquired of him. Looking intently at him as there was a...I don’t know...something about him. His

mannerisms seemed all wrong to me, though no-one else thought so after we had ended our interview of him and stood around discussing the people we had met that morning..

“No...”. He answered coolly. “They’re slowly pushing me aside. I don’t mind as being called out in the early hours of a cold morning is not something I’ll miss...but with all the noise it woke me, and I wandered over to take a squiz and make sure they’re all in sync with one another. The new Captain does a bloody good job but not good enough to save Doug and his mate I’m afraid...there’s the pity”.

“They were both shot”. I responded blandly, hoping to get some sort of reaction from the man.

“Shot!? Aarrh...that could explain something”. He half-turned and beckoned us into his home, opening the door wide. “Look, follow my missus into our TV come Picture Show Room. I think what we have may be of value to your investigation”.

As invited, we followed like Brown’s cows the elderly woman who, with the aid of a sturdy looking cane limped painfully down a wide corridor into the interior of the house. She turned into a double doorway that was awash with light from a window wall at the far end of the room. It gave views of a small courtyard, a central fountain noiselessly splashing droplets of rainbow colours into a pool at its feet. A dozen or so Rainbow Lorikeets dropped in and out of the droplets adding to the colourful display. A pair of King Parrots lent a riot of colour to the scene. As I entered, I heard a wow of surprise as a heavy blackout drape silently slid the vista out. I sat in the back row of two rows of five plush, comfortable sofa chairs come La-Z-Boy seats. I glanced at Tally sitting beside me as the entry doors slowly closed behind us. A large screen folded from some ceiling space to take up position where once the window wall was noticeable.

“Wow...how the other half live...” Tally whispered in my ear as the screen came alive.

Firstly, a flash of light. A Wombat lumbering down the street. A bandicoot then a possum. The night was alive...a vehicle slowly came into view...

“A 2022 Audi Four AWD Hatchback...” Tally whispered.

“You sure!?” I challenged not knowing whether it was a Beetle, a Mini or a Rolls Royce.

“Yep. Bet a meal on it as long as it’s not Maccas”. She responded, sure of herself.

The vehicle stopped opposite the driveway. A torchlight from the interior of the vehicle searched out the letterbox, the house number, and owners’ names. As if satisfied, the car slowly took off up the street.

“What’s further up the street?” I asked no-one.

“A dead-end and dense bush about a kilometre further on...” Someone muttered.

“Another Bandicoot...” Someone offered.

“Nah...” Tally disputed the observation, shaking her head. “That’s an Eastern Quoll...rare as hen’s teeth. Close to extinction. It’s great to see one in the wild...well...bushland setting”.

I was impressed with Tally’s knowledge of Australian wildlife...and imported vehicles.

The Audi returned from the opposite direction and slowed to a stop at the driveway entrance causing the spotlight positioned somewhere on the Holdings front fence opposite to illuminate the area again. Three persons alighted quietly from the car which included the driver. The doors were carefully closed so as not to make too much noise. The driver went to the rear of the vehicle to lift the hatch, retrieving two twenty-litre jerry cans...presumably full of petrol...they’d come prepared.

I leant forward asking as I did whether who-ever was at the controls could they reverse the disc so that I could view the face of the driver as he alighted.

“There’s better images of the three as they return to the vehicle...full face...well lit”. Missus Holding offered without complying to my request. She was the Boss of the room so it seemed.

The scenario continued with one of the men liberally pouring petrol to the outside of the dwelling while the other two broke into the house. Presumably, one splashed petrol on inside surfaces while the other found his way up to the first floor and the main Bedroom. Two flashes almost simultaneously denoted the two shots that killed both men. Immediately there was a whoosh as the internal ‘flashpoint’ of petrol fumes, oxygen and ignition sequences ensured a fireball erupted from inside the house seeming to blow the roof upwards by several millimetres. The outside petrol fumes then erupted enveloping the house in one complete fireball.

The glare and flare of the flames blocked out any detail for some time and a ‘white out’ view was all we witnessed until three images emerged staggering towards their vehicle. This movement caused another spotlight on the Holding property line opposite to illuminate the trio to identifiable detail.

Simultaneously, Tally muttered Orientals while I whispered Chinese Nationals to myself. I had no idea why I had stated this detail...it was something that just entered my grey matter by itself.

“One of them is badly hurt...” Tally uttered pointing a hand towards the screen.

“Burnt down his right side. His arm and his head...” I added. She nodded.

They had trouble lifting the injured guy into the rear of the vehicle and as they sped away Missus Holding turned on the room lights. The Show was over.

“We have the original plus a copy for you, several photographs of the three and a flash drive of the photographs...”

“That should be good...gratefully received. I’ll give you an official NSW Police Force receipt for the offered objects”. I glanced at Tally who stood and left the room. The Receipt Book would be in our Unmarked parked somewhere. I nodded, agreeing enthusiastically as I stood. “That should help a lot...it’ll place the bastards at the property no matter how hard they object to the fact...what major Hospital is the closest to here?”

“There’s one at Baulkham Hills...”

“It’s a Private Hospital and doesn’t have an Emergency Department. A small one at Cherrybrook but the major ones are either Hornsby or Blacktown...” Missus Holding offered over her husband’s information.

I tapped the information into my iPad wanting Tally to chase out that angle when she returned.

‘Check both Hospitals for a badly burnt person...mainly on the right-hand side...say around oh-three-thirty to oh-four-thirty hours this morning. Get onto Stolen Vehicles for a dark coloured 2022 Audi Four. Check with the Gang Related Team and Police Intelligence to see whether they have any intel on what Doug Bera may still have his dirty little fingers into right now...it could help us understand why he was targetted...’

I wrote feverishly, transferring the information over to Tally’s iPad.

“And you?” Tally offered. Out of breath as she handed me the Receipt Book. She bent over then straightened as she walked outside to complete the tasks I had given her...it’s great having one so young and enthusiastic who is at your beck and call.

“I’m going to see whether I can whip us all up a coffee and something to eat if these lovely people will agree...”

CHAPTER NINE

My young colleague had only just sat beside me when her Mobile rang. With a flip of her hand and a slight groan, she excused herself from the large table to venture outside. I could see her through a rear window walking slowly back and forth as she nodded her response to the person on the other end of the phone. She nodded, smiled, and hung up only to dial another number. This time she was more animated, flinging her free hand about as she spoke. Often there were moments where she was listening, nodding

occasionally. Standing still. She eventually disconnected to walk back inside. She slumped back into her chair pleased that I had saved a couple of sandwiches for her. She hoed into them as though it was her last meal...or first in quite some time. She turned coyly to me asking whether I could get her a fresh cup of coffee as the one in front of her had cooled which was not to her liking.

I obeyed. It was the least I could do after her unquestioning assistance.

She played with her spoon spinning it around in the cup as though she had added sugar. I knew she hadn't...

“That was ‘Stolen Vehicles’. They’ve identified a 2022 Audi Hatchback that was stolen a week ago from a Doctors’ Surgery carpark at Dural. It is now a burnt-out wreck in some back lane in Surrey Hills...”

“That’s where the Consulate General of China is located...I think...” I muttered more to myself.

“So?” Tally asked as she gave me a quizzical sideways look. Her mobile buzzed in her hand. She flipped her hand as she swore softly, standing to walk quickly from the room. She’ll never get to finish off that bloody sandwich. I grabbed her now lukewarm coffee to empty it down the nearby sink. She hated anything below boiling for her coffee.

“Police Intelligence”. She informed me as she slumped back into her chair. “Your friend was keeping his hand in. Doug Bera. Runs three Smoke Shops...two down Campbelltown way and the other in Blacktown. Had only been given approval to open one in Merimbula, Narooma, and Bateman’s Bay in the last month...I reckon he’d be making a fortune from them if your tabulations from the other day were accurate...seems he was still in the game...in a way”.

I nodded. A little disappointed that he had not given the game away entirely. The ‘Stud’ and Riding School was a talking point to hide the other lucrative trade that he was operating...I guess the money was just too good to ignore.

“Business NSW...they’d know if there is competition in those towns and what they think of Doug Bera opening up his chain in competition to whoever is established in those towns”. I took a sip of my coffee. “Lay odds it’s not fellow Biekie gangs who do not like him expanding his business...they’d be with him I reckon...some-one else, I reckon. Perhaps a Leb family or...an Islander consortium wanting to buy in on the easy money”.

“He’s got previous form...how come he’s permitted to run those businesses in his name?”

“Business NSW? I don’t know how it is permitted but for those wanting to open a Tobacconist or Smoke Shop there is no need under present legislation to delve into any previous criminal history...a bit strange but there you have it...”

“Mmm...yeah...that applies to all those completing the necessary paperwork? Everyone!?” She asked before she took a sip of her steaming coffee.

“Yeah...a loophole in the law...both a Federal and State Law I think”.

As I was offering this information, I was being transferred from the Police Mainframe onto the Business NSW phone line. The information was as expected. No Court Order, no information regardless of it being a homicide case or not. I instructed Tally to contact the Boss for a Court Order to obtain the information I wanted.

“Why does Joe require such information?” He asked the obvious, a little peeved by my request. Tally handed me her mobile phone informing me of the Boss’s demand. I could sort it with the Boss better than she could.

“Boss? We have two cadavers shot then burnt beyond recognition. Information we have obtained from Business NSW indicates that Doug Bera had recently acquired several Licenses to open new Smoke Shops in several country NSW south coast towns with a further request to obtain Licenses to open shops in the Wollongong area. As our Victim was a former illegal Motorcycle Gang Associate to several of these well-known gangs, I cannot see them...any of those gangs asserting such brutal reactions...so the next step is to acquire knowledge of other...arrh...other organisations or families who have

Smoke Shops in those vicinities who do not like...or do not want any further competition...". I took a deep breath.

"I see...makes sense which is more than you do on occasions. Okay. I'll chase out that Court Order with enough...let's say leeway to give you wriggle room. Late tomorrow or early next week we should have something...nothing else?"

"No Boss. That should give us a direction which we are short of now. Thanks...Oh! One more thing..."

"I knew it!" The Boss interjected.

"Yeah...hah...can you connect with the AFP and the ASIO Liaison Officers. I want to know whether an Audi 4 Hatchback entered the Chinese Trade Legation premises located at Surry Hills between oh-four-hundred and oh-five-thirty hours this morning, leaving some fifteen minutes later followed by a Chinese Diplomatic vehicle which returned to that address some fifteen to thirty minutes later".

"Joe? Now that is stretching the friendship...why is that information so important?"

"The video evidence indicated one of the three Orientals who attacked the Bera residence early this morning was badly burnt down the right side of his body. Tally has canvassed all Hospitals in proximity and further afield who would admit a burns victim...nothing...zilch".

"So, your gut feeling was he was transferred to that location where he could receive medical care unseen...or not admitted by the Chinese authorities that such an injury exists to one of their 'worker ants'...that it? Association the vehicle, huh?"

"Yes Boss".

"Thin Joe...let me have a think about it. I'll let you know either way within the next hour or two".

He always said this when he was going to eventually yield to the request. It may take a day or two, but he always came through. I was beginning to read this Boss a lot easier than I could ever read my old Boss DI John Church aka Abbey. I was betting he would approach the AFP Liaison Officer in an unofficial way with the request. ASIO was a different matter requiring a signed letter with full disclosure as to why the information was important to one of our Cases...if that was provided it could take several weeks for the matter to be returned to us...complying or not to our demand.

The trouble with both requests was that they both were being primed on our investigations that had ramifications with illegal Bikie gangs here in Australia and international criminal organisations who could be supplying tobacco contraband in massive amounts. With the Chinese National persons also involved and now several dead bodies, their joint interest in our investigations could be piqued...guaranteed.

They were a law unto themselves...

“Boss? Chuck that request. We do not want either organisation sniffing around at our investigations into illegal tobacco sales and injured persons...and our dead vics...they’d love the intrigue and political connections”.

“You sure, Joe?”

“Yeah. The more I think about it, the more I want to keep them at arm’s length”.

CHAPTER TEN

It was the third day of the following week and nothing new had emerged to help us. It was if we were waiting on that ‘golden egg’ to drop to help us move forward...nothing like that happens... ever!

“Thirty years almost to the day...bashed beyond recognition. Sounds very similar to your friend’s MO, don’t you think?” Tally Evans muttered aloud as she walked around

hers and my desks, slapping the back of her neck with a three-hundred-millimetre wooden ruler. Jabbing a finger of her free hand towards me as though I was guilty of some misdemeanour that only she could interpret. A Trial Prosecution Solicitor grilling the suspect sitting on the stand...me quivering as I sat behind my desk. A smirk to show I was enjoying the theatre...

My imagination sometimes wanders into wonderful scenarios...

“I hadn’t thought about it like that...” That type of ‘left field’ connection was either Marge Hendricks or Shelley Shields forte, two of my former partners who I often felt were sheltering me from the devils of aging. My young partner these days didn’t have the same nous or ‘left field’ thinking that those two others had in abundance, so I thought.

“I’ve been thinking...when did the Federal Government legislate to tax wholesale prices of cigarettes and liquor in line with the annual CPI rises?” She stopped beside my desk looking down at me as a School Teacher would to have ‘Little Johnny’ squirming in his chair...or waiting enthusiastically to tell that dirty joke.

I looked up at her with a blank expression. I didn’t have a clue, and I couldn’t see the relevance!

“Um...to be perfectly honest, I’m not sure. Maybe some bright spark on the Back benches of Parliament put forward the argument that if Australians continue to smoke and drink to excess, Hospitals in a generation or two would be overfilled with cancer patients...seem probable?”

“Yes...a possible cause...as good as any, I guess. Nineteen Eighty-three...” She informed me. “Nineteen Eighty-three...over forty years ago! The excise has increased twice a year since then in line with CPI increases for *retail* cigarette and liquor sales”. She proclaimed proudly, spreading her arms in a challenging manner. “They’d have not known at that stage that they were constructing a situation rife for the picking by unscrupulous persons. As the difference between the *legal* wholesale/retail price of cigarettes and the price of untaxed, illegally imported cigarettes increases to a disproportionate amount, they were inadvertently creating a situation that would lose them billions in revenue from these illegal importations...wise ones in both the Bikie

Gangs and others overseas who were always looking to make a fast buck realised that as the excise increase, so did their share in dollar terms of the difference in price between legal and illegal sales. The Federal Government at the time was completely oblivious to this situation occurring”.

“How is that connected to our Cold Case and the brutal murder of the Chinese National Lan Soo?” I asked, sitting up straight. She had stimulated my interest with several ‘Guesses’, ‘Probables’, and ‘Could be’s’ clicking into a more defined pattern of fact versus fiction in my mind. That’s how Marge and Shelley had also worked, piquing my interest to permit my brain to click into gear...

She spun around to begin walking slowly around my desk again, hitting one hand into the other open palm. She was on a roll...

“I can’t tell you how many times I read that Murder File on Lan Soo...enough times I reckon to be able to recite word for word back to you now...”

“You took the Murder Book home...” More a statement than anything else on my part.

“Joe? It was worrying the bejeesus out of me...”.

“Tallieeee...”.

“I know, I know...that is a no-no in your book but how many times did you take that same Murder Book home on weekends thirty years ago to read through it...more than me I betcha, Twinkletoes!”. She smiled as she said this. “You can tell it was more than once by the different biro scribbled notes in the margins which I thought was a big no-no...it’s even mentioned at the Police Academy as it was stated these Murder Books...and notes could be submitted at Trial...personal thoughts would/could cause a legal problem”.

I flung the accusation away with a flip of my hand. More important people had reprimanded me on the habit...which did not make one iota of difference! I continue with the habit even to this day...

“Um...one thing that stuck in my craw was that every professional and Board member of the University who was interviewed by you or your Boss Abbey at the time noted that they all...all of them were unimpressed with the knowledge that the Chinese legation possessed on their supposed field of expertise. That is Animal Husbandry and Animal Genetics. They seemed more interested in other things. By the time this point was realised of course, the Legation had returned to China...but if their interest was in other things...what were they?”

I scratched my chin. Pulled at my earlobe. Good question I thought and one that neither I nor Abbey had asked ourselves at the time. I nodded several times.

“This was what...in nineteen-ninety-four...maybe ninety-three...”

“Late ninety-three, early ninety-four”. Tally responded.

“Mmm...a decade after the annual tax excise on all tobacco and liquor sales was implemented by the Federal Government...they were expecting a windfall over the years. A person with a keen mind and one not averse to criminal activities could see how things *might* pan out in their favour in the future...a story for sure based on guesses and suppositions that does link certain things...the Chinese Legations’ real purpose was to assess the reality of commencing a Tobacconist or Smoke Shop in a large provincial town. A series of them across country NSW at first. I would always select those country towns where opposition would be nil or next to nil. Unfortunately, they ran over the toes of an illegal Bikie Gang who had similar plans in the New England area. Our Cold Case victim was the unfortunate casualty, the victim of Doug Bera who could have been contracted to teach the Chinese Nationals a lesson that this was the territory of...take a guess...about a dozen Bikie Gangs to pick from. The bashing that ensued got out of hand which resulted in the death of our Lan Soo. I doubt Bera’s recent death was really a ‘payback’ revenge attack...but for the life of me I’m lost to think of a relevant reason...unless Bera’s recent submission to open several Smoke Shops on the south coast of NSW was not welcome news for...a Chinese gang...but it kinda pans out well, doesn’t it? It would be very satisfying if it were close to the truth”.

“Yeah...it would finalise several of our Cases, huh? If our arms were wings, we may be able to fly, huh?”.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Boss had chastised me on numerous occasions about my annual holidays build-up that was becoming embarrassing. It wasn't that I didn't want to take them when they fell due, but neither the girls nor Tellie were thrilled by another sojourn into the bush or a surfing holiday in the caravan up the coast...unfortunately these were always my two recommendations that did not have 'five stars' accommodation attached which was their want. The girls especially had grown out of the '*loving the bush*' holidays and with their sister in Melbourne they had become accustomed to five-star accommodation when visiting her, it was the only option available for them.

One pleasant morning after Tally and I had enjoyed our morning swim and stretch, the Boss beckoned me into his Office.

"Joe? This has been mentioned on too many occasions which is making it boring and tedious. You have an opportunity right now...the University in Melbourne where your daughter is studying has its mid-year break coming up. It happens to correspond with the NSW mid-term school holidays...and I know your Tellie is at this moment underworked with her Boss allowing her time off to correspond with those of your daughters..." He looked down his nose at me before he tapped away on his laptop. "Your Lan Soo homicide Cold Case isn't going anywhere, and your shooting homicide and arson Case of Doug Bera and his partner Darryl Holding has also been sidelined..."

"Boss...we think there is a link..." I forcefully replied. That's the guy's name. Darryl Holding. It slips my mind every time. I wondered if it was because Doug was in a gay relationship. I shook my head to close that door.

"I'm not interested Joe. Malcom Savage is commencing LSL at the beginning of the school break so Tally can assist his partner Jenny Coolidge while you take at least two weeks minimum off...you're owed a darn sight more..."

"Boss? Tally and Jenny Coolidge seldom see eye to eye..."

“You’re not the Boss, Joseph”. His anger rising. “I’m paid the big bucks to make these types of decisions. School Hols commence week after next...bring your stuff up to date so that Tally can take care of them with Coolidge in control...the decision has been made and I understand your Tellie has already booked the Service Apartments on Collins for those two weeks...you have three weeks off...enjoy”.

It was obvious even to this aging Detective that there had been discussions behind the scenes with me out of the loop until the last minute...what can one do but obey persons of higher standing?

CHAPTER TWELVE

“When you’ve settled Joe, come into my Office...don’t make it too long, okay?”

A funny way to welcome me back into the fold after a couple of weeks off I thought as I made my desk. Angie De Longo came up behind me carrying a large coffee for me and an Iced Tea for herself. She placed both containers on my desk to give me the hugest hug...I looked around the office a little embarrassed...but returned her hug admittedly with a little less enthusiasm. As far as I was concerned, we had yet to bond, and our combined examination only included one Case: that of the ‘Hospital Slayings’...hardly enough to warrant such a show of affection to my way of thinking!

Catalina ‘Tally’ Evans had bedded in well with Detective Three Jenny Coolidge while I was on leave which surprised me with De Longo wanting a partner...immediately.

Me!!

I pulled her away to look intently at her face.

“A war wound?” I asked, nodding towards her face. A slight discolouration on her forehead melting down her left cheek. Now almost hidden by make-up which she rarely

applied. Just a touch to emphasise her beautiful skin, eyes, and mouth. Now it was lathered on to hide her injury and embarrassment.

She stepped back away from me, gently caressing her cheek.

“Yeah...you could say that...settle at your desk and I’ll tell you a story...”

“Arrh...can it wait? The Boss wants to tell me one too...”

“Yeah...you’ve missed a bit...” She countered, that tight grin on her face.

“Where’s Evans?” I asked as I looked down at her neat desk. She usually had one hell of a mess on her desk...but if asked, she could always find that ‘gem’ somewhere in that mess.

“She started two weeks off today after gelling with Coolidge...on a Cruise up through the islands to Singapore. I think it stops in Vietnam which Tally was looking forward to. Her father was killed there...a Nacho who lost the lottery with his number coming up. She never knew him as she was a baby when he got shipped out...she wants to visit the area where he was killed during Operation Coral-Balmoral...yeah...it was the biggest battle fought by the ADF and Northern Vietnamese Regulars...who came off second best, so she informed me before she boarded...Coolidge and I went to see her off. Her first Cruise. She was more than excited to do the trip regardless of our constant bantering to watch out for herself. Those Cruises can be a trap for young single girls travelling by themselves...she scoffed at our concern!”. She chuckled. Shook her head.

As always when an Officer goes on any sort of leave, their desk becomes the repository of all surplus files, Murder Books and copies of papers printed from the Internet. I stood, unhitching my belt holster and ID Badge to securely place them into the special lockable drawer that we all had for such a purpose. Asking Angie as I did so could she begin to move some of the shit off my desk and onto those who were responsible for the pile!

“I won’t be long...” I assured her as I picked up the coffee container, thanked her and began to walk towards the Boss’s Office. I’ll chuck the bloody lot of the detritus when I finish with the Boss, I thought, if Angie hadn’t finished the task by the time I walked

back to my desk. Sometimes these discussions with the Boss on my return to the fold could last ten minutes or all morning...it dependent on what I had missed.

“Close the door Joe”. He instructed as I knocked on the side panel of the door. “Come. Sit. Welcome back. You had a good break?”.

“Yes...a two-week relaxing time in Melbourne with all the family around me...most enjoyable...and a week chasing what little surf there was...”. I took a long gulp of coffee. “Danni has not missed a beat since she’s been down there. We were scared she’d miss home too much after no more than a month...but she has revelled in the lifestyle. I’m both proud, pleased and excited but at the same time troubled and concerned as she is being ‘head-hunted’ by some American Universities that have ties with NASA and other Space Agencies...she doesn’t need to make a final decision until mid-year...America is a lot further than Sydney to Melbourne and back...I don’t know...and you can tell she is divided in her thoughts for the future”. I shifted in the chair showing I was troubled by my daughter’s concerns.

“At fifteen she can’t be expected to make that type of decision herself...she’ll need yours and Tellie’s endorsement I suspect...”

I nodded.

There was silence as each of us mulled over our thoughts. Mine was about making the right decision for my daughter...the right decision for a fifteen-year-old...who in hell knew what that entailed!

“Arrh...Hendo...he’s been retired for what? Two...three years. He was diagnosed with Cancer of the Colon and Prostate...an extremely aggressive form of cancer as you know...” He shook his head to will away the tears. “All those plans...his house was sold and the Granny Flat at his son’s place...Thornleigh I think...it was completed which he had just moved into...a bugger eh?”

I nodded, thinking of all the conversations we had over the many years both of us were in this place together. On his future. On his idea to sell the old family home to move in with his son...a Granny Flat the preferred option...but it held some hidden traps for the

uninitiated. His Bucket List...that is but a dream never to be fulfilled. I wondered how many times I had tried to egg him to accompany me down to the pool and gym each day...I guess it would have made little difference...when your time is up it matters little what you did to try and extend the stay. The place without him has not be the same and never will. His dark sense of comedy and at times quirky sense of humour a blessing that had many a person laughing out loud. I said as much to the Boss who wholeheartedly agreed with me.

“The problem we have is I’ve jumped Soo ‘Sue’ Ping Loo up to the long vacant Clerical Grade Five position since his death...it was about time someone warmed that chair. Human Resources have been pestered to advertise the spot since Hendo retired...they’ve been dragging the chain for some reason only they know about”.

I harrumphed, crossed my legs than uncrossed them to cross them at my ankles.

“You can’t do that Boss. That’s jumping her up two grades when she was only acting in the Grade Three position that she was sitting in...I’m with you in placing her in Hendo’s old position...I’m surprised that Human Resources haven’t been all over this insisting on the position be advertised as it has been vacant for so long. If...when that happens, Sue cannot even contest the position...she cannot go for the job...two grades higher...no...three grades higher because of her ‘acting’ in the original Grade Three spot...”

“Have you seen what she has done in the weeks you’ve been off? She controls a digitised white board with two attached butterfly boards that at a glance you can tell where each Dee is, what jobs they are doing, all their jobs laid out with the latest info, DPP and Court times tabulated...where each person is as far as ‘time off in lieu’, O/T, Sick Leave, LSL and holidays owing...this is all connected into my laptop with only information pertinent taken from that board given to the Pay Clerk, and the Personnel Clerk ...the only trouble with it is that it makes several clerical positions redundant as one person...in Hendo’s position can handle the lot...I have no intention of making this system well known...whomever can find out themselves whenever!” He chuckled as he brushed a speck off his tie...

“Seems to me Sue at some stage is going to be disappointed...she’ll not be eligible to apply for Hendo’s position...and really, you do not have the authority to push her up to

a Grade Five Clerk...the Head Clerk in our Squad...okay, I understand the quandary you are in...and there is no-one else who could act in the position for however long...maybe in GRCU or out in the wider District Headquarters Staff... and what do the other Clerks think of the situation...that they have been leap-frogged by a Two/Acting Three? Any feedback that way?"

The Boss nodded though he didn't reply to my queries. I understood well enough he had placed himself out on that proverbial limb with certain persons eager to see him fall onto his sword regardless of the reasons for his actions...in keeping the Squad operating calmly and without calamities he was doing a superb job since the enforced retirement and early death of Denny Turner...a tragedy for all of us as she was a bloody good boss...Ambrose had a lot to learn to even come close to Denny Turner's leadership.

"There is one loophole that was instigated to usurp the old 'senior' position being an automatic selection...if the person has been acting in the said position for twelve months and has introduced a new standard of excellence in performing those duties, she/he can either go for the advertised position or as Head of the Branch, I can award her the position on merit".

"That one's new to me Boss..."

"You more than anyone else in the Squad knows the intricacies of the Policy and Procedures Manual inside out and back to front. For that reason, I've always wondered why you never put yourself up for selection as the Squad's Union Rep".

"Hah! Let's not go there as it's a long story. That new regulation is your out. When did it make the Manual?"

"A while ago now...when the 'old guard' Commissioners and Deputy Commissioners were pensioned off. It took a week of wrangling in Parliament to succeed but it was whispers in the corridors of power for some time...you're slipping Joe. Sue will be beginning maternity leave next month so Karl Webber from GRCU will be filling in for the year...arrh...due to complications with the pregnancy that arrangement has been pushed forward commencing this week...umm...she didn't know she was pregnant...never a dull moment, eh?"

“Mmmph”. Was all I managed as an insightful response.

“Arrh...now...arrh...jobs!” He looked up at me with an expression almost of an apology. “Umm...Jenny Coolidge and Tally Evans have been doing a sterling job. They have been left to their own devices...” He held up a hand to indicate I should keep my mouth closed. “...covid continues to wreak havoc with Personnel being off...a third of our number in fact...with the normal Annual Leave numbers we were...are down to a shadow crew...luckily Cases have been down, thank God which may not last for long and those on board could find themselves waist high in progressive Cases...”

Not something I wanted to hear...I came back to work for a little less activity! For a bloody rest!

I sat there for another half hour as he lamented over staff numbers, lack of interesting Cases and his retirement date not that far in the future. I was getting a little pissed as I wanted to know how Angie got her shiner...perhaps he could see me becoming more impatient as he tailed off nodding, saying how good it was to see me back. I wondered not for the first time if I was his only sounding board on the floor for him. I was the most senior, the person who knew the Policy and Procedures Manual back to front...I had thought I did but I must confess it had been some years since I sat and read through it thoroughly.

I wandered back to my desk now devoid of all detritus, my coffee almost finished. I gave Angie a tight smile, a lift of my eyebrows and a shrug to show I was a little out of my depth right now. I sunk into my familiar desk chair as though it was an old friend. I didn't even need to adjust a single thing, so I knew no-one else had sat in it while I was gone.

“Okay...that bruise that you're trying so bloody hard to hide...”

Angie chuckled, spun her chair around to face me.

“Trying to impress a new...arrh...a new beau is how they used to describe the latest love. It lasted two dates. We were at a Bistro Pub enjoying each other's company when a squabble broke out a couple of tables over. You know...the usual...loud voices.

Accusations which ended in the guy taking a swing at his female company which caused her to hit the floor. Not even thinking I stood to calm things down. Got the bruiser for my troubles. A bloody sucker punch. I went down hitting the edge of a chair as I met the floor. That's why there's a bruise down my forehead meeting the black eye. I was hoping my date would be the perfect gentleman to come to my aid. That's the last time I date someone not in the Force! He sat there sipping on his beer. Not a muscle twitched. He ignored my plight. A Bouncer came over to pick me up and the poor lady who was still dazed. Took her and her soon to be forgotten friend out the front door...they didn't even pay for the meal and drinks they had just finished. I supposed it could have been a ruse to not pay the bill...I don't know...it could have been as she didn't look any worse for wear..."

"Yeah...I've heard of that type of scam before..." I offered.

"Yeah...me too. My date still sat there sipping on his beer". She again chuckled. "I gave him the finger, told him to fuck off, picked up my coat, spun a fifty onto the table and left...he's tried several times to ring me...I've ignored his overtures, but the bruising is just coming out. You should see the expressions on people's faces when they think I could be a battered female...bloody hell!"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The longer we sat the less interested we were in heading back to the Office.

We'd driven out to the Manly Promenade as there was little work to catch up on.

We finished off our lunch as I was thinking of a decent coffee...the small 'Cafes' along The Promenade always did good take-away coffees...and an assortment of ice-cream varieties...we both splashed out on our favourite flavours...me...always chocolate...Angie's choice was Passionfruit. I had never tasted that flavour but by the aroma coming from it I promised it would be my next selection!

“I’ve been watching that girl...that woman surfing with the black steamers with a yellow streak down them...she occasionally gets a good ride, but she stuffs it up with the way she wants to attack the break all the time...she hasn’t the weight or strength in her lower body to achieve that carve up. She needs to do specialised weight and gym work to strengthen her lower body”.

“Yeah...nah. She hasn’t got the experience or expertise to attack the wave the way she is doing it. She is not balancing her body making it as one with the board...”

“Yeah...I see what you mean. Just a slight adjustment with her feet would fix that up...”

“Yep...do you think we should go and give her a couple of tips?”

“Yeah, right. I reckon she’d tell us where to get off...in two words...”

“You surf, huh?”

“Yeah...since a grommet growing up...love it...I still wax the board down when the surf is decent sets...”

“Whereabouts?” My young partner had piqued my interest.

“The Central Coast mainly...North Avoca and when the sets curl around the South Avoca rocks which is really sick, I surf there...the best break when it is pumping...big heavy sets”.

“Hah! I would have never picked it...good onya. My patch has always been here at Freshwater...I can’t remember when I started but there was a ‘surf day’ for PE at my Primary School and High School which always lasted nearly all day...and then when me and me mate were picked as undercover cops cruising up and down the North Coast keeping an eye out for Cannabis being transported into Sydney and Newcastle, we were in our element...the Panel Van kitted out with ‘boom boxes’ and a custom made mattress...four boards each strapped to the roof-racks and a cop branded radio...arrh...those were the days...”

“Serious? Yer not joking!”

“Yeah...fair dinks...I reckon we did more surfing than surveillance...arrh...I could tell you a story or two...those were the days when innocence still existed, and drugs were basically no-no except for a little grass when a party was in the air...it was mainly just beer and scotch back then...Tequila too”. I shook my head and smiled. “Where in hell did those days go?” I added.

She nodded then shook her head. I keep forgetting she was a young twenty-something...

“Now, the only time I get into the water is if I go up to my parent’s place on the Coast. Living in Minchinbury has its drawbacks!” She offered, a sadness in her words.

“Minchinbury! You’ve got a fair hike to work every day...”

“It’s not that bad...a bus into Liverpool Station and a fast train straight down to Parramatta. I share a house with three others...two of them coppers...the other a Nursing Sister...but yeah, I miss the surf every day...”

That shared arrangement with a couple of young coppers reminded me of my former young partner Sophie Grasso who had renovated her place at Haberfield with views up the harbour under Gladesville Bridge and a slow walk to the ferry wharf on the point. Doing it up to allow for two ‘Lodgers’ to live in reasonable privacy. Sophie’s love was doing up British Sports Cars. She was on her second MGA I think if she hadn’t finished the exercise while looking for an E-Type Jaguar shell. I must call in to see her...it had been too long...way too long.

My laptop pinged an incoming message. I wasn’t thinking about work in any way, and I got a fright when the e-mail came through. A message sent on from the Boss. The original message from Business NSW in reference to any Tobacconists/Smoke Shops that existed in the same towns as those approved for business and owned by Doug Bera. They had provided more than the Court Order decreed...surprise, surprise which was one for the A-team! We rarely obtain relevant information that we don’t ask for! The woman on the phone must have liked my telephone etiquette and tone...

I read the e-mail grunting several times.

“What?” Angie De Longo asked as she tried to lean over to read my iPad.

I was in a bit of a bind as she had not been across any of the Cold Case Homicide out from Armidale thirty years ago or the homicide shooting and arsonist attack on Doug Bera’s residence. It had been my young partner Tally Evans and my Cases. I didn’t know whether I was supposed to keep De Longo out of that loop or not. Were ‘Tally’ Evans and I supposed to continue to run with it even though Evans was not my partner at present...and besides, she was cruising somewhere in the south-east pacific enjoying the balmy weather hopefully and hooking up with a sincere type of bloke who was looking more for a serious affair and not just a boat fling.

I rang the Boss as I scratched my scalp.

“Joe? Are you okay?”

A silly question, so I thought.

“I’ll think about transferring De Longo to partner Jenny Coolidge when Tally Evans returns from annual leave so that she can slip seamlessly under your umbrella when she returns to the floor. Until then, if you need any help...or...guidance...or suggestions on those two Cases you should ask your partner of the moment...elemental Dear Joe”. He hung up. He had sounded a little frazzled...a little pissed at me.

I exhaled loudly before I suggested we finish off our ice-creams to then wander over to the open-air table and chair settings to enjoy one of their well-known coffees and the salty air smell.

“Mmm...nice”. Angie exclaimed after taking a tentative sip.

“Okay...a little slice of history...” I gazed out to sea before I began, wanting to list as much knowledge as I could in chronological order. Starting from when Lan Soo’s body was found in a ditch beside a little used back road some sixty kilometres south of Armidale thirty years ago, I went through what I knew up to date. Most circumstantial,

some gut feelings and some connecting of dots but not all. Angie nodded at pertinent points looking down at her coffee mug as though deep in concentration. After I had finished my monologue there was silence for some time. Angie played with the froth of her coffee with her teaspoon before she looked up at me.

“How many times was he in prison? You know...your mate... your first snitch?”

“Umm...mate? Hardly a good mate...umm...off-hand five or six times ranging from fifteen months to four years off the top of my head. He was a model prisoner while inside...and a bloody good bloke when he was out...even when we used to spar two or three times a week, he would always be relaxed...nothing seemed to faze him”.

“All his forays into prison were for assault?”

“Yeah...assault and ABH mostly”.

“None for assault causing death...”

“It would appear that way...yeah...nah...the gossip was he had killed a few...I don’t know. That wasn’t the man I knew though the whispers were strong”.

“Yet you have convinced yourself that your old sparring partner caused the death of that Chinese National Lan Soo...with no proof to back it up...and then dumped his body out the back of Whoop Whoop. Does his record show him dumping bodies in wayward spots?”.

“Well...um...no...but the same MO...you know, bashing the tripe out of a person who he was contracted to do so by one of the illegal Bikie gangs...anywhere within Australia”.

“The autopsy concluded that Lan Soo was kicked in the head and face several times. Enough to cause bleeding on the brain. Doug Bera would never kick a man while he was on the ground...he repeated this several times while on trial for previous ABH arrests according to his Trial transcripts...”

“Yes...”

She had done more homework than I had done at the time which seems to have been appallingly little by comparison!

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Unknown to us at fourteen twenty-two hours on the day of the shooting and arson attack last month of Bera and his partner Holding, an unscheduled flight plan was submitted for a China Air aircraft to depart from Sydney Airport around seventeen hundred hours that night. The flight was urgently requested by the Consulate-General of the People's Republic of China in Sydney and would fly direct to Shanghai then onto Beijing China with a stop-over for fuel at Hong Kong International Airport. Persons on board would number twenty-one including a flight crew of three and a cabin crew of seven. Passengers numbered eleven...names not supplied. The only cargo of note was a coffin...body interred unnamed.

It took the AFP and Border Security and Customs two weeks after that date to formally advise us of the flight! The Delay? No reason was given except the flight was unscheduled. Luckily, a complete manifest of all persons on board including crew, cabin members, passengers and the Deceased held within the coffin was issued. Some of the names did not correspond with Chinese nationals supposedly working and residing at the Consulate-General in Surrey Hills. When asked about this discrepancy, the Chinese delegate ignored the question entirely branching off at a tangent about the need for both our countries to maintain pleasantries.

This could be sorted in the future if any of those names appeared on future flights into any airport within Australia. We also requested that all international airports Australia-wide operate Photo Recognition Techniques on all Chinese Nationals entering our country. The need to question certain persons on two homicides was enough reason to obtain this protocol.

We also had enough information to request that the AFP place a red flag warning on all persons entering Australia in the future bearing those names. They were to be held for further questioning.

This of course caused the Chinese Government to appeal such a decision which was rejected by the Australian Government...an icy atmosphere garnished further restrictive trade dealings between the two countries for some years.

Not an unusual thing as China reacted like a spoilt child...perhaps a bully if it did not get its way!

The belated information didn't seem to help our Case, but I knew these bits of data that flew around to eventually land on my desk *could* cause dots to unexpectedly connect in the future...me the forever optimistic copper...fair dinks...

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I sank back into the outdoor metal chair and exhaled loudly. The chair not exactly comfortable. My meanderings causing me to block out all peripheral things until Angie broke through my semi-conscious thoughts.

Yes, I was reminiscing... this had been my first Case as a Grade One Homicide Detective under Detective Senior Sergeant John Church and as such it was a Case that remained unsolved which stuck in my craw. It wasn't something that constantly played across my mind and as the years came and went, less and less thought was expended on the Case. Then, like a warm tropical breeze that caressed my mind, the pages of my career would flutter then stop at that open Case. Most of the time at those moments, little thought was expended on that particular Case. The excuse offered? Like most Murder Dees, I was overworked. Too many Cases. Not enough hours in the day to provide the time to think too hard on an 'old' Case let alone the half dozen present ones I had juggling in the air trying my darndest to encourage their individual progress with

the help of whomever was my designated partner at that time. Wasting time and attendance at Court which could be terribly frustrating wasn't helping either!

I have never liked those Court attendances regardless of the case...it was merely a display of Solicitors and Legal Brains playing out their roles with gusto. Half the time I suspected the opposing Counsels had agreed to a written script that showed them all up in good light!

That had been my excuse since I began as a Murder Dee and through the years, I gathered some dozen...maybe more 'Unsolves'. It was that first Case that did cause me sleepless nights at times. I figured that Abbey my first boss in the Murder Squad was keeping me under his wing overseeing my progress on any one Case that he gave me...yes, also until he could figure out who to partner me with...a mental conundrum that must have kept him up at nights, which always bought a smile when I thought about it. A continuing problem until he had a brainwave partnering me with Marjory Hendricks in a successful union that lasted over ten years. A smile to go with those excellent memories...and a warm feeling...and it was usually a delta woman whom I worked with successfully throughout the years. Each lasting over a ten-year period...usually.

I pinched my nose and tugged at my earlobe as I had been found wanting...and more than that, no Dee wants an 'Unsolved' to his name...a thirty-year-old Case at that! My first homicide case!

I stopped being embarrassed, pulled myself together nodding at my young partner.

"Okay...where do you think the case should go? What is the next step especially now that we have more information and can make assessments that could connect dots that weren't available to us thirty years ago?" I smiled at her, encouraging her to jump across the years.

"Um...as we've discussed before, the Chinese Legation did not seem that interested in Animal Husbandry or Animal Genetics at the New England University for young Chinese Students of the time. An itinerary was provided to the AFP that showed the Legation was interested in several large northern rivers coastal towns and cities and ditto the New England and western Plains areas. Most of those provincial towns and

cities had neither any University Campuses attached or Higher Tertiary and Technical Education facilities at that time. So, what were these people looking for?"

"That these regional cities could support a Tobacconist Store or two..." I replied without thinking about it. I will excuse myself from not thinking along those lines thirty years ago because it wasn't on the radar. Not on any Australian State Police Force thinking as an illegal act. Smoke Shops selling imported illegal cigarettes! Not on!! It was something for the future...in twenty to thirty years' time...around the present time!

The homicide of Lan Soo did show that certain illegal Bikie Gangs were thinking along similar lines planning to open Businesses for themselves around that time. They did not need any competition from overseas criminal elements wanting the nest egg for themselves...or for that matter to share it even with a fellow Bikie Gang! That could explain why there was a degree of feudal confrontation between competing illegal Bikie Gangs in certain provincial cities across the State...and maybe an illegal overseas consortium vying for easy money...that was a huge guess on my part.

Twice a year the excise tax on all tobacco and liquor products was applied which meant that within several years the cost of a packet of cigarettes within Australia would be the costliest of any country on the planet! A compounding effect that pushed the retail price of a packet of cigarettes to new highs.

"As this latest information from Business NSW confirms, every town that Doug Bera applied for a license to open a Smoke Shop in, there was either one already open and run by one of the illegal Bikie Gangs or...a Chinese Firm based in Shanghai...and Doug had two other applications submitted to expand his little empire further...easy pension money for him".

"Enough to cause a reaction...we know our killers and arsonists of your mate and his lover were associated with the Chinese Trade Embassy here in Sydney...how are these confirmed criminals from here and overseas able to open such businesses. I didn't think that possible..." Angie stopped to finish off her coffee. "Isn't there some Law that prohibits known felons...criminals with form from opening a business here in NSW...and Victoria? The same for Bankruptees?"

“Huh...both Business NSW and Victorian Small Business Chamber do not quibble about having known felons as Businesspersons for these Smoke Shops. Why? I don’t know but neither Government body, Federal or State investigates applicants who submit the filled out pro-forma to establish a Smoke Shop or Tobacconist wherever in NSW or Victoria. An oversight perhaps that’s never been addressed by State or Federal jurisdictions...perhaps the ‘kickbacks’ are way too good. A similar situation in China where it seems criminal groups are protected. We’ll never get to interview or arrest those responsible for Doug Bera and his mate’s deaths...unless they get too cocky and land back on our shores...they will then be approachable...maybe...if not, this Case will go the way of all Unsolves becoming just a statistic in the annual Australian Crime Committee Report!”

I sat forward then struggled to my feet.

“Scuse me Angie. I think I’ve had one too many coffees...won’t be long”. I explained as I made a beeline to the public toilets. Not really wanting to be a client of the public building as they always stank of stale urine.

I slowly returned a little bent over shaking my head and again slumped in my chair with a sigh. I took a sip or two of the dregs of my coffee now gone cold. Silly really as it was the coffee that worked my bladder overtime...

“Who...I repeat...who...nah, hang on...” I finished off my cooled coffee before continuing. “Who was the fucking sod who concluded that those toilet paper sizes were to be regulated Australia wide...and who regulated the length and width of a toilet paper roll. They have these little perforations every four inches or so along the length of the roll which often tear off in your hand. Not big enough to wipe your bum so you waste it wanting a longer length to clean up the mess on your arse. I reckon he died a happy man after a life-long career that saw his suggestions on these sizes adopted...which meant that toilet roll holders could also be regulated to one size to fit the one size toilet roll. What a wonderful world it would be if more thought was given to a myriad other things that could be regulated...standardised”.

Angie looked across at me. Frowned, asking was I all right. It was obvious she had trouble following my thoughts at times...she’ll learn!

“Yes...no worries. Another ice-cream, huh?” I wondered what was eating her.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Ambrose ‘Ozzie’ Curtiss was a big bloke.

His parents were ardent cricket watchers and had met by accident at the famous Tied Test between the West Indies and Australia played at the GABBA in Brisbane in 1960. Both loved the West Indies team of that era when they had ruled the game of cricket worldwide. In particular, the four West Indian fast bowlers who caused the most experienced batsmen of the time to tremble in their boots. Curtly Ambrose was their favourite, thus the Boss’s first name. He was not as tall as his namesake, but he still felt compelled to duck his head as he passed through any door opening. As wide in the shoulders as Curtly but unfortunately, he didn’t have an athletic bone in his body. He could catch a cold easier than any ball size from a golf ball up to a party balloon...but he loved being a cop...his calling he would always say.

He shifted into the Boss of the Homicide Squad from the Officer-in-Charge Night and Dog Shift of the Murder Squad which he ruled over for over a dozen years or so to obtain more money but more importantly, earn additional superannuation over that contribution he gave on the Night Shift...and to wind down as he only had four years to go until retirement age at sixty-seven. Moved into the position as there was no other suitable candidate and at the sudden and unexpected death of our lovable Denny Turner, the chair needed to be filled. Maybe true, maybe not but he was usually in the Office before us day guys started dribbling in and was still in his Office as the night shift guys wandered in. He would always have a staff meeting with some of the night shift guys and supervisors once a week to keep up with Cases and who was being lax...wanting to know why.

He was a good Boss who looked after his people, and he had a genuine interest in his charges’ lives; their families and their interests.

It was he who re-introduced the weekly Monday morning staff meetings with us dayshift members...a popular choice with attendance one hundred per cent! It never had to be enforced which shows the enthusiasm us day members had for the idea. Often it was the only time that we caught up with colleagues and their Cases...and the latest rumour and office gossip.

It was some time ago in ancient history when our glorious leader DSI John Church aka 'Abbey' first introduced the arrangement.

I can't remember when and why the meetings were curtailed...but everyone complained when they were stopped...again complaining just as loud when the idea was again mooted. *'Taking up too much of the time which we could spend on our Cases'*, was the common cry. But to a man, no-one would miss that morning session even if it was just to check in with their fellow detectives and learn of the latest hullabaloo and rumour...or in some cases, to start another!

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

As I entered the smaller of the two Conference Rooms that we now had on the Murder Squad floor, Ozzie waved to me. He stood and walked towards me, guiding me by the arm back out into the corridor and to a nearby bench seat. He indicated that I should sit...this wasn't good. I glanced at Angie. She looked distraught...this wasn't good.

Ozzie sat beside me.

"Joe? There's no gentle way of saying this. Sophie...Sophie Grasso, your former partner of some eighteen months..."

"More than two years I reckon...going on five". I have no idea why I said this except that feeling in the bottom of my guts was weighing heavily on everything I said or did.

“Yes...close to five years”. The Boss responded, correcting himself. To be fair he was not around when Sophs and I were a team. “She’s in surgery...there was an altercation...a DV incident. She was stabbed four times...not looking good...the aggressive husband...and his wife turned on Sophie and her partner of the time. Sophie came off second best...”

“What was she doing out at the cutting edge...she took a desk job to get away from all the violence and blood and guts...”

The Boss shook his head. He had told me all he knew.

“I think it’s a little early for you to go to the hospital...she has been put into an induced coma”. He sadly shook than lowered his head.

“I can’t sit here Boss...”

“I understand...” He leant forward to rest his elbows on his knees. “Angie? If you could stay for the Staff Meeting...there’s some things I’d like to discuss with you on that homicide/arson Case of yours. You’re up to speed on that Case of yours?” He asked as he turned to her. Straightening up he nodded a few times.

“Yes Boss”.

“Good...” He stood wearily to make his way into the Conference Room. The general noise and humdrum of the room quietened to a hush as he made his way to the podium.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Doctors weren’t certain when they could bring Sophie out of her induced coma. The right radial nerve to her arm had been neatly severed in the attack with the Surgeons

using cutting edge techniques to try and repair the damage. They weren't over-confident.

I sat outside the ICU Ward for several hours. The following day I did the same, wondering why I was seated there. Sure, Sophs and I had a good relationship throughout our brief partnership...well, in terms of my extended partnership with both Marge Hendricks and Shelley Shields, Sophie and I had only a brief relationship of half that time. We had gelled together as much as an adult and a junior officer can. She was a regular for dinner with my three girls loving her and she in return. Tellie was also fond of her. Me? I loved the occasional zip around the block in her fully restored MGA, the motor balanced to racing trim. The wind in my hair; the throaty sound of the exhaust. I felt young every time I was given the chance to drive the thing.

No matter how hard I tried to remember those days, for the life of me I could not come up with a good reason why I shut her out once she left the Murder Squad. Perhaps that was why I was spending hours sitting outside the ICU rooms...yes, I know there was no hope of Sophie knowing of my proximity but maybe partly out of guilt I had a need to sit as close as I could to her. The following day I was joined by Sophie's mother and her Uncle 'Dad'. He her mother's older brother who had adopted Sophs as his own when her father was killed in a multi-vehicle pile-up on the Canberra Motorway. I'd seen neither for the same period that I had not seen Sophie...around three years. Uncle 'Dad' had aged and now needed a walking stick to help him get around. He would be devastated...as much as Sophs if she could no longer use her right arm. Not only would it mean the end of her police career, but more importantly for her, it would prevent her from ever working on her Sports Car rebuilds again...that knowledge would shatter her!

Tellie and I decided to visit Sophs early on the Friday evening. Our two girls were old enough to stay at home by themselves, ordering in their favourite pizzas to settle in watching their 'bestest' TV show.

We arrived at the ICU ward as a large group of visitors were leaving. Apparently asked to leave by the nursing staff as they were making too much noise which was upsetting other patients.

"Not much different". Sophie's mother whispered to me as they emerged from the ward. "She's in and out of sleep...or unconsciousness not knowing what was going on around

her. Uncle Dad and I skipped dinner. Would you care to join us at the Chinese down the road. It has a good reputation...”

“Yes...surely. We’d love to”. Tellie purred.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

If nothing else, he had patience. It had kept him alive and in business for many years. He changed his bodyweight to his other leg as he leant down to eye through the scope.

“Arrh...your time is coming to an end, my friend”.

He watched as the vague figure of his target walked unsteadily down his front driveway towing two wheely garbage bins. He deposited them neatly at the gutter line before he steadied himself to look up at the stars. He didn’t feel the bullet enter his body, dead centre between his shoulder-blades. He fell forward onto the top of one Otto bin before sliding to the ground, lying on his back in the gutter staring blank-eyed up at the sky.

The shooter didn’t wait for a second look before standing, sliding the wire stock into the body of the rifle, unscrewing the weighty noise suppressor that only stopped the reverb of the shot. He slipped its length into a slim pocket of his trousers between his hip and knee. The barrel came off easily. A bayonet connection. He slipped the length of the barrel into another corresponding slim pocket in his combat trousers. Its length from his knee to his ankle. A little cumbersome that did impede him running but it was better than having the entire rifle body exposed. He slipped a handle around up and over the scope position, testing the weight of his ‘parcel’. It looked like a battery charger or something if you didn’t look too closely.

He worked his way around the vehicle up on blocks to jog to the rear fence line which was partially collapsed thanks to his efforts some weeks ago. His van was in the next street.

He was gone before anyone spied the body lying in the gutter at the front of the neat suburban home.

CHAPTER TWENTY

“How is she?” The Boss asked quietly.

“Not much different. The Hospital has limited the number of visitors permitted to two at any one time...apparently there were too many last night...and the night before. It was getting out of hand”. I bowed my head as I nodded sadly. The Boss patted me on the shoulder.

“A popular girl, huh?” He relayed softly.

“Yeah...more than I knew when she was my partner. I guess most would be from the various British Sports Car Clubs...she had a huge following with them...”

“Mmm...the more she sleeps the better the outcome. It’s the body’s way of recuperating...rejuvenating”. He patted me again before I followed him into the small Conference Room. It was the usual Monday morning staff meeting.

“Okay people...let’s begin...any takers to start proceedings off? No? Okay, then I’ll start off. There was a shooting homicide at around ten on Friday night out Lansvale way. One shot that went in between the victim’s shoulder blades to tear part of his heart out as the bullet exited. An over-the-top shell loading so Ballistics are saying. Our Shooter obviously loads his own shells which could mean ex-ADF person. He was a little out in his assessment of powder required. A Marksman. It was a good hour, so they say before someone noticed the vic lying in the gutter beside the two Otto Bins he had positioned to be emptied the following Saturday morning. The Gang Related Crimes Unit have taken control as the victim was the former 2IC of the illegal Black Knights Motorbike gang. He was voted out of his position when his Boss lost control in a democratic vote last Summer. Igor Polski kept his patch, his colours and his hog...someone still didn’t like him and resorted to old-fashion methods to deal with him as a possible competitor. The GRCU boys think Igor was making a run as president at the next voting season in a year’s time which someone didn’t like apparently...that’s according to the GRCU team in charge of the investigation. Could be I guess...but there are alternatives...”

“Anything to do with us, Boss?” One of my colleagues asked. A hand up as though we were back at school.

“No...I just thought I’d fill you in on happenings outside our sphere of influence. We can get isolated...in our own little world...yer know?” He looked around at his ‘charges’ who it would seem were not that interested. They had enough on their plates to worry about without it being weighed down by another homicide shooting they would never take control of. As we all knew, the Gang Related Crime Unit would selfishly guard their Case not wanting to share it with anyone especially with the Murder Squad. It was only a matter of time before GRCU relinquish control of the shooting homicide...for someone to take control...until then, all Murder Dees would ignore all things relating to that homicide...

I was being singled out as the Case Officer possibly months before the Case was shovelled our way, so I caustically thought as someone wittily nominated me as the Ace!

Ozzie called for quiet as me and my colleagues objected to any assertion for the future.

“I’ll bet my house on it...but that’s in the future. Lets’ go over each of your Cases so some bright spark can/may help in proceedings if needed...”.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Sophie was sitting up in bed. The entire right side of her body was held tightly in bandages with a pully system holding her arm up at an angle.

She was happy to see me even though she broke out in tears. Well...that’s how I took it in any case. It had been a long time, one which I felt guilty about looking at her. I too got a bit teary eyed.

I introduced Angie to her. They looked intently at one another, sizing up each other. Sophie looked earnestly at Angie before Sophs began a little tutorial. Holding out her left hand for Angie to hold tightly.

“Listen to him...follow him like a lost puppy as he’ll teach you quickly the ins and outs of any homicide investigation. And some of his guesses from out of the blue turn out to be facts that have broken many a Case open...he’s good at that. His mind can work in mysterious ways. He’s a good teacher, mark my words...I’ve always said he should be a Tutor down at the Academy which he poo-pooed every time I mentioned it which is a loss for the Academy. I know there are some who still hold out hope for that transition”.

She nodded to add emphasis to those words. “How long have you partnered the old codger?” She asked as she glanced at me, that familiar grin shining through.

“Eighteen months...almost two years, I reckon”. Angie replied already experiencing what Sophie had succinctly explained.

“She take up the slack after I opted out?” She asked me. A glint in her eye. “You’ll have to learn to accept his twisted sense of humour, which is different from his sarcasm, his occasional flights of fancy that will have you completely baffled...”

“Yeah...like the other day he comes back from having a piss castigating the bastard who invented the size of a toilet roll sheet...you know, where the roll is regularly perforated...out of the blue...not linked to anything we had been discussing...had me completely bamboozled...”

“There you go. I wish I’d written down all of those...he had some beauties...and don’t get him started on religion. I’ll warn you now”.

Both women laughed. It was then that I realised they were around the same age. Sophie was now in her early thirties and Angie as an adult Detective-in-training was also in that age group.

We stayed until Sophie began showing signs of tiring hoping she will be able to repair. To bounce back to her old self.

“Notice that?” Angie asked as we entered an empty Lift. “No mention of her injury, its diagnosis or prognosis...”

“Yeah...and she didn’t mention any of her latest sports car restorations... yer don’t talk about it, it doesn’t exist...I hope for her sake it turns out to be true...it’ll gut her if her arm doesn’t heal”. That thought hung with me all the way home. I didn’t feel like eating and instead went straight to bed. Around ten that night I had a large Scotch with warm milk and slept like a baby but next morning I felt I hadn’t slept at all. That feeling of dread hanging over me...

Tellie had given up early in the night and slept in Danni’s old bed as I was tossing and turning for most of the night according to her. How she knew that I didn’t have a clue about as she’d given up on me earlier in the night...

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Detective-in-training Tally Evans stood from her desk to stretch her back. She then bent forward to touch her toes. She stood tall before twisting her body at her hips bringing a knee up to oppose that twist as she did. She repeated it but in the opposite direction. I cringed as I doubt my body could withstand the pain!

It was good to have her back, sore back and all...

“Bloody hell!” She exclaimed as I finished relaying to her Sophie Grasso’s injury and the chances of a full recovery. “This is taking longer than I thought to re-acclimatise myself to this grind...oh! For another cruise up into the tropics. Japan next time, I think. Do you think Sophie will bounce back...yer know, get the use of her right arm again”. She asked as she turned to me.

I straightened in my chair, tipping my head back to look at the ceiling.

“I hope so. She’ll lose her job here in the Force but worse still for her, she’ll not be able to continue restoring British sports cars which will devastate her...she’ll be guttered...but it’s early days yet. She has a fair way to go. You can bet the bastard who knifed her gets off on a ‘good behaviour bond’. Don’t that shit yer!?”

“Yeah...it seems to me we are treated like punching bags and the Court thinks the same thing. Rewarding the bastard who got the shot in with a suspended sentence or something just as light with no jail time or arrest noted...it makes me so mad when I hear about it...it’s happening too often! The thin blue line is getting thinner...who would want a career as a punching bag!?”

I looked up at her, a tight smile at her rant...man, she sure can get going when she wanted to...she reminded me of Shelley Shields, another of my delta partners. When she left to have babies through adoption processes, I thought my career was over...then along came Sophs for a brief period by comparison to Shields’ ten-year indenture. Sophs had revitalised me and induced interest in my job once again.

“Tally? Joe?” Angie cut across our conversation. “Coffee for all of us. My shout”.

“Yeah...nah. Go for it, girl”. I held up my hand by way of apology. Calling anyone of the opposite sex ‘girl’ or ‘girlie’ was not permitted in this bright new world. “Sorry”. I

mumbled as I bowed my head in apprehension, waiting for angry words to come from either partner. Surprised when nothing was said in retaliation.

“There was a piece on the late News last night about the AFP and Border Force and Customs seizing the largest shipment of contraband cartons of cigarettes and vapes at Port Botany. Three of those huge shipping containers jammed packed...hell...that’s a bloody lot of money gone down the drain for whomever organised and supplied the shipment. They can’t keep losing money like that...”

“Shows you how much of the stuff gets through to cover the loss. Just look at the Cocaine wave that is swallowing Sydney now. A huge amount of the white powder is being confiscated but they still find more of the stuff every week. Again, it shows how much is entering the marketplace not seized...”

“And how many coke heads, vapers and smokers there are in this fine city”.

“Yeah...we’ll never get on top of it, will we. Makes you wonder why we keep on trying...”

“Complete societal breakdown would be the outcome if we stopped trying...the world as we know it would collapse...complete chaos would reign. Can you imagine Australia in the midst of a civil war? I can’t...what a hell of a way to fuck up a grand country...and you can bet we’d be on our own. No-one would come to help us, not even the Yanks”.

“Mmm...I guess”. She murmured in response. The young see it differently to us cynical old bastards!

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

He scabbled out a hollow foxhole that he could comfortably lie in. He unrolled a ground sheet, flattening out any wrinkles or folds before he carefully slid onto it. Satisfied, he lifted his backpack to sit beside him, unzipping the bag as he did.

He looked around sure that he had not been spotted as he made his way across two empty allotments waiting their turn to be ‘housed out’.

This was a new suburb half completed.

He had wiggled his way under a half completed dwelling up on stilts; high enough to allow the new occupants when construction was completed, a panoramic view of the valley and the mountains behind. The best block on the Estate. His position allowed him a level sighting of the suburban road that steeply climbed then disappeared over a crest. His target lived on the higher side of the street just before the crest line.

Another scudding shower passed over the area. A biting wind made him shiver. He'd have to concentrate to block out any peripheral conditions when he was aiming in, he thought, shifting his weight around hoping he could get that wee bit more comfortable...and warm.

He heard the blat of the Harley long before it began its climb up the incline to its abode. Halfway up the hill, the shooter let two rounds go in quick succession. Both met their target, the middle of the Harley rider's back.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

"Listen up everyone!" The Boss shouted as he stepped from his Office holding a sheet of A4 paper. "A Bulletin just came down from the GRCUnit. Another shooting, like the one the other week. Some of you would know the victim, I'm sure. I did. A regular nice guy. One of the few in the Bikie ranks. Shot twice in the back as he rode home in that shitty weather last night...I could think of better transport methods in weather like that. Joseph 'Little Joe' Shapiro..." There were several expletives and gasps from those on the floor who knew the little bloke well. "We'll take up a collection for a bouquet of flowers at his funeral. If anyone knew his missus; she was a fair dinkum girl who didn't deserve this. Farewell 'Little Joe'".

He stood still for some moments as though in prayer before he spun on his heel to disappear into his Office, closing the door behind him.

The news didn't mean much to my two young colleagues as they slumped back in their chairs, raising eyebrows at one another. They were a different generation.

"I wonder if he had any Smoke or Vape Shops..." Angie murmured.

“What did you say?” I responded. Surprise in my tone.

She repeated her comment.

“Why would you say that?” I asked more than a little mystified. It seemed to come out of the blue with little connection to what was going on around us. She looked around. Shrugged. Held her arms akimbo.

“I don’t know...it just popped out...I wasn’t even thinking about it...like you do on occasions...you know, not think about what you’re about to say next...it just comes out usually surprising who-ever”.

“Okay...yeah...alright”. I scratched my neck, pulled at my earlobe. I wasn’t about to let the matter ride as things like that can lead to surprise endings. “Arrh...then find out...and Angie...the first guy...”

“Igor Polski...I think his name was...or something like that”.

“Yeah him...Igor Polski...a cruel son-of-a-bitch...see whether he was also in the trade”.

“What do you mean...like...the drug trade?”

“No girl. If he owned any Smoke or Tobacconist Shops...that’s what you were thinking, wasn’t it?”

She still looked puzzled as I walked towards the Boss’s office. As I did the two girls put their heads together trying to figure out how they were to gain such information. I smiled to myself thinking this would be a wild goose chase...though I guess they could surprise me. It had only just gone nine in the morning. Time soon for my second coffee.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

My concern that my two young colleagues had not shown up all morning evaporated when I took a call from Border Force and Customs at Kingsford Smith Airport. They were detaining a Chinese National on a Tourist Visa because the Photograph Recognition Techniques (PRT) had identified his face as one of the three that had been

photographed at the death house of Doug Bera and his mate...months ago now. Time was slipping...we had requested an “All Points” out on the three with reasonably acceptable photographs of them. These images went to all Police Stations Nationwide and to Customs and Border Force personnel at all International Airports Australia-wide. A ‘Hold and Detain’ Notice had been issued as well to all international airports Australia-wide if alarm bells began to ring.

His current Tourist Visa and Passport named him as Seong Doe...a name that did not ring any bells with me. The Chinese were playing games as was their want.

I dropped out of the line waiting for a coffee at the Plaza Coffee Jar as I fast walked towards the Basement area of our building to grab my Unmarked. A sudden thought slowed me...had my two colleagues taken the Unmarked for some purpose. Narh...they would not do that as it was against all rules and regulations. Neither of them could drive the Unmarked without a Grade Three or higher accompanying them...they had stated on the ‘WhereRU? Board’ that they would be in Police Intelligence and the GRC Unit upstairs for a couple of hours...it was now past 1400 hours in the afternoon with still sight unseen.

I reached the Unmarked sitting silently in its usual spot. It was me who sighed a sigh of relief!

I called upstairs to notify them that I would be at the International Airport for most of the afternoon. My return uncertain. As I drove out of the building, I turned on the radiator grill and rear parcel tray blue and red lights and primed the siren. I was in a hurry...

This was the first time I had headed to the Airport since several vehicular tunnels were completed. The trip to the airport was now two-thirds underground. The siren whooped and reverberated off the concrete roof and walls causing most drivers to veer from the outside lane quickly. I reckon I made the trip in record time.

My heart sank as I idled waiting to gain approval to enter the Australian Customs compound at the airport. Two black limousines with blacked out windows slowly exited the compound. A National Peoples Republic of China flag mounted on the lead vehicle fluttering softly in the breeze of their progress.

“You missed the blighter by minutes, Detective”. Senior Custom Officer Alena ‘Alice’ Cooper advised. “Bad luck, eh?” Her one compromise to her nickname was a nose ring and one around her right eyebrow.

“Mmm...I’ll bet there is an unscheduled flight of a China Air A380 taking off this afternoon from here...bet the house on it. The bloody flight with only a small number of passengers”.

“Mmm...they had the paperwork signed by our Prime Minister. The date several weeks ago. Something about a security check-up exercise conducted by their internal personnel. That is why their Security Officer flew in on a Tourist Visa”. She handed me a copy of the letter permitting them to transport their Officer under diplomatic immunity back to their Emissary at Strawberry Hills. “Sorry...”

“Yeah...not half as sorry as me. The bloke is wanted for questioning regarding two homicide deaths several months ago...little bloody chance that will ever happen now...they won’t make the same mistake again...shit! They were testing our security arrangements...the bastards!”

“Yeah...well...they’ve got enough bods over there to not make the same mistake twice...yer know, how many billion...”.

I nodded; right royal pissed off as I exited the Customs Office. Looking forlorn as I passed through the metal-detector gate and having my name checked off the list. Returning the large ‘Visitor’s Badge’ I was on the verge of declaring that Jesus Christ was a bastard!

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Whenever the three of us manage to be in the pool together, there’s a challenge. As I leisurely swam my ten laps, my two young colleagues attempted to swim double that at the same time, trying to outswim each other. Invariably this amounted to gulps of air and an inordinate amount of time under the showers recuperating before they began on the running or rowing machine. Even the overseeing Coach suggested they slow down...that never seemed to work for them as their daily competition seemed to fuel their day.

We were lying side by side on our own massage table enjoying the morning pummelling...well...putting up with it! I always wondered how hurting you in such a

way could be beneficial...though my back did feel free for the rest of the day...go figure...

“How did you guys go yesterday?” I asked between elbow presses to my lumbar region.

“Not as well as we thought we would”. Tally Evans replied. “We thought we had it all worked out...”

“Pride before a fall, eh?” I suggested with a chuckle. Lifting my head to turn to her, I smiled. “Let this be a lesson, huh?”

“No Boss...we still think our hypothesis is sound...we just must connect the dots in the correct order. We’re still dealing with three homicide deaths that are on our desks”.

I nodded before relaxing my head back into the breathing hole feeling like a submerged upside-down whale.

“Don’t fall into the trap of trying to make the facts fit your theory...it’s always got to be the other way around”. I tutored. The sound of my voice muffled though there was still an edge of condescension about it.

Silence was their answer, and it wasn’t until we had showered, dressed and was walking towards the Plaza Coffee Jar that Angie half turned to me.

“We’d like a trip up to Armidale...to the Retail Traders Association up there...that’s where it all seems to have begun...in the Nineties...”

“What!? Thirty years ago! What started thirty years ago?” I asked feeling as though I was missing something important. “Wait! Wait!” I began, holding my head. “Wait until we get our coffees and sit somewhere away from the crowd so you can tell me where all this began”.

“Out here at a table...or around your desk”. Angie suggested. “It’s a nice day although that breeze has a chill in it...” Quelling any thought of sitting outside.

“That’s better. I think we need to appear for the Boss’s sake. He seemed to be a bit jittery about your absence yesterday. Asked me several times where I thought you were before I skedaddled out to the airport for no result...must tell you what happened...a bugger, yes...my desk”.

“What’s this about the Airport?” Angie asked.

I filled them both in on my unsatisfactory visit to the Border Force and Customs Office at the airport. Waiting to be given clearance to enter their compound as two vehicles from the Chinese Embassy eased out through the same gate...I had missed my target by minutes. The bastard was identified as one of our suspects in the Bera homicide case. He had come in on a Tourist Visa under a different Passport name. He was picked up by the PRT protocol and detained as requested. The system was working perfectly.

“Bet that got up your nose!” Angie replied.

“More than you know young lady. Thankfully you were not with me in the car. As it was, I reckon I turned the car red with swear words!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The three of us sat around my desk. Me with my feet resting on the lower slid-out drawer of my desk. Boots off showing I needed new socks. My coffee close to my hand resting on my desktop. Angie beside the end of my desk using my desktop to sit her large coffee. Her feet sitting on the other side of the bottom draw. Tally sitting with her legs straight out, both feet resting on the second layer of a shelving unit I had made to fit all the current Murder Books into. The Unit sitting neatly behind my chair and hard up to the desk behind me. Her coffee resting on the top shelf which I was squeamish about. I didn’t want coffee cup squirls left on the timber finish. It was still my pride and joy...

As soon as I had lugged the 150 long by 120 high solid timber unit into the Office, everyone wanted one...I refused saying I did not want to spend all my idle time making shelving units for every guy in the place. An enterprising young son of one of the Detectives took orders. I understand he made enough money to put down as a deposit on a vehicle he had always wished for.

Okay, it wasn't as good as my unit which had sliding dovetail joints on every shelf section and centre uprights and half-dovetail joints on all four external corners which meant not a nail or screw was used except for good quality glue and tight joints.

His was trench butt-joints, half-butt joints, glue and nails! The poor man's version!

What the heck, most of the guys couldn't tell the difference!

For that time of early morning, I was surprised at the number of Detectives on the floor. Sure, there will always be an absence of personnel...sick leave, long service leave, annual holidays, Court time, compensation time and filling another position elsewhere...but we had an almost full complement...something rarely seen.

"Did you catch the News this morning?" Angie asked to begin proceedings directing the question at me.

I shook my head. I had no idea how many times I had informed them of not watching my 'you beaut' TV or listening to the car radio as I drove into work...but it was a regular remark.

"There was another arsonist attack on a Smoke Shop. Terrigal on the Central Coast".

I knew where Terrigal was. I had lived there for a few years early in my career working as an Undercover Cop.

"Anyone hurt?" I asked not showing much interest.

"No...but it was a close shave, so they say. A neighbouring business with Units above were severely damaged by flames, smoke and water. People were trapped and needed

to be rescued by an outside ladder...a bit hairy supposedly as several tenants were elderly persons”.

“Any takers as to the perps?” I asked.

“No...but I’m working on it...”

“Leave it be Angie. It’s outside your area of responsibility...I would imagine the GRCUnit is all over it...and the local Gosford cops would be there too”.

“Sorry Boss, but we disagree. Everything that is happening today in regards to arson and torching attempts of Smoke Marts, Tobacconists and Smoke Shopfronts has connections back to Lan Soo’s homicide death outside Armidale thirty years ago...and Bera and his mate’s death last month...hear us out, eh?” Tally Evans demanded, staring at me.

I went to respond but shut my mouth instead. A better policy all round so I thought. The two young women were enthused with their proposition. I nodded to allow them to use me as their sounding-board.

“Armidale first...the local Forensic Trace people had several hours with the body when it was first discovered in that deep ditch beside the road. Most of what they found was either lost or contaminated over the years. They weren’t as thorough or scientific as the Chinese people. Less than two days after the body was found, it was being flown back to China...with the rest of the Legation that came with Lan Soo being fellow passengers. The Chinese kept all the forensic litter found on the body. Skin tissue, blood, hair, until DNA technology caught up with all Law Enforcement Jurisdictions world-wide. They were able to isolate those items and extract DNA trace. They checked against the NSW Criminal Records to identify a person who had a similar modus operandi...your mate Doug Bera’s name emerged. It may have taken them five...ten years to obtain the match which confirmed that your mate was their man...you know the rest...”

“Wait one moment...” I angrily responded. “Not an ounce of evidence to back up your supposition...not one ounce of truth!” Several of our colleagues close by turned at my raised voice. “Doug Bera never killed anyone...sure...bashed many close to an inch of

their life but not one homicide can be attributed to him though I'll admit, there are a number of outstanding warrants against him for homicides...nothing proven ...and we're shit...talking about revenge some thirty years later...not on!" I wondered why I was defending the man so strongly...he wasn't that close a mate...

"Maybe Lan Soo had a thin skull". Tally suggested. I lowered my head, shaking it several times. She was being a smart-arse!

"A nice story, ladies...but that is all it is...a story".

Tally held up her hand before she spoke again. They were not about to let it go that easily. She emphasised their commitment to the theory by pressing both hands onto my desktop several times.

"At that time when the Faculty Head of the New England University was somewhat disappointed at the Chinese Legation's enthusiasm and a distinct absence to ask pertinent questions about Animal Husbandry and Genetics, the two Bikie gangs of disrepute in the districts, were the Rebels and the White Skulls. We are certain they both had submissions in for approval to open a Smoke Mart each in Armidale *at that time*...hence our need to visit the area to examine the early records of the Shire Council and the Armidale Traders Association. There are now four Smoke Shops in town and the surrounding suburbs owned not by those two Bikie Gangs but by the Shanghai Manufacturing and Export Company...yer got two guesses where they're based, Boss...make your nose itch, huh? And Boss...we are sure the Chinese Trader stepped in after the two existing businesses were torched...burnt to the ground".

I again lifted my hand to quell any further discussion.

"There's not a skerrick of proof in what you say..." I was getting a little peeved at their insistence to keep going with their theory.

"That's why we want to visit Armidale and the local Retailers Association and Shire Council. They were the organisations who granted approval for such concerns to open and operate back then...and why we visited Business NSW and the NSW Retailers and Traders Association in the CBD yesterday". She saw me open my mouth... "You had

no reason to be suspicious as we went by train”. A smile as she would have known I was spitting chips thinking they had taken the Unmarked. “Business NSW are becoming more co-operative without demanding Court Orders. The NSWRTA couldn’t be more co-operative, almost falling over themselves as though they sat around picking their noses most of the time...but we seek further proof from certain provincial cities...a round trip...and both those organisations are willing to supply written information confirming what I have just recited...”

“You’re not going to get the Boss agreeing to any trips anywhere on what you have offered up to me so far”. Me being the Devil’s Advocate.

It was Angie’s turn to hold up her hand.

“During that Nineties period it was the time of cannabis and cocaine with heroin beginning its scourge. In Armidale there were two Bikie gangs competing with one another for business. They both saw the opportunity of easy money into the future owning and operating Smoke Shops. Those businesses lasted no more than six months. That business now operated solely by a Chinese Company...Shanghai Manufacturing. It has four shops in the vicinity. The Chinese Legation led by Lan Soo were interested in six provincial cities none of which had any ties with Universities or Campuses of higher learning...so what was it that interested the Mission? Four of those six provincial towns and cities now have Smoke Shops own, operated and managed by Shanghai Manufacturing with all competition shops closed for various reasons...mostly arson attacks. Now it is getting more serious in Greater Sydney, the Central Coast, Newcastle and Wollongong. Arson attacks of these establishments within those boundaries becoming more common...and we have three deaths in total with more to come...”

“Taking a guess, Shanghai Manufacturing could be the culprit wanting in into the lucrative east coast businesses...that a fair assumption?” I asked a little caustically. “And now things are more serious with loss of life”.

Both my young colleagues nodded in unison.

“Little Joe Shapiro? He owned two Smoke Shops in the Campbelltown area. Igor Polski? He owned and operated three shops in the Camden area...a growing area of the Sydney sprawl. Shanghai Manufacturing have submissions in to open several shops in

those two areas left vacant by the deaths of those two men...which takes the tally of linked homicides up to five...Business NSW will confirm in writing the original owners of smoke marts in those two areas which now have submissions for Shanghai Manufacturing to open businesses of their own...in those two towns...that's not coincidental". The look on her face challenging me to disagree or to at least, come up with a workable alternative.

"Mmm...yeah, well..."

"Those facts will be confirmed in writing" Angie reiterated.

"...we need to build a case of Matterhorn size before the Federal Government even thinks about passing legislation to prevent overseas Companies from opening and operating such businesses here in Australia...and to shut down the trade totally to stop even Outlaw Biekie Gangs from stepping into the void would be our number one choice. The Federal Government is losing huge amounts of retail tax while these operations exist...it is to their advantage to close that loophole, and one must ask why there has been little action so far in that regard".

Tally stared me down over the lip of her coffee container. I knew that both would continue with their vendetta even if I was somewhat iffy in my opinion...but they'd provided a very good linkage even if most of it was still a supposition...a theory.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

"Let me think about it for a while".

I stood to walk from the floor, surprising my two young colleagues with my sudden departure.

I returned about an hour later, two large coffees and an iced tea in my hands. I settled, giving out my largesse.

“Okay...” I began after I had taken a couple of gulps of my coffee, thinking the world was in sequence. “From the top...slow and in order from thirty years ago”. I gestured with my hand for them to begin their long narrative again. I settled back in my chair, a yellow pad on my desk beside my large coffee container, a biro at the ready to note any discrepancies and questions I needed to ask as they progressed.

It was Angie who took up the bit after the two exchanged glances...simply and in a smooth voice. Me nodding every now and again to encourage the account. Taking rough notes of any changes to the discourse including any omissions from the first time they had told me of their proposition. As Angie finished, Tally commented on any important oversights that Angie had missed. Tally had been keeping notes herself.

I nodded as she wound down, pleased with their summation. I commented on various notes I had taken and listened to their reasons which only added weight to their story.

“Well done gir...umm...young ladies...my young partners. You’ve thought this through thoroughly. I’ll take this to the Boss as soon as I can and when he can fit me into his busy schedule...as I’ve stated, well done...to both of you. You have provided a firm base onto which we can commence the investigation into the five deaths we think are associated with your thesis...well done”.

Both seemed pleased with my assessment, my pleasure at their investigative skills and my accolades at their thinking.

I walked to Boss’s Office door but was turned away by a large flutter of his hand.

“Not today Joseph...and tomorrow is not looking good either. Is it important Joe?” he asked as he looked up leaving the thick file balancing off his stomach.

“I think it is, Boss. My two young partners have come up with a plausible assumption that links my first Unsolve back in the Nineties and to the shooting homicides of Doug Bera and his mate and of Igor Polski and Little Joe Shapiro a couple of weeks back”.

“They’re both GRCUnit cases, Joe”. He stated coldly, looking at me from under hooded eyes.

“Yeah, I know...but we’ve got five homicide murders tied into the plot...and when you listen to their theory, the GRCU boys will lose all the associated cases. The local Uniforms will lose every arson attack on Smoke Markets in NSW, and we’ll lose the Doug Bera homicide death...and his mate...umm...Victoria will be in a similar boat, and I haven’t checked with the other States but if they have similar Cases, they’ll lose them too...” I pushed myself off the door frame as I turned, adding “All taken over by the AFP, I reckon”. Just to add pressure onto him. I knew that the AFP were not friends with the Boss, and he’d do anything to keep any Case in his hands and not have to pass anything...even a ‘Post-it’ note over to the Federal organisation...

“Mmm...sounds serious. We’ve got bugger all Cases as it is, so I don’t like the sounds of losing any...and I know the GRCU won’t want too either. They’ll fight like hammer and tong to retain the Cases they’ve got”. He slid the thick file from his gut to the desktop, scratched his scalp and dug a finger up his nose...examining the proceeds carefully. I turned away as I’d never seen him do that before...a bloody disgusting habit!

“Boss...early days, but I can see the writing on the wall. Let me know when you have an hour or two to spare”. I turned to head back to my desk pleased with myself for putting the cat amongst the pigeons.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

“What don’t we have, ladies?” I asked after I had returned to my desk. “The Boss is busy with something very important that he cannot put down to listen to our little theory...and he likes what he found up his nose”. I was trying to lighten the atmosphere around us as we were all very serious and the words I had used to frighten...nay, to make the Boss sit up and take notice began to play with my paranoia as well.

“What is the next step?” I asked as both ladies looked blankly at me.

“Um...what’s next Boss?” Angie as the senior between the two asked. “Um...we hadn’t reached that stage yet...”

“You’ve got a theory...a story that ticks a few boxes and suggests a plausible conclusion...but you need facts. Proof that can stand up in Court. We have five homicide victims...and I suggest there are more so what is the next step?” I wanted the two of them to extend their imagination; to project conclusions that will set the whole scheme in concrete...but they were lacking a response. I let time tick away until I could visualise that next important step. “Do we have a definitive list of where these smoke marts are? Who runs them? Who owns them? And who were the original people who submitted the necessary paperwork to NSW Business for a business approval...and importantly, are they still in business at the original address they nominated on their submission? If not, why not? And why did they sell up or were they forced out of business by their business going up in flames...that’s an important point which we need to delve into”.

They looked agog at me wondering I would imagine where in hell all that had come from. I’m the Boss and that little detail remains a secret.

“Arrh...yes”. Angie replied. “Um...I guess Business NSW might have that on their computer...”

“I certainly hope so as if they haven’t got it all digitally recorded you may get to understand what coppers of old did before computers and stuff like that were even thought of...plan to visit the Sydney Office while I organise a Court Order for unimpeded access to all their records. Next week...okay? I don’t think we need to call in extra help. The three of us should be able to handle it okay...I’ll liaise with the Head Chef and explain what we want to do and if it is at all possible to undertake the exercise with the computer system they are running”.

CHAPTER THIRTY

I scratched my head as the woman tried to explain their computer input protocol. To put it bluntly, they didn’t have one. When a submission came in to open a business, any type of business it was next in line on the memory banks. There was no folios or sub-folios...nothing we could open immediately to find all the applications for...say

tobacconists, smoke marts, vape stores, smoke shopfronts or even brothels neatly stored in sub-folios and alphabetical order per town, city, suburb anywhere in NSW.

I guess it was too much to ask for and the task I expected to take no more than one to two weeks will now blow out to...that length of string!

I moaned...

I wondered if this woman as Head of the Branch had had any computer training at all...and that included all her subordinates! The simple answer was no...she sheepishly confessed. The NSW Government had taken the funding for training off the table leaving them to carry on regardless. Most of their knowledge came from sons and daughters who were computer literate and in Year five and six at Primary School...

I thanked the woman profusely as I turned to leave. I would need help...several IT Specialists from our Digital Forensic Services who knew computers back to front, inside and out. They may even be able to sort out the problems and provide correct protocols for these people who were stumbling about in the dark. I was not surprised to see book volumes where each submission was received, dated, recorded and acted upon. Each series of books were divided into business type cross-referenced to another volume that showed location; another the type of business...the computer entries were there for show...instead they operated the old fashion way.

My two young partners will wonder at how it was once done down to a card system that referred you to what volume for each application...

Missus July Ashcroft explained that without computer training the whole place would have collapsed. They therefore reverted to the old system of longhand entries...whoever had the supervision role over the Branch was sorely lacking in that role.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

It took us almost a week to get a handle on their antiquated system and to work out ways on how we were to construct a matrix showing the information we wanted...by that stage most of us were near tearing out our hair!

We all had a break on the Monday morning attending our usual Staff Meeting. At its end the Boss pulled me aside.

“Joe? Tomorrow morning. Eight sharp. The conference room next to the Commissioner of Police Office in the NSW Parliamentary building. Be there!” It was an order that could not be refused.

“What for Boss? Do I need to bring anything?”

“Nope! Nothing. You’re my advisor...poor choice, eh?” He chuckled showing his yellowed teeth. A dental appointment wouldn’t be a bad thing, I thought.

“Thanks for that vote of confidence, Ozzie... what’s it all about?”

“This sudden surge of arson and torch attacks on one type of business...smoke shops and shopfronts in particular...in South Australia”.

I nodded. What that recent activity in SA had to do with us had me beat. I scratched my skull. Gave the Boss a second look. Could be this was the ‘in’ into the parallel events that were happening on a more regular tempo here in NSW. It was about time something was initiated. The great weight of bureaucracy was stirring...about bloody time!

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Malanie Lind still used her married name though it was over a decade since her husband, my son had died. I often thought it had more to do with a one-finger salute at her own family...a strict religious farming group out from Gulargambone in the mid-west of the State.

Mal had reluctantly returned to the front half of our home after the explosion had almost killed her...she was declared MIA with her days in Manila in the Philippines cut short which had left us in the dark for several years until she meekly returned to our home. To me she will always be my adult daughter, no questions asked.

She was back as Head of the ‘The International Exchange of Illegal Money Transfers’ ‘IEIMT’ for short and loving it.

She was now sharing the larger portion of our home with a younger sister who also had fled the constricting rigid religious practises of the farming family...she and an older brother who was residing in Melbourne studying at MiT. Sharing digs with his new partner Daniel Osborne...a further slap in the face of his family who had disowned him...along with his two sisters leaving an ever-dwindling number of siblings still on the farm.

It was a busy couple of months where I would meet Tellie, Al and Sam at home so that they could change from their school uniforms. A visit to see Sophs two or three times a week in Hospital was a highlight for them as Sophs was a favourite of theirs...along with Mal who often accompanied us.

After one such sojourn and a visit to our favourite Restaurant, Mal asked that I remain seated in our 4WD after Tellie and the girls had alighted. Giggling their pleasure at having been at an adult Restaurant and not a noisy 'meant for kids take-away' joint.

I along with Mal never spoke about our jobs or what we were doing at the time. Cases were off-limits for both of us.

"You're working on the illegal trading of imported tobacco products chiefly from China, aren't you?" She asked matter-of-factly as though her next words would be about the weather.

"Arrh...yes". I replied uncertainly. We were entering a topic both of us had agreed long ago was off limits...

"Yeah..." She responded. "You'd be surprised at the money involved and where most of it is going. We have been monitoring the transfer practise for some time and have involved our Investigative Bureau in the trade for some months. There'll be massive changes occurring in the coming months and not soon enough as a TV Journalist has got wind of the huge scam and intends to disclose the industry in a Special Investigative Report on the TV shortly...then the shit will definitely hit the fan. Be warned Joe, you will lose total control of the entire Case including the homicide cases you have tied to the illegal selling of imported tobacco products...soon...hear me? I will not repeat what I have just said. Please do not disclose where you have received this information...in fact, I would appreciate that this information not be told to another soul..."

I didn't know what to say.

I nodded instead. Blinked then opened the vehicle's driver's door to alight. What else could I do when we had always agreed not to discuss such matters...it was obvious there were more fingers in the pie of this Case than I ever thought...

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

I knew most of the people there...well...by sight. Most were way above my wage package. We congregated around the credenza where the nibblies and drinks were positioned...not-alcoholic I must say. Good quality coffee aroma filled the air and the nibblies took your breath away. Small talk with the occasional '*waste of time*' mixed in with the positive vibes that I could feel. Several warm hellos from persons who I had met previously...most acting as 'Advisors' for their chiefs...they were at my level...there was a distinct cut-off point in the stratosphere. A point that you could not step over, climb over or even spy over like looking at your neighbour's back yard as you stood on tippy toes spying what was essentially the same as yours!

I sat at my designated position as OIC Murder Squad Advisor, a plateful of chocolate biscuits and the largest of the coffee mugs available. I nodded at several persons before turning to Ozzie my Boss whispering what was this all about. He stayed any further talk by placing his hand over my wrist as the 'Big Bloke' at the end of the elliptical table cleared his throat.

"Right..." Began the Chairperson and Spokesperson for the morning. "I need to be out of here by noon at the latest. We can organise another meeting if you think it is necessary. The...arrh...the NSW Premier ordered that this conference be scheduled. The recent events in South Australia have the Government rattled. You are all aware of the events?" He looked from one to the other around the table. "In three weeks, there have been fifteen torching or arson attacks on Smoke shops, Tobacconists and Smoke Mart shopfronts in the Greater Adelaide area. No fatalities yet but they are expected in the future. A turf war between warring illegal Bikie gangs is to blame. The Premier wishes to know if such a similar thing has...or will occur in this fine State. It would seem both Victoria and Queensland have similar problems that have been ongoing for over a year. We have no feed-back from Western Australia, Tasmania, the ACT and the Northern Territory...that can be expected as those States and Territories are considered several years behind us".

A smattering of chuckles at the attempted humour. The Convenor thought she was being clever...too bloody clever for her own good!

I leant forward and went to open my mouth. The Boss stayed me again with his hand tightly around my wrist...I gave him a look that asked why the gag order. He just shook his head slightly.

“Don’t worry Joe. You’ll get to show all these bastards up when you have all the proof you need to take your efforts higher”. He once again whispered into my ear. Not for the first time I wonder how the man knew where we were on our investigation with Business NSW. I gave him a slight nod. A wink...a tight smile.

For the next three hours between coffee re-fills and more nibblies, it became obvious most of these important people...OIC’s of Departments and Divisions in various parts of the NSW Government knew extremely little on the subject, didn’t want further investigations into the crisis or just ignored the hypothesis...the reason for the meeting.

I was spitting chips as I left the room mingling among the ‘airheads’ that I now thought they were. Wondering how in hell they had made the stratospheric levels of their current positions. It occurred to me that it wasn’t their office...their enterprise...they were just the mouthpiece for any number of Advisors they relied upon to look knowledgeable in front of a TV camera...still...it was an eye-opener for me!

“So, what did you think?” A soft voice having a tinge of a pommy accent. I hadn’t heard it for many a year. She was sitting on my side of the table, so eye-contact was rare...

“Hello Toni...I tried to get on my feet when I saw you heading for a refill...how are you? You’re holding up well”. Not the recommended opening to encourage mutual admiration in this politically correct time.

“You’re showing your age, Joe. Heard of your existence and many brave deeds when I was out and about. I’m head of the NSW Anti-Corruption Tribunal with about one hundred staff...most Investigative Detectives and growing under me. The things you can dig up on a person. Make you shudder at all?” She lifted her chin towards me. That cocky young girl was still there. “A little paradoxical, don’t you think. I have you to thank for getting me this job...remember?” She ran her tongue around her lips. I was correct when I stated she was holding up well. She would be in her early fifties now but still had the skin, the radiance of a much younger woman. I could see her interviewing suspects making them think she was attracted to the bastards...another form of psychological torture...

Toni Albright was my junior by a decade almost and could have got me into heaps of trouble sleeping with a juvenile so many years ago. She was a Pommy Backpacker 'Doing Oz' when my undercover partner and I were surfing the north coast hotspots and looking for drug mules of any type transporting pressed, dried cannabis leaf down from the Grafton/Lismore area into Sydney. I nabbed her twice...both times she was carrying twenty kilos of dried weed...enough to get her a prison sentence of at least seven years each time.

I couldn't tell you even today why I did not arrest or charge her...her willingness to spend many a cold night in the back of our Wagon won me over is all I'll say! My partner Barry Holtz wasn't as charitable being forced to sleep in a swag outside in some foul weather! I would have done it for him, but he wasn't that kind of guy...

Toni suddenly disappeared, me thinking she had been 'topped' with her 'Handler' knowing she was entertaining an undercover cop...and here she now was...permitted a position in the State Public Service because she did not have a criminal record...life is full of surprises!

That afternoon went by slowly as we dined at one of Sydney's best Seafood Restaurants...say no more. I was more than tipsy by the time I got home. A Cab fare paid from Toni's account. She rang for a chauffeured limousine...the life of Riley...it was later revealed to me as office gossip that Toni is always looking for inter-office contacts who could be useful in any future internal investigation...I prefer to think it was for old times. A kind of payback for her successful career that I had permitted her...

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

I sat back to listen to my two young partners fill me in on what had prevailed over the past couple of days...my mind elsewhere on what could have been. The two glanced at one another that allowed Angie to stand. She was always better on her feet she always said and an agreement between the two always had Angie as the spokesperson between the two.

"Okay". She began, coughing to clear her throat. "Let's begin where it all started...Armidale...in Nineteen Eighty-three as you know, the Federal Government of the time changed the legislation to allow the excise tax on all tobacco products to be increased twice yearly in line with the CPI increase of the country...a great

compounding effect on the price of tobacco products that now means Australia-wide, we have the highest price for a packet of smokes in the world...June, Nineteen Ninety-four...". She walked around my desk as though I was a Suspect on trial for homicide murder. An arm across under her breast while the other hand stroked her chin...the elbow resting on the other arm...a typical Court Room or Classroom stance! "Nineteen Ninety-four. The murder of Lan Soo. A Chinese National here under false pretences. We contend killed in a most brutal way by an Enforcer employed by one of two Bikie gangs that were prevalent in the New England area at that time. The Devil's Children...which has long been disbanded or swallowed by other Gangs...and the Rebels. The Rebels, using a pseudo-name had placed an application before the local New England Shire Office for permission to open a Tobacco Shopfront in the Armidale Mall. Permission was granted in November Nineteen Ninety-four. The Business began operations in February Nineteen Ninety-five. Three years later almost to the day, the premises were torched leaving nothing but a scorched shell with a neighbouring historic shop severely damaged. Two months later an application was received by the Shire Council to open, manage and operate a Tobacconist business of the now cleared previously torched site. The application was submitted in the name of Lan Doe, a successful Businessman in Sydney who had ties to Shanghai Manufacturing and Export Company...a front for a major Chinese criminal syndicate which was never investigated by the local Shire Council".

I held up a hand.

"Wait a tick...proof! You must have proof!" I iterated forcefully.

"The dates, the names, the Applications. They are all available on the NSW Business operating files...going back before they had computers...we will have confirmation in writing to all facts taken from the Business NSW records in due time".

"Yes, I understand that, but just because the dates follow with certain bodies submitting applications to the Shire Council does not prove that that criminal body set fire to a premises to remove their competition...the proof isn't there! It's purely circumstantial...I"

"Boss...we have an Excel Spreadsheet where we are down to 'H'. Helensburgh. There is a pattern that we can now plainly see...all the criminal names we know are on that list...including a few we were surprised about. All the known illegal Bikie gangs that operate in NSW were there. Four competing criminal Lebanese families...ditto Māori, Tongan, Samoan and Fiji criminal families, one of the largest criminal Indian consortiums and our favourite, the criminal gang operating under the umbrella of the Shanghai Manufacturing Company based in Shanghai, China are all listed. Sure, there are some Mums and Dads consortiums hoping to improve their superannuation bottom

lines, but they are a rarity when compared with the Shanghai mob and the number of outlets they own and control. The proof is in the ongoing pattern”.

“I understand and applaud your hard work, but the bottom line still exists...there is no proof of homicide murder. Remember, our whole reason for going down this road was to connect five homicide murders that we know of by the way, to the way these criminal elements are obtaining permission to own, manage and operate these smoke marts...we can jump to a conclusion that *could be* correct...but the proof is lacking...sorry ladies”.

“You are saying we should stop?”

“No! Finish off the exercise as it will form the basis of our investigation into those homicide cases. No, keep with it until the end. You’re what, halfway through about in one and a half weeks’ worth of work. I’ll give you another two weeks to round it off”.

“You’re a bit out on your maths Boss. ‘H’ is the eighth letter of a twenty-four-letter alphabet...give us three weeks, Boss”.

“I’ll think about it”.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

I sat with both my junior partners wanting to go over the ground they had been working on for the past month while I endeavoured to connect dots the old fashion way...shoe leather and hundreds of interviews for not much progress. I was warming to the girls’ hypothesis mainly out of frustration for little progress my way...not seated at my desk but somewhere along the Manly Promenade out in the sun.

The Boss and I had been summoned to a second meeting at the NSW Parliamentary Offices. Eight sharp the following morning.

“Now I can take this flash drive and insert it into my laptop. As long as there is blue-tooth connectivity I should be able to project the Excel Matrix up onto the very large screen they have in the Conference Room...it is just a bigger than normal computer screen...is that right?”

Both girls nodded, surprised at my nervousness and anxiety...the older I got, the less confident I was in all things computers and digital things...things were moving much too fast for me...still three steps behind was my explanation...

“I’ll be front and centre to all these bigwigs waiting on my very word...if they tune out, I’m lost...mmm...Angs? Can you make yourself available tomorrow. Sit behind me and steer me through the steps...”

“Yeah...no worries, Boss. She’ll be jakes!”

“Mmm...we are still in the same boat of having no proof of certain persons committing five homicides, but we are sure of our facts up to a point. Let’s see if I can convince them of our thinking...my shout for an ice-cream”.

“Remember Joe...isolate and stress the value of these illegal transactions and what they are robbing Australia of...real money! That’ll get their combined attention for sure. The Retail Price over the counter of one cigarette ‘stick’ anywhere in Australia is around \$1.25¢ to a \$1.30¢. Approximately \$1 of that is State and Federal excise taxes. The approximate cost of a single cigarette ‘stick’ illegally imported from China is around \$0.2¢ to \$0.3¢ per ‘stick’. If we allow for transport and distribution costs, these cigarettes can be sold under the counter for about \$0.10¢ each. That is a huge saving for the average smoker and a huge deficit to the Commonwealth of lost taxation revenue...we’re talking billions of dollars here, Joe. Enough to raise my hackles and ask why something hasn’t been done about it up to this point. The trade nationwide is now controlled by criminal elements as I have stated before”.

I blinked several times trying to digest this information...and the differential will only widen for as long as this illegal activity is permitted to exist...and this artificial tax increase twice a year is allowed to continue.

My choice had changed to a double scoop of passionfruit topped with jaffa, a mixture on its own of chocolate and rich orange...divine. I wondered if they served up ice-cream up there. You know, if there is an ‘up there’...I’d believe in it a little more if they did serve ice-cream. I raised the question as I sat beside my two young partners, glancing at the surf that looked so inviting.

“You know whether they serve ice-cream up there...”

“I thought you didn’t believe there was an ‘up there’”. Angie replied between licks of her new favourite flavour...it changed every week!

“Mmm...you know...what’s the most fattening? Ice-cream or chips with plenty of salt”.

Both young ladies glanced at me then at each other knowing I was about to sermonise. It had been a while since I had stood at that pulpit...

“Whatever...” Tally responded. “At least ice-creams in a cone don’t attract the seagulls...winged vermin they are...”.

That finished that line if thought, I thought to myself.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

There were several new faces...about half a dozen missing. I again was as nervous as all hell knowing I was going to bring to the attention of all in the room of our findings...

I was surprised that Toni Albright was missing, the table a little less attractive by her unattendance. The Chief Investigator whom I knew, of the Australian Tax Office graced the table, winking at me several times. A smirk or was it a tight smile to show she was pleased to see me. Two off-siders sat either side of her. The 2IC of the Australian Federal Police Investigation Branch sat book-ended by two surly Officers with a party of four others occupying seats behind that position. Malanie was one of those persons. I nodded, winked at her though she sat rock still. Four other persons who were obviously representatives of some national body not recognised with their own ‘table name’. Their attendance not confirmed by the Chairperson as she did the rollcall.

ASIO or some other alphabet soup semi-secret organisation that someone thought were required to warm seats at this second conference.

The remainder I had met at our first conference.

After getting drinks and nibbles we settled into the normal pattern...too much time taken up discussing the ‘Minutes of the Meeting’ of a month ago before things slipped back into the normal banter.

The Chairperson asked for quiet and requested my input as first speaker. I coughed to clear my throat at the same time all thought of how to connect my laptop with the large

screen at the head of the table flew from my brain. Angie could see my discomfort, leaning forward to press a couple of keys that brought instant results. The large screen lighting up showing the list from A through to D. A slight scroll allowing further towns and cities to be seen...a shuffling of feet...a few expletives as my audience comprehended what they were seeing for the first time.

“Thanks to my two junior partners who did most of the work that you see before you...arrh...” I then began word for word on our supposition, interrupted several times by Candice Thorpe, the ATO Chief Investigator who seemed pleased that she could still get a rise out of me.

“Those small flames? What do they represent?” She asked when I was on the verge of explaining the symbols.

There’s always one in the room...

“Torching and arson attacks at certain addresses”. I replied quickly. “Quite a few more than you imagined, I think”.

“And the crosses?” She immediately responded.

“People who have died because of the arson attacks...or homicides attributable to the attacks”.

That silenced her for a bit. She had swivelled to look at the large display, nodding her head as though she now fully understood its importance. Turning back to me she smiled.

“That many...and this is just within the State of NSW! Are there any figures collated for the rest of Australia...States and Territories?”

“That’s what we are hoping this conference will initiate...a nation-wide search based on the same criteria that we have used for our study...we believe that illegal crime gangs both national and international have infiltrated the industry and now control all activities associated with the illegal importation of tobacco products and the selling under the counter of these products that are not subject to excise sales tax...”

“Is there anything significant that has come from your research?”

“If you’ll let me get to that point Mz. Thorpe...” I can remember embarrassing her when she was a junior investigator just beginning her career...no...we had met numerous

times since without an ounce of ‘payback’ noticed...but I was in a different arena this time...a mere minion in a pool of important people of the State.

Politics can be a dirty business.

She remained quiet for the rest of my spiel at which time there was murmurs and asides to show the mood of the people around the table. Most were surprised at the depth of the illegal dealings in imported tobacco products. This was noticeable when all, but a few businesses were managed and operated by illegal gangs of one type or another. They would not be in the game if profits weren’t acceptable and of a high proportion.

“Detective? It is Detective, isn’t it?” The 2IC AFP Investigation Branch interjected. He knew very well I was a Detective. My name plate stated Senior Detective. “I understand this Conference was first requested by the State Premier after the recent fracas in South Australia where businesses were torched and lives nearly lost. Are you aware of other States actions in this regard?”

“No sir. You would be better placed to judge that as you do have jurisdiction where I don’t...” The Boss glowered at me. I had just given the AFP the ‘in’ to take control of the investigation Australia-wide. Homicides included...I bowed my head punishing myself...Mal’s words of warning came back to me...we were about to lose the whole box and dice!

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

It took them a fortnight to visit our office...without prior notice they walked straight onto the Murder Squad floor...tailor-cut suits and flashy ties. About a dozen AFP Officers and two file carts. They loaded up every scrap of paper, murder file and notes on the subject that we had gathered over the course of our investigation. Even taking all information on my first ‘Unsolved’, that of Lan Soo whose body had been found some thirty years ago sixty kilometres south of Armidale. That discovery had started the whole train of thinking...and it obviously had ramifications in all other States and Territories...

I couldn’t stand the ‘stealing’ of all our hard work.

I stood, breathing deeply.

The one thing I cherished on my desk was the fiftieth Birthday present from my three girls. A large coffee mug almost as large as a soup bowl. A photograph of my three on the side...bright eyed with innocent, happy smiles beaming up at me. Every time I looked or glanced at the mug it gave me warm feelings and a smile of my own.

I turned, grabbing it tightly, spinning to smash it against the rear wall shattering it into a thousand pieces...

The Boss lumbered from his Office to stand toe to toe with me.

“Detective Lind...you’re on notice!! Understand!? Get the fuck out of here...piss off to the sub-basement pool...or the gym...just get the fuck out of here...hear me!”

I didn’t need a second order. I was seething as I walked off the floor wanting to be some distance away from the AFP bastards. My two young colleagues followed me seeing their hard work disappear.

“I’ll go along with removing all evidence of chain of events relating to the sudden spike of arsonist attacks on illegal tobacco businesses but to also take everything relating to the five homicide cases that we knew of was akin to having my arm chopped off”. I stated through gritted teeth as we rode the Lift down to the ground floor.

I needed to walk...my two young charges having trouble keeping up with me. I eventually walked into a small Coffee Café some blocks from our Office Tower...breathing deeply to calm down. Both Tally and Angie were surprised at the depth of my anger...it had been the subject of gossip around the floor for a while, so we were all expecting something...but not this process unannounced. The Boss had to have known...

Maybe the Federal Government will eventually tighten all laws associated with the banning of all illegal cheap tobacco products and their on-selling by criminal elements...and the AFP solving our Homicide Cases...

Let’s wait and see...I doubt that we will ever be advised either way...

pcb

01/11/2024

NB

As I wrote the last few Chapters of this story, in late October 2024 the NSW Government was placing through the legislative process a series of propositions that would fine both individuals and firms with excessive fines for dealing in, selling or profiting from illegal imported tobacco products. I guess it was a start...