

LOVED TO DEATH

MURDER SQUAD DETECTIVES
JOSEPH LIND AND SHELLEY ANNE SHIELDS
A CRIME NOVELLA BY



PETER C BYRNES

MURDER SQUAD DETECTIVES
JOSEPH LIND, SHELLEY ANNE SHIELDS
AND RUTH KINDLE

LOVED TO DEATH

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The 60th book in the Murder Squad Detective series

CHAPTER ONE

I was onto my third ‘throw-down’ bottle of beer, lying on a banana chair on the back deck freezing my tootsies off even with my fleecy Ugh Boots on. I heard Tellie come out, quietly sliding the back door closed behind her.

“You can’t sleep, huh? That’s a bad habit to get into in the middle of the night, Joe. Drinking grog as a substitute to a Sleeping Tablet or a couple of Melatonin tablets. Want to talk about it?”

I didn’t, but when the love of your life asks a question like that, you sure should have something to say in response. I shook my head slowly to give the impression I was having a battle with myself. I looked over at her, throwing my arm around her shoulders to bring her closer to me, picking up the blankets to allow her to squirm under. Being cuddly on one of these lay-down chairs might have been okay when we were slim teenagers who would not think twice about the design deficiencies or comfort factor, more interested in the cuddles and whatnot under the blanket! Now as a middle-aged couple, such carry-ons had several problems while the two of us were stretched out on the thing. I was a little worried that the ‘chair’ may not have been designed for our combined weight for a start...and as a comfort indicator it was not above zero!

Where has the romantic bugger got to?

“You know I’ve been seeing the Shrink at work...” I looked at her with my most serious expression thinking that this information was seeing the light for the first time.

“Ellen Phelps...yeah. I sat with her a couple of times when that AO who I was married to before I met you, belted me around a bit. I just needed to have some-one tell me that’s not how it is supposed to be. I knew that, sure...but...it’s hard, you know? You make a decision to love a guy, to marry him and then the whole belief system you have of your life...and position...and yourself...just flies out the door when he starts bashing you around.” She flung her arms around to empathise her words. “You kind of wake up to see how he truly was, from the very beginning. Manipulative, domineering and a giant AO...then you meet some-one out of the blue when you least expect it, or really want it...” She looked up at me, that little girl giggle mixing with her words. “...but you know this guy is the complete opposite to your AO husband...and this other guy makes you laugh. I couldn’t remember how long it had been since I laughed...truly laughed...I never did with him. This other guy doesn’t bash me around as he would much prefer to disappear outside until he has calmed down and can speak with any sense of comprehension...but...he still has his faults that I would never want changed as they, along with his good attributes, makes for a wonderful man. That’s my life, sport...what’s yours?”

“Hah! How do I beat that!? This woman whom I love to bits, rescued me from a life of being a Buddhist Monk...in mind and thoughts. I never thought I would ever meet a woman who defies description...and who never made me compare with the first missus...she is not like her at all, but in so many ways she is the resurrection of her...how’s that sound?”

“Mmm...it needs working on, but it will do for the moment...Being compared with a dead person has its problems, especially when I feel so alive with this guy...”

“Okay...I’ll remember that I need to work on it, eh?” We both chuckled as we kissed each other, a trick that is hard to do! “You knew I was seeing Phelps. She spoke to you about me, didn’t she?”

“Um...bugger...she wanted me to keep it confidential...I wasn’t supposed to let you know...sorry...but yes, she called me one day asking if I would go up and see her for half an hour or so. Three hours later...I stumbled from her Suite feeling all cried out...and all we did was talk about you!” That little giggle again.

“You married a very wise old Detective with a nose that smells a lie or a confidential discussion from a mile away...”

“Sorry, I forget Oh Wise One.” She gave me a gentle dig in the ribs to let me know who was in control. “Now...why have you had your balls in a right royal twist for so long...I’d say for as long as I’ve known you...but it’s gotten worse as the years have gone by.” She propped up on one arm to look sternly at me. “At least once a week for all that time you would have a night sweat...and it was gradually getting worse. I was so worried; I spoke to Doc Phelps about it...and our family GP”

“He said not to worry about it as I’m the most loose Patient he has...that I don’t worry about a thing and that possibly, the night sweats are caused by a Case being wrapped up...like a chick who grows and then flies the nest, there is a feeling of abandonment...of being left alone...no longer required...isn’t that right?”

I wriggled around to make it a bit more comfortable for both of us. These chairs never made for more than one, unless you are a teenager in love and uncomfortable chairs didn’t matter.

“Um...our Doctor? He is getting a senile I reckon, and I am not happy with his diagnoses. He thinks a slight twinge is growing pains...at my age!? C’mon! I think we should be looking for one close to home especially now the girls are growing...way too fast.”

“Well, yeah, I’m having second thoughts about him, myself...as far his prognosis? In not so many words, but yeah. I’m not a hen sitting on half-a-dozen eggs, but yeah, when our three are of that age where they want to fly the roost, I too will feel that sense of abandonment, I suppose...and something more...apprehensiveness at whether we have taught our girls of the world and all its traps...and lastly...pride...to see them stand on their own two feet...with some-one they love and are happy with.”

She snuggled further into the warmth of my body...and the couple of throw rugs I had covering me. I wrapped my arms around the woman I love with my life...when my first wife Helene was killed, I thought nothing could replace her...then Tellie came along...after quite a few years...but she offered me maturity, wisdom, warmth, laughter and unconditional love...and something else...that feeling of truly being wanted...as I said, it had been a long time.

“The Doc’s opinion didn’t gel with me whenever I discussed it with him over the years...still treats my like his precious specimen who really doesn’t require his presence or diagnosis...it makes me feel as though I am fibbing with everything...and truly, we need to find a better Doctor somewhere close by.”

“I agree...but you feel as though your loyalty has been compromised just thinking along those lines...and as far as fibbing, aren’t you? You are a typical male in the way you are when you’re sick...it makes it so hard to figure out your fair dinkum aches and pains from the over-acting episodes...”

“Over-acting be blowed...I show quite clearly the actual degree of pain...”

We both had a giggle at that one.

I drank the dregs of beer and carefully placed the empty bottle on the glass-topped table beside the others, softening the sound of impact of glass on glass.

“I thought his prognoses on you were often bullshit too...I thought these night sweats...um...they may have had something to do with Knacker’s terrible death...his life not being discussed and how he often seemed to talk in riddles and then...you know...his death. You took that very badly, didn’t you, huh? You ended up in hospital with a heart attack...remember? That really scared me. But the sweats didn’t stop. In fact, they slowly increased...as though something haunted you...something horrid that you could not cope with...something terrible...his death, perhaps? That would have been a shocking thing...you standing there beside this limbless and headless torso washed up onto some beach up north. Only understanding he was your mate towards the completion of the Case. I know what ‘Floaters’ can look like after a couple of days in water...yuk! Maybe in some way that affected you a little...but I always was of the opinion you were tamping down on something, you know...trying to keep that particular door closed...something illegal that you committed...I don’t know, when you and Holtzy were working undercover together...something that you couldn’t face as you are really an honest man.”

I was silent for some time, my brain in turmoil wondering whether I should take the plunge in telling all to my darling wife. First up she was my wife whom I doubted would ever squeal on me...but then she is a cop in the Force who may feel dutybound to report whatever illegal matters I may disclose to her.”

“I was carrying the guilt of my first partner, Barry Holtz when I did not have to do so. Stupid, I know, but the truth only came out after three...four hypnosis sessions with Phelps. I was shouldering his guilt as a way of helping him...and as time showed, he didn’t seem to give a fuck. I was the one suffering over a guilty conscience. Strange, huh?”

“No, I don’t think so...you have always wanted to take on the woes of the world. Save the world from itself so yeah, I can see you wanting to share the guilt with your best mate and partner of the time...”

I really didn't want to disclose all the details, but I couldn't stop myself. I talked softly for fear of waking the dead...or our three little girls asleep inside. Tellie let me talk without interrupting, but when I had finished, she half sat up with amazement, gaining her leverage by pressing on my chest.

It hurt and I had to half roll her off my chest!

"Your bloody elbows!" I moaned. "They bloody hurt, digging into my chest."

"Sorry, love." She replied, kissing me as though that would help. It did actually.

"It was Shelley's father!?" Tells was agog with that information. "I knew there was plenty of...um, you know...innuendo around his service back in the day...but...he was going to kill you and Holtzy? Man...that's bad, huh? Like why? Shells father..." she repeated, finding it hard to take in this information.

"We didn't know it was Shell's father at the time...just a dirty cop willing to kill other cops when ordered...on the orders of his Boss...Gus Batelli, we think. Yeah, it was Shelley's father doing the dirty work, but we didn't know that at the time...that it was Shelley's father...or even who he was! Shelley would have been no more than mid-teens at the time. She had less and less to do with him after he and her mother separated when she was around seven years of age. He had broken all ties with her by that stage of us being out amongst those sand dunes. An irony that she would become my partner some twenty-five years later, eh? Funny how things work out sometimes..."

I nodded more to myself, agreeing with my thoughts.

"Still...does Shelley know that?"

"Yeah...she um...she had a rather ambivalent attitude about her father. After he separated from her mother, she saw him less and less. All she had was her mother's vitriol about him from around the age of seven onwards. She knew he was called "Rusty" Shields for a reason, so she had no misconceptions about him..."

"Still...he was blood to her...there must have been some sorrow on her learning that..."

I was caught between two emotions; one of guilt though I did not know why and the other, indignation at Tellie not being able to grasp and understand the one-dimensional relationship Shelley had with her father. Then he just disappeared, with Shell's mother just assuming he had been killed.

"Her often heard mantra about his sins catching up with him." I shook my head at the fact that Shelley did not seem to be affected by the continuous asides of her mother.

"Um, sweetheart? He was going to shoot both of us and before that shot to the back of the neck, he was going to force us to dig our own graves...out there in the heathland behind the old Rifle Range...Baz managed to throw sand in his eyes and then he jumped up and swung

the spade with a bloody lot of force as he first almost cleaved his head in two and on the second swing, he beheaded the bastard. Me? I was sitting in the back seat of the cop car with my wrists manacled. Baz appeared out of the darkness looking like Nicholson in that Movie...you know that Stephen King novel? The Shining, wasn't it? Wild eyes. An insane grimace with his hair standing on end. He took a pot shot at the car and then swung the spade again which shattered the windscreen. Whoever the driver was...whom I now know was Detective Sergeant Dave Hutchison, the younger brother of the Minister of Police, Bart Hutchison back then...he banged the car into reverse spinning the wheels in the dirt before doing a handbrake turn that helped me to be flung out of the rear seat. Bazza took a couple of shots at me, before I wrenched the gun and the spade out of his hands...we sat in the middle of the track, Bazza sobbing hysterically, trying to tell me what he had done...and he was adamant then and there that he was getting out of undercover work. No amount of talking on my part swayed him...he never did any undercover work after that night..."

"Jesus Joe...you sure did walk on the wild side back then, huh?"

I laughed, having to explain what '*walking on the wild side*' truly meant. She looked sheepishly up at me, a grin saying me in drag would not be a thrilling sight.

"Most aren't models, my love, but they think they are. In fact, there is a kind of sadness in seeing such people dressed up as they could never fool anyone of who they were." I had to chuckle as a few flashed across my mind...then William Dean Worsley blazed brightly across my mind's eye. Even in death he had fooled us until we saw him on the cutting table. He was one of the few whom you would never pick...a beautiful human being, by all accounts. A guy when glammed up, could really fool you...

Tellie broke the silence and my inner thoughts.

"They were serious, weren't they? They were going to kill the two of you, eh? Why?"

"Hah...because we were too good at our job. We were drying up the North Coast supply line of Marijuana leaf coming into Newcastle and the Sydney Basin which meant they were losing a huge amount of money. The easiest solution in their minds was to get rid of both of us...who'd miss us? Only our close family...and as we were working undercover, our sudden disappearance could be easily explained away. Easy for them to construct a feigned attempt to investigate our deaths...with our bodies never found..."

"Okay, I can buy that...they would have known you were untouchable in accepting any sort of bribe to turn your back on the supply route..."

"Thank you my dear, for your acceptance of how it happened...and your complete trust in me..." I smiled and kissed the top of her head not really knowing if she was being truthful or sarcastic!

"Why wasn't there some...come back with Detective Rusty Shields death?"

“The people who controlled certain sections of the Police Force, the Courts, certain Politicians and much of the criminals of the time all in their pocket, the last thing they wanted was an investigation into Shields disappearance. How would you explain what the two of us were doing tied up in the back of a squad car with Hutchison driving...out the back of the Rifle Range?”

“So, Bazz killed Shelley’s father...but you heaped the guilt onto yourself thinking that would help your partner...and as the years went by, your guilt grew...mainly because you were hiding an illegal act in both of you killing the man...that’s how a Court of Law would look at it...you would have been implicated in the death of a copper...”

“Yeah. Guilt shared...both of us sentenced together for the crime.” I nodded my head for emphasis.

“All these skeletons being found out there would have really made you concerned...really thrown you into a spin, eh? Especially thinking you may lose your job, your family, friends and yourself...a spot in prison with your career wrecked...”

“Thank you for being so blunt...” I chuckled.

“And there are so many other things that must be upsetting your equilibrium at the moment.”

“Yeah...I reckon...but I thought I was on top of it all and without me realising, the load was being heaped...added to...Shelley’s inability to fall pregnant. I was worried about her on that level but also worried about myself losing another perfect partner with the chances of me finding some-one else of the calibre of Shelley or Marge Hendricks before her rather slim...I was upset at myself for even thinking along those lines when I should be happy for Shells if she did remain pregnant for the duration...and...their plan...for Malisa to carry the baby for Shelley. I haven’t said anything yet, but I disagree with the whole thing. Mal has been the breadwinner since Bill had his accident...what? Around six months ago now. Even I can see he is not up to his old self...he is slower, his wit and quick thinking are not there. The Doc offers platitudes saying only time will tell of Bill bouncing back to his old self...me? I have my doubts so this surrogacy thing that Mal and Shells have thought up may leave Mal and Bill without any form of income until Mal gives birth...but it is Bill’s ability and whether he will be able to retain his position in the DPP...and if he can’t, what will be his future...that is worrying me greatly.”

I lowered my head and shook it several times, the tears coming too easily.

“C’mon ma’mam. Buck up. I think that surrogacy idea, though a good thought, is well and truly on the back burner...and Bill’s bounce back? We can only hope, eh?”

I nodded. This was the first time I had put into words what had been worrying me on that front. I had not even discussed it with Phelps. I promised myself I would be more open with her as Bill’s condition was also a heavy burden for me...after all, he is my son!

“No more secrets, my love? These confessions? Can you ever be found guilty of the crime?”

“Yes...most certainly...even if it *was* self-defence, you have that charge of concealing a capital offence on top of it...it would be a case of proving a self-defence action which would be extremely difficult to prove after all this time. Either way, both our careers would nosedive...and there is that weight...there is no limitation on a murder investigation and charge...”

“So, you will have this...this dagger hanging over your head...forever! What if...”

“Don’t say it sweetheart...the only way it could come out is either Holtzy or myself confessing to the act...and that is never going to happen. As long as Holtzy continues to climb that promotional ladder, he will never allow his career to crash and burn over the actions on that night.”

“The Doc?”

“Weelll...always possible I guess, but the confession occurred during a visitation with her, so anything stated, implied or suspected stays with her under the confidentiality of Doctor/Patient anonymity...but...”

“Mmm...and me of course. The Prosecution could subpoena me...me forced to testify against you. Unlike the States, here a spouse could testify, couldn’t she?”

“Yes...that’s true...in certain situations but I know you would never do that...would you?”
A smile to go with the stir.

She slapped my chest before she nuzzled into me. I knew this knowledge she had now obtained would never see the light of day...but...there is that tiny worm that will occasionally make me apprehensive...uneasy...ensuring my insecurity and negativity would have a field day with these emotions as time passed...

“You can be an AO too when you want...come to bed, please. You know how I am the day after a broken sleep night”.

We both slept like angels...me still a little tarnished, but who isn’t?”

CHAPTER TWO

“What’s it got to do with us, Boss? It appears to be a ‘Hit and Run’ that the local lads can deal with...”

“They were going to go down that track until they viewed several local CCTV footages and interviewed several witnesses. According to the Lead Sergeant on site, it was a targeted hit

with the vehicle double parking up the side street for some time until the victim began to cross the road at a Pedestrian Crossing point. She stepped off the kerb with the green 'Walk' sign on. The guy accelerated as he came around the corner, went through the red lights to take out our victim...so that is why we have been called in...okay? Gather up your things and get out there, quick smart, eh?"

I nodded, walking back to my desk as I told Shelley to get her act into gear as we were out of there.

"Ruth Kindle is coming with us, Joe..."

"Yeah, sure...one too many for a crowd but what the heck."

As I passed Hendo's desk, I picked up the necessary paperwork and details, transferring the information into a new Case Folder on my iPad as we rode the Lift down to the sub-basement where our Unmarked was parked. Burwood wasn't that far from our building at Parramatta and with lights flashing without the siren giving me industrial deafness, we made it in good time. Burwood Road cordoned off with the Belmore Street intersection the centre of all the carry-ons, giving the local Uniforms a major headache in directing the heavy traffic detouring around the area. Belmore Street as a cross-street to Burwood Road was also sealed off. Through traffic diverted via Railway Parade up and down Wentworth Avenue or Shaftsbury Road both running parallel to Burwood Road. Wentworth Road halfway between Strathfield and Burwood Train Stations.

Shells parked the vehicle close to the crime tape 'barricade' and we asked the young junior Constable who was in charge as we signed the Crime Scene Register who was the Scene 'Lead'. The young woman pointed to a tall woman who had that look of authority.

"Glad youse could make it," she replied after we did the usual hand-shaking ritual. "You sign in?" She asked as though we were wet behind the ears Probationary Constables who still had to learn the ropes. Shelley must have seen the steam beginning to escape from my ears, as she stepped in to take control of the situation between me and the Crime Scene Lead.

"You seem to think this was a targeted attack, Sergeant?"

"Yes...at first we thought we had the usual 'hit and run' but when my lads were going shop to shop trying to get some video feed evidence from local shop CCTV cameras, we revised our opinion..."

"Can we see the videos in question that give us the best views?"

"Yes...from four separate locations. We are still canvassing the near area hoping to gather additional video of the incident. One from the Hairdresser's that clearly showed the lady leaving the Shop to walk out to stand on the footpath waiting for the green 'walk' sign to appear. She would be about halfway across the traffic-lane heading north up the street when this 4WD came screeching around the corner, going through the red light arrow to turn left at his location to hit her...flinging her some metres up the road. She was still alive at that

point, but he continued running over her body with the front and rear on-side wheels as he went on his way...that killed her..."

All this relayed as we walked up Burwood Road past the chalk lines of where the collision occurred and then some metres further on where she was cold-bloodedly run over with both wheels. I didn't want to hear the Station Sergeant's description as I wanted to see the evidence before forming any opinion of the incident myself. We stepped up into a Tech Vehicle that housed a minilab on wheels, only the second time I had seen one. The first time was during the discovery of all those skeletons out amongst the Malabar sand dunes.

I walked up behind her, placing my arm around her waist, bending to kiss her on the cheek.

"You took your time, lover-boy. Hello Shells. Ruth. How are you both."

My wife turned to greet us, a thin smile showing she was glad to see us, but not too much which could be misunderstood. I was surprised that she did not object to the show of affection...things are looking up. So it should, as the chill at on-site visitations where both of us were attending was thawing. About bloody time after so many years of official 'at arm's length' carry-ons!

"My wife..." I explained to the Senior Sergeant, who nodded her understanding. "We rarely rub shoulders on a Case...um...the best video of the incident? Can you play it for me?"

I sat on a tall stool facing the larger of the bank of screens, waiting while one of Tellie's Assistants tapped away on a keyboard to bring up the images.

"There!" She exclaimed excitedly as the video began. "Not good quality, but they rarely are. We'll enhance a copy but keep the original as is..."

"How long does it go for?" Shelley asked as she too, swivelled around to watch the large screen.

"Around one and a half hours...but we will condense that enhanced copy. This copy includes the time the victim was getting her hair done...the important thing is that it clearly shows our Offender double parked in Belmore Street just off the intersection with Burwood Road until the victim walks out of the Salon. As she begins to cross Burwood Road *with* the green 'walk' sign he accelerates madly...as though he was surprised that he hadn't seen her earlier..."

"A waste of money, huh?" I muttered. Both Shelley and Tellie dug me in the ribs. "Well it's true, isn't it?" I added, my arms held wide in a questioning manner. "How long does it take a woman to have her hair cut?"

Tellie turned to the Senior Sergeant, a smile to show it was my slightly off-centre sense of humour.

"The Lead Detective isn't known for his tact..." she said apologetically.

“What’s the point...she’s dead!” I replied which earned me another poke in the ribs. “The guy double-parks for what? An hour! The woman could see the vehicle if she turned her head...so the vehicle is unknown to her...good grief...a little faster and he could have easily overturned the 4WD as he came around the corner...he isn’t a good driver...he over-corrects taking the woman out as he does so...he panics, floors the vehicle and runs over her as he accelerates away...a hit and run...pure and simple.”

“So why does he double-park for what? An hour and a half? And only moves as the Vic steps off the kerb to cross the road?”

“Mmm...the one flaw in my theory...and with that one stroke, the theory flies out the window...maybe. Perhaps he was on his Mobile Phone which requires one to pull over to converse on such an implement whilst driving a vehicle. The initial call meant he had to make several others...he rings off as the green light in Belmore Street turns to amber, so he accelerates madly to make the intersection in time.” I turn to the women and spread my arms.

“Case closed...” Murmured Shelley. “The famous Dee has done it again without working up a sweat...I feel so humble in being his partner.”

I ignored the slight, laughing at Shelley’s humour; suggesting she was indeed lucky...and honoured in working with me. That earned me sniggers from Shelley, Ruth, Tellie and the Sergeant. Too many females against me to continue with another theory that was just as plausible. It was usually Shelley who flung that spanner when we were at a crime scene.

“Has the woman been named? We’ll need to dig into her life which may give us a clue to who her killer might be.”

With that comment, the matter became a Homicide Investigation.

CHAPTER THREE

“Let me look at it again, will you Tells?”

I sat and watched the video considered the best of the bunch.

“Can I see some others...taken from a different direction, please.”

The sound of rapid keystrokes broke the otherwise quiet interior of the van. I watch as another version of the same scenario began.

“Do you reckon he went through a red arrow...he sits there patiently waiting for the woman to walk to the kerb and begin to cross. He actually misses the green arrow that would have

allowed him to make that left-hand turn. He realises this and accelerates as the arrow turns red...and the red 'do not walk' sign turns green to permit her to walk across the road."

I watched every tape they had gathered from neighbouring Businesses. I was not convinced at all that this was a homicide...although Tellie especially scoffed at my propositions. I was a little taken aback by her attitude. Her role as the Forensic Trace Team Leader, is to gather evidence and not offer conclusions or opinions in such a strong manner.

"Is there a traffic 'red light' camera that would also give us another view? Their cameras give better quality video..."

"No unfortunately." Tellie replied as she turned to me with a smile. I was still having a problem with this being a 'targeted hit'. He may have fallen asleep, woke suddenly to see that he could miss the green arrow. Tramping the accelerator, he careened around the corner way too fast, collecting the woman by accident. As the name 'Hit and Run' implies, he panics and keeps on going.

"Talking on his mobile perhaps..." Shelley suggests just to throw a spanner in the works which she is often guilty of. "He needed to stop in order to converse, otherwise he was breaking the law."

This a repetition of what I thought possible. She was being smart! Then again, perhaps she had thought my supposition through and agreed somewhat that the situation was not cut and dry. That my summation could be how it went down. I knew she would never accept one supposition over another until she had more evidence herself.

I nodded my head.

"For an hour and a half!?" Tellie replied incredulously.

"It can happen...the initial phone call causes several more telephone conversation, all the while, he is sitting at the kerb line...as one should."

"With the motor running, Joe. That is still a no-no. he could still be booked."

There were too many scenarios to say with any surety that this was a homicide case. Still, we would keep control until more evidence is gathered making it significantly more conclusive on the manner of the woman's death.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Patricia Elizabeth Vance. Born January one, Nineteen Seventy...she celebrated her fiftieth last week. An address in Croydon. 'Croydon House,' Riverview Crescent...mmm...sounds rather classy...is there a classy section in Croydon?"

I shrugged my shoulders, not really taking much notice of what Shelley was saying. I was still caught up on it being a simple ‘hit and run’ Case with me needing a lot more facts to turn my opinion around to it being a ‘targeted hit.’

“I think there are some large two-storey Victorian Houses dotted around the suburb. On large blocks of ground. It was a gentrified area in the early days. Rolling pastures down to Parramatta River...”

I looked at the young Detective Kindle wondering how she would know this fact. Instead of asking her, I went off at a tangent as I’m known to do.

“She had been at her Hairdresser for several hours. A long way from home. There would have to be a dozen Ladies’ hairdressers between here and her address. Women tend to stick to their favourite Hairdresser...I would imagine there would be many words spoken between the two...” I mumbled as I stepped down from the Mobile Lab. “Um...Ruth? Come with me while I talk to her Stylist...it may save us a bit of digging.”

“We’d still have to confirm whatever she says as we cannot act on a he said/she said scenario.”

“Yes...you’re right...but it’s a start, eh? We may get valuable insights into the Victim’s life. We’re looking mainly for background stuff to get us going.” I said over my shoulder as I stepped from the minilab. “Um...Sergeant? Have your lads conducted any formal interviews on witnesses and others?”

“Yes, we have. I’ll have the ‘Statements of Interview’ conducted by all my people typed up and sent over to you as quickly as possible. The only party within proximity to the incident that we haven’t interviewed are the two Stylists in the Hairdressing Salon our victim spent several hours at this morning...”

“Oh! Why?”

“They were going to close for business this afternoon because...you know. They cancelled several appointments and were just going to complete the ladies sitting in the Salon awaiting their appointment. They told us to come back around twelve as they’ll be finished by then...”

“It’s about that now.” I replied, gesturing to Kindle to come with me.

CHAPTER FIVE

The front glass double doors of the Hairdressing business were closed and locked. I tapped on the glass and held up my ID Card against the shopfront. A woman popped her head out of a doorway at the far end of the premises, waved an arm, stood, and walked quickly

towards us. She bent to unlock the bottom lock and stood on tippy toes to disengage the top lock. She swung one of the doors wide to allow our entry.

“Sorry about that Detectives. Some people don’t take the hint. Even with this card on the door there are some who completely ignore it...or pretend to as though they will not allow such carry-ons. Come in Detectives...we were making a coffee after we had just completed our last appointment for the day...and having my first ciggie of the day. Would you care for a coffee?” She asked as she once again closed and locked the doors. She adjusted the sign that read,

‘We are sorry for the inconvenience
but this shop will be closed for this afternoon and all day tomorrow,
Friday Three March
due to the death of a dear friend and customer.’

We followed her towards the rear of the shop. A back door that lead out to a car space fully ajar. We accepted the offered mugs of coffee, nodding in agreement that the world was becoming worse with little thought given to our fellow man.

“How long have you been at this address?” Kindle asked, tiring of the small talk.

The two women looked at one another.

“Um...we brought the Business back in the early-nineties...” Looking at one another for confirmation. “Thirty years...it has gone like a flash...just like that.” They both nodded their heads to go with that comment. “We poured in a substantial amount of money to modernise the place. The woman whom we purchased the Business from had had enough...she was finding it hard to stand for most of the day...there was a good clientele base when we came in with most staying with us...we didn’t make much for the first ten years...in fact we were operating at a loss for a couple of years until we paid off the Bank Loan...at one stage we were thinking about tossing in the towel...”

Silence as they recalled the early days...smiles on their faces detailing it wasn’t all doom and gloom with happy memories as well.

“It’s a long way to come for a hair-cut...from Croydon where the Vic lived to here...”

They nodded their heads in unison.

“Patty um...I had a small Salon business near the Croydon Rail Station...um...Patty and her mother used to come in about every three or four weeks. When I sold the business and became partners here with Kirsty...um...Patty followed me...that’s not that unusual...but her mother stopped having that three-weekly appointment...”

“Any reason why?” Kindle asked as she took another sip of her coffee.

“Patty never said. She wasn’t much into talking about herself...or her mother. I can remember her...she wasn’t that frail from what I can remember, but...you know...I rightly don’t know why her Mum stopped coming...she hadn’t died...in fact she died...umm...I say in the last couple of months...late last year.”

“Angie was her Stylist for all that time...around twenty-five years...” Kerstin Tolhirst explained. “Um...Angie never let her down in all that time...she like me, has a loyal list of customers who come in at least once a month for a style or trim...”

“Was she a talker? Pattie Vance? A lot of women unload their entire lives to their Stylist. Was she perhaps like that?” Kindle asked, taking over the interview without a sideways glance at me.

“Yeah...” A chuckle. “There are some who think you have some type of Psychiatric Degree...or they are in a Confessional of some kind...some of the stuff!” She shook her head and again ended with a chuckle. “Pattie wasn’t like that...she usually went into a semi-conscious state is how I would explain it...yeah...she lived in an old two-storey mansion in Croydon that her great-grandfather built before the War. The First World War. He was considered to be in a protected war industry or something and therefore could not be asked to join up...she looked after both her mother and father until they died...her father at the turn of the century and her mother? Late last year as I said. It took Patty a lot to just mention that. I got the impression...no, I shouldn’t start rumours as I don’t know the facts at all...”

She looked at Detective Kindle before standing to drain her mug.

“If there is nothing else, Detectives? We want to lock up and head home. Have you any idea on when she will be buried...no, she wanted to be cremated with her ashes spread on the rose gardens at her home...can you let us know?”

“If we find out, yes. Most certainly. I would imagine it will be listed in the local paper’s Obits...yes?”

CHAPTER SIX

She was a sliver of a woman, standing less than five-foot tall, weighing in at fifty pounds wringing wet, if that! Her skin paper-thin and blotchy, her teeth now exposed in something akin to a death grin. Her breath came in short, rasping gasps as though it would be her last and she was finding it hard to catch that tiny amount of air.

Not for the first time she wondered if she had lunch as she was feeling peckish...even for that pap they served up! The Hospital starched white sheet pulled up to her chin, making it look as though only a head existed in the bed. Even though it was a single bed, her tiny head made it look a lot larger! Her stringy white hair splayed out around her head on the pillow, a

halo when the sunlight was right, sneaking into her room and illuminating the grey-white strands.

She wondered again whether she had something for Lunch. She couldn't remember. For the second time that day she had voided her bowel and bladder. She was now squirming in the mess not understanding what the feeling represented. No-one came to check on her otherwise she would have remembered. She didn't remember having her Meds either. Not breakfast nor lunchtime. She turned her eyes, not her head to the sound of the room door opening. A woman stood at the door and said something to her.

She couldn't work out the words or even recognise the Sister.

The woman strode into the room, the aroma clearly indicating that the elderly patient had shat her bed. She picked up the medical chart.

"Missus Bartlett? Have you had your mid-day meds yet?" She glanced down at the chart, scribbled some comment which she signed and added the time. "Yes, you have! By the smell, you have made a mess again, Missus Barlett! You're a naughty girl, you hear me? We can't keep changing your bed...we'll run out of bedlinen. You have almost exhausted your allotment, in any case. You have got to ring the bell if you have a need to use the toilet...and you need to talk to your family to bring in incontinent pads or pants, hear me? You have run out of your allotment."

The old woman didn't understand what the elderly nursing sister was talking about.

"I'll get the Aid to come and shower you and change your bed...sweetheart, you've got to tell us when you have a need to go to the toilet instead of letting it dribble out of your incontinent pants. Understand? No, I suppose you really don't. You make it hard for us, you know."

She patted the bed beside the stick-thin old lady. Looked at her with an expression close to sympathy...and something else...impatience?

An alarm went off out in the corridor. The Sister slammed the Health Chart back in its holder at the base of the bed and walked briskly from the room. No-one came except for the Aid who would feed her the night meal. When the woman recognised the smell, she placed the meal dish on the bed-side cabinet and left the room...no-one came to feed her or change her bed or give her the evening meds. So, she thought.

No-one came to give her the night-time meds, so she thought...she was dead by the following morning, again voiding what little she had from her bowel and bladder.

Shelley and I attended the death scene.

"Dementia...in the last throws, I'd say." Drew Waller muttered quietly. "What a terrible disease...just wasting away until the brain forgets and stops sending the signals for the body to breathe..."

“What was her treatment like? Regular-like...with the proper meds?”

“Yeah, Joe. Nothing for you but to write up the Report for the Coroner...an easy one.”

No death was easy. They still required a Report of some size to satisfy the Coroner, though his time too would not be extended on this Case. It was cut and dry, even to him with nothing suspicious about it. The fact that she received her Meds and meals at the prescribed times was enough with her squirming in her own shit never reported or notified. It was an oversight that would be a regularly scene in a lot of Aged Care facilities. Not even an autopsy would highlight this discrepancy...an autopsy rarely undertaken when the patient was recorded as being a severe Dementia/Alzheimer patient and the death signed off by the visiting Doctor.

It would not even be mentioned in the recently commenced Federally funded Royal Commission in the Aged Care Industry.

CHAPTER SEVEN

It was dark...he could hardly see. The blinds on the front window were down, making the darkness heavier, giving it depth...giving more size to the small room because you couldn't make out the wall opposite. The curtains and blind were always down. He often wished that his daughter would open the drapes and roll up the blind so he could see out...see the day and the sunlight. The tree out in the front yard or even a bird flying past. No matter how many times he asked, she never did let the daylight and sunshine in.

The 'stand-by' red light on the television beamed like a beacon in the night. He didn't know what time it was...or whether it was night or day, as he rarely turned the TV on. He absolutely hated most of the daytime 'slop' on every bloody channel, so he rarely bothered with it!

He needed to void his bowel. He stood unsteadily, feeling the edge of the bed as he did. The last point of solidness before he began to walk unsteadily towards the bedroom door. He needed to go to the toilet. It was close, just down the Hall. He was quite capable of making it himself. He had done it countless times before. He missed the door by its width, slamming into the small wardrobe that stood next to the door.

This confused him...he began to wonder where he was. He didn't recognise the room he was in. Things became foggy, disorientated, disorganised. He stood before the wardrobe then fell backwards hitting his head on the edge of the bed.

It took some time for his daughter to open the door and turn the light on.

By that time, he was dead.

CHAPTER EIGHT

She placed the coffee mug unsteadily onto the small kitchen table, spilling some as she slumped into the hard-backed chair. She rested her elbows on the table-top, her hands cradling her chin. She forcefully inhaled and exhaled before she gave into her emotions. She began to cry, letting her tears drop onto the table, mixing freely with the spilt coffee.

She never thought it would be this difficult. Sure, the Assessment Team that had visited her home had said as much. Warned her in a roundabout way but no...she could handle it...just like looking after a baby. Her Doctor and the Respite Nurse also hinting at it. She suddenly realised that she would be tied to this house until such time as her mother required more professional help...or she died...then she would get her life back again.

At forty-eight she was not eligible for the Old-aged pension, but the Carer's Pension looked especially welcoming...just as much as she was earning as a casual Shop Assistant making sandwiches and milkshakes two and a half days a week. In fact, the Carer's Pension wasn't a taxable income so she was a lot better off...and her mother's pension on top meant she could live life in an easy fashion.

So she thought as much when she had begun this journey.

It had now been almost twelve months into this arduous chore...that is what she felt about looking after her mother...a bloody chore! Even the Respite Nurse didn't help that much...and the Visiting Nurse who came every second morning to bath the old girl, was not especially friendly. Like the Respite Nurse...must be a prerequisite to get such a job, she thought, causing her to smile! She came for an afternoon once a week, giving Charlotte enough time to do the shopping...but not enough time to get her hair done or just sit and enjoy a coffee somewhere out of the house. All her circle of friends lived in Sydney and the occasional phone call at night, or the silent chatting of Messenger on her computer didn't take her away from this...this...oh, what the hell!

Her life had become a day to day trip to hell.

Her mother didn't seem to want to help or make it easier in any way. In fact, it was just the opposite, so it seemed; the old bitch mouthing words such as 'payback time' as she had struggled bringing up Charlotte. This repeated until it seemed like a chant. A child with a mind very much on one track...what was good for the old girl. A bout of Bulimia...a stint with marijuana...even brought home by the local cops, she pissed to the eyeballs. Finishing off a really 'sick' night by spewing on the carpet beside her bed...several times in fact...really, too many such nights to count...even more difficult to remember. She was sure that her mother could tell her accurately how many...she was like that now!

Charlotte could not see the irony in that at all.

She had just finished changing her mother's bed linen as she had crapped herself making one hell of a mess...again. It wasn't like she couldn't get out of bed and make her way to

the toot...she seemed to like her daughter in distress. The old woman would almost smile at these little episodes as she called them...butter wouldn't melt in her mouth when the Respite Nurse visited that one afternoon a week.

"Such a beautiful person..." She would coo to Charlotte who would find it hard to put on a brave face and smile at the comment.

The old bitch liked playing these games.

CHAPTER NINE

Ruth pulled the unmarked slowly to the kerb as I let out a low whistle.

"We got the right address?" I asked as I undid the seatbelt.

"Croydon House in fancy script on the wrought iron gates gives it away every time." A tight smile to go with the jibe.

"I could live in that joint any day of the year. I wonder how much the Rates are..."

"Too much for you to afford, Joe."

I stood from our vehicle and walked quickly to the double entry gates. I looked down at the lock that now prevented the gates from opening. I rattled the chain to see whether the lock would pop.

"That's a new lock Joe...brand new!"

"Christ, the poor woman isn't even cold yet and they've taken possession...who ever 'they' are."

I watched as two men walked quickly down the inner road towards us. One of the heavy-set men was holding a German Sheppard on a tight leash.

"Sorry folks..." The other man stated officiously as he drew near us. "The place is off-limits to most folks."

I showed him my ID Card which should have made some difference. Neither man missed a beat.

"...Even coppers!"

"That's quick!" I retorted. "The woman hasn't made the Morgue yet..."

“Don’t know anything about that...we are just guarding the joint twenty-four-seven.”

“Your Boss’s name?” Ruth had to look up at both men. Both were muscle bound more than likely bought in a bottle of pills.

“You got a Warrant? A Court Order? No, then we have nothing to add except piss off.”

They half turned to leave, noticing that neither Ruth nor I had followed instructions.

“Coppers? I don’t care how long you stand there it ain’t gunna make any difference...so you may as well tootle off...” Walking his fingers as an adieu. I glared at the clever one who was holding the dog. “Don’t even give it a thought. At night we’ll have three dogs unleashed and on patrol around the entire grounds...”

I grimaced, nodded a couple of times, and turned to walk away.

“Expect to see us again...in the next day or two.”

“We’ll look forward to it.” The guy responded before they too, turned and began the walk up the hill towards the two-storey Victorian Mansion that in its prime, more than likely had a vast paddock rolling down to the river. A Manor for perhaps the first Landowner in the district.

CHAPTER TEN

Ruth Kindle walked up to my desk. I was leaning back as far as my chair would allow, my hands behind my head, one foot resting on the open bottom drawer of my desk. Me already feeling as though the day had passed and I was ready for home. The day couldn’t go as quick as I wanted it to!

I had been seated at my desk for less than an hour! My first coffee consumed.

I needed another!

This was not the first time I was unenthusiastic about the day! It was becoming the norm. The ‘Hit and Run’ Case had slowed with us waiting for the complete Autopsy results and any useful forensics; if any. We were waiting for the Court Order to allow us to walk through the family home...and to interview the Family Solicitor. Maybe some time later today we would get what we needed to progress the Case.

“Good to see you readying for your holidays, Joe. Without you and Shelley, the place will look empty...and there won’t be the usual banter and stir, if you know what I mean. Looks as though I will be your and Shelley’s partner in crime for some time...well, I will be if you decide against taking your holiday.”

“Oh, why? And who says the two of us are going on holidays? Maybe next year...Oh! You’re talking about Shells and I volunteering for a spot in the Investigation team, huh? I’m certainly not hanging out to join that Royal Commission into the Age Care Industry...and if Shells even hints at joining the throng, I’ll do my best to talk her out of it!”

“A couple of Murder Dees, including my geriatric partner Don Ballard have been sequestered to the Royal Commission into Aged Care facilities across Australia. According to Don, they have quite a gang of Investigators to do the spade work for the Royal Commission. According to him, only the best Dees with some sort of reputation are being considered for the investigating Dee roles...makes you wonder where they think you are, huh?”

That smile that all females have down pat! Showing a patronising yet snide expression which no male could imitate.

“Oh, how I have missed this...this bitchiness.” A smile to show I still had my stir in place. “I thought Don was counting down the days towards retirement.” I sat up straight, placing my clasped hands on the surface of my desk. “He was looking forward to that day as far as I knew. What? Has he delayed that date to take on such a thankless task in some Royal Commission which will mean a load of work and a hell of a lot of travel, so said some who had been sequestered to the Child Abuse Royal Commission several years ago.”

“Seems so. He reckons that with a doubling of his wages, he’ll go out on a better pension...another two years, minimum. I hope for his sake he makes it.”

The rest of my brilliant repartee drowned out by Denny Turner, the Boss.

“Listen up, Detectives. Those who are Grade Three and above, please be in the Number Two Conference Room at ten thirty sharp tomorrow morning...do I need to repeat it? No? You are all bright enough to get the gist of the order...yes, it is an order. There will be no excuse for you to not turn up at that time and in that location...unless you have Court time. Hear what I have said, huh? All you grade three and above Detectives.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

He was a big man, standing just shy of two metres tall. A barrel chest that tapered to narrow hips. By comparison, his legs looked skinny, but I reckon that his one leg was thicker than my two combined. A full head of hair just starting to grey at the temples. A rugged if not a handsome face. I bet myself that he was an Aussie Rules player in his younger days and had kept up very a vigorous exercise regime ever since. I heard Shelley beside me growl a couple of times before he began talking to the full complement, a microphone held some distance away from his mouth as though he thought it superfluous.

“Good morning ladies and gentlemen...thank you for being in attendance. My name is Neil Pretoria. My background is as a Deputy Superintendent with the Westralian Fraud Squad for twenty years. I am now the second in charge of all Investigators sequestered to the Federal Government’s Royal Commission on Aged Care. The Commissioner has requested we ask for more volunteers to help in our investigations. We have only just begun with a two-week sitting time in Adelaide and already we are snowed under with individuals wanting to air their firsthand experiences to the Commissioner. We realised that if this situation continues, we will be chasing our tails once all other States are represented.”

He stopped and took several swallows of water from a plastic bottle.

“’Scuse me, people. A dry throat.” He coughed a couple of times. “This Royal Commission is not just about Nursing Homes and associated organisations but will include investigations into home Aged Carers and their role, the management of all aspects of elderly living including Retirement Establishments and Villages and the manner under which they operate. As a Royal Commission, we will only be interested in facts and bringing them forward for the Publics’ interest...at the end of the Inquest and the publication of the Findings, certain matters will be forwarded to the relevant State Authorities to press charges as they see fit. We do not have the powers to prosecute, but understand, we will have very wide powers of investigation. I am hoping that I can convince some of you present here, to volunteer for a role in this important Federal examination of that industry.”

Again, he took a couple more swallows, almost finishing off the bottle.

“The salary commitment will be similar to a Grade Four, Level Four Detective on New South Wales salary scales...” He waited until the murmur had died down before continuing. Those seated before him were impressed by that revelation. “Arrh...and as we are including every State and Territory in this exercise, there will be a fair amount of travel with the added bonus of ‘Living away from home’ allowance, Travel Time and Meal allowances. Also, full Overtime rates will be included, which would bring about another one third to a half of non-taxable concessions which will make for a very attractive salary bundle. Those who would be interested, I ask that you pick up an employment form as you leave. Thank you...and now if there are any questions...”

I zoned out of the rest of it, not wanting to hear any more.

“What do you think, Joe?” Shelley leaned into me to softly ask the question.

I shook my head, turning to her to whisper in her ear.

“Nigel Selwood...do you know of him?”

She looked at me, shaking her head.

“Paul Rowntree?”

“No Joe. Who in hell are they?”

“Two Detectives...Nigel was from Melbourne...I think from the Child Abuse Branch down there. Paul was from the Fraud Squad here in Sydney. He’d come out of White-Collar Crime. Did a top job there and in his short spell in Fraud, he made quite a name for himself; both were good blokes and excellent Detectives. They are off on full pay close to basket cases...”

Shelley glared at me wondering what I was on about.

“So? Where’s the connection, Joe?”

“They were sequestered to the Royal Commission into Institutionalised Child Abuse...it hasn’t long published its Findings as you would know...about six months ago. Those two...and several others as well...they were greatly affected by the Investigation. Part of the problem I feel, is that there is no closure for any investigating detective carrying out his duties for a Royal Commission. They look under every rock watching to see what crawls out. They highlight the guilty party and then watch and listen to the bullshit that most Organisations went on with to protect their band of child abusers...and that is it! They don’t even have the pleasure to be involved in the prosecuting formalities...and because most of the abuse is historical stuff, most of the bastards were either dead, or between the ages of seventy up to ninety. Look what happened to the Bishop of Adelaide. That went to Trial on facts gleaned from the Royal Commission. He not sentenced or given any form of punishment. That apparently smacks these Investigators in the face every time.” My voice emotional.

“Yeah, okay...I understand that...but?”

“Has anyone asked the question, why the Roman Catholic Church went on a ‘hiring’ binge straight after, before and during the War...as most of these historical child abuse cases...worldwide...involved men who were born in the nineteen twenties and thirties...putting them in their eighties and nineties if they are still alive. Can anyone tell me *why* three out of five of these men in that ghastly period were child abusers, homosexual or paedophiles? Why were so many approved into the various seminaries around the world while being so tainted? You can see the damage they all caused by simply going on-line and delving into every country’s attempt to bring those old men to account...with few doing time for their proven abuses! Does the entering a Seminary exclude those who did enter the Church from serving in that country’s military service during World War Two?”

Shelley looked around us finding it difficult to understand the relevance of my little speech.

“Joe? What the fuck are you talking about?”

“It’s about a year since the Findings of that Royal Commission were tabled. Has there been a significant shift in any Religion to abide by the Findings? Guess what, the answer is no!! A murmur of conciliation...of becoming more open about claims of sodomy, child abuse, homosexuality in their respective religions and for all religions to recognise the rights of all in the LGBTQI community...guess what, it was just words tossed into the wind. Not one major point from the Royal Commission has been adopted...well, they make conciliatory sounds to improve their regulations to allow such persons be brought to answer for their

sins...but that's all it has been...words flung into the wind with little being done to comply...that doesn't help at all, especially if you are an Investigating Officer putting in the hard yards, thinking you are making a difference...interviewing men and women who have lived through hell all their lives because of what these men of the clergy did to them when they were young. Listening to conciliatory words from all these institutions knowing full well that their hard work and diligence will not be rewarded by the imprisoning of any of these bastards. Hoping your sweat and tears will be honoured when really, you are being ignored."

I shook my head. I was becoming angry, indignant, and frustrated.

"That is why I will never volunteer for such a job. Being an Investigator for a Royal Commission...like in the child abuse cases...and now in crimes being committed against another vulnerable section of our society...the aged, infirmed and handicap...with no respite for the Investigators and no sense of closure afforded them...that is why I am a bit angry...and frustrated...you will not catch me ever being a part of *this* investigation or any other in the future...and apart from that, I reckon I'd be away from Tellie and the girls...and you and all my friends for far too long."

Shelley nodded her head. It was obvious that she had not thought past the carrot dangled in front of her face...the salary package doubling her present salary levels.

"And that's the thing...the whole incredible actions of Catholic Priests and Teaching Brothers...what, no-one knew about their 'sins of the flesh'! It was a whispered subject satirized by Comics for countless years...and this Pope? He visited the UAE or one of those Middle East Muslim countries and in a speech confesses that his Brethren had used the concubines of various Nunneries to satisfy their 'sins of the flesh!' This to show that Catholicism was similar to those of the Islamic Faith who also abuse their women! There wasn't any outcry which really deserved the Media of the World asking the important question...was there any Priests who were 'married' to the Church and their God? I mean, that is what we have always believed...these being servants of their God...it shows from the early days of the Catholic Church, they were not the Servants of God at all...like with this new Royal Commission into the aged, affirmed and handicapped...everyone is shocked by what is being unearthed. Much the same as that of Child Molestations in the Churches...but everyone was aware of it. Instead of demanding action long ago, it takes a Whistle-blower NSW Cop, a Journalist, and an Atheist Prime Minister to get the ball rolling on the Child Abuse question. In the case of this latest Royal Commission, it took evidence from hidden cameras to highlight the abuse of elderly and dementia patients being physically abused to start the ball rolling...why is most of the community walking around with blinkers on not wanting to know what is really happening...just look at Domestic Violence! One woman a week is murdered by her spouse, her boyfriend or former partner in Australia...and it is a similar worldwide problem...everyone knows about it, knows someone who has been a victim of spousal abuse...but does nothing to bring this problem out for at least discussion. Turning their heads and their concentration onto other less brutal subjects that are easier to digest...or forget!"

“C’mon Joe...settle down. You are getting up on your soapbox again and people are taking notice. Let’s have an early Lunch sitting down by the river. It is a beautiful day and I am now not in the mood to go back to work for a while.”

“You were considering the change, weren’t you?”

“Yeah...before you and your clumsy attempts to put the kibosh on the whole thing.”

“What about Brin? Your animals? And your veggie patch?”

She was shaking her head all the way out of the Conference Room which we were leaving early, having to tread on toes as we excused our way passed those still sitting and enjoying the *‘call to arms’*.

That was my sarcastic attempt at placing a label on this whole shebang!

CHAPTER TWELVE

“I’m sorry Detectives, but you should know that I cannot discuss anything about the family, the Will which hasn’t been read at this point in time and due to the uncertain details of my client’s death, it will not be read for some time I would imagine...”

“Why are there two armed guards with attack dogs now looking after the estate? She was only killed two days ago.”

“Yes, a sad affair...again, I cannot discuss any details of the Estate...”

“Um...I am not asking for any details that would jeopardise your Client confidentiality clauses. I am merely asking why there are armed men roaming the four-acre estate?”

He looked at his hands clasped loosely together before he again looked up at me.

“Missus Vance? After her mother died, she became almost paranoid that there were persons roaming the property in the dead of night. She asked me to arrange such a detail as she was scared out of her wits...she was afraid she maybe killed...I tried to calm her, but she wouldn’t listen...” He shrugged his shoulders. “So, I organised the...arrh...added security about a month after her mother died...um, in early November.”

I nodded my head.

“Did she have any idea who would be behind such threats?” Shelley asked. “Any ideas as to whom would be roaming the area?”

“No...but she slept peacefully once the arrangement was organised...a sorrowful act. I understand that you believe it was a targeted ‘hit and run’ meant to kill her...is that correct?”

“We are conducting inquiries into her life...and who may benefit by her death. Yes, we are conducting a homicide investigation...everyone in her life will be spot-lighted so anything you wish to share with us, will be greatly appreciated...like who might be behind those night visitors. I believe your Firm has acted for the Vance family for some time, yes?”

“Yes...um...my Grandfather became their Lawyer back before the War of 1914-18. We have had a successful and happy union since then.” There was a smugness in the way he carried himself as though this arrangement set some type of precedence. This raised my hackles as any self-aggrandisement always did. Especially of any Law Firm. “Have you spoken to any of her siblings? Her larger family including cousins, aunts, and uncles?”

“No...we are in the preliminary stages of this investigation. Can you give us a run down of other family members and who was to be the beneficiaries of the Estate? I would think it is quite large.”

The Solicitor leant back in his chair; a furrow etched across his brow as if cogitating the problems of the Universe. Reaching forward to press the inter-office telephone, he asked that the catalogue of all furniture, carpets, artwork, and vehicles of the Vance Estate be supplied for our benefit...along with the larger family members, most who would gain some benefit in the Will.

“Seven siblings all scavenging for their slice of the pie...Missus Victoria Charlotte Vance changed her Will after her husband Gordon Barton Vance died in Two Thousand. She made Patricia Vance sole beneficiary to everything including a sizable bank account, share and property portfolio. Um...Croydon House and its interiors valued at close to forty million dollars...what enlarges that amount is a beautiful art collection, sketches and first edition novels. Gordon Vance had excellent tastes and knew when to buy and when not to...he had a nose for a good buy especially in paintings. He was truly one of the unknown Donors who preferred to be incognito in supplying any finance to worthy causes. He could definitely afford such benevolence...he was a true gentleman and I understand his father before him was of the same calibre. Missus Victoria Charlotte Vance became a...arrh...let’s say a little hard to handle in her last years. A real pity as she was a lady of some quality herself in her younger days. The Vance banquets and parties were substantial affairs and well described in the social pages of the newspapers.”

“We would appreciate a run through of the property...and the names and addresses of all family members...and larger family members if you could.”

“Only when I can accompany you...your size fourteens are well known to cause damage...”

He again leant forward to the inter-office phone to ask his Private Assistant when he had a free half day.

“Next Wednesday morning. No later than one as you have two meetings PM...”

“Okay...pencil in Wednesday morning while I accompany these Detectives through the Vance home...get me a list with telephone and addresses of all the siblings and others who may be beneficiaries of the Estate...” He looked across at me. “I’ll have that ready to give you on Wednesday morning. Say nine thirty at the gates to the property.” He rose from behind his desk and walked us to the door. “Understand,” he said. “I have gone further than some would but I want Patty’s death solved...there is little more I can reveal to you except to say money can turn reasonable folk into piranhas.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

We’d stopped at the ‘south side’ Rest Stop at Wyong on the M1 heading south towards the city after spending most of the day in Newcastle at the Court House. The horrible Case of the brutal death of Lindsey Carlisle and his associates finally, after almost two years being put to bed. We were required to attend for two days. Sitting around picking our noses waiting to be called. A cup of coffee and a muffin taking care of the hunger pangs because we had skipped lunch.

My Mobile buzzed in my pocket and I managed to answer it before it began its boring ring tone. Shelley raised her eyebrows as I mouthed that it was the boss ringing.

“Joe? Where are you?”

“Heading south on the M1. We have stopped at the Truck Stop and Restaurant on the south side carriageway...at Wyong. We are heading home for an early mark as we have had two longer than usual days at Newcastle Court House on that Castle and Carlisle Case of a while ago...two bloody days for about an hour in total on the Stand!”

“Good...then you will pass by Mount Colah heading south, eh?” She gave me an address informing me that Andrew Waller, the Forensic Pathologist had requested we pop into that address.

“A dead body, huh?”

“Seems that way, but the way Waller was talking, he doubts that charges of negligence causing death could be placed against the next of kin. Let me know what you think. Either way, you will have to prepare a report for the Coroner’s benefit.”

“Boss come on! It’s almost four so we will have another long day. Isn’t there anyone else who can attend?”

“Your name was mentioned and as you are in the area...”

I swung my arm about as we were still an hour away from Mount Colah. Before I could mention this, she had rung off.

“Do you think she is favouring you and me on new jobs as they come in?”

“Yeah...it seems like that to me...jeez...I’m bugged. Looks like another late night for both of us. After we have a look at the scene, you can drop me at Hornsby Railway Station, and you can take our Unmarked home...”

“Some bastard is going to wake up one day that my car is often parked at Ingleburn Railway Station overnight. A great car to knock off!”

“Your car!? It’s a bloody heap that no-one would want to knock off...come on, let’s get going and get this over as quick as possible.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It looked as though a massacre had taken place in this quiet suburban street. The number of cop cars and divvy vans, an ambulance, the forensic pathologist van, and a ‘plainclothes’ morgue van all clustered around the address as though a siege mentality was in play!

We double-parked. We had no choice as the closest we could get if we parked at the nearest available gutter opening was halfway to Hornsby, so it seemed.

I stood from our Unmarked and stretched, looking around at the streetscape. We were on top of a flat ‘plateau’ with dense foliage dropping away from us into valleys that meandered away out of sight. I thought it was a catastrophic nightmare waiting to happen when the right natural aspects were all lined up. The roar of flames pushed along by one hundred kilometres an hour hot winds from the nor-west, hurtling up the valley sides to engulf the housing estates clustered on top of the ravines. Who in his right mind would have approved such developments in those locations?

The scenic view the drawcard chasing away the logical thought. A beautiful vista of forested valleys snaking away into the hazy blue distance overcoming those streams of concern.

Still, the houses had survived for close on thirty years, so who am I to worry...when these housing estates were commenced up on these plateaus surrounded by deep valleys and gullies, all foliage was flattened. Now, there was a plethora of mature trees and bushes on every block...enough fodder for those angry flames I spoke of...

I walked over to the forensic pathologist Andrew Waller who was standing beside the ambulance, nattering to the two uniformed paramedics. Both nodded at me. They had been present at other death scenes that my partner and I had attended.

“Good afternoon, Drew. What have we got?”

“You guys didn’t take long...” He said matter-of-factly, giving a special smile to our young off-sider, Ruth Kindle. She blushed a reply. “We have a Missus Doreen Hadley...possibly deceased for up to twelve hours. She has been in the care of her eldest daughter, Sandra Skelton. The deceased is eighty-one. Cause of death unknown at this stage but could be either a brain aneurism...or lack of nourishment...or failure to take medications as prescribed.” He held his mouth in a tight grimace, shrugged, nodded his head then looked down at the ground. “The conditions we found her in can only be described as atrocious...we will be cutting her to gain some insight into her death...” He looked sheepishly at me as he added that the scene was a bit worrying...

“Are you suggesting that her death has been caused by the nominated Carer’s negligence?”

“I really don’t know at this stage. I may know more when we cut her and take samples for testing...can you have a quick squiz at her as we need to get her to the morgue as quickly as we can. With these hot temperatures and humidity, she is degrading fast. I should warn you to wear a mask...it is not a pretty sight...or smell in there.”

We followed the man over to his van where he gave us each a mouth mask which he lined lightly with Vaseline, hoping to deaden the smell.

As we headed towards the house, the ambulance and two of the patrol cars slowly accelerated down the street leaving us in charge as though there was some unheard order to evacuate the street immediately; the cavalry has arrived to save the day!

My mobile rang as I went to step up the front steps of the dwelling.

“Detective Lind...” I answered as I turned to retrace my steps to the front gate.

“Detective? Yes, this is Senior Sergeant Matilda Grant at Burwood Police Station. We’ve found the vehicle used in that fatal hit and run of the other day. Missus Patricia Vance was the victim. The vehicle stolen from the Westfields parking area at Burwood a week ago...we received a report of it being stolen that day. The Number Plates had also been switched...um...we have organised the vehicle to be transported to the Vehicle Impoundment Yard so the Forensic Officers can give it the once over...”

“Was it a burnt-out shell?” Me thinking this would be the likely outcome.

“No...which surprised us also! There were indications that they tried but failed to burn the vehicle. Amateurs I reckon. I have placed your name for contact purposes with the Forensic people...is that all right?”

“Yeah, sure. No worries...any sign of when their work will be done?”

“They say inside ten days except for any DNA trace which could take a little longer.”

“Good work. Thanks for that. I’ll keep you in the loop when we have a Preliminary Report from them.”

I rung off as I once again headed back to the front steps of the house, thinking that the whole episode reeked of ‘first timers’ trying to kill the victim. The way the vehicle had roared around the corner almost losing control...and now the fact that who-ever had tried and failed to burn the vehicle spoke of amateurs undertaking the homicide of Patricia Vance. Useful forensic traces will be obtained. I was confident of that fact as the Perp seemed to be very sloppy. Not a professional ‘hit’ it seemed to me.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

As we strode up the front footpath, all of us placed the masks over our mouths and noses. The front bedroom where the deceased lay on a large Queen-sized bed could not accommodate all of us at the same time. We had a bit of a problem of all of us fitting into the room. Waller and his First Assist and the three of us. We crammed in shoulder to shoulder!

“Just as well they didn’t want a King sized...” Someone murmured, which broke the solemnity of the moment.

What hit us was a combination of smells...stale urine, the smell of shit and an underlying smell of stale air and that of death. I looked around towards the window thinking I should open it. For me to make it to the window meant we all had to shuffle about and alter our position in the room. I gave up...

I looked quickly around the room that to my eyes seemed like the junk room. The far wall for its entire length and close to the ceiling stacked with removalist cardboard cartons. In some places, it was two deep! Presumably holding her life’s bric-a-brac and special occasion framed photographs with nowhere to display them. Her life rolled up and deposited into these removalist cartons...I wondered if all our lives would finish up like this. The front wall had a large window with blinds down and two layers of drapes to ward off the day-time light. In front of that was an old-fashion Dressing Table with a large oval shaped mirror. A flat-screen TV sat on one side of the Dresser. One of those old-fashion wardrobes was on the adjacent wall next to the entry door into the room. The queen’s sized double bed seemed to have been shoe-horned into the room.

She lay on one side of the bed looking fragile, frail, and small. A lifeless face, skin stretched tight over the angles of bone. Grey and wizened with wisps of hair on her bony head. A death grimace indicating that Rigor had set in and was yet to diminish.

Waller drew back the sheet to expose the body of the woman. She was naked except for a pair of incontinent pants hanging off her. There were blotches all over the sheets of stale urine and shit just scraped from the sheets and left to dry.

My eyes filled with tears as Waller pointed to the many bruises over her body. I waved a hand to denote I had seen enough, and I walked from the room out onto the front veranda,

standing stiffly, legs apart with my hands on my hips. I breathed deeply before removing the mask.

“What’s the chances, Joe?”

“Unless negligence or any one of those punches caused the death of the old woman, then I think there is little here for us...if we cannot prove intent to kill the old girl, we again have nothing to go on. I guess we could go for ‘Death by Accident’ or Man Two but I doubt it would stick. Unless some-one has first-hand knowledge on the way the old girl was cared for, say hidden camera shots of the Carer bashing into the old girl...you know... I only hope my kids don’t display a similar trait of laziness and indifference to me if I make it to that point...that is bloody disgusting.”

“Worthwhile having a word with the daughter?”

“I don’t think so. To me it will only reinforce the absolute negative thoughts I have now towards her.”

I watched as the Morgue Attendants removed the body on a stretcher. She hardly filled out the blue body bag. By their actions, the old dear looked light on in weight.

“Not good, eh Joe? I understand you saying that you can only progress this case in your domain, is if the death of the poor old dear was caused by the actions...or inactions on the part of the daughter. Is that about it?”

I turned to look at the guy, nodding my head as I did so, saddened by the whole scene. Is this the way of Society? Domestic Violence and ill-treatment of our elderly an everyday occurrence? Looking after ‘loved ones’ so the Carer can claim the Carer’s Pension...and pocket the Old Aged Pension of the parent as well? Doing it as a way of robbing the Government. Living moderately well with about a thousand dollars combined a week...or a little more! Take the ‘oldie’ to the Doctors once a month, perhaps. Do the shopping once a week. Having professional people on hand for all the things he or she required?

I slapped my thigh, shrugging my shoulders as I headed for the front steps wanting to be alone for a bit...as I walked I spat onto the ground trying hard to dislodge whatever it was that was making the stink...as it clung to the inside of my mouth.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I wandered around the outside of the house until I had settled down. That lump in my throat gradually disappearing. I saw Shelley hold onto Ruth as though our young colleague wanted to walk with me. Eventually I came to stand on the front veranda as the Pathology team cleaned up. Their work completed.

“Autopsy maybe the day after tomorrow...give us a ring to confirm it, will you? You want to be present?” Drew Waller looked up at me.

“Um...I never want to be present at those things, but we should pay a visit, I guess...” Yielding not to my better judgement but out of respect for the Deceased. Giving her the time of day is the least we could do.

“Where’s the daughter? I’d like a couple of words with her...” I added, not enthused with facing her. Afraid my emotions may come to the fore.

“She’s out the back, puffing away on a reefer as though the police do not exist in her home...”

“I guess that is one way to diminish the guilt that the woman must feel...she must feel some contrition...or an understanding of what she has done...surely!?”

As I walked through the house heading towards the back veranda, I glanced into three other Bedrooms. While not antiseptically clean, they were neat and tidy with nothing out of place. All had large windows at least half-opened letting a cross-breeze and sunlight to enter in unhindered. The large Lounge Room, Kitchen and Family Room were similar. I wondered to myself why there was such a noticeable difference between the rest of the house and the stale, dark Bedroom of her mother. It was as if she was closing the door thereby distancing herself from her mother and the responsibility of looking after her.

I crossed the threshold out onto the rear roofed veranda. Sandrina Skelton was carefully pinching the end of a reefer, a roach in her hand, which she skilfully dropped into a pocket of her Dressing gown.

“You can’t get rid of the smell of the smoke, you know. It has an aroma all of its own.”

I sat at the outdoor table setting. Kindle joined me. I wasn’t too sure where Shelley had gotten to. It was close to five in the afternoon and I doubted whether the woman had changed out of her sleeping attire from the night before.

“Has she gone?” She asked, not looking at either one of us. Her head down, her shoulders slumped as though the weight of the world was crushing down on her.

“Yes...it will make a difference to you, won’t it?” There was sarcasm in my words.

She glanced up at me then slid her gaze out into the back yard. The lawn needed a shave as it was a mangled mass of weeds and grass almost hip high.

“I have enough to live on...from my late husband’s Insurance payout when he was killed going to work a couple of years ago...that rocked me...and still does...and now Mum. I wasn’t ready to cope with looking after her but...my siblings...they weren’t interested. Sad huh?”

I nodded my head. Shelley had dragged that information up from somewhere and relayed it to me as we all stood on the front veranda watching as the Morgue guys transfer the old girl into the back of the Morgue van. The woman was just confirming what we already knew.

“Still...losing the Carer’s pension and your mother’s Old Age Pension will hurt the bank balance a bit...”

“The point, Detective?” She glanced at me with cold eyes, a look of disgust in the expression.

“There has been rumours that you took on the responsibility of looking after your mother because of those two pensions being available to you...”

She glared at me. Sighed, sitting up in her chair.

“Have you ever looked after your mum or dad...no? Then you have no idea how difficult the chore is...”

“A chore! You describe looking after your mother as a chore and the money you obtained undertaking this chore as insufficient for the act.” I felt Shelley touch my arm. A signal for me to take a deep breath. Step back and away from the pressure building inside.

“Too bloody right! The minute you start, you can stop having a life of your own. It is a twenty-four seven sacrifice that you make...and you get no help but constant criticism from all your siblings who are free with the condemnations as though they could do much better but fail to offer a hand to help...all the bloody time! The hardest thing is your mother becomes the little girl while you become the parent...a complete role reversal which is extremely hard to come to terms with...well...it was with me.” She looked up at me, her eyes red-rimmed. She blew her nose and swiped at her eyes with a tissue that she had wrenched from a box on the table in front of her. “I loved my mother and I understand the sacrifices she made while bringing up eight kids...she stopped her life to do so. But that was the...the...” She waved her hand about hoping to catch the words she wanted. “...the ordained rite of marriage and child-rearing for a female back then. Caring for my mother twenty-four/seven is not in the realms of reality...that and those two combined Pensions don’t make the job of looking after her any easier...” She glared across at me, challenging me to make a comment I suspected.

“That’s why you smoke reefers? It helps you get through a bad day...”

“Could be, I guess...”

“Even though we are coppers, we are from the Murder Squad. What you smoke or don’t smoke, is of no concern to us...”

“The Murder Squad? What, you think I killed my mother...or something?” I didn’t know whether it was a grimace, a smile, or a leer as she glared at me.

“We are called in on any unexplained and/or sudden death of a person. Just to prepare a Report for the Coroner...it’s the Law.”

She shook her head, slinking further down into the chair she sat on. I heard a noise then a booming voice wanting to know where his good-for-nothing lazy sister was and how did his mother die and where is she now. Sandrina shrugged, throwing her arms into the air in a sign of exasperation at what she had been telling us just materialised.

He was a large man. He burst out the back door, his face ruby red.

“You fuckin’ lazy bitch...you killed our mother, you bloody lazy sod. Spending all day getting high while your mother shits and pisses in her bed and you don’t even change the filthy sheets but just lets your mother lay in her own shit all night!”

He advanced towards the woman who looked up at him almost daring him to touch her.

“Simon? These two are coppers, understand?”

“I don’t give a fig if they are cohorts of the Queen and Duke...what are they doing here? Going to arrest you? About friggin’ time, is all I’ll say. All they gotta do is look at this place and take in where and how you kept mum in the dark...all the friggin’ time! She hated that, let me tell you!”

I stood and turned to face him.

“Mister Skelton?”

“Simon Skelton...so what are you guys doing here? Sandi there wouldn’t know how to bring up bloody silkworms...”

“Yeah...Simon says, and we are all expected to salute...and all you lot did was criticize...” She stood and turned to her brother. Her face twisted in anger. “Not one of yers offered to take some of the load. Out of three sisters and four brothers, not one of yers even understood how difficult it is!” She stabbed her finger at the man.

“Yer got a woman comes in twice a week to bath and shower mum. Yer get another comes in to do the housework once a week...and does the entire house for you...even offers to do the washing and to cook some meals...and yer got another woman comes in once a week for an afternoon so’s yer can go and have a coffee and do the shopping. What more bloody help do you need. Yer can even have a bloke come in to mow the lawn...but no...you can handle it! Look at it! It’s like a bloody jungle in the back and front yards...and on the occasions when one of us asked, yer always knock back the offer as though yer didn’t want us in yer home...even for us just to visit mum...you wouldn’t allow it!”

The woman drew herself up to stand before her brother who was a lot taller and beefier than she. She looked up at him with fire in her eyes. She stabbed the air several times before she let loose.

“When yers did come...which was sporadic and didn’t suit, yer could never understand that she slept most of the time so a visit was completely useless...she wouldn’t have known youse were here. You just thought yers could visit any old time as though this was a bloody Hotel or something...and bring something to eat? Not on your life, huey!” Anger and frustration tinted every word. “I told you so many times that the lot of you could eat me out of house and home in a bloody afternoon...yers still didn’t bring a bloody thing...and while you were here, was there any thoughts of you lifting mum up and bringing her out here for a while...you or Dougie could lift her no worries...I couldn’t but yers never seemed to understand that. Yers just sat there drinking my tea, coffee and milk complaining on how I never brought her out of the Bedroom...all the friggin’ time...but an offer of you doing it? Not on yer bloody life!”

The small woman lunged at her brother who towered over her. Kindle grabbed the woman and shushed her down to something akin to calmness, asking her to sit down again. Ruth then went inside the house to make a cup of tea.

“Mister Skelton? Do you mind if I have a word with you...say in the Lounge Room?”

“Yeah...sure...what for?”

“Just a chat...” A faint smile to encourage the man to follow me into the Lounge Room where we could converse with some degree of privacy...with the constant passing of Forensic and Pathology Officers doing their job, our privacy was questionable at best.

I led him through the back door as Shelley came through. I raised my eyebrows in a questioning manner and cocked my head to Sandrina who had sunk back into her chair. She had wailed like a Banshee before willing herself to deep sobbing as she rocked back and forth! I guess it was the first time she had allowed herself to really cry at her mother’s death. All her brother could say was she was putting on a show for all these people!

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The sun had gone down without me noticing the darkness outside. It was close to nine that night before we left, feeling extremely despondent as we sat in the Unmarked. Shelley drove to the end of the street and slowed the vehicle to a stop.

She let out a huge sigh of relief as though she had not taken a breath since she walked into the house.

“It’s sad, isn’t it? The whole family is in turmoil over what? It looked to me that all the siblings sat back waiting for some-one else to pick up the responsibility of looking after their mother...and then carried on like spoilt kids when their sister took up the slack. Their combined anger, criticism, and bitter displays...it seemed to me they were angry at themselves in not helping...know what I mean? It seems to me that the whole ugly mess in

the family becoming completely unhinged was out of guilt that they didn't help at all...and their actions when they did meet here was an attempt to worsen the load for their sister...pure pettiness!"

I nodded my head.

"Yeah...if you can't stand the heat then get out of the kitchen. That was flung at her repeatedly...as though that negates their cooperation in any way but continues this line of negativity. There was no way they were going to take up the slack...ever!"

"To me, it seems that not only did all the siblings fail muster, but the Respite Nurses neglected to take action once Sandi showed her inability to cope with the problem. I would have thought that would be a part of their job. If anyone is guilty of not doing their job properly, it would have been them...on a professional level they also failed the old girl. What? A visit three times a week by these professionals and they failed to report the gradual decline in Sandrina not coping...a classic example where the problem is moved sideways with a closed door the result...that being the poor old woman's door, shutting her away from love and daylight...and Sandrina just becoming more despondent and depressed..."

"I think the entire family and support people were responsible for the mess. Makes you wonder what the old girl thought of it all..."

"If she was capable."

"Yeah...true...life! How wonderful it can be!"

"It will be interesting how the Coroner will word his Findings...and I get what you mean Joe..."

"What do you mean?" I asked as I wound down my window.

"About the frustration and anger most Detectives would feel while staying within the parameters of the Royal Commission...if that had been the tenth example of Old Age abuse that I was involved in, I think I would have been close to cutting my throat...thanks for letting me see the light..."

"Yeah...you should listen more to what this old Dee has to say...shit...I forgot to get the names and telephone numbers of all those professional people who supposedly came to assess the old girl's caring situation. I reckon there will be red faces all round..."

"It's okay, Joe. This 'on the ball' young Dee thought about that...that's why I was missing for a while. I contacted each Firm who are involved in the Respite care, the weekly bathing and house-keeping...they will have to answer for their inability to fulfill their weekly responsibilities...I've made appointments for next week to see the persons involved."

"Arrh...thinking for yourself. Good show, young lady. Good show! I could reward you with one of my feathers, but you don't have anywhere to put it..."

“Now, now. There’s no need to be so frugal. I can put it in my hat band...”

“That big white hat would look silly with a feather accruitment. Tell me, why do you wear your mask even when there is only you and me! Seems to be there would be a tell-tail outline of where the mask was...with the rest of your face sunburnt...”

“The hat? It’s big and has a very wide brim...does that answer your question, Tonto?”

“No, not really. Blind Freddy could identify you with that mask on...or off! It makes you look more stupid than my one feather head-band!”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A visit to interview the Respite Nurse, the Housekeeper and regular Nurse made all the easier as every one of those persons worked for the same Provider. We arranged to interview all persons involved with their Superior Officer being present.

“I believed our suggestions to have Missus Skelton removed from the premises was fiercely opposed. Such action showed to me that if we did do that, Sandrina Skelton would’ve been whipped to an inch of her life by certain members of her family. A bit melodramatic, yes.” She looked away, a little embarrassed by her summation. “The other family members would feel vindicated that Sandrina wasn’t up to it...but they were not seen as helping at all. We were preparing the necessary paperwork to have the old woman transferred...a little too late, huh?”

“The condition she was in when she died...it was terrible...” Shelley offered in a steady tone.

“Yes...we were aware of the deterioration of Missus Skelton’s life...it had been reported after each visit by our people...and the continued inability of the daughter to cope. Unfortunately, we can only be involved if her daughter had called for help...or admitted her inability to take reasonable care of her mother. As we have indicated, it is not an easy task to relocate the elderly woman into better accommodation where she can be looked after properly if there is no agreement from the daughter...she fell through the cracks...not the first and certainly will not be the last.”

That was the gist provided by the Housekeeper, the Respite Nurse and the twice a week nurse...though there was hardly an air of contrition or responsibility in the slow downward life of the old woman. The excuse was these people were spread thin and paperwork involved in bringing charges against the Carer was a mountain of worry.

“Arrh...we will need to prepare a Report for the Coroner. Your opinion on the matter would be appreciated to include with our Account. I think I can safely say that the Coroner will not be impressed with the handling of this Case...be prepared for it.”

“The Royal Commission into the Age Care Industry should pick up the relevance of too little professional persons to carry out too much work...the whole industry needs a shake-up and I hope this Commission will follow through with a giant shake-up.”

We spent two days with the three of us writing up a Report, then combining the three Reports into a coherent bulk and conclusion. The thing that really irked the three of us was the total lack of responsibility or apology for the old girl's death by the people there to ensure she was afforded the best of care. Their Report had been carefully worded to absolve any of them from further action.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Thankfully, this ‘grind’ in preparing the Report interrupted for one morning when we visited the beautifully maintained Victorian two-storey building set on manicured grounds in the middle of suburbia. Croydon House. I could extol the wonders and treasures that were inside the place, as though the property was caught in a time warp. Just completed and looking spick and span throughout with fancy, expensive furniture of the day...of the late Eighteen Hundreds.

Shelley kept falling over her tongue as she took in the ‘period’ furniture in every room. The condition of all pieces was A1 as though just delivered straight from the Manufacturer. Most exact copies of the bulky furniture she had removed from her mother's place at North Bondi, though those pieces had a harder life. Some given dozens of coats of paint during their one-hundred-and-fifty-year life cycle. I wondered what the eight kids of the union did when in the house. Nothing was to be touched. No doors slammed or drawers slid shut with anger...no writing on walls with the punishment ten strokes of the cat-o-tails whip.

“You'll need to learn how to French polish. Finishing your furniture pieces with polyurethane will lessen their value, I reckon.” I muttered to Shelley as I stood to look at a beautiful old desk. Green leather inlay. Drawers and even secret drawers that the Solicitor gleefully showed us.

“That desk was Edmund Barton's desk before he became the first Prime Minister of Australia, so I have been reliably informed.” Gregory Flint commented as he ran his fingers along the edge of the desk. “I would like to have it in my Office. Beautiful, isn't it? They don't make things like this anymore.”

“Hah...Brin said the same thing...you and he are in cahoots in getting me to do a French Polishing Course...why me?” She giggled. A look of ‘woe is me’ plastered on her face. “To tell you the truth, I've been looking to see whether there is such a Course long before you two started hinting at my attendance at such a course. There's not that many around as it is a dying trade but I think I may have found an old bloke who would be willing to teach me...for a cost...cash only so his pension is not affected.”

We wandered through the building with the Family Solicitor. He had supplied a manifest list of all pieces with the approximate value. The list was impressive; the total cost of items staggering. All Shelley and I could do was drool...with us talking about it for days. Both she and I had taken oodles of photos of every piece...and the artwork? Some of the works were by world famous artists with a small Monet the crown of the collection. Australian Artists the bulk of the 'collection', with several Namatjira and family paintings along with other well-known Australian painters hanging on the walls.

"Grubby, huh? How the other half lives...but I can sympathise with the Carer in this instant. She was not about to walk away from the responsibility of caring for her mother. Unfortunately, she could not handle the stress of the caring obligation...I think there would be a lot of similar scenarios as this one, except they never are given any Media attention."

"Isn't it funny the way things happen. We have that Case of the Skelton woman...and here, the Vance family did a similar thing...leaving the caring duties to one person. I reckon that the death of Patricia Vance may have something to do with the Estate...and who will prosper the most. The old girl's Will was changed after the death of her so that Pattie Vance was sole beneficiary...with her now dead, who gets the dosh?"

"As you know, I cannot discuss the bulk of the latest Will that Patricia had prepared. All I will say is that everyone of the family will share in the spoils. A sorrowful state as some of these items may have to be singled out and sold...I'll be keeping an eye out for this desk." Flint smiled.

"Should we put you down as a possible perp into Patricia Vance's homicide, Counsellor?"

He laughed but I saw a shadow come and go...I did not trust the man. He was too smug for my liking.

Back at the office we completed our Reports which we then combined to provide the completed version. We couldn't help but talk between ourselves on the fate of the poor woman, wondering what she may have thought of her last years on this earth!

Shelley and I had walked into the Boss's Office to obtain her signature on the completed Report of the elderly Skelton woman's demise and a Draft Report on the death of Pattie Vance.

"Yeah...even with the intention and duty of the professionals involved, it still failed. This new Federal Royal Commission into Age Care? Will it look at something like what has occurred to poor Missus Skelton and her dreadful death?"

"I really don't know Joe...you um...you didn't put up your hand for one of the Commissioner's Investigators. Why?" Denny looked up at me, that lovely little disarming smile dismissing all the negative thoughts of the Skelton death from my mind. It took me some moments for me to track the change of direction.

"Umm...Shelley was a bit surprised herself and she was on the verge of applying. As it is an Australian-wide investigation, your normal home-life would be shattered...they seemed to

gloss over that point by stating that a Level Three Dee could almost double the salary package...but as I said, I think you would be away from home more than at home...and the other thing, a Royal Commission doesn't have the ability to charge perpetrators...sure, they can question and write up a Report for all the world to see...but they can't close that circle by charging a felon...there is no closure on any aspect...sure, those with a semblance of being charged are referred to the relevant State cops but..." I left the thought hanging. Denny nodded. "Those gifted Investigators are left up in the air. Not my cup of tea."

"Mmm...yes, I see what you mean. It is obvious you gave it a lot of thought...what I will say remains within this Office. Detective Pretoria? He was hoping you would sign up...he had it on good authority you were one very alert and conscientious Dee...how about that. Your reputation is known of in Perth, would you believe!"

"Yeah? Fair Dinks?...I did think hard about it but...as I did with the Federal Royal Commission into Institutionalised Child Abuse...there is now two Dees that I know of who are off work on full pay because of the stress and sights they saw while doing that job...I do not want a similar situation to occur with me if I took on the role. My family demands a certain respect and a future where I am relatively sane."

She slid off the corner of her desk, nodded her head as Hendo walked into the Boss's Office with a new Murder Folder and information to get us started.

"A good call...you certainly surprise me at times and that is something that is said about you...you can show a penchant for deep thought...and compassion and care for those you love." Denny muttered as she walked behind her desk to sit in the over-sized executive chair that had been a fixture of the Office since Abbey was in control. Me left wondering whether I had been complemented or not.

Shelley spun towards me, a grin on her face.

"The Boss is pleased with your progress, Tonto. A gold star for the top of the class...maybe another feather to keep that lone one company."

"In two secs you can demolish anything that I gained from that little chat...okay Hendo, what have you got for us?"

"First up I wouldn't get too much of a swollen head as a two feather Tonto isn't that grand...or important in the eyes of the rest of the tribe...and secondly, a death of a mother who was the single carer of a handicap son. Cronulla. So, you have a fair drive from here. I would imagine that Trace and the Pathologist will beat you to the death scene. It looks brilliant outside...and there is a fantastic Fish and Chips shop just up from the beach...do you need another off-sider to give you directions?"

"Hah...arrh...no. That woman living in the GPS thing-a-ma-jig is Joe's favourite woman who tells him regular-like where to go!"

Hendo and Ruth almost wet themselves at Shelley's humour. Me? I waited in the Lift Lobby with an angry scowl to display my objection of being the butt of so many jokes by so many of my fellow workmates. Usually I could handle it okay and give as much as I received. This morning? I was not in the mood which only made matters worse!

"You can't get that extra feather in any case Joe, as you failed the latest task, so I am led to believe..."

"What do you mean? I deserve another feather...you heard what the Boss said of me?" I replied testily.

"You almost failed the first task in putting up your tent...*and* the last task? It was knitting and you didn't know the difference between purl and plain!"

All I could hear as I wandered out to the Lift Lobby was cackles of laughter as Hendo joined in to also give me a giant stir!

Welcome back into the fold! That feeling of smugness and pride initiated by what the Boss had said quickly disappearing...leaving me swimming with the rest of the clan!

CHAPTER TWENTY

We meekly but obediently followed the directions from Miss Direction, the shallow infuriating lady who must know of every street, road, and town in Australia. She in residence in that tiny GPS screen. I could not think of a more boring profession. I mean, having to learn the name...and correctly pronounce every town? Come on, there must be more fruitful professions than that!

We were ordered to turn left at the next street junction, some two hundred metres from our present position...she was bang on correct and we turned left into Barnsley Street. On the second block down, we were prevented from proceeding by Police Tape stretched across the road. A Uniformed Constable lifted the tape for us to crawl into the inner sanctum of the Crime Scene once we had identified ourselves. We could not find a suitable parking spot what with all the official looking vehicles. You can tell they were official vehicles the way they parked...higgle-de-piggily! We drove out the other end of the inner sanctum, again a Constable lifting the tape to allow us to exit.

We found a parking spot straight away.

We walked back to the house that was the attraction for all these people. Signing on, we asked how many Vics there were just going on the number of cars about.

"Down beside the house. The poor Dear almost made it through the side gate and away from her attacker...just missed!"

If he had said *by that much*, I would have pistol-whipped the wannabe comedian around his bloody head!

There were two ezi-erect, portable tents; one on the inside of the side fence, the other on the outside of the same fence. Three sides of the outside tent were down to exclude anyone from viewing the area. An open gate showed the position of the Deceased. The three of us walked slowly over to the tent and lifted a side to gain entry to view the body. Not a great start for the morning, I thought to myself. The woman in her late forties or early fifties. The blood and gore of her head clearly displayed multiple blows were inflicted, turning her head into a mangled mess.

“Good grief!” I muttered more to myself. “What...or who is responsible for this attack? And what was used, definitely not fists?”

“Good morning to you guys. With the three of you here it is a little squeezy, isn’t it?”

“Good morning, Josh. You earn the right to be out on your own at long last, eh?”

“Yep. Got my final Report last week. This is the first of many hopefully...”

“Congrats. I know that Muscles has been taken by your progress.” I again looked down at the body. “Your first, huh? I hope your future specimens are not as bloody as this one, one would hope.”

“Yeah, I guess...” As though the scene before him had not made an impact.

What is wrong with these people who can look at the goriest scene and wonder what they will have for lunch...

Josh Turnbull had been Andrew Waller’s First Assist for ages...and he had done more than his share of Autopsies as Muscle’s Lab Assistant for ages also. Muscles had always labelled Josh as the next best blood-man behind Brenda Wzerlic and was being ‘groomed’ by Muscles as Brenda’s Deputy when he decided to retire. Now that Josh had his own wings, I suspected that Muscles would call it a day pretty soon. I know that Drew Waller was not that pleased about being leap-frogged by a junior, but then the breaks. Josh was a much more talented body-man than Drew would ever be...get on with it and accept your limitations, I could hear Muscle’s retort to Drew’s many complaints about the set-up.

“What would cause this type of...shit...this type of bloody mess?” I asked, turning to Josh.

His First Assistant replied.

“A skate-board. The son’s skateboard...wielded by a son who had no idea how big and powerful he was. He was upset at his mother for taking the skate-board off him and trying to hide it from him...there were words, a bit of screaming and then the lad went berserk.”

“Where’s the boy now?” Shelley asked quietly.

“Around the back with a Constable either side of him...the lad is handcuffed and has already been the target of a Taser...he apparently is still boiling...that far away from self-implosion.” He indicated with his thumb and forefinger.

I did a double take. What, was the Get Smart movie on last night!?

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“Detective? You can’t step over the body to get into the house via the back door. You’ll have to go via the front door...and the forensic team may stop you from going that way as well.” Stated as though he knew my very thoughts. I nodded my head.

“Good to see you on deck, son. Flying solo...” I slapped my thigh, asking my two colleagues had they seen enough. Ruth turned and held back the side flap of the tent as though she had been waiting for me to say enough was enough.

A young Constable stopped us entering the house through the front door.

“Detectives? A word before you go and question the son?” She guided us along the length of the front veranda. “I was quite sure when I laid eyes on the young bloke, that he was within the autism spectrum. There was a phone number on the wall. The Department of Community Services telephone number. A Mz Vickie Starr. That is the phone number of his Case Officer...I am sorry if I stepped out of line, but my brother is in the same spectrum so it was easy for me to pick out the signs...”

“On the contrary, uh...Constable Perkins...” Looking down at her ID tag. “You did the right thing...when can we expect the Case Officer?”

“Right about now, Detective.”

I turned as she introduced herself and her Boss as they walked up behind us onto the veranda. Things were looking up as we normally must wait some time for them to show.

“Anything you can tell us about...um...” I glanced at Shelley for help.

“Hugh Applegate. His mother is Lorna Applegate...” The Case Officer stated in a formal way before shaking our hands with everyone getting chummy.

“The husband?”

“Cleared out years ago...couldn’t stand the heat. I must admit Hugh was hard to handle at times. A quick temper easily riled. It was okay while he was a young bloke, but now that he has grown, all you can do is lock him in his room. We had to get a solid door installed...and

the gyprock walls are a bloody mess where he has punched through them...we suggested years ago that he should be institutionalised but Lorna wouldn't wear a bar of it..."

"Is he capable of standing trial for the murder of his mother?"

"That's not up to us...that is a Court matter, but yes...he really wouldn't know what had happened. He has no concept of time or cause and effect. He lives in a small world which has caused problems with the local police. Unfortunately, he doesn't give the appearance of being within that range which has caused some embarrassing turns especially if he was out helping his mother with the shopping...and stuff like that."

"Perhaps you should have a word with him first...with us sitting in..."

"Only one of you, Detective...otherwise he will feel overwhelmed by all of us in the one room."

"Shells...perhaps you can rig up your iPad to stream through to mine...put an ear-piece in so I can suggest question options to you."

Shelley nodded her head, though she was unsure why she had to be the patsy.

"That's a good idea, Detective. He is calmer with women about. He thinks that a man in proximity means a belting..."

"That brings up a whole heap of questions...tough love...or maybe the opposite in some sense...loved to death."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

"Hello Hugh...it's been a while since we spoke last, hasn't it?"

"Been a while, yeah..." He nodded his head and peered up the backyard as though there was something interesting along the back fence...there wasn't, with the yard reflecting thousands of other backyards Australia wide.

"Do you remember me?"

"Yes...you are the lady who wants to put me in a new school." He nodded his head slowly, not locking eyes with any of us.

"Yes, that's right. Somewhere where you can do your own thing."

"Yes, do my own thing. I would like that. Do they allow you to ride your skateboard?"

"Oh, I really don't know. I will have to ask them...what have you been doing since we last spoke?"

“You know, things...riding my skateboard...my mummy went crook at me for riding my skateboard down the driveway and out onto the road...”

“Oh, Hugh. Mummy went crook on you because she was worried you might hurt yourself...or be hit by a car when you veered out onto the street. Cars can hurt you if you hit them hard.”

“Yeah, she said that...mummy did.”

“Your mummy said that because she loves you and does not want to see you get hurt.”

“Yes, she said that she loved me and...that was why she hid my skateboard...and she didn’t tell me where she hid it...that made me mad.”

“That’s because she loves you and doesn’t want to see you get hurt...do you wear a helmet and knee pads?”

“That’s for sissies...”

“Who told you that?”

“That’s for kids who fall off their skateboard all the time. I don’t fall off my skateboard because I can ride really good. Mister Lawrence across the street says I’m real cool when I’m riding my skateboard...that’s pretty good, isn’t it?”

“Oh!? I thought you must have fallen off your skateboard because of the blood on your hands and up your arms. You even have some on your T-shirt. Did you hurt yourself?”

“Mmm...must have...I don’t remember though...” He pulled the bottom of his T-shirt so he could get a better look. “I must have fallen over. There’s a lot of blood, isn’t there?”

“Where’s mummy?”

“Gone shopping.” This answer conveyed hurriedly where he had taken his time answering questions up to that point.

“Why did you hit mummy with your skateboard?”

“Because she hid it and wouldn’t tell me where...but I found it...”

“And you hit mummy on the head because she hid your skateboard...”

“Did I? I must have. Is this mummy’s blood on me...she must have fallen over when she went to go shopping? She tripped over and I...” He frowned, the first time he showed any emotions. “Mummy’s gone shopping.” He repeated.

“This morning?”

“Yes...”

“When will she be back?”

“When she finishes shopping...did I hurt her? No, mummy loves me. I would never hurt her unless she made me very mad...like when she hides my skateboard...”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“What do we do? I have never come up against this problem before...I don’t think keeping him in a Holding Cell until a Bail Application is processed...which we would not oppose...is a good idea under the circumstances...but where does he go then?” I looked at Shelley for help. “Are there other family members who could take him in?”

“He is likely to become very depressed once he gets his mind around what he has done. It could take hours...it could take weeks, but I think he would need to be contained, especially when he comes to that realisation...that mummy will never come back from that shopping trip. I think we have due cause to place him in the Special Lock-up at Long Bay for the criminally insane. I can see him dropping over the edge without heavy surveillance, psychiatric services and the correct...um...medicinal regime afforded him. Um...I don’t think transporting him in a Divvy Van would be appropriate. Let me make some calls and arrange suitable transport for him.”

“We can’t help?”

She shook her head as she walked from the room. I turned to the Case Worker.

“How old is he?”

“Seventeen.”

“A big boy...but still a juvenile.”

“Yeah...but that holds little weight where we want to place him. He um...he shot up almost overnight. That was the main trouble with him. While he was small...up until about thirteen or fourteen, both his mother and father could handle him. I am not going to insult your intelligence by saying his father did not belt the tripe out of him...that was part of the problem. As Hugh grew, he would retaliate especially against his father. The old man couldn’t take that and walked out, leaving this potential time-bomb ticking under the care of his mother. We tried many times to have the boy admitted...but...his mother thought she could always control him with love and affection...that killed her in the end...loved to death...” She murmured as an after-thought. She tilted her head, giving a tight smile as though that would answer all questions.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

I walked out to the front of the house just in time to see the small body of the Deceased loaded into the Morgue Van. The size of the body bag that enveloped her, making her seem even tinier than she was.

Denny picked up my call on the second ring. I ran through this morning's events as she listened to me, not interrupting once.

"Mmm...it is usually the Court who requests a psychiatric report on whether the Accused is sane enough to face charges and the Court. This one is upside down. I mean they would be the ones who could testify to the Court on the suitability of the Accused to face the Court. We on the other hand...at this early stage into the Case...it is us who has complete control of where the Accused is to be held...and his Bail conditions when it reaches the Preliminary Hearing. Where do we put him...and we certainly cannot beg the Court to release the lad on his own volition...he has shown that he can lose it...quite violently and without warning. They want to place him into the secure Wards at Long Bay. I've been there and that is not a place I would want my great aunt referred to, let me tell you. Hold on, Joe."

I heard a muffled conversation before she came back on the line.

"Sorry...look, I have just been summoned by those on high. Arrh...in this circumstance, they do have some authority to proceed with their plans over us having the authorisation. The lad can attend the Preliminary Hearing via CCTV...and because he is currently in custody in a sense, a Bail Hearing would not be needed. I think it will save you and the ladies a bit of work, but you will still need to prepare a Case as though it will go ahead to Trial...gotta go. See you when you're next in the Office...sometime late tomorrow."

With that she rung off.

I watched as a matt grey vehicle with a sign-written sign on the front mudguard came to a halt at the front gate. I got a chance to read the sign. Department of Corrective Services. Three burly blokes alighted, two from the cab and one from the rear of the vehicle.

It brought back memories of the 'Black Mariahs' that would cruise around the black spots of Sydney picking up unsuspecting and innocent crims and those playing up, getting caught in the act. Inside there was enough room to have several copper 'thugs' belt the bejeesus out of the 'pick-ups'. Invariably, they would then be hurled from the back of the vehicle; most requiring hospital attention that they never received. A few deaths were attributable to this vehicle and its inhabitants with no charges ever laid against those coppers involved.

That whole era of the late fifties and early sixties calmly deposited under the carpet!

Vickie Starr came out onto the veranda and beckoned for the three blokes to follow her. She gave the three a quick smile of familiarity as though she had dealings with them previously. It seemed like seconds as the three walked back out, one either side of Hugh and one

behind, holding onto the rear of the boy's pants. They had removed his belt and buckle, turned his pants pockets inside out. Hugh seemed meek, voluntarily obeying the orders of the lead guy. As he was helped into the rear of the 'wagon', Shelley and Ruth came to stand beside me.

Vickie Starr and her Boss shook our hands and had made their way to their vehicle before the grey vehicle had pulled away from the kerb. They would go with the vehicle to Long Bay, so they had informed us when they were saying their farewells.

"What do we do now, Joe. We've got neither a Vic nor a Perp."

"I had a word with the Boss just before. She is saying we continue with our investigations as we normally would...question neighbours and friends, other members of the family if any, the family Doctor and any Teachers who may have had any dealings with the young Hugh during his Primary School days..."

"Why? The guy will never stand trial...we'll be wasting our time."

"Regardless if there is a Trial or not, there possibly will be a Coronal Enquiry...so we proceed as usual."

Neither women were enthusiastic, and to be truthful, neither was I!

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

This type of homicide investigation was debilitating requiring constant 'gee-ups' for both my two colleagues and myself. We knew the Deceased, the Perp and why the homicide had taken place...unfortunately, we knew it was never going to be presented to the Court. Consequently, what should take mere days stretched out to several weeks as we interviewed everyone remotely attached to the family. Obtaining collaborative information that further displayed the bravery of the Deceased in caring for a son who became more and more violent as he grew.

A Final Report of some seventy pages which included all on-site forensic trace and autopsy details was at last completed. That final Document signed by me, Shells and Kindle, then counter-signed by our Boss before it was sent to the DPP Office.

My mobile phone rang in its dock. A DPP number.

"Detective Lind? This is William Lind at the DPP Office. I am ringing you after having just completed perusing your Final Report on the Homicide Bashing Death of Lorna Applegate. The alleged perpetrator is her son, Hugh Applegate."

I smiled knowing that as a homicide Case, it could not get much simpler!

I was always amazed that Bill and I had very few cases where our paths crossed...two in the fifteen years that Bill had been gainfully employed with the Public Prosecution Office. It was encouraging to see that the DPP Office had accepted Bill back into its fold, though Bill would handle only simple Cases and never be considered for promotion unless he showed improvement...and his presence and cut and thrust while in Court had improved. We were still waiting for that miracle.

There had been whispers from on high about his employment as a young Prosecutor with him being spoon-fed Cases. Here he was earning more than Assistants but doing less. I had been told that he could be shovelled to a Legal Clerk or Researcher. I secretly crossed my fingers every time I thought of his situation knowing the day was getting closer and closer.

Like Tellie my wife, any consult had to be conducted in a professional manner and not as husband and wife. Bill expected the same degree of respect in our dealings, not as father and son. I found that just as hard to manage as a work chat with Tellie.

“Arrh, yes, arrh...Mister Lind. A tragedy. As the son aged, he became harder to control. He had various drugs to keep a semblance of balance but Missus Applegate, the victim had stopped that daily medication some years back. She was convinced that with her love, she could control his mood swings...and violent outbursts. She learnt the hard way that was not the ideal solution...and that love does not conquer all...”

“Yes...yes, so it seems. What is your thought on this going to Trial?”

“I think the two Reports, one from his Case Manager and the other from the Oversighting Psychiatrist at the Mental Clinic at Long Bay jail, concludes that the lad is incapable of understanding his crime, does not possess a glimmer of guilt or contrition for his act because it never occurred in his mind; and most importantly, he incapable of following the intricacies of a formal Trial.”

“I still think the Case should be presented. The Judge can then make a valued judgement on the ability of the alleged perp to stand Trial.”

“Seems like a total waste of time and money to me...especially as there is already a Psych Report detailing his inability to comprehend or understand the workings of the Court.”

“Yes...to an Officer of the Law I would imagine that being the case. The intricacies and nuances of the Law would not necessarily be in your handbook, Detective.”

The only reason I did not respond in an angry tone was that I could hear the smile in his words.

“Said like a true professional who does not compute or understand the laws of the streets...or of people’s emotions and what drives a lad to commit such a crime. His only concern is the black and white of a Final Report or Jury deliberation and fails to feel the nuances of the crime.”

“Touché! The father? He is not mentioned.” Again, I heard the smile in his voice.

“No...we have hunted high and low for him right across Australia...he is not living in the Land of Oz.”

“Name change?”

“Could be but not registered if that is the case.”

“Overseas?”

“That is the likely answer. He has not been on the scene for close on six years. We know that he was abusive when the lad was younger but as Hugh aged and begun to put on weight, height, and muscle-tone, he begun to give as much as he received. We are sure that is why the father left...we have an ‘Alert Priority’ out on the guy through Scotland Yard, EU Central and the Americas...nothing as yet but you never know, he could pop out of the woodwork tomorrow morning.”

“I won’t hold my breath, Detective.”

“Neither will I.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The fatal ‘hit and run’ Case was beginning to lose momentum, mainly because we had these other Cases popping up which meant we were hardly in the Office. The Applegate Murder and Missus Skelton’s demise was taking up more time than they should.

We sat in an Office clearly of a very important person in a large multi-national mining conglomerate. The depth of the carpet, the richness of the timber veneer on the walls was hard to ignore. Neither was the view of Circular Quay, the Opera House and The Bridge. There were several framed photographs on a low credenza. A smiling Boyd Barton Vance with other very important persons. Two had him shaking hands with two former Presidents of the US. The largest frame was of his family pictured beside a BBQ setting. Five kids, a beautiful wife and two dogs...labradoodles, the latest token breed of note! Another frame of the same size was of a family setting also. I could make out Patricia Vance amongst the large gathering.

“Your family?”

“The Vance line taken last year a couple of months before Mother died. Her birthday, I think.” He lowered his eyes. “I guess the next time we all get together will be for Patty’s funeral and wake...the only time we seem to all get together nowadays. You know, invitations go out each Christmas, but it is a rare event that all my siblings with their

families attend. The usual who always say it is a pity we are growing apart as a family...it is them who reject the invitation usually...funny, huh? It happens a lot, eh? You know, with family..."

I was surprised to learn that Patricia Vance's body had not been released to the family or their nominated Funeral Director.

"Mister Vance, could you tell us where you were at the time of your sister's death?"

"That was on a Thursday morning, is that right?"

I nodded my head agreeing with him.

"The second of March..."

He held up a hand as he flipped a switch to ask his PA to bring his Meetings Diary to him. An elderly woman with a style about her, knocked on the door before opening it and handed a standard Diary to him, opened on the date in question.

"Um...yes. I landed at Mascot mid-afternoon on that day. I was attending an International Mining Seminar in Toronto, Canada. My wife woke me as I always suffer badly from long haul flights...I had come straight home from the Airport to collapse into bed. My wife knows not to wake me unless she considers it is bad news...the older I get, the harder it is for me with these long-haul flights..."

"How did she know about your sister's death?"

"Um..." He looked from me to Shelley. "I really don't know...I can ring her if you want, yes?"

I shook my head, informing him that we would eventually interview her as well.

"Does that present a problem?" I asked.

The man stood and began to come around the corner of his desk.

"I know in situations like this, you always concentrate on the victim's family first. Eight out of ten times it is some-one in the family."

I smiled as I nodded my head.

"Not always, but yes...and that is about the percentage."

Boyd Vance nodded his head a little sheepishly. He gestured to the Office door with an outstretched arm. We had expended our time limitation according to his opinion on the matter.

“I’m sorry Detectives...um...spending five days in Toronto, Canada can be a Godsend in some ways but all it means is I am that far behind in my work...please, if there is anything else, please ring.”

We walked into the outer Office as he called his PA in. We headed for the Lift Foyer.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

I doubt there’d be a cop in the Force who believed in coincidences. After I answered my mobile this morning, I’m willing to believe there could be something to the myth! That coincidences were possible with the right line-up of celestial planets warping reality...sounds good, huh?

“Detective Lind? This is Supervising Officer Barry Wright of Border Protection and Customs out at Kingsford Smith Airport. I believe you organised a ‘red flag’ alert on a Mister Edward Hugh Applegate some weeks ago. I am holding a Mister Ted Gates with a Canadian Passport that the PRP...Photo Recognition Program says is your man. Do you want to interview the guy? We can hold him with no charges laid for seventy-two hours under the Anti-terrorist laws.”

“Ted Gates, huh? Yes, hold him. We’ll be right there, say in forty-five minutes at most.”

I stood as I signed off on the call.

“Okay...girls let’s go. It seems that our missing Mister Applegate has surfaced under a different name and a Canadian Passport.”

“Joe, you’re forgetting...we have an interview with Hugh Applegate and his Solicitor and the resident Psychiatrist in an hour...”

“Poop, bugger...” I exclaimed as I sat back down at my desk.

I so wanted to be present at that interview as they had found a drug that will partially sedate him, controlling his mood swings to manageable levels and restrict his unexpected violent outbursts. It may also allow him to look at cause and effect a little better.

“Bugger!” Shelley responded. “Maybe...could we pick Applegate up at the Airport and include him when we see his son?”

“Only if he is willing to go along with that arrangement. We have no grounds to arrest or charge the guy and we certainly do not have grounds to force him to accompany us.”

“Let’s give it a shot...he maybe doesn’t know we can’t force him...and in fact, he may very well agree to accompany us.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“Hello son...”

“Dad?”

“They tell me that you have been a naughty boy...”

“That is why I am locked up...because I’ve been a naughty boy...”

“How’s yer mother?”

“She’s gone shopping. I don’t know when she’ll be back. Do you want me to give her a message from you?”

Ted Gates nodded his head.

“Yes, tell her I am sorry for the way it all worked out. Do you remember what happened?” The Psychiatrist placed a hand on Ted Gates arm. He glanced at her as a reply. Nodded his head again.

“I need to have a sleep. I’m tired.” The lad ignorant of what was going on around him.

He looked up at the man who had stood silently and motionless behind the boy. The powerfully built Psych Nurse helped Hugh Applegate to his feet, and without another word or a backward glance at the people who had sat opposite him, he disappeared out of the room.

“He’s a bloody walking zombie!” Gates boomed, slamming his hands onto the stainless-steel table after his son had left the room and the door had clicked shut.

“The best way to control him, sir. Without that medicinal regime, he could be a danger to others...and himself!” The Chief Head Shrink explained levelly, a smile to round out the explanation.

Gates shook his head slowly, finding it a little difficult to keep the fuse from igniting.

“Jesus bloody Christ! The best for *whom*?” Ted Gates turned to the Psychiatrist. “That is no life...and no future for a young bloke like my son!” Getting a little annoyed going on the tone of his voice. “He trudges about in a semi-comatose state not having a clear, original thought in his head...or a question to ponder over like why is a chair so shaped, or that of a toilet bowl perhaps...or other wondrous questions escaping his mind falling like autumn leaves around him leaving his mind devoid of anything...and that’s it until he dies!? Fuck me! What type of life is that?”

“Perhaps if he had been given the medication on a daily basis before, he wouldn’t be where he is now...”

Ted Gates sighed at the conundrum before him. Daily meds and he was malleable and controllable...no meds and he was a danger to himself and those around him...a tough love! A tougher choice for many...like his missus who could not reconcile a future so spent by her son. That was why she had stopped the meds...and had paid with her life because of that decision.

Was that the only choice with these people?

“Yeah...perhaps...I kept on saying to Lorna that she cannot take him off his meds...she said she was his mother and knew what was best for her son. A constant show of love and affection. She did not want him in that zombie-state all his life where there were no feelings...no emotions...no living.” He again shook his head and clasped his hands together so tightly the blood fled from them. “He was worth more, so she believed...I guess that is why I left, I think. I could not make her see as Hugh got older...and bigger...and stronger, he would become a danger to all of those around him...even the Department Case Worker agreed with me. They were trying to have the boy put into the proper Facilities where he could be watched twenty-four seven when he was twelve...but Lorna...” He shook his head, sniffled. “She...arrh...you know...and now look what has happened.”

“Is that why you are back in the country?”

“Yeah...a mutual friend contacted me via e-mail the day of the tragedy...he saw it on the evening TV news. I came back to go to her Funeral...tomorrow, isn’t it?”

I nodded my head.

“You went straight across to Canada?” Just to fill in the oppressive silence of the room.

“No...Great Britain then onto Sweden then across to Canada where it felt a little more like home. I have a business, live very happily with a woman and her two kids and one of ours...I guess there is nothing stopping us from getting married now...”

“You changed your name...took out Canadian citizenship...”

“Yeah...a clean slate.” He smiled sadly. “If there is nothing else?”

We all stood as one as though someone had blown a whistle, trooping single file from the room. I shook the hand of the Departmental Psychiatrist, the ever-present guard and the worried looking Case Officer who would never find closure unless Hugh Applegate died while incarcerated. By the condition he was in, there would never be a single flash of brilliance, no thought of escape, of a tomorrow never coming and of a son who would forever be waiting for his mother to return from her shopping trip.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

I scratched my neck and then let out a roar as I ran my fingers through my hair now not long enough to call it a tussle! The anger building up within me needing an escape. I stood and flung a biro against the wall. I walked over to one of the narrow, floor to ceiling windows just to peer outside. To allow my heartbeat to slow. The view was of Parramatta River and the Ferry terminus. People were waiting patiently for the next Ferry into town.

“What’s up Joe?” Shelley asked as she came to stand beside me, her hand on my upper arm. I shook my head wondering how I could explain my frustration.

“The Vance family...eight siblings including Patricia who was the youngest of the clan. Boyd Vance the oldest of the eight...then Victoria Hall nee Vance who is in England now. Then Clementine Halford nee Vance whose husband is a Professor who has a Teaching Chair at Cambridge. That’s where she lives. She keeps in regular contact with Victoria Hall...more so than any of the other members of the clan. She is flying in before the funeral of her youngest sister. They had always been close. Clementine’s husband Professor Halford will not attend the proceedings. No excuse offered. Allan Vance was in the air flying back into Sydney from Queensland where Vance Holdings has a large pastoral property. He was accompanied by Suzanne Peters nee Vance with her husband Des who ran... managed the Cattle Station. Toby Vance, the youngest above Patricia, is a Floor Manager at one of Sydney’s premier TV Stations and was on deck all day...their stories all check out with countless people substantiating their claims...”

“Yeah...so?” Shelley asked quietly. Hoping I was coming down to a simmer from the steam eruption!

“It’s all too pat...” I turned around and spread my arms. “Eight people...sorry, seven not counting the victim...they all had fire-proof alibis with their whereabouts easily confirmed. This would be the first Case of my entire career where that has happened. None of this *I was at home, but no-one can confirm that*...none of that! Know what I mean?”

“There’s always a first time, Joe.” Shelley uttered before she headed back to her desk.

“Nah...not like this...” I mumbled as I followed her like a lost sheep.

“You know what Joe? You are getting into conspiracy theories and paranoia. If it stands up to investigation, the seven persons are guiltless.”

“Unless they are all in it together...” I smiled at her. A frown her reply. “What...the Solicitor indicated a total of around thirty-two mil. Seven ways...not a bad little nest egg for each of them...even though it looks like it will only add to what they have already...money generates money, eh?”

“What about the Cattle Stations? One in Queensland, the other in Victoria. They haven’t been included in that tabulation as Allan Vance and his sister Suzanne with her husband seem to think those two properties would remain with them.”

“I don’t think so Shells...the final assessment would include all properties I would imagine...that’s what? Another sizable amount well over fifteen mil...enough to kill for!”

“I wouldn’t spray that theory around too much, Joe...”

“It’s too pat, Shells...way too pat!” I shook my head as I sat into my chair. Nothing that Shelley had said had me thinking otherwise. “Fuck!” I exploded as I stood to walk off the floor and do my usual bad mood trudging around Parramatta streets, settling into the back of the little Café some blocks from the Office where I was confident no-one would spring me.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Shelley glanced at me before returning her concentration back to driving. She had heard my theory repeatedly. She was starting to react to it, but not in a positive manner.

“Let’s have a lunch out, eh? Somewhere where we can sit in the car and watch the waves roll in.”

“Bondi Beach?”

“Yeah, good call. Only means a short detour from here...and there are plenty of selections of food along the main strip.”

I was silent for some time, just ignoring life but watching the passing parade as we headed for Bondi Beach.

“You see the News last night?” I asked suddenly. “About the Pope’s visit to the UAE...the first by a Pontiff ever to a Muslim country.”

Shelley shook her head no.

“I’ve just about had these Cases where you feel sorry for both the Victim and the alleged Perpetrator. There is no closure...no guilty guy...give me a simple Case where the Vic is obvious, the Perp is as guilty as sin and a completely unlovable bastard and we do not have to guess at the outcome...just charge the Perp with the homicide murder of his nearest and dearest! Simple...clean and easy.”

Shelley again glanced over at me, a frown displaying her confusion at what I was talking about.

“Arrh, Joe...what about the News last night?” Hoping to get me back on track. These meanderings that I often did was sheer torture for her. I heard Kindle give a little giggle from the back seat. She also confused by my unconnected thoughts and meanderings.

“Mmm...” I had to think about it. “I forget now when I read it...or heard it...or spoke about it...about the ‘Seven Hills’ disappearing denoting the end of the Roman Catholic Church as we know it. That Psychic...Methuselah...no, that’s not right. He authored a ninety-eight-verse poem of the future of the world...this is going to bug me for the rest of the day. He predicted the ‘fall’ of the Roman Catholic Church with the ‘seven hills’ being Rome...”

Shelley wriggled in her seat, frustration beginning to overtake her. Next, she will swear at me and ask what the blazes was I talking about.

“What the...!! What the blazes are you talking about, Joe!?” Her anger and confusion palpable.

“The ‘MeToo’ movement too...”

I heard her growl her exasperation as we drove slowly through Bondi Junction.

I suddenly began, making Shell jump. She rolled her eyes and warned Ruth Kindle in the back seat to block her ears!

“The Pope used that visit to hint at the way these Muslim countries treated their women as second-class citizens...in servitude in all regards. He mentioned that the Catholic Church was also guilty of this attitude. The Church had used Nuns and specific Nunneries for Priests and other high-ranking members of the Church to use these ‘Women of God’ as sex slaves...I mean it was known, more in hushed terms and the subject of sniggers, asides and jokes but this was the first time that a Pope...a serving Pope actually stated that situation as fact. That is a huge concession on behalf of the Church itself. It paints the Priests as normal human beings and not a ‘tribe’ of men who forego the normal human practises by marrying only The Church. It again highlights the duplicity of the Church and its leaders. That after just about every country in the World exposed almost three in ten Priests as child abusers, homosexual or paedophiles...we now have the fact that the acts of faith of these men were fertilised by the basic union of nuns and the various levels of the clergy. The Church of God is crumbling...long live the church. I mean, the Bible was produced to keep the masses in tow and under the rules of the ‘group of men’ and to legitimise and protect those same individuals in creating this elitist, patriarchal ‘club’...to give weight that these persons as being ‘god-like’ in their functions and existence...and needed to be fertilised with the blood and sweat of all the ‘underlings’ who believed in this fiction until such a time as The Church could rely on the self-generation of riches...money, to again ensure that the various levels of the Church hierarchy remained intact!”

“That was a monumental moment of truth...” Ruth said from the back seat. I didn’t know whether she was being sarcastic or not. “It kind of makes the old saying about Priests being married to The Church and His Word a little skewered...and that of Nuns too who say they

were married to The Church...instead they are the Priests' concubines...whoa, the very building blocks of Christianity...not just Catholicism are looking a little crumbly, huh?"

"...and one wonders on other whispered facts like what happened when a Nun fell pregnant...does she get an abortion? Or are the babies killed once they are born...or are they just fostered or adopted out?"

"They reckon they found evidence of that in Ireland with the skeletal remains of babies found in a well that was in the grounds of what had been last century, a Home for unmarried mothers..." Ruth again offered. "...and before that a Catholic seminary for intending nuns."

"...yes, and in such establishments world-wide, there would seem to be more babies than single mothers present being put up for adoption...I mean, the basic tenets of the religion have been abused...totally abused in so many areas that brings a smile to this aging Atheist who has for a long time been angered by the apparent carry-ons of all religions to turn a blind eye to those facts while continuing to carry on in such a manner that is totally against the teachings of these supposedly pious leaders...and is against the very Laws of a country that they daily abused."

"Hear, hear. The new Follower of Truth has spoken...I mean Joe, so what. People will still continue to believe in what they believe no matter what is thrown at them as the gospel-truth about the Leaders' behaviour...a lot of people need that prop of belief in order to get through life...take away that prop and you have a lot of people that cannot live but become shaking blobs of matter."

"It amazes me that every other Christian Denomination seeks to divorce themselves of what is happening in the Catholic Church...but that same supposedly 'holy book' is still their written doctrine. They cannot see the duplicity and stupidity of their beliefs being the same as those of the Catholic Church..."

I got the impression that Shelley was tiring from my many sermons of truth. I remained quiet, having exhausted my thoughts on the matter in any case.

Shelley was again lucky to find a parking spot on the Bondi Beach frontage. We had all manners of choices of food to select from before we drove down along the promenade at the South Bondi end of the beach to park then eat what we had bought.

It was good to be alive...especially after I had vented my frustration on all these non-closure Cases by ridiculing the slow demise of a once grand gathering of elitist but tainted beings.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

We fell silent as we enjoyed our meal, me sharing my chips with my two partners who had bought salads thinking of their weight. The only problem with this was they had more of my chips than I did!

My Mobile rang as I was crushing up the paper that my fish and chips had come in. Salt spraying everywhere!

“Detective Lind.” I answered feeling sated after a decent fish and chips meal.

“Dee Dee Symonds, Joe. You sound like a contented cat ready for its afternoon nap...”

“Close to the truth, my love. I’ve just finished a beautiful meal and I am feeling wonderfully sated.”

“Cabramatta, huh? That famous Vietnamese Restaurant?”

“No...but I think it’s about time for a returned visit there. It’s been a while since our last visit. What have you got for us?”

“We’ve just got the Prelim Report from the Vehicle Impoundment Yard. That vehicle...um...I believe is a Toyota Landcruiser Sahara V8...reported missing a week before the ‘hit and run’ death at Burwood. Owned by a Mister Reg ‘The Beaver’ Djenkovic. His fingerprints lifted from various panels. Also fingerprints of Georgios ‘Whip’ Kovac. It is contended that Georgios was driving the vehicle when it ran over Patricia Vance that morning last month...there were other fingerprints and DNA trace, but we haven’t had a match yet...we’ll continue to run them through the system...”

“Aren’t you a little out on that proverbial limb suggesting Kovac was driving the vehicle when it was involved in that ‘hit and run’?”

“A little perhaps...but have you got another theory?”

“Not at present but I do not jump at shadows in a darkened room...trying to create something solid.” I knew the put-down would not be taken unkindly.

“Just to get your blood moving at a fair speed, Joe. You sounded as though you were due for an afternoon nap...”

“Yeah, well...you got that one right. Have both men got form?”

“Yes, and pretty impressive...both have been booted out of the Moguls MC gang some years ago now. They used to be the top of the heap...but as in life, it was thought they were getting too old...and too slow.”

“Have you got a current address for us?”

“Would you like us to interview the guys for you as well...we know that we’re good, but it would get a bit tiring trying to hold down my job as well as yours. See you at the next body case...or your place for a BBQ, whichever comes first. You’ll get the full summation when Trace and blood tox results are known...until then...”

I could hear the cackle as she signed off.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

“How do you spell ‘Kovac’?”

“Arrh...K.O.V.A.C. possibly with a H to finish off.”

We heard Kindle whizzing over the keyboard of her Laptop at an incredible rate.

“Both are listed in the Felons Register...a ‘C’ and a ‘CH’.”

“The person we want will have some mention of the Mogul Bikie Gang...”

“Yep, got it.” There was silence for some time as she scrolled through the data on the life and times of our Mister Georgios Kovac. “This guy is a habitual criminal.” She let out a low whistle. “Came to our knowledge at the age of ten, would you believe...now in his late sixties...mostly drug related crimes, a couple of battery with intent, concealed weapons charges and in possession of same. I reckon all he needed was one homicide and he’d have the prize of being charged with every offence on our books...a real nice bloke.”

“Is there an address for him?”

“Latest known address is West Ryde...Railway Crescent.”

“We can pop in on the way back to the Office...all for it?”

A groan from both women made me smile. To be truthful, all I wanted to do was curl up in a nice warm bed. We must be coming down with something, I thought. Coronavirus or something as deadly.

We followed Victoria Road heading west away from the city, having to do a circuitous route to get onto Railway Crescent at West Ryde.

“There! That house.” Kindle pointed as Shelley wheeled over to the kerb, managing to find an opening several houses up. As we began walking up the front path to the veranda and front door of the house, a gruff voice yelled out. He was seated on a lumpy looking couch

that had seen better days. His head just above the brick parapet, as though he was watching the passing parade. He would need plenty of patience as there was little pedestrian traffic and no traffic going past.

It was a dead-end street!

“Fucking coppers. Don’t know nuttin’, didn’t see nuttin’ and even if I did, I wouldn’t fucking tell yers!”

“Mister Kovac? A good afternoon to you.” I asked as I walked up to the veranda. This was a good example of the Californian Bungalow style that was popular between the Wars and straight after up to the Nineteen Fifties.

“I don’t tink this is going to work out that well for me. You can go to the top of the class, copper. Now you can piss off as I’ve nothing more to say to yers...”

“In that case we will charge you with a hit and run incident that caused a woman’s death, handcuff you and take you into the Office for further questioning...”

“Whoa...hang on a tick. You bastards trying to fit me up with a murder charge. Not on, coppers. Not in your wildest dreams...”

“Okay, you deny the charge. Tell us, where were you on Thursday morning the second of March last?”

“What!? You think I keep a diary of all my engagements like some hoi-polloi Boss of some big firm, or something...to be truthful, I can’t tell you what I had for Breakfast yes’dee...and you want me to recall what I did...what...about ten weeks ago? Half yer luck on that one, coppers!”

The man stubbed out his cigarette and reached for another straight away.

“Yeah, I know, it’ll kill me! Maybe yeah, maybe no. Maybe last Spring...me and the missus scratched one off our bucket list. Borrowed the mate’s Landcruiser, hired a you-beaut off-road Caravan with all the bells and whistles and went right up the coast to Cooktown, around through the Gulf country and down through far-west Queensland Channel Country to Cameron’s Corner, Broken Hill and back here...bloody wonderful...the only problem was the Landcruiser was stolen from my front lawn here as I was gunna give it a good wash...the mate had it insured and all, but...”

“When was this?”

“Arrh...the week-end after we got back...late February I think...everyone told us we’d be stupid to head up that way what with the beginning of the Wet up around there. We had about three days of rain...the Wet is late this year so they’re saying...thoroughly recommend the trip if yers want to brush out the cobwebs...”

“You’d left the keys in it, huh?”

“Well yeah, I’d only just moved it onto the front lawn. Who’d a thought it was gunna disappear so quick. Goes around the back to get you know...stuff to wash it with. A Gernie to do under the truck and the engine bay...we went on a lot of dirt roads...recommend it...loved it. Me missus too.”

“This was your mate’s Landcruiser?”

“Yeah...the Beaver’s truck. Reggie Djenkovic. He wasn’t pleased, let me tell you...”

“Yeah, I can believe that. It’s in the Police Impoundment Yard. He can put in a request of Ownership and he can have it back soon. I think they’re just about finished with it...”

“Hold on! You’re tellin’ me it was involved in a ‘Hit and Run’ resultin’ in some old bird being killed? I don’t know if Reggie would want it back under those circumstances...go see him...I’ll give him a ring lettin’ him know you’re on the way.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Reggie Djenkovic was a little older than his mate. His Felons Register details had him at seventy-two...an old seventy-two who reminded me of some-one from my past. He gave me a double take and asked had we crossed paths before.

“Maybe Reg...definitely possible from a long time ago before I moved into the Murder Squad...yeah, could be...you’ve kept yourself out of trouble for a lot of years...like your mate Kovac...”

He nodded his head like one of those Nodding Dogs that were once popular to attach to your dashboard. He kept on repeating ‘yeah...yeah’ in rapid tempo to his head nods as though he was on the verge of adding to it...or breaking out in song.

He never did!

“Maybe me truck!? You’ve found it? Funny, the Insurance Company has been draggin’ the chain a bit...seems I won’t have to ring ‘em every bloody day, huh? Um...one thing though. I don’t know whether I want it back since it was involved in a hit and run accident so’s Kovac says...that fair dinkum?”

“Your truck was allegedly stolen a week before the ‘hit and run’ homicide. It was allegedly stolen from your mate’s front yard at West Ryde a week after he returned from a twelve week ‘bucket list’ trip around Queensland...”

I made a mental note mid-sentence to have the vehicle checked out for red dust under the chassis. A good enough sample to confirm the trip. Reg had stopped nodding his head as though a memory had flashed through it mixing everything up.

“Um...you say the vehicle was stolen from the parking area of Burwood Westfield’s shopping centre...and not your mate’s front yard?” I half turned as though I had had enough and was on my way. “Armm...you live here at Canada Bay...what were you doing at Burwood Westfields?”

“You’re a suspicious dog...why? I’ve stayed out of trouble for a fair while now, copper. I’m too old to worry about me safety inside. There’s all these muscle-bound young blokes wantin’ t’ ensure theys are top of the heap. A seventy-odd year man like meself has history...and a rep theys young blokes want a slice of...if yers get my drift.”

I almost choked and I am sure Shelley had to bite into her tongue to stop exploding in gales of laughter.

“Allegedly this; allegedly that...I am telling you the truth copper. If ya gunna waste me time, then a good afternoon to yers.”

I held the door open with one foot. He got tired of trying to be the top bloke.

“Okay, okay!” He puffed and wheezed. “What else you bastards need?”

“Burwood Westfields? What were you doing there?”

“A Coffee Shop...owned by my better half...well...she was a lot of years ago. We meet up with a couple of others who have been shoved aside out of the Club. Talk about old times and stuff...about once a month we live the glory days...”

“That’s where your vehicle was stolen from, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah...a week after me mate come home after his trip” Nod, nod. “Yeah.”

“Yer mate? Georgios Kovac? Was he with you having a coffee the day your vehicle was reported stolen?”

“Yeah...I’m sure...maybe he wasn’t. My mind ain’t as good as it once was...nah, he wasn’t with us that day...or was that last week...I’m not sure coppers.”

I felt his confusion and forgetfulness engineered for our benefit. Knowing his history showed him as sharp as a tack!

“A week before the hit and run homicide...I’ve got a problem with that. Sure, you reported the theft of your vehicle to the Burwood Police Station. On Thursday twenty-six of February...seven days before it was used as a ‘hit and run homicide’ further up Burwood Road.”

“Sounds right, sure...it was late February...Georgie had driven it over after he came back from his trip...yeah, that sounds about right.”

This connection to Burwood was giving me a headache. It seemed unlikely to be that all this was a series of coincidences around Burwood. The thought wouldn't shake free and have form which meant I will wake in the middle of the night with the thing screaming around in my head...bugger!

"Your mate? George Kovac? Only hours ago your mate George...he stated that your vehicle, a Toyota Landcruiser top of the range was stolen from his front lawn on that Thursday morning...he had parked it there so he could give it a decent wash before he returned it to you...why would he say that?"

He lowered his head, shaking it gently as though he thought the game was up.

"He gets mixed up at times...he gave it a real good wash though, even the engine bay. Looked like new, it did...he's losing it more'n me...yeh, he washed it to sparkling show room finish before he gave it back to me...if he had the truck, how did I get to Burwood that morning?"

"How indeed..." Shelley murmured as she turned him around and handcuffed him. We had arranged for a Divvy Van to pick up the mate, Georgios Kovac. We figured we could hold both men for seventy-two hours. By that time, we would have dug up everything about their lives, loves, account balances and drug taking habits though that comment stuck with me...how indeed would he have gotten from Canada Bay to Burwood Shops.

"Try a bus..." I muttered. "When we get back to the Office, see if there is a bus route that goes through Canada Bay to Burwood...then check out the financial stakes of both men and whether they received any large sums of money around January with a final payment after the deed was done..."

"Need your shoes shine as well!" Shelley commented.

"Nah, not really...but a could do with a close shave."

I managed to dodge a biro flung with some venom, so I thought.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

"Kovac may have spent his half on that bucket list trip..."

"Yeah...possible, I guess. Get a hold of his 'plastic' Bank records and see whether regular amounts were deducted as he and his missus went on their merry way...it's not right. If he had a handful of cash, there'd be little plastic use..."

I threw my Biro onto the table. I patted my hands down both sides of my face. Three days looking at all the details of both men's lives had my eyes watering. I shook my head slowly.

“The two of them have addled brains from snorting ‘cones’ for most of their lives. I doubt either one could come up with an alibi that cleared them...let alone a plausible story that would convince us of their guilt...no, I reckon they’re not in the loop for Pattie’s death. No...look right back through their histories with the Moguls...sure, stand-over tactics were not below them...or distributing drugs to the needy...but hitting then running over a person at full throttle...nah...it’s not in them...not either man’s style.”

“What about this different story about the 4WD?”

“An Insurance fraud I reckon, but they’re so muddled they couldn’t get their stories straight.”

Shelley shook her head as she pushed back her chair. Stood and walked from the small Interview Room we had sequestered while we delved into the two ex-Bikies. Now just old men living in the spotlights of yesteryear, both on Commonwealth Old Aged Pensions.

It was a good half hour before she returned, three large coffees from downstairs.

“That’s gunna hit the spot, Oh Masked One.” The smell was glorious. We had not stopped for lunch with Shelley being the only person to leave the room. Once to organise the release of Kovac and his mate Djenkovic, the second errand to get the coffees and allow her frustration to dissipate.

“Which family member knew of their mother’s original Will giving everything to Pattie...and also knew of Pattie initiating and changing her Will to give all of them equal share in the Estate?”

“You know what you’ve done, Joe. You’ve put us back to square one...”

“No, not really...we know the 4WD was stolen by persons unknown. The vehicle in the crosshairs for the job...pre-meditation...but not undertaken by a Pro...in either flinching vehicles or in ‘hit and run’ jobs...or torching said vehicle. So...what have we got? We know Pattie Vance was sole beneficiary for her parents Estate through her Mother’s Will. Pattie had her Will struck and amended some months after her mother died...duplicating the wording that her father had wanted...who else knew? Who was going to benefit from Pattie Vance’s death? All her siblings...which one out of the seven would gain the most? They all look as though they aren’t short of a quid in their own right...who was going to benefit the most? That’s where we’re at...so...team? What do we do?”

“Follow the money...” Shelley murmured.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

I hunted through the Murder File looking for...I had no idea! In sheer frustration I turned to Shelley.

“What am I looking for, Shells?”

“Bugged if I know...”

“Now that isn’t helpful at all!! Who has the most need within the Vance family for the ‘readies’...maybe who-ever is a gambler...bets on the horses...”

“The dogs...”

“The Pokies at a nearby Pub...or Club...close to home...”

With the help of the two women I was now totally confused having lost that train of thought that I believed was leading me to our murderer...not now, though! I stood and slammed down my Biro which bounced miraculously straight into Shelley’s hardly drunk coffee container.

“Okay...okay. That’s not how I would classify a thank you for all our input...spoiling a good mug of coffee.” That patronising smile that only females...and the Mona Lisa can muster. I growled and walked out of the Office. A scowl, warning others to keep clear.

“I can tell by your expression that you are close to completing the ‘Hit and Run’ Homicide Case.” A smile on Hendo’s face that was waiting for some smart bastard to king hit him...

“Don’t go there, mate...unless you want your ear used to sharpen my pencils!!”

I wandered around the CBD eventually sitting at the Ferry Terminus, looking up and down the river. It was a warm day with a slight breeze to rustle through several groves of Gum Trees nearby even though Winter wasn’t that far away. I fell asleep...woken violently by the Ferry and its passengers noisily disembarking. Perhaps the crew thought I a passenger wanting to head to the CBD down the Parramatta River. I had to indicate that I was not an intending passenger. I struggled to take my iPad out of my coat pocket to get the number of the Vance family Solicitors. On ringing the number, I was told Gregory Flint was in Court by a courteous, sexy voice. I wasn’t fooled as we had met on the several visits we had made to the Solicitor’s Office. That sexy voice was a middle-aged woman who would never be an advertisement for Waste Watchers. He was due back after two this afternoon. I left my number for him to give me a ring.

Shelley and Kindle sat down beside me. Shelley handed me a Steak and Mushroom Pie with a buttered sandwich and a large Iced Coffee.

“No change out of ten, Tonto...it goes on the tab.”

“No...I’ll pay you now.” I replied as I dug my wallet out to give her the ten. “Thank you. A pie! Exactly what I wanted...how did you know?”

“Every time you stamp out of the Office ready to kill everyone in sight, you always have a steak and mushroom pie...every time...”

“Who needs a wife when you have a partner like this? Always thinking of you...”

“Balls...don’t get too cocky, young man! Ruth? Let this be a lesson for you. All males on the lower strata rungs of life and career below even the saddest female cases, have a need for certain foods depending on their mood at any particular time of day or night...easy as...”

I shook my head as I enjoyed the pie and iced coffee, making me feel one hundred per cent when I had finished.

“See what I mean Ruth...he is as happy as Larry...so bloody obvious...and transparent...you couldn’t train an obstinate Lion as quickly huh?”

My Mobile buzzed in my top pocket. It was Greg Flint.

“Thanks for ringing back...a couple of things. When did Patty’s mother change her Will to exclude all but Patricia?”

“Um...hang on, I’ll grab the files. I think you are going to ask me about Patty’s Will as well, huh?”

I nodded my head as I listened to a muffled conversation presumably between his PA and himself.

“Okay...Victoria Charlotte...she preferred Charlotte as her first name...that or Vicky which she thought was rather cool for a woman her age. She changed her Will a year after old man Vance died in two thousand with everything going to Patricia. As she said, her daughter could sort out the bitchiness and complaints of the rest of her siblings...I think the old girl liked throwing a spanner in the works and sitting back to view the repercussions.”

“And they all knew about this arrangement?”

“Yes...and they were not too pleased about it at all...”

“Who seemed to be the one with the loudest voice about this arrangement?”

“Hah...all of them. I suppose if I had to pick one of them, I’d say Toby Vance if anyone...he had just gone through a messy divorce.”

“Patricia’s Will?”

“She changed her Will after her mother died late last year. She was never one to throw such a large spanner into the works. She told me when we were discussing the make-up of the Will, she was not in favour of what her mother had done...and she wished to rectify it...”

“Giving equal rights to all of them?”

“Yes...including several Charities with an annual amount and a nominal amount to Meredith and William Stoker...”

“Who are they?”

“The loyal couple who had been hired by Barton Vance early in the piece. They have lived in a comfortable two bedder Flat above the Barn since Adam wondered what that thing was hanging between his legs as Eve didn’t have one...had three kids between looking after the very needs of those in the ‘Big House’. It’s now the Garage. Bill originally hired to be the chauffeur when Barton Vance was required in an official manner. Bill looked after the grounds and hired in extra help as well...usually in summer. His wife Meredith or Dippy as she is known as, is the House Cleaner and an occasional help in the Kitchen when a formal gathering met in the ‘Big House’. They were permitted to explore their options as to Retirement Villages and this arrangement was to be completed before the rest of the Estate was to be tabulated, sold, auctioned or what-ever...and split up for the other siblings...”

“What about the Farms? One in Queensland, the other in Victoria?”

“They are separate from the other Holdings. They cannot be sold or cut up and they must remain under the Vance Holding legal arrangements”

“What Charities are involved?”

“Wires...um...a special annual stipend for looking after the animals affected by those terrible fires that we have just experienced...and the RFS and SES people. A couple of others who will benefit by annual donations...”

“How was this to be worked if all the matters were finalised?”

“There is enough left over, I can assure you...and we will keep the account in order...”

“Is that still in place?”

“Yes...look, I have a client waiting. If there is nothing else...”

“No, sure. Thank you for your time.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

“Follow the money, you said. Would a second-string Vance sibling who didn’t marry into money and who has just gone through a messy divorce require money...especially now that the divorce settlement has been finalised with the ex-wife unable to touch any money falling as mana from heaven for the ex. Hubbie?”

“We’ve got his address...and his place of employment from Greg Flint. I think we should just pop in and see Toby Vance, firstly, let’s see if he is at home...”

Shelley woke him with her telephone enquiry.

“I have nothing more to say to you Detective. You made yourself known after Pattie’s funeral which I thought was a disgrace. You got everything I know about her death at that time, so I have no wish to talk to you people again...you people...Public bloody Servants think you can walk through a person’s life and leave him gutted...leave me alone as I’ve had enough of youse.”

With that he hung up. The sound of dial tone wasn’t even there. How much more fun was it in the old days when the sound of the phone being slammed down with a loud clunk was most audible and conveyed the sentiment of the bodiless person on the other end.

“I guess he didn’t want to cooperate, huh?”

“He says he is sick and tired of being gutted by lowly public servants who all took a bite of him. Disillusioned I reckon. Mixed with a fair proportion of anger.”

“Let’s look in detail at the man’s life...Shells? You stay and delve into the man while we have a word with Dippy and Bill Stoker...”

“Good luck at getting past those two apes at the front gates.”

“Mmm...I’ll put my Glock up the nose of the nearest Neanderthal demanding we be permitted onto the property...”

“Mmm...I have my doubts on such an advance working noiselessly. You want me to come with you to show you how it’s done. Ruth can run down the history of Toby Vance while we are away.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

“Unusual that the gates are open. Drive through Shells and follow the driveway around to the rear where the Stables are located.”

I looked over the grounds that were in tip-top condition. The grassed areas like some giant smooth and level Bowling green with trees and garden beds dotting the area giving it interest and a clear message of being loved. As we pulled up in front of the Six garage doors, an older bloke came to an opening where the garage door was up. He stood ramrod straight, greying hair at the temples that gave him the appearance of a very important person...in his very persona.

I stood from our Unmarked and walked towards him.

“Mister Stoker...” I said as I held out my hand. A firm handshake, that direct look common of yesteryear. “Detective Joseph Lind. My partner Detective Shelley Shields.”

I got the impression Shells nearly curtsied. He had that air about him.

“Yes...call me Bill...” He squinted and looked towards our Unmarked. A man who likes his cars, I thought. “I saw the two of you...yes, with another young Detective at Miss Patricia’s funeral a couple of weeks back...now...what can I do for you?”

“We’d like to ask you a few questions if we may?” I had to get rid of this feeling we were talking to royalty or something. I looked around hoping he would offer us a spot of tea or coffee in the ‘Big House.’ I almost scolded myself and for a few brief moments I was close to laughing at my behaviour.

“Yes...will you wait one moment while I wash up before we go up to the Flat...you know, the missus would have a piece of me if I entered the way I am at the moment.”

I followed him back into the gloom of the garage. This one space taken up with implements used for gardening. Two large sit-on Mowers stood side by side. One with a small trailer behind. A small Tractor with a front-end digger further into the bay. As the man bent to wash his face and neck, I looked around. You could see down the width of the other garage openings. I let out a low whistle at the vehicles parked in the spaces.

“That’s a 1949 Roll Royce Silver Dawn. The only one in Australia of showroom condition and just one of five still in working order in this country. A beautiful motor. Barton’s favourite vehicle that was originally his father’s. The other vehicles show Barton’s interest in high speed luxury cars. That late model Jag was Pattie’s favourite. She was too scared to drive it, so I had to chauffeur her when ever she felt like ‘a drive in the country’ as she put it...” He gave a quiet chuckle as he wiped his head with a towel. He had extracted himself from the navy boiler suit that had me wondering how he did it so easily. He slipped out of his work boots to step into a pair of slippers, combing his hair as he did.

"I'll get Dippy to make us a coffee...we can go up the back stairs straight into the Flat. Please follow me and just be careful of tripping on something I forgot to put where it should go..."

"A place for everything and everything in its place."

"Too right, young lady. Saves you hours searching for something that has been wrongfully placed where it shouldn't be."

I turned to Shelley who was a stickler for that theory. Me? A little more carefree which unfortunately, *did* cost me hours looking for something!

"How can we help you Detectives?" William Stoker asked as we sat in a comfortable but minimalist Lounge Room. Photos in frames seemed to crowd out every available wall area which showed their enthusiasm and love to their three kids, eight grandkids and one great-grandkid. We were introduced to them all.

"Who's the Photographer?" Shelley asked, impressed with the quality of each shot.

"My daughter-in-law. My oldest son's wife...it has always been a hobby of hers. When we all get together, out will come the camera...we have several Albums full of her shots. She is very good."

"I see you are packing up...moving?"

"Yes...um...as Bart Vance arranged, we have found a retirement Village up out of Port Macquarie where we will be close to two of our kids...and grandkids. The papers have all been signed and are with Greg Flint. We are planning for two weeks-time for the change-over. We will both miss this place...and truly worry about its future though we have been told the entire property will be given to the National Estate...lock, stock and barrel so I think we are worrying about nothing." He looked at me, his eyes welling with tears. "You know, it's like saying good-bye to a child...you still worry about what road they may take..." He took a starched handkerchief from his pocket to blow his nose and wipe his eyes.

"Do you know the address of this Village? We may need to contact you again...before this case goes to trial."

"Yes...hang on, I'll get it for you."

He gave me a Brochure on the Village on what could only be described as one step down from Heaven. I wrote the address into my iPad, a little apprehensive. I have often heard the Brochure was nothing like the real thing.

"Have you had a good look around at this establishment?" I asked, cynicism lacing my enquiry.

“Oh, yes Officer. We have been up there several times looking at that Village and several others. We have picked out our lodgings and as I have said, all the paperwork is with Greg Vance for finalisation...a pool, heated of course, a bowling green and croquet field, tennis courts and a billiard room. Our lodgings are almost twice the size of this place and very modern with all the mod cons...there is also a panic connection to the main office if there is any trouble...we will be spoilt. After looking after the Vance family for most of our lives, we may have trouble fitting in not worrying about anyone else except ourselves.”

Dippy agreed with every word.

“Patricia Vance’s death...what do you think of her homicide?”

“Terrible!” Dippy Stoker vehemently exclaimed. “She was such a gentle person...and patience? Victoria her mother became more and more...um...shall we say bothersome...as she aged...and just months before she died, she was...” She shook her head to stress the point.

“She had a cruel tongue and took great pleasure, so it seems in reducing Patty to tears.” Bill butted in. “It got to the point where Patty would not take her out...for coffee or have her hair done for fear of what she may say...or do to embarrass herself. I remember when I first took up the job of Barton Vance’s chauffeur and handyman, she was such a warm, happy person. To see her in her last years is such a shock.”

“What will become of you two?” Shelley asked as she took a sip of coffee.

“Um...yes. We breathed easier when Patty told us she had changed her Will so that all the family...including us, would be cared for. Old Bart always said that we would be looked after...and we had no reason to expect anything else. Then Victoria in an act that cannot be explained, changed her Will so that Patty got every dollar down to the last cent! To our eternal gratitude she changed the Will back to how her father had it worded not long before she was killed, actually.”

“Do you think that had anything to do with her death?”

“I don’t see how...she changed it back to her father’s wording so there was no person missing out...she talked the matter over with me...I read Bart’s Will which Patty showed me. She respected my opinion...I think I may have become her surrogate father in a way...”

“Who do you think would benefit from the Will alteration?”

There was silence. Bill fiddled with his stirring spoon. The silence shattered by the stainless-steel utensil on the bone china saucer. Both Dippy and Bill preferred that cuppa tea! He looked up at me, shrugging his shoulders, slowly shaking his head.

“Let me put it another way...the Will prepared by Victoria Vance to have Patty as sole beneficiary. Who knew of that? In the family?”

“Um...everyone! Victoria made it her business to tell all the kids that they had been left out of the amended Will...she gained pleasure in watching the objections flowing in...in watching her own kids grovel...that’s her words.”

“They could contest it if it had been retained...”

“None of the siblings wanted to go down that track. They thought such an action was crass!”

“But they would have also believed that Victoria Charlotte Vance their mother, was acting out of character in having that Will prepared...their mother acting like an old crone. Acting out of spite and ill-will...”

William glanced across at his missus as though urging her to speak.

“Um...” She cleared her throat. Nodded her head. “Vicky...which she preferred to be called...um...she and Patty...there wasn’t a day go past that both would have very unwomanly arguments over the Will. Patricia could be quite...what do they say...she boxed above her weight. She was the only sibling who would take her mother on...”

“Everyone knew of this monumental dummy spit in changing the Will, yes?”

“Yes...I believe so.” I looked across at Dippy. She nodded.

“So, who knew of the changes made to the Will that would ensure everyone was equally dealt with?”

“Umm...I can’t answer that, Detective. I really don’t know...”

“To your knowledge, the entire family was not made aware of the changes, is that so?”

“As I said Detective, I really don’t know.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

“What do you reckon, Tonto? You think you have a nose for duplicity, untruths and complicity...so what are your thoughts?”

I nodded my head agreeing totally with her on my various positive ways.

“I tell you one thing; I’d like to have shares in Flint & Sons Solicitors. They’ve been making a fortune off the Vance family for several generations...”

“Yeah, but what do you think?”

“Why do all fridges have an ice cube maker...I haven’t used ours ever. The bloody thing just takes up space!”

Shelley groaned as she drove slowly along the driveway of Croydon House.

“Those two goons are no longer here...”

“They were here solely to lessen Patricia’s paranoia about some-one strolling through the property at night-time. I’d say William may have stopped the practise in the past couple of weeks saying that it was an expense they could do without.”

“They’re old-worldly, aren’t they? I half expected both to be in some sort of uniform when the ‘Big House’ was lively.”

“Yeah, I agree with you...you don’t see that anymore, do you? Like Downtown Abbey or whatever the TV series was called. With servants at the beck and call at all hours.”

“Servants? Who can afford them these days...after talking to them, where do you stand with the likely Offender?”

“Some-one in the family. It has to be.”

As Shelley crawled through the large impressive gates, my Mobile rang. It was Ruth.

“Joe? This may or may not mean anything. Toby Vance? His wife is living in the family home in Greenwich...no kids so I wonder why the Court did not instruct the home be sold with the proceeds split fifty/fifty. I’ve read through the copy of Court Proceedings...the guy was slaughtered...no other words for it!”

“I have no idea unless a lousy Solicitor was engaged by Toby perhaps...anything else?”

“Yes. Toby is living in a caravan in the back yard of his daughter and son-in-law...guess where?”

“I have no idea, young lady. Where?” I was getting a little exasperated with the way Kindle carried on.

“At West Ryde...neighbours...next door neighbours to George Kovac’s place.”

“Interesting. Very interesting. Good work. An easy way to gain a large 4WD to do damage to a person. I think we should have a meeting with our man who is still in a state of shock from previous attendance at the Family Law Courts.”

I had only signed off when my phone rang again.

“Dee Dee Symonds, Joe. You asked us to compare forensic trace and fingerprints from the vehicle with exemplars you obtained from all the members of the Vance family. The reason

it took so long was New Scotland Yard dragged their heels on the two residing in England...we have a match, Joe. For fingerprints and forensic DNA trace taken from the vehicle involved in the 'Hit and run' homicide."

"Toby Vance..." I interrupted her spiel.

"Yes, that's right. How'd you know?"

"I have a nose for smelling out guilty people." I replied deadpan.

"Just as well it's good for that as it doesn't do much for your looks!" I heard her giggling as she cut the connection.

Whether Toby knew of the Will amendment was not of importance, but thinking about it, he had to have known, otherwise why kill his sister. His world was in a right royal fuck-up and getting his rightful inheritance would have been the answer to all his prayers.

"Let's take a drive out to West Ryde, eh? I feel that a conversation with Toby Vance will prove fruitful."

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