

MURDER SQUAD DETECTIVES
JOSEPH LIND, SHELLEY ANNE SHIELDS
and re-introducing
SASHA BLAYNEY

GHOST RIDERS

A Crime Novella by
PETER C BYRNES

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GHOST RIDERS

01/08/2016

This is the 38th Instalment in the Series detailing the Homicide Cases of Detective Joseph Lind and his younger partner, Detective Shelley Anne Shields.

They have been mentoring the young and enthusiastic Detective Sasha Blayne until a suitable experienced partner can be allocated to her.

Synopsis

In 2012 in a packed White House Media Conference Room, an Advisor to President Obama who had assigned the gentleman to lead a Congressional Meeting was introduced to the Media.

He was to determine the safety and security of the various Social Media sites available for use by the younger members of the USA, especially young females,

He began by asking the Media audience: -

'Would you permit your 13-year-old daughter to stand on a corner of a busy arterial road in your neighbourhood, skimpily dressed in mini/mini skirt and revealing tank top holding up a large placard that detailed:

- *Her name and home address*
- *Her date of birth*
- *Her mobile phone number*
- *Her High School, her class and grade and her favourite teacher*
- *Her e-mail address and her Tweeter account and FB passwords...if she had any!*
- *Her likes and dislikes*
- *The fact that her entire family were spending 4 weeks in Florida during the summer holidays*
- *Her favourite male and female singers and her favourite songs*
- *Her favourite colour, clothes, and make-up*
- *Where she was going the following weekend and the weekend after that...and who with*
- *Who was her VBF*
- *A photo of her pet dog, her teddy and various 'selfies' in different clothing*
- *Other personal details that she would be too embarrassed to even tell her parents!*

No?

Not on, you say?

But that is exactly what your 13-year-old is detailing every time that she hops onto her favourite Social Media Site to speak to her group of friends. Not just for the benefit of whom-ever she is conversing with, but also for the benefit of whom-ever wants to listen or join in the conversation...or just sit and watch from the comfort of their home.

Friend, family, or foe!!!

While the majority of Social Media Users do not really care or give a damn about some 11-year-old Soccer Star in an outer suburb of Sydney, Australia, there are those who swim in the murky depths never being anticipated, seen or suspected.

They are waiting...they are stalking...waiting for the moment...to strike!!

These are the Ghost Riders...

CHAPTER ONE

"Didja hear what those dudes were talking about?" Jerry asked his mate sitting on the high barstool beside him. Both young men hunched over with their propped elbows on the narrow bench that ran the length of the large picture window. Looking out at the coldness. The rain and the wind.

In the middle of Summer, the window would be fully open, letting in the warm air. A great view of the Beer Garden expanse outside where chicks would cavort in bikini tops and not much more below. Now, in the middle of Winter, the window shut holding out the fierce cold wind and scudding showers coming in off the Bay. The Bay waters a mass of white horses galloping off the tops of the windblown waves, whipped up by the ferocious, cold wind.

You could feel the chill attempting to fuse through the large expanse of glass.

A cold Schooner of beer sitting in its own condensation ring in front of each of them.

His mate nodded silently before taking a long gulp of beer.

"Yeah..." Chris eventually replied as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "It was in this mornin's paper". He added.

"Those dudes thought it a bloody, beaut idea". A look of puzzlement on Jerry's face. "But if it was such a bloody good idea, how come they got pinched by the cops on only their second break and enter?"

He took a long draft of beer. A worried look on his face. He shook his head slowly as the facts did not seem to compute to him. He glanced out the large window at the huge expanse of tiled area that during summer would be brim full of young drinkers, most half naked soaking up the harmful rays of the sun. The area alive with laughter, the exuberant shrieks and hoots of youth and the pungent aroma of laced cigarettes and stale beer. These young sun worshippers still of the opinion that they were invincible; that cancer both inside and outside their bodies was in the realms of fiction belonging to the constant whines of old fuddy-duddies who had never lived or experienced the rush of youth...as though their generation had invented the days of fun and sun! It showed their depth of intellect as they still couldn't figure out where all oldies came from; definitely not from the Roaring Sixties with its drugs, grog, sex, and rock 'n roll.

Nah!

Just not on!

'Bloody kill-joys', Jerry thought to himself.

He constantly railed against his parents, accusing them of knowing nothing and living even less! What would they know about anything, he would often scold them, as though he was Einstein and they the dunces of the class. Forgetting that he didn't even make the Year Ten exams!

Now in the middle of winter, the cold southerly wind whipped across the tiled expanse threatening to bowl over the large umbrellas now tightly furled, standing in the centre of each table setting. The chairs turned inwards and tilted against the table edges so as not to pool water on the seat-bum area. A few brave souls huddled there, the only area of the Pub where smoking was permitted. The few smokers huddled with backs to the wind. One hand holding a cigarette, the other their beer glass as though their hands required the added chill.

Jerry needed a smoke badly but the warmth inside the Bar was far more inviting than the biting wind and the occasional scudding, misty rain squall outside.

He figured that he'd get two or three in as they walked across the grassy parkland towards the Football Stadium.

Chris thought about Jerry's comment for some moments before he replied.

"It is a clever idea, I reckon...you know...but...like...they didn't think that hard about it before they started out. Like, the Cops pegged it quick-like. They broke into houses of kids who belonged to the same Footy side. Under 10 Soccer team and in the same suburb...close like. Ya know what I mean? More'n likely, the same Cops turned up at the two different B&E addresses...like...they knew straight away that there was a connection...it wouldn't have taken long for the cops to twig to the scam and how it had been thought out...like...they's not completely stupid...there's a few with brains like...yer know?"

He could see Jerry mulling over the information.

"What they needed to do", he continued, tapping his finger on the narrow timber shelf after mulling over the problem himself for some moments. "Was they shoulda widened their search, you know? Like..."

He felt that he was getting on a roll. Formulating a plan that he thought was foolproof as he went along. He scratched his head. Took a swig of beer before he continued. Wiped the froth from his top lip with the sleeve of his checkered shirt.

"Like...where we live on the Coast...that's gotta have the largest number of kids playing some type of sport every week-end in the whole bloody country! Don' cha reckon?"

He didn't wait for a reply from his slow-witted mate sitting beside him.

"Like...also the biggest number of different sports being played too. All you need to do is pick out the rich kids from all the plebs right across the Central Coast and to fool the cops, you never hit two houses in a row where the kids are playing on the same team...or in the same sport..."

As an afterthought, he added, "In the same month". He nodded his head, pleased with himself.

Jerry had a puzzled look on his face.

"Yeah...okay, I get that but how ya gunna do that? You know...pick out the rich kids playing like...Softball in Bensons Beach...which is what? Like fifty kilometres from where we live. Doh! We don't know nobody who lives in Bensons Beach, do we?"

Chris finished the last of the dregs of beer in his glass in one large mouthful. Wiped his mouth with the back of his arm.

The wind had picked up and the rain was scudding across the outdoor area forcing the brave few to run into the warmth of the inside Bar, flicking their half-smoked cigarettes onto the ground as they did so. What with the price of a packet of fags these days, that was also an expensive habit. Throwing away half-smoked fags!

"C'mon mate, it's your shout. I reckon we'll get another in before we need to go". Chris scolded his slow-witted mate.

'This was typical Jerry', Chris thought to himself. 'He was only finishing off his glass with another two waiting! As bloody slow as a wet bloody week and not just in drinking'.

This made him smile and mad at the same time.

He looked out the window wondering how in hell they were going to make the Stadium without getting drenching wet while he waited for another full schooner to be placed before him by his mate. As long as they made it by half-time, it still should be all right, though he railed against paying the full fare when they would only see half the game...that's if they could run all that way half pissed!

He smiled to himself. Chuckled.

Then again, the way the wind was whipping up the rain, they may be stuck here in the Pub all afternoon!

Not a bad thought, he concurred, looking around for a TV screen. At least they'd be dry and not parking out those bloody high prices for a plastic cup of beer that always seemed half-flat and warm by the time they had bought it and returned to their seats....and they may have trouble finding a seat out of the rain in any case.

He looked outside to ascertain the direction of the wind.

Jerry placed a beer in front of Chris, failing to get another for himself.

'Half a bloody shout' Chris thought to himself in disgust as their mate Paul, sauntered up to them, taking one of Jerry's full glasses. The 'fresh' one, Chris noted. He gave a snort to comment on his opposition of his two mates having long pockets and short arms.

"Yer timed that bloody right, didn't ya? A free bloody beer and not enough time to make the next shout!" Chris exclaimed angrily. "We thought ya weren't coming..."

"The trains were running late....and I'm just helping Jers out before his beer goes flat". Paul replied deadpan.

"Yeah?... a likely bloody excuse. You're full of it, mate. Just full of it! We'll need to go around to the eastern side of the Stadium to keep out of the wind and the rain".

"Now that's a bit bloody stupid, yer nong! Talk about brain dead. Yer want to go over that side to get out of the rain yet we'll be wet through just getting over there. That makes no bloody sense, ya nong!"

Insulting and stirring up your mates was an Aussie tradition.

The more you did it, the better the laughs all round.

'Paul's always got a bloody excuse for every bloody thing he does', Chris thought to himself angrily.

Chris was in one of his moods, which was usual when it came to drinking. He kept a hawk-eye out on the rounds and whose shout it was.

It was the Aussie custom that was sacrosanct.

Could not be broken.

Went back to the 'old days' before the War, so he would always say.

An Australian custom.

That is, if you're drinking in a group with your mates or not, everyone had to take a turn to buy the group a drink...a shout... regardless of how many were in the group.

No-one left the Bar until a full round was shouted.

That's how it was; that's how it had always been! Two or twenty in the group, it didn't matter. You stayed there until you all had a shout.

It was part of the Australian Constitution.

Written in the blood of thousands of Diggers who fought and died for their country.

Mobile Alcohol Units or Booze Buses, it didn't matter. That's why there had been a huge drop off in Pub clientele, Chris would always say. Because the large groups of mates groggin' on was disappearing...mateship in this country, a tradition dying a slow death!

"Bloody hell, look at that rain coming down, will ya? Just as well I bought me golf umbrella...I'll be fine but I'm buggered what you two are gunna do?" Paul commented, a snide grin on his face. He wondered aloud who was the dumbest of the three when all the Forecasts had predicted these showers all afternoon.

Jerry seemed to want to finish the conversation that had been interrupted by Paulie's arrival.

"So tell me, if'n we don't know a soul up at Bensons Beach, how'n bloody hell we gunna know who is rich or not?"

Paulie looked from one to the other of his mates.

"What the fuck yer talkin' 'bout, Jers?"

Chris shook his head in exasperation and quickly filled Paulie in on the conversation.

"Yeah, those dudes were in the Paper this mornin'. Read about the dudes in Adelaide who thought that they could fool the cops...they were only on their second house when theys was nabbed by the cops...silly pricks...and who do you know at Bensons Beach?"

Chris objected, shaking his head in exasperation. Wondering why he had such dumb bastards for mates. He slowly explained what was wrong with the original scheme.

There was silence as Paul and Jerry mulled over the explanation.

"Why keep it to the Central Coast?" Paulie asked eventually, his arms out in question mode. "Why not expand it to the Newcastle area and the upper North Shore of Sydney? Around Hornsby. Wahroonga say down to Pymble. That'd keep the cops guessing as to who was committing the robberies and how they were scopin' out the target houses...how are you scoping out the target houses again?"

"Facebook..."

"Yeah? Facebook?" Paulie looked puzzled.

He had to have a gulp of his free beer to give him time to think.

"How?" He asked as he gently placed his beer on the narrow elbow shelf.

"These teams, especially the younger ones, say Under Twelve and younger, they all correspond on Facebook...well all the kids do, up to the twenty-year-olds, too, I reckon. They post whether they won or lost on the weekend. When, where and what time was the next week's Practise night. Where theys playing the following week. Who's theys playing and what time they gotta be at the ground. They all put up photos of the match of the previous weekend...and usually a 'Team Shot', especially if they make the Finals, even giving the names of every kid in the photograph. Doesn't matter whether it is 'littlies' Soccer, League, Touch, Tag, Cricket, Netball...um...another half dozen different sports types...it's all there on Facebook. The kids at that age aren't concerned with security and what they are divulging. Half the time with what they supply, it's as good as getting their addresses..."

"Okay. Yeah...I get that...but how are ya gunna find out if theys from a rich family?"

Jerry was still confused.

"Christ, you two! You've got their surname from the FB page of their particular team...you look up their address in the White Pages...you already know the District that they live in by the team that they play for...if their address is in some swank suburb within the proximity of the...say, Under Tens Soccer Team from Benson Beach, there's a fair chance theys rich...nine out of ten times...a nice house, plenty of bling inside...and a late model car...but just to double check, we go and watch the Practise nights. If little Johnnie turns up in a ten-year-old Commodore or Toyota or something like that, you scratch him out as the parents more'n likely on the Dole...but if little Tommy is dropped off on the Practise night in a Beamer, a Lexus or a top of the range, this year's model Landcruiser Sahara or a Range Rover, then ya got your rich parents. You know their name. Their address and ya just got...you know...arrh...is it confirmation of them? And ya can bet that on the weekends, both Mumsie and Dadsie would not miss little Tommy's Soccer match. Lay odds! We already know where and at what time the game is scheduled for the following weekend...by the information posted on FB...ya can bet ya left knacker that the house will be empty during the time that the Match is played...and possibly for at least an hour after that because theys having lunch with little Tommy at Maccas. That is when we will strike...maybe two or three houses on a Sat'dee and the same on a Sun'dee...easy as".

By the looks on his mates' faces, he knew that he was at least an hour and a half ahead of both.

"You do the same with Aussie Tag, Touch, Cricket, Baseball, Tennis, Netball, Little Athletics, Little Nippers even...and heaps more!"

He had run out of puff and the number of Sports to suggest, but he felt confident that there were so many more to choose from. Up and down the entire length of the Central Coast...and maybe up into Newcastle and down to Hornsby...but that would mean that they needed to spend a great deal of time in 'researching' the scam, but then were the breaks if they wanted to break into the big time and succeed and keep one step ahead of the cops.

He knew that patience was the name of the game.

They could do it through the Winter and Summer months...no worries!

"You know...like...act like ghost riders..." He muttered, knowing that his two mates wouldn't have a clue about what he was talking.

"What do you mean? Acting like Ghost Riders?"

"I heard some dude at Tech use the expression...yer sit on some FB page of a particular person watching the conversation theys having with some-one else...not making a sound. Not participatin' but just watching the conversation. I've done it a couple times, like...it's crazy!"

"So, whys ya just sittin', lookin'?"

Chris shook his head.

"Ta fill in the day, like...that's all dudes. Ta fill in time when there's nuttin' else to do. Some of these kids... what they talk about with each other is so uncool...bloody crazy. Sick, man".

"I could think of something better ta do then watch two young dudes talk away on FB, like. I reckon' that's so uncool, dude. That's weird, man...a decent wank would be a better time-filla, don' cha reckon?"

"Yeah. Sick, man". Jerry agreed, shaking his head.

"Chicks...Jers. Chicks cause ya may be able to score...theys don't know who theys are talking to when yer haven't told them whose ya are...ya can score sometimes..."

"Ya ever score like that, Chris?"

"Nah... not yet, dudes...but like...it's just a bit of practise, is all ya need...pretending yer as young as them...they wouldn't know..."

"Yeah. Right".

"How's ya gunna pick the sports theys play?"

"The local Paper. They have all the results for all the sports played on a weekend, don't they?"

Both Paulie and Jerry looked at each other.

Shrugged their shoulders in unison.

Picked up their glasses and drained the dregs.

Chris looked at them, wondering why he hung around with two slow sods who wouldn't worry their IQ level with the number of beers that they had that afternoon.

Simple, bloody idiots, he would call them out of earshot.

CHAPTER TWO

He loved just sitting there watching the conversations that these kids had with each other on the various Social Media sites.

Most was absolute dribble. Sometimes it was quite hilarious, making him break out in spontaneous laughter.

He would sometimes break into the conversation pretending to be their age.

Interested in the same things.

Conversing in the same manner.

Sometimes they would twig somehow, but most of the time they didn't have a clue.

Arrh... for those days of innocence and trust to return, he would often wish.

The World would be such a better place.

He had to chuckle at himself.

The very exclusive 'club' that he belonged to preferred to call themselves Ghost Riders as they latched onto some young pony without them knowing they were being ridden. Others may call the 'club', The Leaches or something as demeaning. But it didn't matter to him as no-one knew that he was always watching...selecting, plotting, grooming and in the final act of a Ghost Rider, luring them to luscious endings.

That thrilled him, just thinking about it...he had yet to complete that end game, but one day he just knew he would and no-one would be able to trace him. When he thought along these lines, he felt himself hardening and he knew he had to relieve himself if he were to get a goodnight sleep...but one day he would have a young, supple girl...he rushed to the toilet...

No-one would know who the culprit was...not even the cops, he was sure.

CHAPTER THREE

He was known around the District as 'Young Davey' even though he was in his late twenties. He would only come out of his room when the local Under Twelve Soccer Team played a week-end game at the nearby Oval.

A block away from his place.

He would be allowed to walk to the Oval by himself on those days. His lightweight tripod collapsed and stored in its very own pocket in his knapsack. His camera in a bum-bag at his waist. His Mum would pack him a lunch. Some water. His favourite biscuits and his raincoat and hat. His raincoat would cover his knapsack and camera bum-bag so that they wouldn't get wet. They were expensive and his Mum didn't have enough money to replace them if they got wet. Or were lost. Or stolen. His Mum would always say that, as he started out towards the Oval on those days that his Team was playing there.

Just to remind him.

He was always very careful.

He'd know that his team was scheduled to play on the Home Ground by the information that was placed on their Social Media site and their own Web Page.

They were his favourite sites on the Internet.

Them, and the players own Face Book pages.

He thought they were an absolute hoot, though he never participated in taking part in discussions on those pages.

He couldn't think or type fast enough, he would always tell himself.

'Young Davey' may have been within the Autism Range, but he knew his way around a computer and the Web.

He would attend the Home Game, positioning himself with his expensive camera always on the tripod on the Home Team's Goal Line. That's what the professionals did. Always used a tripod. The Under Twelve Berkeley Barkers Soccer Team. Young Caitlin Suffolk's team. She always played left wing so he always knew where to set up his camera to focus in on her when-ever she would run down the side-line towards him. There was nothing better. Her balance. Her speed with her ponytail waving in the wind. The way that she had control over the ball and the way that she would always centre the ball was a sheer joy to watch. She was the most popular person in the team by far. Boy or girl...and she was by far the tallest. The quickest. The most beautiful.

Her father coached the team.

He was a good man, always saying 'Hello Davey' when the boy-man walked down the side-line with his camera and tripod.

Everyone knew him.

Everyone thought him quite harmless, even though Caitlin would be a little embarrassed by his constant focusing onto her alone, and no other member of the team. This constant attention would sometimes cause her to lose control of the soccer ball when she was going full tilt down the side-line, knowing that 'Young Davey' was videoing her every move.

If she wanted to be honest with herself, the unnatural attention made her nervous...and made her shyder than she was already.

She wasn't to know that 'Young Davey' would constantly re-play the latest example of her talent with the ball; her youthful, young body, her long slender legs exciting him to the point of self-relief!

He liked it better when he played the action in 'slo-mo' that accentuated her every muscle. The smile on her face. The way her ponytail bounced rhythmically. Her long slender legs...

It had become an unnatural obsession!

CHAPTER FOUR

He was viewing the footage that 'Young Davey' had taken the previous weekend.

He had pirated it without 'Young Davey' being aware of it happening...young Davey wasn't that good on the computer. Sure, he had inserted 'fences' and 'gates' but a reasonable competent computer 'geek' could jump those fences and open those gates with ease.

Copying every detail of the young girl's actions.

Time after time.

He was confident he was hidden from view, even from those who may want to track him.

He had a rich vein of material from which he could fantasise...to scheme...to plot...to one day fulfil his innermost dreams to lay beside the young thing without another person knowing about it. One day he would have worked up the courage...when all the pieces were in place...one day!

When the urges overtook the caution...he knew that it was getting close to that point.

He again replayed the footage...wasn't she just wonderful? Wasn't she just perfect?

One day...soon. Very soon, he promised himself.

He too, knew where they were to play the following week. The times of the Practise nights. Where'd they be afterwards. Usually at the nearest Maccas when the Coach would shout them, especially if they had a good match where everyone tried. Win or lose, it didn't matter, as long as they played as a team.

He'd be there.

In a corner.

Even sitting out in his car.

Watching her every move without anyone noticing, so he thought.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Mate! C'mon! We've been friggin' about for what? A couple of months now. The Winter Competition will be over for most of these Sports in a couple more weeks. We's got a list a mile long of rich peoples whose kids play in some District Comp... let's get going and start to hit those places we knows about, eh? We's could do with the money, like really bad!"

'Jerry had a whining voice when-ever he complained about something. It could be bloody annoying', Chris thought. 'Grating was more the word for it'.

"Do you know how to off-load all the shit we take from these houses?"

A good point, Paulie thought.

He'd just thought about it...well, not really. It was in some TV Show the night before. How they needed to sell the stuff they robbed from outa these rich people's houses to a Pawnbroker or some-one like that.

Otherwise, why knock off these houses at all?

Chris had included Paulie in the scam because he had a ratty old van that didn't look out of place at some dude's house. A fake sign on the side of the van would tell people that they were TV Aerial Repair Servicemen...or Gutter Cleaners...or just Mower-men doing the front lawn or something.

"Yeah", Jerry chimed in. "We could knock off the Queen's Jewels but if we can't hock or sell them, what's the use!"

It was obvious that Chris hadn't thought that through properly as he stood there frozen to the spot. He did know that to try and hock the stuff through a local Pawnbroker was asking for

trouble as most were in the pocket of Cops in any case. So went the word on the street...and they should know, right? Get something worthwhile and the Cops would be straight onto it, that was for sure.

As sure as Ned Kelly hanging!

"eCove...or Pinetree..." Chris stated suddenly as though the thought had burst upon him like a cold-water shower. "There was something on the Wireless the other day. People make squillions of tax-free dollars doing that...they go and buy stuff on Special at the big Stores and sell it at a profit on eCove...how cool is that! We can do the same with the stuff we pinch from those well-to-do houses...easy as..."

The other two looked at him as though he'd gone mad.

"Why do we want to go and buy baby's stuff on special at some Store and then sell it on eCove for? That's about as stupid as it gets when we are supposed to have this fool-proof scam all sorted out!... well...according to you, huh?"

Chris walked away shaking his head wondering how he ever got mixed up with these two idiots.

"...okay, okay..." He was going to ignore the last several minutes even existed. "We'll hit three places on Saturday. Another three on Sunday. From Umina Heights, Terrigal, Terrigal Bowl then Bensons Beach. On Sunday we'll hit Bell's Cove, Springfield, and Erina Park". Both Jerry and Paulie looked confused.

"The Football's on at Gosford Stadium on Sun'dee...we can't work next Sun'dee. A league game is on at the Stadium". They both whined in unison. "We's were going to the game, Chris. We's can't work on Sun'dee. No way!"

"Okay. Okay". Chris said with a huff. "We'll just do Sat'dee as a trial run, okay?"

'Geez', he thought to himself. 'A squillion dollars theys looking at, and theys got to go watch some ratty League game, instead! They don't deserve to get rich!'

CHAPTER SIX

"It's gotta metal roof, Chris... what'll we do?" Jerry whined.

"Yer didn't think are that, did ya?" Paulie sounded angry.

"We can always peel a coupla sheets back..." Jerry suggested without knowing how ridiculous that sounded.

"Yeah", Chris mumbled angrily. "Let's take the whole bloody roof off. No-one would notice what we were doing, doh!" This was not going to end right he murmured to himself as he walked away.

"That would be too obvious...just try a couple of the windows around the back. If there is none open we'll just go to the next place. There's plenty of places on our list...that's another reason we made such a long list, guys".

Chris sounded so smart-arse at times, as though he was the Professor and the other two were the dunces of the class.

"I was at Mum and Dad's place last night for tea...they have a man-hole alright, but it's in the Garage...and yer can't get from the Garage to the rest of the house..." Paulie added, trying to sound helpful.

"Most of the modern houses have tiled roofs..." Chris muttered.

"That one didn't..."

"...and a door from the Garage into the rest of the house...anyway, we'll try the next one on the list, okay?" Chris as always, the optimist.

"Mmm..." His two slow mates didn't sound convinced.

They were ready to toss in the towel already. They'd spent most of their dole money on getting stuff to make things easier...like a magnetic sign that would stick to the sides of the van. A couple of ladders which cost them heaps...other stuff...yet they were still buggerising around having done squidling shit!

CHAPTER SEVEN

They had to win this game to play in the semi-final but at 2-0 against them, it wasn't looking good.

The kids jogged off for the half-time break expecting the Coach to be a little angry at them. They knew that they hadn't played to their potential and didn't appear to have their mind on the game at all.

They were friggin' around as the Captain had shouted out a couple of times. She was trying to egg them on to better things...but it didn't look good for the game. Two nil down at half-time was an insurmountable task to achieve a win from there.

It was cold. A very chilly south-westerly was whistling across the field, bombarding the unprotected legs of the Under Twelve team. All the parents down both side-lines were rugged up, some even having blankets over their shoulders, beanies, and knee high Ugg Boots on. They must have still been cold as they were not shouting out instructions as they usually did during such important games.

This pleased most of the kids as it was quite embarrassing at times. What some of the parents shouted out. Swearing at the Umpire...and even the kids at times!

Caitlin Suffolk watched the guy jog awkwardly across the playing field up to the opposite Goal line and set up his camera and tripod again. On Caitlin's wing. It was a bit spooky...and it was starting to embarrass and trouble Caitlin. When she had first spotted him at the beginning of the season, she was a little thrilled...yet still embarrassed that the guy concentrated all his efforts on videoing just her as she ran with the ball down the side-line.

Now it was just plain spooky for her.

She wanted to mention it to the Coach, her Dad, but other things got in the way, like what the Coach was saying. He still believed that they could win the game if they stuck to what they had practised...he was confident if each gave one hundred percent.

The final score was 3-2 their way.

The Under Twelve Berkeley Barkers Soccer Team was heading towards the semi-finals.

Then the Finals!

Then the big one.

The Grand Final.

District Champions...it was within their grasp!

Caitlin had scored one goal herself and been instrumental in the other two goals.

She was chaired from the field. A hero again. The most popular team member and the most valuable player...she was so proud.

Caitlin was wrapped up in the euphoria of the win as it meant that they would get a bye next week and play in the Final the following week.

All thoughts of 'Young Davey' lost in the celebrations.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Did you have any trouble?"

"Nah, I was lucky. The man-hole was directly below me when I slid a couple of tiles out of the way...."

"Okay, let Paulie set up to look as though he is cleaning the gutters. We'll help him with the ladder. We should case the joint. I'll take the Bedrooms, you take the Lounge and Kitchen...what-ever you see of value take out the back door and straight into the van. No mucking about. Look for ready cash. Sometimes people keep a jar somewhere in the Kitchen into which they chuck their loose change. Look in the cupboards at eye level. Yer see it, take it straight out to the van. Okay?"

They went their separate ways. Chris into the bedroom wing while Jerry lurked around the Lounge and Kitchen area.

There was a sudden scream from the rear of the house.

Chris ran towards the horrible sound to find Jerry laying on his back pointing at a bulky recliner chair in the Lounge Room, positioned to get the winter morning sun through the large picture window.

An elderly lady sat slumped in the large chair.

The handle of a knife sticking from her chest.

She gestured slightly with a shaking finger. Pointing it momentarily at Jerry and Chris.

Her hand then slumped back into her lap.

She slowly opened her eyes, looking pleadingly at Jerry.

"Shit, Jerry! Let's get the hell out of here. C'mon Jerry". He pulled at his mate's jacket. "Let's get the fuck outa here". Chris was close to losing it. He grabbed Jerry by the arm and began to pull him across the floor. He'd never seen anything like that before and if he were totally honest, the sight of blood made him heave! Half pulling, half pushing his mate, Chris ran to the front door, not really noticing that it was ajar. He yelled out to Paul in a high-pitched tone that sounded more feminine than male.

"Get off the roof and put the ladder on top of the van roof, will ya. C'mon. Bloody quick! Tie it down".

His voice on the edge of hysteria, he yelled out again for his two mates to hurry up as he wasn't waiting for them.

Jerry refused to hop into the cabin of the van.

"Chris, mate! For Christ sake, she's still alive...we can't just leave her".

"If you want to stay here and get caught not only for BnE but also bloody murder, don't let me stop you, but I intend to get the fuck outa here. If ya not coming, then shut the bloody door!"

Chris started to edge the van down the driveway of the house.

Jerry hopped in and slammed the door.

He took out his mobile and entered in Directory Assistance, asking for the Crime Stoppers Number, and requesting to be patched through to the number.

CHAPTER NINE

"Who called it in?"

"We don't know yet...it came through Sensis 1234...there's a bit of work to do to trace that out. Takes a bit of time".

"Home Invasion gone terribly wrong?" I stood and looked about the room.

"Don't think so. More than likely a BnE gone wrong. In a Home Invasion, they don't normally come in through the roof and the ceiling manhole..."

"Oh? What? There's roof tiles slid out of the way?"

"Yeah. Seems like it...right over the ceiling manhole...they were expecting an empty house I suspect and lost their cool when they came across the old girl. A single stab wound to the chest with a large knife. She's a slight old thing, but looking at it, she may have taken some time to die..."

"The Perps get the hell out...no signs of forced entry? Who are the residents of the premises?"

"According to the neighbours, the Suffolks...Paul, his wife Denise known as Denny, and their three kids. Caitlin who is almost twelve and a local young soccer celebrity deemed for better things...and two boys, Jacob ten and Jackson eight. Paul Suffolk is a former Victorian Police Officer out of Benalla. He now works with The Central Coast and Newcastle Area Tourist Board...and coaches his daughter's and eldest boy's Soccer teams. Very successfully, I might add. Caitlin also is remarkably successful in Little Athletics as a two hundred and four hundred runner. Shows great promise but her true passion is Soccer, so the story goes. The Deceased is Denise's mother, Charlotte Chambers nee Barnhill who lives on the premises in a small Grannie Flat tucked onto the rear of the premises...underneath, adjacent to the double garage..."

"So, what is she doing in the main part of the house?"

I walked around the body one more time, glanced about the room before advising Pogowski that I had seen enough.

"I'd say she was sitting in that chair getting some morning warmth from the sun..."

I nodded my head, not that interested in half-baked suppositions.

Shelley came into the room, looking glum.

"Anything?" I asked her, as I nodded to Pogowski that they could remove the body.

She filled her cheeks with air before exhaling with an audible blow. Shook her head.

"Signs of rummaging in the main bedroom. A couple of drawers pulled out with the contents upended onto the double bed...the Forensic guys are paying attention to the manhole in the Hallway adjacent to the main Bathroom...about a dozen roof tiles askew on the backside of the roof...no fingerprints...both front and back doors were open...the front door showing signs of being forced...recently... maybe not, but not that long ago as the scratching has not weathered or oxidised".

"Mmm...if you intended to ransack a place, wouldn't you position your vehicle so that in taking stuff out of the premises, it was hidden from view of the street...and neighbours?"

"Ye..ess! According to the neighbours in Number 18, Mister Collis, he thinks that there was a van parked in the driveway earlier...a beat-up van. Skewed across the driveway so that its rear open doors were close to the side path that went around to the back yard. He thought that was a bit strange...his words. A ladder was leaning against the front of the house...he's pretty sure that a sign on the side of the van advertised Gutter Cleaning and general Home Maintenance".

Shelley turned to watch the Morgue guys begin to prepare the body for transfer out to the Morgue van.

"The Poulos family in Number 22, confirmed that statement". The Senior Constable, Dave Mills from the local Station offered. The man couldn't look at the slight cadaver.

I nodded. Pursued my lips before pulling on my earlobe.

"Then why was the front door forced? And where is the Suffolk family?"

"We've dispatched a vehicle to the Pat Morley Playing Fields. Bateau Bay off Cresthaven Avenue. Paul Suffolk's daughter's team is playing there this afternoon. They should be here any time soon..." SC Mills added.

I nodded again. Turned around to take in the room again.

A bloody bad reason to have to leave the playing field early.

They must have an Assistant Coach who can take over and a couple of reserve players who can step in for the young Caitlin, I suspected.

I wiggled my hands in my pants pockets. It was a chilly day.

CHAPTER TEN

The family were understandably devastated over the death of their beloved mother, mother-in-law, and grandmother.

Luckily, the body removed from the premises before the family returned home.

Paul Suffolk identified the body as it was about to be slid into the Morgue van. He returned to his house to sit and answer questions that my partner and I may have for him.

A blank expression on his face.

The tone of his voice, lifeless.

Our temporary third partner Sasha Blayney was up on the roof with the Forensic Lead, Dee Dee Symonds.

The three children sent several houses away. Close friends of the Suffolks whose son played in the same team as young Jacob Suffolk. The kids shared the houses, so it seemed at every available moment. The short Cul-de-sac and 'turnabout' the usual playing field after school and on weekends when a game was organised with local kids.

We asked the usual questions for the expected replies.

They had no idea who would want to stab to death their kind old granny.

They had purchased the house on the Central Coast with the money that both had received from their jobs in Benalla, Victoria. The selling of their property there.

Paul Suffolk had left the Victorian Police Force because of the growing unease of attending fatal vehicle accidents of young people usually from Benalla and surrounds. As the Coach of several of the Soccer teams in the rural city, Paul knew most by name. A lot for several years, having coached them in lower grades when they were but tots under ten years of age.

Watching them grow.

Watching them mature.

Then seeing them mangled and covered in blood in some demolished vehicle wrapped around some roadside tree.

Usually, speed was the culprit.

It got to him.

Having to pulled mangled, lifeless, young bodies from vehicles.

He applied and was accepted into a mid-management role in the Central Coast and Newcastle Tourist Board glad to be rid of the Police Force.

It seemed only natural that he would again take up a coaching position with the young kids of the District.

His wife, Denny Suffolk had had a mid-management position with a Victorian Government Administrative Department in the town. She was lucky and snared a position with the NSW Fair Trading Department that had offices in Gosford.

We departed after around an hour of questions from both Shelley and I with the Senior Constable, who had become a friend of the Suffolk family, also being present.

Paul Suffolk followed us out onto his front veranda. He wanted to say something out of earshot of his wife...or that is how I interpreted his reason for following us. He turned towards the front door and then back to us. Looked up the street at the Police tape strung across the road. The number of Marked and Unmarked vehicles, some with bar-lights still flashing blue and red.

"I should go and get the kids soon...when most of your Forensic people have gone".

Being an ex-cop, he would know that this could be several hours away at least.

He shook his head.

"Caitlin's team? They won their match today...they'll have a lay-off next week...that means that they will play for the District Grand Final the following Saturday. Either the Rhinos or the Benson Bay Bears. I don't know how she'll go after this...she was close to her

Grandmother. Loved her to bits...and I think this will upset some of the other kids too. Some parents would take offence at me trying to talk to their kids about dying...and living...and being killed. They'd say that their child is a little too young to be talking about it...but kids? They're not stupid...or divorced from the rawness...the stupidity...the sheer lottery when that ball drops...or the senselessness of the act...what can I say that will help them get over and accept the situation...and to make them concentrate on the task that they will face in a couple of weeks...I don't know...I'll walk down with you, Detectives. To pick up my kids. They'll be hurting".

He looked lost.

Broken.

Not the right emotions to have as his team heads towards the most important game of the season!

But where do you place your priorities in such circumstances? Life goes on...for most of us...but when is a good time for Suffolk to resume coaching the kids after what has just happened?

And is that the right attitude for the kids?

Giving them something to hang onto...or is that a little early? And cold?

"You okay?" Senior Constable Dave Mills asked Suffolk. "You need a hand, just give us a yell. I'll fill in for you if you're not up to it, okay?"

"Yeah, sure...nah, she'll be right, but thanks anyhow. Brendan is pretty good and the kids know him well. Like him".

Brendan was his offsider and Assistant Coach and Oranges and drink provider.

It was a good community network that these junior sports teams engendered. Everyone looking out for everyone else...but then, if it was that bloody good, why was it that the Central Coast had a high teenage suicide rate? It did not compute.

That was it, the competitiveness of the area would ostracise those not so inclined. Then again, I didn't know enough about it to comment, really. It was just my investigative mind running wild again.

Enough! I slapped the side pockets of my jacket looking for that elusive packet of cigarettes knowing that it was nigh on five years since I had last lit one up. It surprised me when I thought about it and not for the first time, wondered how I allowed myself to be hooked so deeply on the things.

I slumped into the passenger seat of the Unmarked as Shelley opened the driver's door.

"Where's Sasha?" I asked as she placed the keys into the ignition.

Shelley shook her head.

"Fair dinkum, that girl. She's been crawling around with Dee Dee and every Forensic trace person that she can tag along with. I reckon she should have been a Forensic Technician instead of a Murder Dee".

"Go get her Shells. We're going to be late back in Sydney as it is, without her making it worse..."

"What's wrong with you doing your own beckoning?"

I waved the question away as I slowly removed myself from the vehicle...I really wasn't in the mood.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Autopsy on the senior Charlotte Chambers was conducted the following Thursday morning.

We had plenty to occupy our time, not the least being the IVF Clinic Case that involved multiple deaths and no villain to arrest right now.

We still had a fair bit of work to do on the case to satisfy the DPP Reps.

Reports, collation of Forensic evidence and the mundane interviewing of family, friends, and acquaintances of all persons involved. A Case was never wrapped up with the arrest of guilty parties...there were plenty of facts to collate to satisfy the DPP...and sometimes our Boss!

In this case, all guilty parties beat the Hangman to the gallows, so to speak! A particular frustrating way to complete an investigation which left a particularly lousy taste in my mouth!

We stood and listened to Muscles Sarvich mutter and murmur into his voice activated recorder as he cut into the slight body of the old woman. His voice took on an almost rhythmical cadence and tempo as he described the various procedures and examinations of her body organs.

He seemed to enjoy the time spent with the cadavers lying on his autopsy tables. Seeming to discuss matters with each body. Telling jokes and wondering what the person lying on the stainless-steel autopsy table may miss out on, due to their premature demise.

Sick to my way of thinking. I supposed it helped him through the process, I guess. I'd heard that Surgeons often used similar banter during operations to quell queasiness.

Go figure.

I could think of better subjects to get my jollies off on!

"How do you reckon you'll manage a second bubs coming along so soon after Aleesha?" He asked as he looked up from just completing the saw cut to remove the top of the skull. The high-pitched whine of the saw making me grit my teeth. He extracted the mass of brain material to hand it to his other Assistant.

How he managed to conduct an informal and friendly conversation at such a time had me beat.

"You seemed to have thrived after the birth of your three, mate. I hope that I can achieve around half the pleasure that you gain from the triplets as that would make me a happy and proud man".

He nodded, looking down at the specimen laid out on the cutting table.

"I've said it before, Joe, there's a public and a private persona..."

I laughed as he completed the 'Y' incision and prised open the rib cage, holding it open with what looked like a Carpenter's long cramp on the backward function.

"Mate! I know you well enough to know that those two facades are one and the same for you...."

He chuckled as he lifted the Heart then the Liver out of the body. He instructed his Assistant to remove both Kidneys, weigh them and take a sliver sample.

"Mmm...you should have been at our place over the past couple of mornings...not a good look, I can tell you. Marge has the patience of...who was it? Was it Solomon? I can't remember...This woman is seventy years of age yet she has the internal organs of some-one much younger...not a trace of the normal degradation in any of her organs. This dame could have lived to a hundred, I bet...such a bloody waste. One lunge with a very sharp Carving Knife that just managed to snick the Aorta...just a millimetre or two away and she more than likely would have survived the attack...a bloody great pity...I'll give a description of the knife, take a lot more photographs...or at least my beautiful young Assist here will, and write up a Report for your gratification by the middle of next week. Full blood work-up and tox will take a little longer. She did not take any form of medication except for a blood thinner...didn't smoke or drink but was known to swear like a trooper at times...and from Pogowski's notes, he is of the opinion that the knife belonged to a Knife Block on the Kitchen counter approximately five metres away from the seated position where she was discovered...where she died...nothing else...any questions, Detectives?"

We were dismissed from Muscles little world. He was dissecting something while the kidneys sat in a stainless steel 'salad bowl' as we walked from the 'Cutting Room'. He didn't acknowledge our exit.

I had this vision when last at his place.

A tossed salad in a stainless-steel bowl very much the same as the one that now held the old woman's kidneys.

I felt a little nauseous!

Glad to be out in the fresh air, we breathed deeply to rid our lungs and noses of the slight smell of death and that antiseptic odour. Sasha walked to the edge of the dock and shivered. Shaking, looking for all the world like a fluffy little dog trying to shake loose moisture...she was shaking that much!

"Your first?"

She looked across at me. Shook her head.

"No... but I can't get used to them...and the conversation...so trite...disrespectful...so cold".

I nodded.

"Some may assume that I guess". I gestured for the three of us to head for our Unmarked.

There didn't seem to be anything you could say in defence of my and my mate's behaviour.

Our trite conversation. It happened every time we were at the post-mortem of a person to do with our Case. It was as though we encouraged each other for small talk...I have no idea why this would be so except to say I was in sync with my mate's feelings on a particular day.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"Detective Joseph Lind? This is Bruno Bacci in the Police Communication Liaison Office. We have tracked down a trace on that phone call that advised Crime Stoppers of that body find up in the Central Coast last weekend..."

"Yes...sure. Who was it?"

"The mobile phone is owned by a Jerry Schofield. An address in Woy Woy...he has priors. Minor petty crime. Mostly Good Behaviour Bonds with a short stint of three months for breaking a Good Behaviour Bond eighteen months ago".

I had written the name, last known address, and mobile number down on the Suspect as it was detailed to me. I read it back for confirmation.

"Good work, Bruno. Thanks for that".

I gave the information to Sasha so that she could bring up Schofield's prior history. Shelley watched her every move, nodding her head at the speed in which the young Detective did her search.

"Petty theft mostly. A closed Juvenile Record. A couple of Drunk and disorderly. Heading for the scrap heap early in his life". She recounted. "Known Associate one Christopher Stavros. Similar history. Nothing clever or threatening, really. That goes outside the norm for both boys in stabbing an old dear in the heart...not their form up until now...I guess they could escalate things though the two don't seem to have much between the ears".

"Yeah, an escalation in criminal matters...it's on the cards". I agreed.

I had my Devil's Advocate hat on. A smile to lessen the negative feel.

"That's a big jump...and then why contact us Cops after the deed was done?"

"Guilty consciences, perhaps?" Shelley added, not wanting to stay out of the conversation.

"Cold feet..." Sasha offered.

"Mmm....."

I wasn't convinced.

It wasn't in their DNA make-up, as far as I was concerned. These types of guys often straighten out their lives after a while. Maturity and a strong woman often makes them see the error of their ways. Though it is common for a fair few to become more hardened crims as time goes on...it depends on a lot of things going either right or wrong for them. But with no priors for Break and Enter or for assault with a deadly weapon or homicide, I couldn't help but think that there was something else going on here.

"Drugs?"

Sasha shook her head.

"No sign of it...maybe they got involved since their last brush with the Law...they do a B&E on a house looking for easy money for drugs and are surprised by this little old lady who gives them the rounds of the Kitchen. It reminds them of their childhood, perhaps...the negative bullshit piled on top of them by their parents...they snap under the barrage of verbal abuse..." She looked over at me as she spoke with a smile on her face. I nodded...pleased with her summation.

"A theory has to tick all the boxes to be considered close to the truth. I think that you missed a couple".

I gave a chuckle.

"A trip up to the Central Coast, huh?"

I glanced at the Office clock.

"It's a good day for it. Let's go. There's a great Fish and Chip joint up that way on the waterfront at Woy Woy from memory. Feel like fish and chips for lunch?"

We hadn't made the Motorway 'on' ramp when my phone chirped its Big Ben chimes. I was tiring of the chimes along with most of my colleagues on the Murder Squad floor.

"Joseph? It's Dee Dee...we have a partial palm print in that Central Coast homicide case. The old biddy who was stabbed in the heart while she was sitting enjoying the warmth of the sun. A bit blurry with not all points matching. But...it may give you something to work on though...along with a list of eight possible matches is one Kevin Yardley. A local lad up that way. Known small time drug dealer, user, and all-round bad boy. A grot who will die young. Lives close to the Suffolk's premises. Two streets away in fact. His indistinct palm-print on the Kitchen bench beside the Knife Block which we presume was the home of the Carving Knife used in the attack...that confirmed by the Suffolks when questioned on the matter. His last known address close to the crime scene address spiking our interest...um...the other seven residing far away from the coast so we don't consider them POIs ".

I copied down the name and last known address, thanking Dee Dee for her excellent work.

Usually, partials like this are not acted upon as they can be called into question in Court. But the nature of this homicide had affected us all and there were people pulling out all stops to help in the investigation. The proximity of the last known address of one of those that the 'partial' indicated was all that we needed to make further enquiries. I called through to the local Cop Station asking to speak to the Senior Constable who was lead at the premises and a friend of Paul Suffolk. Dave Mills.

"Does the name Kevin Yardley mean anything to you guys?"

"Um...the name rings a bell...hang on..."

I could hear one finger typing on his computer.

"Yes..." Dave Mills finally answered. "A nasty little weasel who seems to enjoy run-ins with us local guys. Small time but having all the symptoms of wanting to expand his sphere of influence but lacks the brains and the smarts to do so..."

"How about Jerry Schofield? Christopher Stavros?"

"I know them personally. They sometimes get around with a Paul Rebbit. Again, the combined IQ of the trio wouldn't worry your fingers or toes...arrh...as far as I know that trio do not have anything to do with Kevin Yardley...your first subject query, though their small bit crimes could cause them to cross paths occasionally...but let me ask around..."

"No, wait..."

I explained the indistinct palm print and the call by Jerry Schofield to Crime Stoppers.

"Do you have an address for Yardley? We've an address close to where the Suffolks live. We're on our way up and would prefer to nab Yardley. Could you organise the relocation of the other three to your Station cells with them kept apart until we can question them. I'd like to bring Yardley back to the Station as well. Okay?"

"Sure, can do...it will be a pleasure...you reckon the four may have had a combined effort in the homicide of the old girl?"

"I don't know...my gut tells me no... but we need to roast the lot at once if you know what I mean".

"Sure...I'll organise our end...oh...last known address on Yardley is the same as the one that you have. OK?"

"There goes fish and chips for lunch..." Sasha murmured as Shelley picked up speed onto the Motorway heading north.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It was a lovely, fine day. The sun weak, though there was warmth about it.

Spring wasn't far away. Three weeks about.

I stretched as I uncurled from the passenger seat of the Unmarked feeling my back and legs hardly moving for the past hour and a bit.

I nodded at Shelley as she indicated that she would take the back door.

"Sasha? Go with Shells..." I murmured.

Waiting for a sec to allow the two women to make it to the back door, I strode up to the front door to knock loudly on the adjacent glass panel, yelling out the crud's name as I did so.

No answer.

I again thumped on the door more forcefully, yelling out Yardley's name and identifying myself as a member of the NSW Police Force.

The door opened a crack.

I pushed hard to fling back the door, bowling the woman over who had hidden behind it.

She began to scream about police brutality.

I stepped over the threshold, and with a cooing voice pretended to gently lift the woman to her feet all the time keeping her in front of me. Half lifting her, I propelled her slowly into the dimness of the house. I gently deposited her onto a threadbare sofa lounge as I peered around the room and at every door opening. Luckily, there were only two leading out of the small Lounge Room!

"Your son, Missus Yardley? Do you know where he is? Is your arm okay?"

"I think I'll get a bad bruise from it...and no! I ain't seen me son in about a year. Why do you want him?"

"A suspected homicide..."

"He don't do stuff like that. Goin' 'round shooting peoples like you Cops do. Keeps it simple to supply his drug cravings..."

I was surprised at her coolness when she was privy to the news.

"He must have needed a fix badly as he was looking for stuff to hock...it escalated quickly into a homicide..."

"What? The one around the street? The old girl? Last weekend? My Kevin? As I said before, not likely..."

"BnE? He thinks all the family are out. Gets a surprise when he almost falls over old Missus Chambers taking in a bit of sun in her favourite Recliner chair...he panics...you know the rest...how? Yer son tell yer?"

"The shops down the road are abuzz with the talk...that's all...and the local Radio Station. Her son-in-law is well-known around these parts hisself".

I nodded in reply as Shelley and Sasha came into the room clipping their pistols into their holsters. Shelley shook her head. They had done a complete search of the premises and surrounds.

"If he's done a runner, where would he likely go?"

"Buggered if I know...and I ain't inclined to let you AO's know in any case...if'n I knew...but I don't even know the names of his friends so's there's no need to ask me". She jutted her chin out in defiance.

We'd get nothing else from her.

"Brothers? Sisters?"

"Nah. They don't talk to one 'nother...and besides, I ain't got a bloody clue wheres they are. In Sydney, I suspect...they don't care no more 'bout their old mother...".

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"Good morning....Jerry Schofield, is it?"

The youth nodded his bowed head slightly, not taking his eyes from the top of the stainless-steel table that separated us.

"You're in a right, royal pickle, son. Homicide. Break and Enter. Fifteen years at a squeeze. Puts you close to forty before you see free air again, son. Your life gone before your very eyes. Not a good thought, huh?"

We sat in silence. Schofield not moving a muscle.

"We know you were at the Suffolk residence last Saturday morning..."

A glance my way before he adopted the stance of a bowed head again.

Again silence.

"We know that it was your mate's vehicle reversed up the Suffolk's driveway. Right hard up to the side gate. We know that a ladder was leant against the front of the house after being

removed from the roof racks on top of the van...one of you was cleaning out the gutters to make it look good. Your mate, Paul Rebbit, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, he was cleaning out the gutters...it's his van too..."

"So, you were at the premises last Saturday?"

He knew that he had fucked up. His eyes lifted slowly to meet mine then drifted back to the tabletop.

"So, your mate is there cleaning out the gutters, while you remove approximately twelve tiles to gain entry into the premises?"

Again silence.

"Dirty fingerprints around the man-hole...and the perimeter frame. You were lucky to lift those tiles at the point on top of the inside manhole..."

"Wasn't luck..." He stated defiantly. "We visited a Home Exhibition Village. The same house...we did our homework...Chris was...you know...sick about doing the homework...what a silly bastard, we didn't even get to do over one fuckin' house...worse'n those Adelaide dudes".

"Not enough homework, so it seems, huh? You thought that the premises would be vacant...you didn't know of old Granny Charlotte Chambers living there, did you?"

Again silence.

"She surprised you...she couldn't get around that well, but she sure had a set of lungs. She screamed at you, huh? Called you all the names under the sun...I betcha a few words you'd not heard before, huh? Scared the bejeezus out of you. You grabbed the knife and stabbed her in the chest...you just missed her heart...an old woman who could hardly see without her glasses...one stab wound...you sure are a big man, Jerry".

He squirmed in his chair.

Held on to the edges of it as though it was about to buck him. His colour had drained from his face and he looked as though he was on the verge of perking!

I let the silence lengthen.

He was about to explode one way or another.

Then he just seemed to deflate.

He had control over his emotions.

I doubted that we would get anything more from him for a while.

We'd try again later after he had stewed while we had a go at his two mates.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Shelley and Sasha took the lead in questioning Chris Stavros. They identified themselves as the young man zeroed in on the attractive young face of Sasha.

"Why did you select the Suffolk premises to rob?" Sasha employed her low, soft voice. Leant towards the dude as though he was the most important person in the world. She then lent further, resting her chin on her closed fist. Her elbow on the table. Looking intently at the young bloke.

The young dude blushed.

He wasn't used to the attention of a pretty young thing. He was now wrapped around her little finger and was completely unaware of how it was done.

"We knew that they wouldn't be home..."

"How?" She asked with a hint of a smile.

"Um...because we did our homework..."

"You stake out the joint for a couple of weekends?"

"Something like that..."

"Then why have you got a list of over fifty addresses from almost Swansea down to Pearl Beach? The list we found in Paul's van".

He tried to look away but was held by her eyes. He scratched his crutch. Bit the side of his mouth. Scratched his nose while still captured by Sasha's eyes.

"There were some dudes in Adelaide..."

The more he spilled, the more he found it hard to stop as Sasha was encouraging him with astonished looks and comments on how clever she thought he was.

"... so, the Suffolk's premises was your first? Too bad about the old girl...but it will look good for your case that you at least called it in for an Ambulance to attend..."

"That was Jerry...he felt bad about it..."

"So, Jerry stabbed her? Not you?"

"No... I was in the bedroom when Jerry screamed like a little girl. I came running out. Jerry was flat on his back just pointing up at a Sofa. Yer know? One of those big Sofa Chairs...you know, one of those big recliner chairs. I couldn't see her at that point. When I did, I said we should get the hell out of there. I've never seen anyone dead before. Jerry wanted to stay to try and help. I had to push him out the front door. I yelled out to Paulie to get down off the ladder, put it up on the van racks and let's get the hell out of there...Jerry wouldn't. He rang Directory Assistance to be patched through to you Cops...and the Ambulance as he was hopping into the van. Then we got the hell out of there..."

"So, if it was Jerry who...who stabbed the woman...then why would he ring for help?"

"Jerry didn't stab her...it's not in him to hurt some-one like that. No way..."

"Then if it wasn't you... or Jerry? And Paulie was up the ladder cleaning out the gutters, then who stabbed Granny Charlotte Chambers?"

Chris for the first time, looked down at his hands clasped tightly together.

"You and your mates are in a bit of a bind, Chris. Let me tell you. Your story doesn't add up. You know you'll spend your fortieth birthday in prison more'n likely...a long time out of your life. Your story just doesn't add up. You had plans for over fifty BnEs...a real crime wave, so a homicide or two to ensure that your little scheme keeps on going wasn't much, eh? You've just entered the big time, boyo...How does it feel?"

This spat out with real vehemence that even surprised Shelley sitting beside her colleague.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

We interviewed Paul Rabbit last, now knowing that he had been methodically cleaning out the gutters at the front of the premises as though his very existence depended on a bonzer job. He did manage to confirm the scam that Christopher Stavros devised. I of the opinion neither Paul Rabbit or Jerry Schofield had the nous to even blow their own noses unless instructed to do so. Stavros was the brains. The 'doer'. The Boss...two weeks ahead of his two dumb mates.

I had to admit to the several Uniforms and the Lead Senior Constable David Mills sitting in conference with us after we closed the Interviews, that I thought the methodology was worth a few 'gold stars'.

"I mean, how long would it have taken for you guys to stumble onto the scheme?"

"We do communicate between the various Stations in our Local District Command, you know". The Lead Constable admonished. "We keep across BnEs, Assaults and the like throughout the District...and further afield. Okay...okay...it may have taken some time to stumble onto it, but the spike in the number of BnEs would have sparked our interest...to think they thought that they could get rid of their booty by selling it on-line...that was the weak spot in the scheme. We have that side of things well covered...and the fact that the on-line mobile number would come up fairly frequently would also be a significant clue to us...but ten out of ten to them...and the fact that they did that amount of homework to get to that stage of preparation showed true stamina. Most of the guys I know who would try something like that would have given up after the second visit to a Soccer Practise night...and if it was cold...or damp on the night, they were out of there..."

He shook his head in admiration. I couldn't figure why.

"That's what happened to those two Adelaide dudes...they gave up on the hunt...the homework which was essential for a scheme like that...that's where most of those dumb clowns fall down every time".

"What-ever, you've got the three sewn up for a nice little scam, regardless...with intent to carry out up to fifty if all had gone according to Hoyle. Good work..."

"What about our Number One Suspect on the Granny Chambers Homicide?"

"He'll stay pretty much around the District I would imagine. He's never been known to go walk-about...I'd say he's holed up with some mate in The Entrance or Wyong area...couch surfing. We'll keep an 'all eyes' out for him...this type of guy needs his fix regular like so he'll

surface sooner than later. We'll get him for you, Detectives. For sure. Won't take long. He likes his Dole payment too, so he'll trip up at some time when he needs ready cash...we'll keep an eye-out on his Bank transactions and ATM locations...it won't take long".

Dave Mills stood and walked quickly from the room as though disinterested in any further discussion. I raised my eyebrows at the sudden and unexpected action, looking at the Station Commander.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"He's going through a particularly messy divorce. Left with nothing...except two bloody dogs to keep him company. He's fallen apart and not doing his job correctly...his mind's not on it...I may have to insist that he takes time off...but that too can be counter-productive if you've not got anything to occupy your mind except terrible re-runs in your mind of the past year or two..."

The job was hard enough, demanding more of a person than other career paths. To have the shit heaped on top of that could be too overwhelming...the Cop Force had a high suicide rate.

What can you do?

We headed towards Woy Woy for a late lunch and an even later return to the Office. None of us felt we had achieved much for the day...it was contagious between the three of us!

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Monday morning.

I was eager for a full twenty laps of the pool and fifteen minutes on the rowing machine. My shin soreness was still noticeable when-ever I did more than a lap of the Athletic Field near home so I had curtailed that exercise for God knows how long. Even though sore shins could be painful, I missed that late afternoon circuit of the nearby Athletic Field about a kilometre from home. In my illogical logic, I blamed the kilometre run from home to the field for my current soreness, not the circuits of the field with other twits just on sunset...besides, I figured I was aging not liking the habit...that was easier for me to accept rather than my body objecting to a silly daily drill!

We were lying on the rub-down tables side by side, wondering why Sasha would not join us. Her excuse? She was not a Gym Junkie!

Can you believe it?

"Did you see the News last night?" Shelley mumbled through the breathing hole of the table.

"No....why?"

"Caitlin Suffolk? Remember her? Paul Suffolk's young daughter? Up on the Central Coast. Her grandmother was stabbed to death...remember? She's gone missing. Caitlin. They suspect that she may have been abducted..."

"Shit! Fair Dinkum? Christ, the family has been through enough already, I reckon. Bloody hell! That's so much bad luck! The local guys will be ducking for cover what with the Media interest that her disappearance will generate. Shit! What a bugger!"

It was obvious that the perp thought little of the family's hurt...thinking purely of his own wants and desires...

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"Senior Constable Mills? Detective Joe Lind, Murder Squad...we met at Paul Suffolk's place the other weekend. Granny Chambers homicide case. I understand that Caitlin Suffolk has gone missing...is that true?"

"Yes. I'm afraid so...it appears that way...a real bummer, eh?"

"What happened?"

"As you may recall, Caitlin's team had a 'By' this weekend just gone. Straight into the Grand Final next weekend. They had a light training run at the Oval just finishing on dark on Saturday afternoon as they always did. Paul Suffolk volunteered to take them to Maccas straight after...the kids? They wanted to jog to Maccas from the Oval. Not far. About a kilometre. A little more perhaps. They all jogged together. As a group. They are all extremely close having all been in the same team since Under Eights. They jogged through the back of the Pub. The Parking Area. Plenty of light and CCTV cameras. As they came out onto The Entrance Road, Caitlin suddenly remembered that she had left her training jacket on one of

the seats near the Amenities Sheds at the Oval. She told the rest of them to continue to Maccas and she would catch up. We have vision from the Pub cameras of her jogging back through the Car Park and across the road to the Oval...then nothing...there was vision of a vehicle coming out of the Oval Car Park but there is no way that we could identify the vehicle...all we have is a set of headlights as it swung away from The Entrance Road to go in the opposite direction along Hillcrest. We've trolled every house along that street hoping for a glimpse from domestic camera locations. Nothing...we are all on double shifts here and we've bought in extra staff from Wyong and The Entrance Stations...we are trying our best..."

"She was the most valuable player in the team, wasn't she?"

"Yes, she was...by a long shot".

"A disgruntled supporter of a team that didn't make it to the Grand Final, perhaps?"

"Yeah...We're looking at all angles, no matter how puny...and now there is another thing. A Twitter comment that has gone viral. It's in this morning's papers as though it is factual and a couple of those Radio 'Shock Jocks' have taken up the call without checking the facts..."

"Sorry, I neither read this morning's paper or listen to those idiots on the radio as I drove into work. What's it about?"

"Accusations on how we should check out Caitlin's father and coach... another on how both the eldest kids had been admitted to Benalla Regional Hospital with suspected injuries caused by sexual abuse. How Caitlin's vagina had been badly bruised and covered in blood on one occasion...and on and on with unsubstantiated claims...all insinuating some form of sexual abuse by the father..."

"Have they been checked out?"

"As we speak..."

"And the Twitter comments...they can be traced...the AFP Digital Investigation Section are world beaters in that regard..."

"We hadn't thought of the AFP...we put out a request for our Digital Forensic Analysis people down in Sydney to trace out the account...if they could".

"Go through the Liaison Group to get the AFP involved. There's none better, I can assure you. Mention my name...I don't know whether it will help much, but it will do no harm".

"Your reputation precedes you, Detective...."

"Yeah, something like that...you okay? You seem flat".

"Huh...domestic troubles, that's all. Nothing I can't fix. She'll be fine, no worries".

"If you need any help...you know...with your mental state, the Police Shrink is extremely good. You can take it from me...and the Social Workers are there for your benefit. Use whatever there is to help in the matter...if you feel that you need help, all you got to do is reach out".

"Yeah...no worries. I'll be able to handle it okay".

I hung up, a little peeved at the typical male response that they could manage it okay. I wondered on the number of suicide persons who had uttered the same thing some time before they took their own lives. I shook my head as I placed my mobile back in its dock. I'd been there. I knew how it felt and how you seldom looked for outside help, usually to your own detriment. How can intelligent people be so dumb?

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I threw a pen in Shelley's general direction.

It missed her by miles, bounced off the edge of her desk to skid across the floor.

"Like that, huh?" She muttered, not turning around.

I filled her in on the background of Caitlin Suffolk's disappearance.

"Those cretins...imbeciles...straight out AO's...shit people who see only their debased needs...no thoughts of others...no empathy or sympathy for the pain and suffering they deal out to people that they don't even know..." My voice heavy with anger.

Shelley spun around to face me. Concern on her face.

"C'mon, Joe. You know as well as I do that over 80% of these cases involve some-one within the family circle...known by family and friends...besides, calm it down as it is not your case. A missing girl...sure, Sasha and I had a talk with her and her two brothers while we were up

there the other week. Nice kids. Intelligent. Polite. Smart...and yes, I...and I betcha Sasha here too, is hurting because of her abduction...but cool it, Joe. It's way out of our area of responsibility..."

"At this point in time..." I whispered as I picked up my Mobile and scanned through to my pseudo-daughter-in-law, Malisa.

I waved Shelley away as Malisa answered.

"Mal? Yeah...hi...yeah, sorry to ring during working hours...is Knackers about? Okay, can you put him on, please".

I listened as Knackers went through a torrent of reasons why I should not contact him at work. I let him dribble and then asked had he seen this morning's newspaper. He replied that he had read the article in question and what did it have to do with him. I filled him in on the number of tweets that incorrectly insinuated that Caitlin's father, as her coach was implicated in her disappearance and the serial sexual abuse of his son and daughter while the family lived in Benalla, Victoria and that is the reason the family had suddenly split from that country town to settle on the Central Coast of NSW.

"It's so far from the truth, mate. I can personally vouch for the man. He is one of the good guys, let me tell you. Could you chase out the tweets and the person behind them for prosecution?"

"How do you know there's not a grain of truth in the accusations?"

"C'mon mate...because I know, mate..."

"Now there's a good enough reason for us to short circuit all written protocols and understandings that exist between the NSW Police Force and the AFP...and you are not even the Lead Detective on the case as it is not a Homicide investigation at this point. Is it?"

"Not at this point, though my gut reckons it will be in days or weeks to come...when her body is discovered in some dump...or creek bed".

"There's good enough reason for me to concentrate scarce resources on a wild goose chase based on your gut feeling...Tweets you say? Give us a couple of days. I'll see if Dallas Courtney can run a lasso around it".

CHAPTER TWENTY

We'd finished Dinner and Tellie had stood beside me as I loaded the Dish Washer. Nodding her head as I correctly placed all the cutlery and crockery into their rightful positions. It had been a constant source of annoyance from Tellie who could not understand why males always had a problem in the loading of such an 'easy to do' function.

Muscles too, had to suffer the barbs occasionally flung his way on the manner of his Dishwasher loading. As though the two women had attended some Higher Education Course on the intricacies of Dishwasher loading! Give me strength! These obsessional traits seemed to only surface when she was pregnant...or breast-feeding, but oh, be the insensitive sod to bring this trait to her attention brought on paragraphs of expletives and how I was such an uncaring, cold, insensitive, politically incorrect nincompoop!

How I longed for this period to end!

I would always contend that it was females who did not have the mental dexterity to stack a Dishwasher correctly!

Go figure!

Malisa came through into our section of the house and slapped down a Manila Folder thick with inserted folios.

"No Letter heads. No watermarks. No fingerprints. No idea where this information came from. Got it? A particular nasty piece of work is all I'll say on the subject. If you ever need the services of my Group again, I will implore you to travel through the correct channels obeying the Protocols that exist between both our organisations...we will only consider special favours for special people...you are not one of them, Joe...so don't make a habit of it, huh?"

She kissed me on the cheek. A smile on her face.

"Is Aleesha still awake for her nightly time with her favourite Aunty?"

"Yep...she's been waiting for you though you'll need to pass muster with AU2 her constant companion and bodyguard. She too, is very selective in handing out favours".

She giggled.

"She's easy to get around. A complete wooze, aren't you AU2?"

She caressed her ear as she bent to talk to my dog.

A wag of the tail was her answer.

Always.

AU2 was the pure breed Kelpie who was the chief organiser, nurserymaid, watcher, and constant companion of Aleesha. You saw one, the other was close by. She given to me as a thank you from a family whose son was stabbed to death above some beach up Newcastle way years ago. A long way from home. A lonely way to die. His constant friend and companion died in a Vets' Hospital near to the murder site. The dog given alcohol to drink, something that is poisonous to all dogs. At one stage, we had thought that the homicide was carried out just to kidnap the pure bred and champion Kelpie. Its name was AU! As in Hey You!

Hence the naming of our dog after the blue-ribbon dog.

The Case had been an 'Unsolved' that we had inherited from the late Woodsy and his young protégé, Shelley Shields...that's how many years ago it had been...Shelley has been my partner for close on ten years or thereabouts. It had taken some time to weed out the Perp and the Farming Family, who bred champion Kelpie stock, extremely pleased to give me a little female from the latest litter. I should not have accepted the 'reward' for a job well done...but what the hell, I had only just lost my constant and faithful friend of almost fifteen years some months prior to that case, so it seemed like it was written in the stars.

Them's my reasons for ignoring the NSW Police Force Policy and Procedures Manual...so shoot me!

I sat down and read slowly through the Report which was surprisingly extensive and of more pages than I thought possible to collate within one short day. I reckon that it was Dallas Courtney who had laboured with the bulk of the work. His bread and butter.

I rang Dave Mills on his mobile number.

"Have you got an e-mail account at home..."

"Arrh...yes, but I don't have a Printer".

"No worries. Save the Attachment into your Computer and then transfer it onto a Flash-drive. You can then transfer it onto the official Cop Computer when next in the Office".

"Yeah. Okay. Yeah. Easy as..."

"The Report I've got is of over one hundred pages in total. Is extremely extensive dealing with the 'Tweeterer' of all those false accusations on Paul Suffolk. You'll need to obtain a Court Order for all relevant Hospital Records to keep this a part of the legal investigation. Sufficient detail incorporated in this Report to commence proceedings against one Mary Anne Hammond. She a former Nursing Sister at Benalla District Hospital who worked in the small Emergency Department of the Hospital. She and her two children, one of the same age as Caitlin Suffolk and in the same Soccer team, were given life bans for the way she especially, conducted herself on the side-line during her daughter and son's soccer matches. She was also charged and found guilty of abusing Match Officials, members of the opposing teams and the Coach of her son and daughter's teams...one Paul Suffolk...hang on..."

I had begun to copy each folio as I was talking and saving them into a computer file.

That was extremely difficult for me to do while I was talking at the same time.

"Um...she was fined \$1500 for the offences and banned for life, never to set foot on any Soccer Field in Victoria. She and her family moved to Lithgow, NSW around the same time that the Suffolks relocated to the Central Coast. She works in a similar position at Lithgow Base Hospital. Her husband works with the Council. It would appear the recent publicity concerning the homicide death of Charlotte Chambers and the fact that Paul Suffolk and his family were photographed and recorded for the nightly TV news may have instigated this attempt on Paul's character...I think you have sufficient information contained in this file for her to be formally questioned...the insinuation of the sexual abuse of Caitlin Suffolk can be easily discounted once official hospital records are formally received. Along with the other physical abuse references on both Caitlin and her younger brother. There are copies of those Doctors and witness statements as Addenda to the Report which clearly describes the injuries suffered, especially by Caitlin. These how-ever, cannot be used as evidence at any time as their provision and collation were without the correct formally approved Court Ordered selection. You do not need to know how they were procured...but *destroy* them after you have read them, none-the-less...I'll hold you to it, Dave...it could cause embarrassing questions being asked of both of us...questions we cannot answer without getting in the poo".

I sat down beside my copier. I repeated my instruction more forcefully. It was obvious that Dallas Courtney had somehow broken into the Benalla Hospital Records to gain all pertinent copies of both Caitlin and her younger brother's admission papers.

"Dave? I think it would be best if you deleted all the pertinent folios detailing the hospital records and witness statements after you have read them to be on the safe side...hang on".

I was getting out of sync with the actions of feeding each folio through the copier and then saving it to a computer file.

"Okay...back with you...Caitlin suffered a serious kick to the nether region which resulted in heavy bruising and bleeding to the vaginal area. She was hospitalised for almost seven days and did not play or take part in practise for a month after the incident. A similar accident some months later. I would hope that these conclusions are readily made available to the Media so that apologies and retractions will be forthcoming... ho, ho...no chance of that ever happening, huh? Okay, are you ready? It'll take me about half an hour to copy the rest of the stuff into an attachment before I start sending them through to you".

"How? So quickly? Thanks, Detective..."

"Joe. My name is Joe".

"Okay".

I could hear the nod of his head in acknowledgement.

"Your domestic problems sorted out?"

"Arr... no...at least I've got my two dogs for company though". He gave a cut-off harrumph.

"Sorry to hear that. It can be a hard time to get over. You want to talk about it?"

"I'm right Joe. For the moment. Thanks for the offer".

"You ever need an ear, give me a ring, okay".

I was not one to outwardly offer my services especially over a domestic dispute. They can get ugly and stretch out for months, even years, but Dave Mills seemed like a really nice bloke who didn't deserve the stress that these situations can bring.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Police Force Media Group issued a statement detailing the arrest, charging and conviction of a person found guilty of using a Carriage Service to transfer vilifying, malicious, incorrect,

and insinuating material that denounced and insulted the honesty and integrity of a person who did not warrant or deserve such treatment in the public domain.

I placed a copy of it on the Murder File as it crossed over the several Cases we had on the Central Coast.

Very few avenues of the public media domain picked up the release as it was contrary to what had already been published by them. Any reports detailing a reduction in homicides or assaults with intent, or assaults with a deadly or prohibited weapon were ignored as the consensus encouraged by the irresponsible broadcasting was completely the opposite. They would gladly report on the alleged finding of a Dingo some thousand kilometres from Ayers Rock with the remnants of baby's bones lodged in its teeth as a gospel truth, regardless of how silly it may sound so long after the fact, but to publish facts that were contrary to their previously published findings was just not on.

A National TV Reporter and her Cameraman and crew from a popular Current Affairs Program were reported to have interviewed over two dozen persons whose children had been coached by Paul Suffolk in Benalla some ten years previously before they found a mother who begrudgingly, slowly and with some coxing, admitted that the Coach had hugged her child for longer than was acceptable! A conciliatory hug. A congratulatory hug or a commiserative hug? That never explained to the Public, with the inference left dangling!

The insinuation being that there was some sort of menacing or sinister intent in the completely innocent gesture...how civilisation has progress!

Never let the truth get in the way of a predetermined opinion of members of the News Corp!

Paul Suffolk still found guilty of something...perhaps...which had an adverse effect on him and his family in the present.

He would always be labelled 'that coach' who *may have* molested his young charges... he was protected as he was an ex-cop...it was just never proven!

That comment uttered by a respected and popular day-time Radio Shock Jock who admired the sound of his own voice and who could not go against unsolicited comments that he had previously made in the days preceding the Media Release.

Paul Suffolk's brilliant coaching career of minors was over through no fault of his own.

A sad indictment on the social mores of a modern society.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

"Detective Lind? This is Senior Constable Jayde Mallet. Alice Springs. Northern Territory Police. We had a very serious single vehicle road accident here yesterday...about one hundred kays up the main drag out of Alice. The Sturt Highway. The vehicle collided with a mob of Roos...makes one hell of a mess if you're travelling at over one hundred which this guy was. Is now in an induced coma in Darwin District...not good odds for survival...but his idents appeared to a bit dodgy so I ran his prints through the system. Your name with a red flag attached was my reward..."

"What was the match, Senior Constable?"

"Call me 'Hammer'. Everybody else does, including the young blokes around town..."

There was a smile in his voice as he said this as though it was the joke of the century.

There was a moment of silence as the man re-adjusted his stance and friendly manner. It may be the way that they did things in Central Australia, but I was not about to go calling him by his nickname...that made me think that I didn't have a nickname which deflated me.

"Ye..ess...um, Senior Constable...what was the match?"

"Um...A Dyson Bell. Wanted for questioning regarding several homicides. A 'Before and After the fact' Arrest Warrant out against him".

"...and you say that there is little chance of his survival?"

"That's correct, Detective. The medicos at Darwin General are of that opinion".

I noticed the tone and address in his speech becoming more official. I must have rubbed him the wrong way!

"Could you keep me across his medical prognosis, Senior Constable?"

"Perhaps if I give you the name of a Detective attached to the Darwin Crime Squad? They may place a guard on the man if you want".

"Um...in an induced coma I doubt that he will be a flight risk, but yes, that would be fine".

He gave me the name of a Senior Detective, the Senior emphasised, attached to Darwin Central who would be given the Case. I was to liaison with him on Dyson Bell's medical condition.

I thanked him profusely for his cooperation...a little too much as Shelley spun around in her chair and gave me the hand sign to cool it. She shook her head as I placed my mobile back in its dock.

"Jeez, Joe. You can rub people the wrong way all because you wouldn't call him by his nickname more'n likely. Right?"

"You shouldn't be listening so closely to my telephone conversations, my dear".

"It's not hard to sometime, especially when you get your nose out of joint...and call me your dear once more, dude, and fair dinkum, you'll have a Bic Biro between the eyes...you know to your prior detriment that I am a decent thrower of Bic Biro's...".

Sasha had been listening to the repartee, finding it hard to hide her giggles.

"He's kaput, huh?"

"Seems like it. Flown up to Darwin Base in an induced coma. Prognosis not good..."

"Bugger...there goes another one. We'll never know for sure of his involvement in the IVF Homicides". Shelley moaned.

I couldn't hide my frustration either, standing from my desk and inviting my two young colleagues to share a table downstairs in the sunshine for a cup of coffee. My shout. I wanted to let off steam without the hard work of doing laps in the Sub-Basement pool.

That's how shitty I felt.

Bugger the expense!

I even by-passed "Big Red", the punching bag that still hung in the centre of the large open Office.

That's how shitty I felt.

Angry and shitty that another one may have gotten away!

A slow release of the built-up anger occurring as Shelley had a way of making me release the raging emotions...a decent mug of coffee helped too!

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

"Before you guys disappear from view..." The Boss yelled out as we passed his Office.

We stopped to backtrack, the three of us filing into the Office to sit in front of his desk.

"Bad news...um...Tom Ballard? Collapsed as he was about to board the bus to come into work this morning. Heart Attack it seems. Is in Westmead. They're going to transfer him to North Shore Private for a quad by-pass operation scheduled for tomorrow morning...he won't be back at work for a while...if at all..." He coughed to clear his throat. Ballard and he were good mates and about the same age and build...both threatening the scales. "...but that will depend on how he pulls up after the operation. With his combined LSL, Holidays, Days off in Lieu and Sick Leave, he has enough to take him past his retirement date...so...apart from poor old Tom...we have a problem". He looked earnestly at Sasha, again clearing his throat before commencing. "Sasha? How do you feel about being paired with Don Savage? He's a good operator. A good cop. Has the occasional flash of brilliance. I worked with him when he first came into the Murder Squad. On night duty. A good bloke. Think about it while you three enjoy your coffees downstairs. Bring me back one will you, Joe?...and Joe, it never helps to keep those angry emotions locked inside you...a decent round with 'Big Red' or a couple of fast laps downstairs could help heaps..."

I shook my head as we waited for the Lift.

"We must have had that thirsty look, is all I'll say".

"There's usually reasons why they are the Boss and we're not, Joe".

A condescending look on her face.

"I reckon that I could learn such a talent...if that is all it takes to step into his shoes". I muttered sarcastically. That didn't even earn a reply from either female. I must be weakening!

Sasha glumly sat with her eyes closed.

The sun was warm.

Bright.

Spring almost upon us.

"You don't like the idea, Sash?"

She looked away into the middle distance before glancing up at me.

"No. Not really...you guys have taught me so much...and you always seem to enjoy coming to work...you really involve yourselves in the Cases but manage to keep it light-hearted...in perspective...your methods, for instance, just the whole business with background checks? Do you realise that not all the staff use that pro-forma...that data base formulae that makes it so, so much easier, and quicker...and more detailed? It's just not that...I've really looked forward to coming to work each day...not even second guessing what ghastly case we may inherit...know what I mean?"

Shelley and I nodded our heads in unison.

Sasha began to laugh.

"You look like those clowns at the Easter Show...you know...the ones where you drop the ping-pong ball down their mouths...you two are so much the partnership, if you know what I mean...and you opened up your arms to include me without any questions. It has been so good. Thanks..."

"Jeez...you sound as though you are reciting a eulogy or something..."

I chuckled. Shelley raised her eyebrows and gave me a look.

"You know, this doesn't mean that our friendship is over, Sash. We still work in the same Office. We can still share a coffee or two when it suits...you'll be okay, truly".

Even as I said it, I knew that it wasn't true. Sure, we had the occasional lunch together with some of our colleagues when it suited, but most of the time it was a general coming and going from the Office. The only time most of the day crew got to say g'day was in the regular Monday morning staff meetings that had been a tradition since the early days of Abbey's stewardship.

It was sad in a way that that was the case, as I knew there were a couple of my colleagues who could become genuinely great mates if only we shared more time together...one or two shared swim lanes or adjacent rowing machines but conversation in those circumstances

wasn't the order of the day. That was the nature of the beast, as it was your partner who became your best friend. If they didn't, it could make things a little awkward when things got a bit rough as they always did on occasions.

You needed each other to make it through a normal day. If it got grisly, you needed each other more so.

"Yeah...I guess..." Sasha uttered, a frown telling us what she was thinking. "I feel like that unwanted gift that changes hands every Christmas...does the rounds through the entire family...you know".

She choked back a cross between a laugh and a sob.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

"Joe? Shells? You'll have to do away with your usual morning exercise habit, I'm afraid. They've found Caitlin Suffolk's body...um, take Sasha with you. Hendo will fill you in on the details".

I looked around the cavernous Office wondering what Sasha would be doing here so early.

"I'll call her down...Sasha's up on the eighteenth doing her Yoga exercises...bin doin' it for a bloody long time...don't tell me you didn't know about her morning regime, Joe? You the Ace Investigator!"

The last sentence said with a tinge of sarcasm meant to stir me up. That information surprised me no end. At no time had we been privy to her early morning habit. I was a bit put out!

We stood in front of Hendo's desk as he filled us in on the initial details of the case.

"The body? Found early this morning, just on sun-up by a Jogger doing the rounds of the Pat Morley Oval...the rear playing field which you access by Passage Road via a round-about off The Entrance Road. I'll give you the coordinates. The poor girl wrapped in heavy duty building plastic...um...here's the Murder Number, Book and the murder details are now on your iPads...create a new file, okay for this Case. One or two of the guys have forgotten that little detail and ended up with one hell of a mess that takes days to unravel...so...City Forensic Pathologist and Crime Scene Forensic people on their way...it's a nice drive this time of day...and against the traffic too".

Sasha came running into the Office.

"I'll change. Won't be a moment". She called over her shoulder as she fled out of the Office again heading for the sub-Basement Change Rooms. A quick shower and into mufti gear.

"Ten minutes, young lady. We'll be down on sub-three warming the Unmarked up".

"Can you take my gear...handbag, gun. ID and iPad?" She asked feverishly as she unlocked her gun drawer. That made me boil a bit as no-one else should have access to your gun drawer, or ID Card especially. I'll have to have a word with that girl. Shelley gave me that look that told me to pull my horns in as it was not the time or place. Sasha was excited to still be a part of our team, for however long.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

High wispy cloud that the sun found easy to shine through. A brisk sou-westerly that wasn't blowing in Parramatta. It chilled you through up here on the Central Coast.

The three of us alighted from our Unmarked and walked to where all the people were standing around. The body heavily wrapped in clear construction plastic. The roll carefully laid against the rear of the Amenities Building adjacent to the car park.

"Easy as...drives up to the kerb, stops, rolls the body out of the back of the car and drives away..."

"Except that the security gates and locking boom arm that permits access into this area are not unlocked until seven...an hour after sun-up this time of year...and some forty minutes after the body was discovered, so who-ever, had to cart the body over from the roadway...about 50 metres away".

"Mmm...there goes a good theory to crash and burn..."

I bent down for a squiz. Not much to see, just a faint outline of the girl through the translucent plastic.

"How are you, Brenda? We haven't seen you in a while". I asked as I stood taking several steps away from the body.

"Yeah...well...since I've been back, I've been relieving night duty staff..."

She stood with a groan still looking at the body lying at her feet. Her hand on the brick wall behind the body.

"She was a popular girl by all accounts". Nodding at the form at our feet. "Been missing just over a week...I haven't been able to examine the body as the Forensic Trace people want full access to the plastic with a slow unrolling of the material so that any trace that may have been trapped in the process of wrapping the body, can be quarantined...this may take a while..." Brenda muttered as she turned and exited the white crime tent, ensuring that the side flaps were secured against the biting wind.

The local guys had cordoned off a huge area of the Playing Field and the length of the street. They were going from house to house for the full length of Passage Street knocking on doors. Asking the same old questions for little result.

It was an hour before Brenda Wzerlic and her two Assistants were permitted anywhere near the corpse.

"Joe, don't come in here without scrubs on...we've been forced to wait to examine this pretty young thing so now it's your turn to wait..."

She eventually emerged from the tent.

A sad look on her face.

"Cause of death possibly strangulation, maybe as he was raping her. Multiple times. Both vaginal and anally. Immersed in warm water not long after death. Time of death a little hard to determine due the immersion in warm water but within the last twenty-four to thirty hours. Her body cleansed with strong soap and washed out quite extensively. I doubt that we'll find any body fluids or seminal fluids. She's been flushed out expertly. Ligation marks on her ankles and wrists. I'd say that she had been spread-eagled on a bed for the entire time except for toilet trips and eating meals...but that is somewhat of a guess. Bruising around her mouth consistent with forced entry...if you get my drift. Evidence of contusions would indicate that she may have had tape across her mouth for extended periods. Thumb marks evident on her throat...the usual signs of strangulation which will be confirmed when I open her larynx and windpipe...bloody poor kid. Let me put her in a body bag to expose just the face before her parents can positively identify her...you had dealings with her, didn't you? Do you want to take a look?"

She looked at the three of us.

I nodded.

We did not require bio-suits as the Forensic Team had taken the plastic sheeting and placed it in a large paper evidence bag to transport back to the Lab.

We ducked under the tent flap as the frail looking body was transferred to a body bag that had been positioned on a gurney. Not much to see, except a life cut way too short.

I glanced at Shelley who ducked back outside to accompany both Paul and Denny Suffolk into the tent. Brenda stood close to them, giving them an overview...a cleansed version of their daughter's last moments before death.

They nodded sadly. Both had tears falling down their cheeks and both required help to make it to the Police vehicle. Their privacy ensured by the vehicle having blacked out windows. Ample protection from the large representation of the Media who were kept well away from the dump site. They had not yet been informed of the identity of the corpse but most had jumped to the correct conclusion with the news being screened to the various Radio and TV stations as the Suffolks were being driven away from the scene.

Not willing to wait until relatives and friends were formally informed, the word spread over the airwaves long before correct protocol would dictate it!

A horrible way to find out about the death of a loved one. A niece. A sister. A friend. A teammate.

A five second sound bite over the local airwaves that could have adverse effects on those who learnt of the death over the airwaves or on the local TV News.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

We walked part way along the route that Caitlin, along with her teammates would have walked that late afternoon over a week ago now.

Wanting that celebratory meal at Maccas.

The Coach shouting the entire team. Pleased with their effort. Win or lose it didn't matter, as long as they enjoyed themselves and gave as much as they could. Now? The team would

never be the same. The Coach? The family? Who knows. It can take a long time to get over something like this. Some people never do.

After we had exited the Pub car park, we propped at the approximate location where Caitlin had discovered that she had forgotten her Training Jacket. We retraced our steps back to the Oval. The exact location where she may have been taken a pure guess. The rear entry roadway into the Pub's car park off Cresthaven Avenue was surrounded by bush and trees with not a streetlight in proximity. Then you crossed over the main street, Cresthaven, to gain access into the Playing Oval. Again, there was a small car park adjacent to the Amenities Shed where she may have been taken...a more plausible guess at this stage.

"Was it this Oval or the rear playing field that they were training on the night that she disappeared?" I asked Lead Constable Dave Mills. He was the lead on the girl's disappearance. I found this extraordinary as he was good friends with Paul Suffolk and was a Coach of a lower aged group of soccer kids, something that I thought would exclude his presence on the investigation.

I looked at him. He looked dishevelled. Tired. A might nervous.

Separation and divorce will do that to a bloke who also has a high stress job.

"This Oval...it is the one that is usually lit up at night...oh! The back Field is also lit but no, on that night, it was this front field that they were using. They had a bye..."

"So, they played their Grand Final last week-end? Saturday? How'd they go?"

"They won. 2-1. They'd played for Caitlin, so they said in unison and to prove that they weren't a one-man team...they played like demons, so those who saw the match commented". He gave a funny smile. Halfway between a smile and the moment when some-one breaks out in tears.

"This car park, Joe. This was known to our Perp more than likely...he may have been parked here all through their practise times during the season..."

"Oh?" I turned to address her. "Why would you say that Sasha?"

"If we assume that he had been tailing Caitlin, then it wasn't a crime of opportunity, so therefore, he would have been here watching... or somehow tracking her movements each week. Practise nights and Match days. Times included. I reckon he has done a bit of homework on his prey...knows her quite well..."

Taking the Devil's Advocate role again, Shelley voiced the opposite. I was becoming superfluous to the two-women team!

"...and if we assume it was a moment of opportunity, the more likely place for the abduction occurred on that section of back lane-way leading into the rear of the Pub car park..." Shelley offered. "He drives up behind her offering her a lift...she refuses...he checks the surroundings before quickly getting out of his vehicle to jumble the girl into the front seat of his car..."

I nodded in agreement, realising the extension of the theory. That the Perp was a regular spectator at all of Caitlin's games.

"Then again, if it was a crime of opportunity, then you are right in assuming the best place to bundle her into a car was at that stretch of road that forms the rear Hotel Car Park entrance...no lights and no CCTV coverage..."

"If he knew her, then maybe he innocently offers her a lift to catch up with the rest of the team...as he would have been here when the Coach offered the free Maccas to all the team on him that night".

"Meaning that he was close by when the Coach offered to open his pocket...he could even be an Assistant Coach, a parent or relative of some-one playing for the team...or one of the lower grade teams".

We could to and fro like this for some time with theory after theory as each of them could include a trace of truth. I stamped my feet. The coldness was creeping up my legs. I turned to the Senior Constable.

"Have you interviewed everyone that was here that night, Dave?"

"Yes...every person who had a vehicle parked in that front car park...nothing stood out or seemed out of place...no person twitched our noses. None what-so-ever..."

"Mmm....you were also here on the evening of her disappearance?"

"Um...yes. My daughter.... she had a game earlier in the afternoon...they went home with their mother...I just sat here in my car completely ignorant of the time passing...I did not see a thing or even Caitlin returning...sorry...to say good-bye to your kids knowing it will be two weeks before I see them again...it hurts..."

I shook my head to wave away his apology. I could remember how I felt after my first wife died. Minutes, hours, even days seemed to drift by without me realising the onward march of time.

"I think we need to sit down and go through your entire case investigation up to this point...."

I saw the Senior Constable in charge of the disappearance of Caitlin Suffolk stiffen. I held out my hand, placing it gently on Mills upper arm to obviate any apprehension or suspicion that he may have of our ulterior motive in requesting the arrangement.

"Dave, this does not in any way intimate a lax investigation on your part or on the part of your group. It is a standard practise to consider all facts that may have been gleaned as part of the initial case of her disappearance to be re-visited as part of the homicide investigation. Perhaps if we can meet in a large enough area within your Station...with all personnel who have been assisting...I would want each member to go through their part in the investigation...from memory before we refer to each of their Case Books...no intimation of a foul up or poor work on the part of any of your men, okay? I mean that..."

Dave Mills nodded. Offered a tight smile. He still was unsure of our motives.

The 'ace' Detective and his partners from the city coming up here to scan back through the Case as recorded by these 'hick' Uniforms was his concern more than likely. You faced it every time you took over a Case especially in the bush where inferiority complexes can be deep...and 'city slickers' superior attitude rife. I needed to step forward slowly not to reflect or deepen that concern.

"Perhaps we should meet in one of the smaller Conference Rooms at the Wyong Police Station. The Entrance Station would nominally have control of this earlier investigation, but neither The Entrance or Wyong have the Forensic Officer expertise or the personnel with prior experience. The Gosford Station has all the necessary computer resources....and the fact that I had experience in the Granny Suffolk homicide case ensured that I should be Lead Officer into the disappearance of Caitlin...so, how about we meet at Gosford in say, an hour? I'll get my team together".

I nodded. Scratched my ear as we headed towards our Unmarked.

"One moment, Joe...Sash? You commented that more than likely, Caitlin was taken within the boundaries of the front car park at the side of the front Playing area fronting onto Cresthaven..."

"Well, yes....it makes sense. If we assume that it wasn't a crime of opportunity but one that had been meticulously thought out, then more than likely, the snatch point was in that front car park...or maybe it is incorrect to label it the snatch point. As we've previously intimated, in knowing the girl, it could have been a harmless sounding offer to drive the young girl up to Maccas..."

Shelley nodded. She looked at the young Sasha as she was about to say something in reply.

"He wasn't to know that Caitlin would return to pick up her Training Jacket that she had forgotten...doesn't that point alone mean that it was more likely a crime of opportunity?"

"Yes and no. I get your point, but if he had been known to our Vic, which is more than likely..." I trailed off. I was unsure on the validity of the assumption. It really didn't matter whether the Perp was known to our Vic or not. It made no difference, except it made it easier to explain her having readily got into a vehicle without any qualms.

"Which would mean that the Perp had been a regular visitor come spectator at games and even that night when it was purely a Practise night...and a bye...and therefore had been interviewed by the locals...in other words, he did not stand out as a stranger".

Both Shelley and Sasha nodded in unison.

Dave Mills understood the logic of the supposition.

We invited Dave to accompany us for a Lunch break.

He declined saying that he had to organise the reservation of the small Conference Room at the Gosford Police Station, gather his team together and make sure that all hard copy information on the Case up until that point was available to us. We would need a copy of all notes on the Case within the next day or two.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

We were all seated around a conference table that looked as though it had been fabricated within the room. There was no way that the table could have been located or ever removed from the room without cutting it in half! Water bottles and coffee mugs dotted the table top along with a plethora of Case Books and loose sheaths of paper...not an ashtray to be seen which was a good thing looking back when everyone smoked!

"I coach the Under Tens. They train before the Under Twelves who train on the eastern field while the Under Sixteens train on the western or nearest field to the Amenities Shed. Other groups train on the rear or southern field at the same time so there is usually a lot of people about..."

"But it disperses pretty quick, especially if it is a chilly afternoon...or early evening which it would have been at this time of year...hence the reason for Caitlin to return to pick up her Training jacket".

I nodded. Scribbled a 'remind me' note onto my iPad.

"Do you think that because of your closeness to the case...you know...you're good friends with the Suffolks and you train the kids only one grade down, you should preclude yourself from the investigation?"

"I thought that too. I had a word with the Boss about that. We are down on numbers and he felt that my presence would not jeopardise the investigation in any way...on the contrary, as I knew the ins and outs of the teams, I may have some insight into Cattie's disappearance".

I nodded. Gave it some thought.

"Your...um...present personal problems..."

He waved that away with an angry swipe of his arm.

"I'll be alright..."

Again, I nodded though I wasn't comfortable with the way that he had replied. I glanced at the man whose shoulders seemed more rounded as though the weight was bearing down. I turned and gave a nod to Shelley who wrote something down in her Murder Notebook.

"This Young Davey chap? He has some type of fixation with Caitlin Suffolk. For some time, so it would appear..."

"David Jonathan Portland...is within the autism spectrum. That's obvious to all who know him. Age 29...and yes. His computer is full of video of the Victim running down the side-line dribbling the ball or running full pelt in support of the team...plays them relentlessly going by the history tag on his computer...even has video of our Victim running in the local Little Athletes practise mornings in summer. According to his parents, John and Cybil, this fixation had been occurring for about a year...maybe eighteen months...since Caitlin shot up above her fellow teammates in height and especially after he was given a reasonable quality digital

camera and tripod as a birthday present last year...he learnt to master the digital camera quickly...but ditto with his Laptop...he runs rings around me...his eye for good shots is rather superb and his video taking of moving persons is delightful...he was upset by the disappearance of his favourite subject but his attention has now moved onto a younger version of our Vic. A Candice Turney who is also a splendid young athlete on the up...ten years of age...tall for her age just like Caitlin was..."

"Oh? What team does she play for?"

"The Benson Bay Bears...I don't think there is much to worry about with the guy..."

"Not a reasonable suspect?"

Dave shook his head.

"No, I don't think so. He's not allowed out after dark...in fact he is afraid of the dark. Sure, he lives one street away from the Oval and only goes to the Oval when he knows that Caitlin's team is playing there...not on Practise nights though because it gets dark before they finish up...and his new subject? She would be lucky to play here at Pat Morley twice in the same season..."

"So how did he know when Caitlin's team was playing at the Oval?"

"Through the Face Book page of different team members who would converse in the public arena...or through the official Face Book page of the team. The Coach would also post the following week's location and time of the match on the Team Page..."

"Would David...Portland converse with team players through those pages?"

"No... he said that he was too shy...and he couldn't think fast enough to type something clever...his words...an investigation of his computer and his Smart-phone indicated that while he was a nightly visitor of many of the team member's pages, he would never attempt to converse with anyone...he was too shy and self-conscious..."

"That doesn't mean that others didn't...or couldn't converse in a manner that would not raise suspicion amongst the young ones..."

"Or not converse at all, but just watch and listen...learn".

"That's creepy..." Some-one around the table murmured.

"Ghost Riders". I heard some-one mumbled.

Several of the younger Uniforms nodded slightly, afraid that their opinion may place them in the spotlight.

"One thing that this investigation did bring to light was the position of a rather dingy, white van in the car park on several practise nights for several of the teams from Under Tens through to Under 16's. A couple of suspicious parents took a photo of the van...with a couple clued up enough to get a shot at the rego plates..."

"Let me guess, the van was registered to one Paul..."

I turned towards Shelley for help.

"Paul Rebbit and his two mates. Jerry Schofield and Christopher Stavros?"

Shelley was better than my old partner, Marjory Hendricks when it came to names of persons involved in our investigations. It amazed me that such facts could be stored for so long!

"What spins around, comes around..." I muttered to the chuckles and nods of those around the table.

It was well after seven that night before we left Gosford Police Station.

Giddy with a multitude of facts sifted out by the six-man Investigation Team lead by Dave Mills. The group included two women who it seemed, were more than capable. It would be the middle of next week before a digital copy of all relevant documents that the team had collated were made available to us. E-mailed down to my desk at Parramatta.

We had a list of just on forty persons who admitted parking their cars in the front car park off Cresthaven Road. The area had approximately 108 vehicle spaces. Two of which were handicap vehicle spaces. I was surprised to learn that Dave Mills had his vehicle parked in the car park that night. But then his Under Ten team did a training run prior to Caitlin's team commenced their light training run.

Even though all owners of vehicles parked in the area had been interviewed by the Uniform Task Force investigating Caitlin Suffolk's disappearance, we would need to re-interview every one of them again now that we had a homicide investigation. A boring job and one that would anger a few who thought we were stumbling over our own feet!

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Malisa was standing beside me at the BBQ as though she was hanging out for something to eat.

"Hungry, huh?" I asked with a sideways glance. A smile on my face. "Lamb or Beef...perhaps a couple of King Prawns or a snag or two, Mal? As a 'tasty' before the throng enjoy their share?"

"I can't decide, Joe...how you going with that Caitlin Suffolk Case? Her body was dumped on Monday morning at the beginning of last week, wasn't it?"

"What's your interest in it?"

"None really. Just the fact that she was an Olympic runner in the making...or a soccer champion, some have said. Just a sad case...and you did get us involved with those tweets about her father...the Internet? It can be a great tool for mankind but you'll always get the cretin who sees it as something useful for evil...what is this world coming too?"

"You're a little young to develop that thick hide of cynicism..."

"Mmm...yeah, you could be right. Frankly, I don't know how you remain sane, Joe...and retain that sick, happy sense of humour working so close to the coal face. How's that Case going?"

"Not good, actually. What hasn't been released to the Media is that she had been dead for less than twenty-four hours before her body was dumped and discovered...which means that she was alive for at least five to seven days of her internment...what she must have suffered is beyond comprehension...the usual committed by a sick mind. Multiple times one would suspect".

I shook my head sadly.

"He's got a bit of a warped sense of humour as we think the body dump site was close to where he took her...and her body was cleansed thoroughly in a bathtub before it was wrapped in the plastic...and the plastic was from a brand-new roll of building plastic. The roll is heavy duty and usually used as a moisture barrier under slabs before they're poured...The Forensic Trace team are not confident of finding any worthwhile trace evidence...what with the bathing, it doesn't leave us with much...he knew what he was doing..."

I turned to her holding the large BBQ fork in my hand.

"You may know, Mal. I heard some-one use the expression. One of the Uniforms or Forensic staff though it didn't twig at the time...what's a Ghost Rider?"

"Apart from the accepted Ghost Riders in the Sky type of thing? Social Media forms? That's what you are referring to, huh? They are highly successful in what they do; these Media sites...but there is a downside to all things. Ghost Riders are the worst type of person that these Social Media sites breed. Face Book for example. After Obama held a Nationwide conference on the evils of Face Book around 2012 or 2013 and how easy it was for people so predisposed to stalk, to bully, to manipulate and then to lure innocents to their deaths, the security gateways on Facebook were strengthened. This may be okay for some, not keeping them awake at night...most people that is, who have little knowledge or interest to want to trace and stalk members of the public using Facebook, but the problem remained. Whether you use the offered Security gateways and precautions is problematic. The guys who know their way around a computer still find these additional precautions puny..."

She picked up a King Prawn ready for eating off the hot plate, dipping it into a new sauce that I wanted to try on the family.

"What do you think?"

"Mmm...bloody hot! Exquisite Joe...can I have another?"

She greedily grabbed another Prawn to gulp it down in three bites. Wiping her chin with her hand she took another gulp of beer and continued.

"It's just not kids who ignore the offered security gateways. It's adults too. So, these people have conversations with one another in a form where anyone can follow the conversation. Out in the public domain. I mean everyone! With a bit of patience, these Ghost Riders can learn a lot about a person just from the content of those conversations. Usually, it's just a bit of fun for some-one...but there are those who thrive on remaining hidden while they gather as much as they can on a person...for either inane reasons known only to themselves or for real evil...and as you know, there are plenty of persons out there who love this type of stalking...complete unknowns. Completely hidden...it heightens their twisted sense of the hunt. They absolutely get off on it! The prowl. These are the Ghost Riders...and the best of the bunch leave little trace of their snooping around the internet...they must have a lot of time on their hands and a huge amount of patience, is all I'll say...but the facts cannot be ignored. Since 2010 in Australia, over fifty homicides have been attributable to this type of activity on Social Media sites with the Victim being lured to their deaths...the reasons are varied and usually involve the Victims' own interests which the Ghost Rider gleans from just waiting silently and patiently until he thinks he has a handle on the person's psyche...it...it's not just young teen-age girls but even mature women and men...the victim list is surprising...we have

been on the cyber trail of these Hunters for years but we still are two steps behind...sometimes never identifying the Perp at all...and people still lay out their lives on these sites completely unaware or ignorant of the dangers involved...who would want to stalk me? Come on, I'm a nobody, is the oft heard remark. What chance have we got when this attitude continues? I'll tell you now, Joe, when I have kids, all social Media sites will be banned from ever entering my house...or be so easily accessed by my kids".

Noble thoughts, I thought to myself. Easier said than done when the kids are pestering non-stop saying that they were being ostracised from normal friends' gossip and conversation.

She grabbed another Prawn.

"Leave some for the others, Mal".

"Bugger the others".

She was in one of her moods. The only way around it was to ignore it...much the same as those adults who are well-versed on the dangers of the internet...and Facebook...

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

After we had attended our habitual Monday morning staff meeting, I had intended to head straight up to the Central Coast.

Instead, I beckoned for Sasha to follow me. Shelley was no-where to be seen. She had slipped out of the Boss's Office before the end of proceedings and had not been seen since.

"We're we going Joe?"

"Our Forensic Digital Analysis Section...I have a few things that I want to discuss with them".

I filled her in on the conversation that I had over the weekend with Malisa.

"Ghost Riders...I've heard of that expression before...I think...maybe".

I didn't know who it was best to see, so I ran through the Case and Malisa's conversation with me with the Head of the Analysis Team, leaving out the information that she was a Digital Detective with the AFP.

"Detective Lind...you're the one who convinced Dallas Courtney to swap over to the AFP, aren't you?"

"Arrh...yeah...well no, not exactly. He was leaning that way in any case because of the international component that the AFP would open for him....and his proximity from home to the Office which meant that he could travel there in his electric buggy".

Whoops, I was not a popular bloke around these parts, so it seemed.

"Um... that would be right... as he put it, he would be instrumental in ensuring that criminals who had fled overseas would lose their money conduit from Australian investments that allowed them to live like kings in the country of their parents' birth...he felt more suited to that type of detection". I was starting to dribble. Waffling. Repeating myself.

By the expression on his face, I doubted that his cooperation would be given freely.

He nodded. Looked gravely at the colour of my high-tops, so it appeared to me.

"Mmm...I've heard that expression used. Ghost Riders. Yes". Anthony Burton murmured. "Let's take a look".

I raised my eyebrows at Sasha. She was non-the-wiser as she was not around when Dallas Courtney had been a member of my team, however fleeting. We followed him through a double door air seal into a room where the atmosphere was higher than outside. This kept airborne dust and microbes away from his precious computer banks, he explained to us as though he was teaching a couple of duds!

"Her name?" He asked briskly as he addressed a bank of screens and several keyboards.

"Caitlin Suffolk." I spelt out the name.

He was ten minutes in front of me, bringing up her FB page before I had even finished spelling out the name!

"Mmm...a typical young teenager's use of a Social Media site. Completely ignorant of any security measures, not that they would stop anyone from trespassing who knew their way around a computer...back or front..."

"Caitlin died a couple of days ago...was murdered". Sasha seemed upset.

"The information that exists on the Internet does not die with you..."

He seemed disconnected from the fact that the Victim had been killed. I wondered whether constant hours in front of a computer screen made you so ambivalent...or plain dead to such a sad ending of a young individual.

"...it stays there for eternity in countless home computers...unless you have a magic wand that I don't know about to delete everything".

His fingers shot across the keyboard at a rate I thought impossible. Rows of binary slipped down two screens as he seemed to watch both simultaneously.

"Hmm...she has several shadows...we call them 'shadows' as against your interpretation of them being 'ghost riders'. Both express the phenomenon perfectly though...do you want to see if we can chase them out into the open?"

"Can you? One could very well be her executioner. Her Abductor and killer..."

"Yes and no... these guys aren't stupid. They converse between themselves..."

"What? Like a little club of like-minded persons who love to sit there for hours watching what the young ones are conversing about?"

"Yes...some are just like that. Completely harmless with no ulterior motive contemplated...while others are more dangerous and it is these people who have that chummy little mateship...like a ring of like-minded paedophiles? We would think completely and utterly sick...these people driven by a different stroke of the clock...and they have some wild security arrangements, let me tell you. If a worm so much as enters their space, they automatically shut down that site. Three days later they open again for business on another Server...they are hard to track for that reason...extremely difficult. But we will try for you. No guarantees. Do you have a Murder Number? We'll need that for the allocation of our time...could take a day...could take a month. No guarantees...Ghost Riders. I like that".

It seemed that he was discussing the weather. A completely disassociated manner to the brutal homicide of the young girl. His concern the 'quiver' of a binary stream that may indicate a close shadow. A Ghost Rider!

CHAPTER THIRTY

The Uniforms had done an excellent job in isolating every known Paedophile in the District and even further afield that encompassed the Greater Central Coast area. I felt that this had been a somewhat knee-jerk reaction to satisfy the constant Media attention while our Vic had remained out of sight. This was not the usual *modus operandi* of most known paedophiles listed. And those who had a similar habit were well and truly excluded from the investigation after having been hauled in for questioning by Millsy's team.

The Media were quick to put names to faces for future reference. Found guilty before evidence of innocence, but then in a way, in us pulling them in, we were guilty of the same crime...the same assumption.

We had to start somewhere, is all I'll say in our defence, though I have no excuse for the Media's assumptions down the same road!

Once Caitlin's body had been discovered, I quickly discounted all but one of those names detailed in the Paedophile List. The manner of the treatment of the body and its encapsulation in the roll of plastic did not compute with any method known to be used by any of those registered.

The one name that I pulled from that detailed list?

I had no idea, but his name seemed familiar. Even a perusal through his File did not enlighten me as to why...but it was one of those things that would keep a-buzzing around in my mind until something clicked.

Every morning we would leave early to travel to the Central Coast.

Shelley had commandeered the Unmarked. I would ride my old Ducati to the Hornsby Police Station where she would meet me. Sasha lived at Cowan further north on the line so we would pick her up on the way through. She still living with her parents, saving desperately for a place of her own as her parents were sending her slowly around the twist...and as the youngest of a clan of six siblings, she was the last to leave the nest.

In the meantime, a lot of the chores fell on her shoulders.

A meal that did not arrive exactly at six was not an evening meal at all, according to both her parents.

That was an impossible task, especially at present with our days turning to twelve and fourteen-hour events every day. Her sister would begrudgingly walk the four houses down to her parent's place to do the chore on those days that Sasha was unable.

Even this change of habit was hard for the old folk to accept, bless their cotton socks!

We'd work in the cramped little Conference Room going over every word contained in the files of all those so far recognised as having been in the front car park of the Pat Morley Oval on the afternoon of Caitlin Suffolk's disappearance.

For two hours max, after which we would congregate on the small, terraced area out in the fresh air. Not to appease any smokers amongst us as there were none, but to clear the head. I wanted to retain the number of Uniforms who Dave Mills had set up for as long as possible, knowing that the day of reckoning was not that far away.

I was balancing my third or fifth coffee of the day.

"You know, while we have determined and identified the number of persons in attendance that day at the car park, we have not determined why they were there..."

"...or what is their relationship to the deceased". Constable Robert Clune chimed in.

"...and it seems that just about everyone seems to remember the inclusion of that white van...which could not have been there on that afternoon by the way, this very fact would...or could distract said persons from the sight of any other vehicle not normally seen there".

This last observation offered by Constable Nancy Gardiner. I felt that she showed promise with her many asides and assumptions. So much so, I had already mentioned it to Dave Mills, wanting him to encourage the girl onto greater things...like the Murder Squad...

I nodded my head at the offerings.

"Okay...we can dismiss...let's say about fifty percent of those that have been identified...so we should re-interview those persons left who we have not established links to the Suffolk family or to members of the team practising that afternoon...who seriously goes to watch the kids practise on a bitterly cold afternoon except family and let's say, a small number of close family friends? If they do, in fact! What of the rest?"

"That leaves about twenty persons..."

"Okay, we have a strategy...let's map out a route so that we are not wasting time. I don't want us all to gather at each residence, so Dave? You, Shells, Sasha, and I, while the rest of you can continue with your computer background searches and digitising our copy of proceedings so far".

Groans came from those destined to remain in the cramped little 'Operations Room' with its poor air-conditioning and window-less walls.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

"Why would the Assistant Coach of the San Remo Rhinos travel all the way to the home ground of the Berkeley Barkers on a practise afternoon?" I asked incredulously.

"To spy..." One of the Uniforms mumbled, as though this fact was as plain as the nose on your face.

"What!?! These kids are in an Under Twelve side, for Christ sake..."

"The Grand Final was played between the Rhinos and the Barkers...it's keen stuff, let me tell you".

"You have to be joking! These are kids! All they should be doing is having fun...enjoying the competition...playing Soccer. There's plenty of time to ingrain the 'winning formulae' into them..."

"Winners are grinners, Joe...can you name who came second in the Rugby League Competition in the last five years for example?"

"I'd be going to name who won those games, for Christ sake!"

We all had to shake our heads. Have a bit of a giggle as some bright spark named the Grand Finalist for the past ten years!

We headed out towards Dooralong Valley. The last in the list who resided out in the hinterland before we gravitated towards the home district and close surrounds of the Berkeley Barkers where most of the people that we wished to interview, lived.

"This area was once known as Hill-Billy country. It now is dotted with top quality properties and Hobby farms...along with the occasional bush 'retreat' surrounded by bush and tall trees where anything is likely to be grown if you get my drift".

"Again, we are miles from the home ground of the Berkeley Barkers..."

"Um...Jack Barnett? He was the original Coach and the founding member of the Berkeley Barkers...Berkeley Vale was his address as a lad".

"Still...keen, I reckon. Driving all the way to Bateau Bay on each home game day".

"He travels further afield probably on away games".

We turned off Little Jilliby Road onto a Property track that would be a devil in wet weather. Veered onto another track that took us to the front of a low slung, long Ranch style homestead that had a double, double garage stuck onto one end of the residence. As we alighted, we heard a vehicle roar into life on the neighbouring property and at speed, hit the junction of the two tracks that we had just crawled down.

There was an almighty crash and the tearing of metal. The sound of a speeding motor unhindered from its engineered load.

"Jack Barnett? We'd like a word...after we check out that noise". I commented to the tall, middle-aged chap who had opened his front door as we had approached.

He joined us as we made a beeline for the divergence in the homestead tracks.

As we drew close to the site of the accident, the driver was crawling from his vehicle. He had blood oozing from a scalp wound and a bloodied nose. Apart from being dazed, he appeared to have been one lucky bloke. Both front wheels were still spinning. The vehicle like a tortoise on its back. Completely helpless and defenceless.

"Well, well...what lucky circumstances. Kevin Yardley. You dropped out of sight when we needed you most". I joked, as I bent down to help him to his feet. Keeping a tight grip on his upper arm. "We've been looking for you, lad. Took on a bit more than you can chew, huh? I'll betcha that ain't your car...nor the right plates neither...would I be right on that, lad? I think you better come along with us as we'd like to question you on the stabbing homicide of one dear, little, old lady. Charlotte Chambers...know of her?"

I turned to Dave Mills who was still puffing from the 300-metre run.

"Let's take a look at this young bloke's living quarters, shall we? Organise a Tow truck...arrh... Mister Barnett? Our attention will be diverted for about an hour. Will you still be home to answer a few questions?"

He nodded, only too glad to co-operate with the Police once again.

I was pleased with this morning's trawl.

It turned out to be a fruitful day.

We would need to take him back to the Gosford LAC Cop Shop for official questioning, charging and to organise the Bail Hearing. I doubted that he would make bail as he had stayed under the radar now for close on four weeks. Too long a time to warrant a freebie out in society.

Queensland would have been his next port of call, was my guess.

The interviewing of Barnett completely slipped my mind.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

The back shed that Kevin Yardley had called home, was something of a shamble. It looked as though the house-keeping duties escaped the minds of both youths who used it as their digs.

Stolen goods were piled up and had encroached so much onto the area of the Carport, the thought of even parking the nose of a vehicle under the roofline for protection was out of the question.

I looked around the one room residence. I felt dirty just standing there. Two single beds. A table and a couple of chairs. A very large, flat screen TV that had to have been stolen, sitting on a milk crate. A Kitchenette which was just a sink with a Micro-wave for heating TV Dinners and a small Bar Fridge. A Bathroom of sorts out through a back door. A toilet bowl stained a rusty, black colour. An open shower cubicle that looked under-used. A set of cement laundry tubs.

It'd be bloody cold in the middle of winter. Then again, like a lot of homeless guys, they would use the hot and cold showers down at some beach for their monthly washes.

Yardley made patterns in the dust on the table. The breakfast things an open box of Weet Bix. I expected a couple of cockroaches to peek out before making a run for it off the edge of the table.

An iPad sat forlornly in the centre of the table looking lost and unused.

Small quantities of Ice, Ecstasy and several baggies of marijuana seized, adding to the woes of Yardley and his mate.

We transported a surly Yardley and his younger companion, Robert Westley into the Gosford Police Station. Made them both comfortable in separate small Interview Rooms and let them stew for close to an hour while we had a break, a cup of coffee re-acquainting ourselves with the Granny Chambers stabbing homicide case.

Westley looked to be hooked on Ice. He had that persona. I couldn't tell whether he was sober or was high as a kite, but if he were coming down, he could be as unpredictable as a tomcat on a hot tin roof with a dozen females on heat tempting him. I asked that he be transferred to the neighbouring Interview Room. I felt that he would fold quickly after being left alone not knowing what his mate was disclosing about him....and I wanted Yardley alone.

Two Uniforms sat in the small room with Westley while we concentrated on Yardley.

Yardley declined the offer of a coffee, instead choosing a small bottle of Coke.

Young Blayney came into the room with me, taking some time to settle before we looked at our suspect.

Yardley followed Sasha's every move, paying particular attention to her breasts.

"Old Granny Chambers? Remember her? You broke in through the front door looking for stuff to steal...and any ready cash that maybe lying about, huh? She gave you a fright, didn't she? Yelled out like a bloody trooper, so I've been told. Could teach me a few more swear words...a delightful little woman...loved by all who knew her...she started screaming...you, young lad, got the fright of your life as you thought that the dwelling would be vacant with the Suffolks watching their son and daughter's Soccer matches. Plenty of time to ransack the joint, taking only stuff that you could easily carry...is that about right?"

I looked over at Yardley. His skin dirty and pock-marked with scabs that he picked at occasionally. Ice has a way of spoiling your looks in a very short period.

"You do this mainly for your mate...or are you feeding a habit?"

He glanced up at me with half closed eyes. I expected him to nod off any moment.

"Love your digs...what every good thief aspires to, huh? A very salubrious set-up, I must say...now...she surprised you, didn't she? You thought quick. Leant over the Kitchen counter and took the largest knife from the knife block...your palm print is there for all to see. One lunge with the knife shut her up, didn't it? Then you heard the van reversing up the driveway...you got the hell out of there didn't you. You and your mate...he wore gloves though, didn't he? You forgot to bring yours, huh? Bad mistake...did I get it about right, lad?"

"Shit copper, you don't need me. You got it right in one..." A grin to go with his comedic routine.

"Is that a confession, Yardley?"

"I ain't saying nothing else until I get some Lawyer here to tell me what to say".

"That's your prerogative, lad. Your right, but I don't think he is going to help much, for a murder charge is hanging over you. Be prepared to do serious time, eh? This ain't a simple BnE is it?"

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

We sat crammed into CB's Office for the usual Monday morning staff conference.

"How're you going with your 'Granny' homicide and the 'Body in the Plastic Roll' Case, Joe?" CB asked light-heartedly after the usual banter subsided.

"By a stroke of luck, we have our man for the Granny Homicide. A confession. Bail Application rejected, thank God. We have the Preliminary Hearing next Tuesday at Gosford Court House".

I then recounted what Malisa had told me about 'Ghost Riders' the weekend before last.

"I could think of better ways to get my jollies off..." Sasha muttered, which made us all laugh. "You mean to tell me that there are blokes...yes blokes, who sit there watching young girls converse on these Media sites...and that's it!? Yer gotta be joking! Truly? What a total waste of time...I mean, have you heard what young girls talk about? My sisters used to drive me crazy by the time that they reached their teens...I was a sensible ten-year-old!"

That caused us all crammed into CB's office to laugh our heads off and for quite a few moments we stirred young Sasha on being a sensible ten-year-old. A species that I thought was as extinct as the Woolly Mammoths!

Funny thing is I could just see her as that in my mind's eye!

"Yeah, well...it seems like a lot of hooey, but that is how these guys find their mark...their prey...either by the talk or the looks...just look at young Caitlin Suffolk. Who would really want to do what was done to her...arrh yes, her Post-mortem is on tomorrow morning. Who wants to go?" I looked at my two colleagues.

"I'll wait to read the Report". Sasha stated firmly.

"Arrh...people? As the Murder Squad team in charge of the case, the three of you should go. That is an order, hear me?" CB chimed in a little miffed at our attitudes.

Sasha and Shelley bowed their heads. Nodding slowly. Hoping they hadn't heard right.

"You telling me that one of these 'Ghost Riders' more than likely picked her out by trawling through the Internet pages until something stopped him? Her looks? Her stature? Something simple like that?"

I nodded.

"Yeah. Pretty much...and it would seem the initial intent was merely to spy...but the pressure mounted...apparently...and the initial attraction is of a certain physical type. These guys usually have multiple targets that they are viewing at any one time...who will be the next victim is anyone's guess...but now that he has commenced down this track, opened that door, it will more than likely happen again".

There were groans from several of my colleagues.

"No. I disagree. This is just a plain old, filthy paedophile attack".

"Where do you think that these paedophiles get most of their targets? They could have piggy-backed 'Young Davey's' fixation of Caitlin for months before striking out..." Don Savage pointed out. I nodded turning to smile at him, agreeing up to a certain point with the elderly Detective.

"Mate, I don't disagree with you, but Paedophiles usually groom their victims from some-one in their immediate family, extended family, or within their group of friends. It is more a

'hands-on' attitude. I'm not saying that Paedophiles do not use this method of 'Internet grooming' because I think they do, but..." I waved my arm to end the conversation as I was unsure of the dissimilarity between the two. Or even if there was a difference, I wasn't too sure. "So, you possibly have our Perp piggy-backing several sites until he picks his mark, then he just ogles at the young thing's FB page without a soul knowing of his attention...or intention".

"Pretty much".

"That's sick".

"Too right! Remember the days of your youth?" I asked Headley Sullivan, one of the new, up and coming Detectives who had not been with us that long. "How you used to sit on the sea-wall at Manly and perve intently on the young beach bunnies? Never game to go talk to them. Never game to approach...but man, you used to practically stare at some of them...remember? No other intention but to take in the young girl/woman's body...you did do that, didn't you?"

I smiled as I asked him the question.

He shook his head slightly.

"Well...not at Manly. Coogee was my patch. The Boardwalk was a great perving spot".

"There you go...you tell me what's different about it! Except that technology changes the method of perving....to the comfort of your own home..."

This bought the usual wags out who could not resist a good-natured stir of the young man before CB called for calm.

The young Detective desperately trying to hide his red face from all his colleagues. Failing dismally in the attempt that would have him marked for weeks ahead. he'd need a helmet to protect himself from the endless salvos of stir tossed his way...if he ever lived it down!

"Don't forget, a lot of our culprits are just plain sick in our eyes, but they themselves never see it that way...ever...we've all interviewed Paedophiles. Do you remember any who thought their...um...way of life was obscene...not normal? I'll lay odds and say not one. It's the same with these guys usually...by the time that he has allowed his urges to progress to the stage where he has taken a young girl like Caitlin...and done the things that he has done to her, he may be starting to hate himself...maybe..."

"So, okay. How are we going to get this sod if he doesn't leave any trace of his endeavours...either physically, forensically, or digitally? Wait until he trips up, perhaps?"

"You suggesting he'll strike again?"

"Yeah...it's on the cards...it's taken half his life for his urges to come to the fore where he acts on them. All his life they have remained dormant...usually some life moment triggers him into action where once upon a time, the inactive perve was sufficient. Now that he has tasted the nectar he will do it again".

Something pinged in the synapses of my brain. I waited for a connection but it failed to attach.

CB nodded in agreement, sadness in his eyes.

"Then you better find the bastard, quick like". He said flatly.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

"Detective Lind, is it?"

I nodded which seemed superfluous under the circumstances. The chap was ringing from Darwin.

"Your 'Red Flag' POI? Dyson Bell? Just a quick heads up. He is improving and the Doctors say that he should be able to be interviewed next week...would you like a visit up to our fair City?"

"Convincing the Boss maybe an insurmountable obstacle..." A smile in my tone of voice. "We'll see about extradition when he is good enough to travel. That might be my best bet for a trip up there".

We both chuckled at that.

"I'll work on him and let you know. End of the week. Thanks for that".

I had little to no chance of convincing CB to approve me and my two colleagues' trip to Darwin. It was close to the end of the 'Dry' and conditions would be perfect if we can get out of there before the build-up to the 'Wet'...which was forecast to be a beauty this year. They

needed it as the last two Wets were dismal affairs which left great swathes of northern Australia in the grip of a very dry, extremely hot drought period.

We remained Office bound for the rest of the week except for the two-hour Preliminary Hearing for the Granny Chambers Stabbing homicide case...and a stomach-churning appearance at Caitlin Suffolk's post-mortem. The deskbound hours spent concluding exhaustive background checks on the remaining twenty-odd persons that we had to interview regarding the Caitlin Suffolk homicide.

We intended to conduct those interviews the following week, staying at The Entrance for two nights so that we could revisit those addresses where there was no-one at home on our first trawl through. Dave Mills had lost his small group of Helpers and he had taken time off for personal reasons. We had gladly accepted his offer of help as a local bloke was indispensable on Cases such as this where the answer was in the detail. Local knowledge paramount. We knew that we could not hang onto the Squad for too long. Their help had been enormous for the period that they had been on the case.

The Darwin trip not approved though the Boss congratulated me for trying.

Surprise, surprise!

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

It was late Saturday afternoon.

We'd had a junk light tea.

I was thinking of bed.

Tellie was already there, reading some book on Parenting, preparing to juggle two kids under the age of two.

My mobile rang the Big Ben chimes for twelve midnight.

"Joe, change that flaming ringtone, will you? It is grating!" Tellie yelled from the bedroom.

I had thought that it was a beauty!

"Joe? Barry Devlin. Gosford LAC Commander. Sorry to ring you at such an hour and on the weekend but I figured you'd want to know...we have another young girl gone missing..."

"No... arrh, shit! Who?" I asked as I walked quickly into the Study. My Laptop already booted up.

"Chrissie 'Sticks' Strezeki." He spelt out the name. "Just turned fourteen. Plays Centre for the Mardi Pardies...don't ask me who thinks up these team names..." He chuckled. "Their second last game of the season. Won't make the Finals though they are always thereabouts every year. They were playing at the Tacoma Oval and had just finished...1630 PM this afternoon...that's when she went missing...within thirty minutes with her mother unable to locate her. She went to the Toilet, was going to put her Training gear on...but she never returned to her mother's vehicle parked some sixty metres away".

"OK...I've got her on her FB page".

A tall, very slender girl by all accounts though she wasn't the tallest in the team. What do they feed kids nowadays? I thought to myself. Another shot was obviously a 'selfie', the latest shot to be posted on her page.

A clear-skinned, big-eyed girl with a flashing, toothy grin that spread across her face. Some would have said when she was young that her eyes were too large and her mouth a little too big, but as the girl matured and fleshed out a bit, she would be a beauty!

I skipped down through her recent posts to scan over her conversations. All with friends and teammates. Movies. Latest Taylor Swift song. Latest purchase at the shops. What, where and when they were training again. Latest make-up colour. Going out again...so on and so on ad nausea. She seemed to also be a High Jumper of some note having the District Record for the past two years and would improve enormously as she matured and strengthened.

I was amazed at how her blog pages were so like Caitlin Suffolk's.

Kids try so hard to be individualistic yet in having all the same interests, having to dress in a similar vein and that awakening innocence in suddenly realising that boys were different, they all sounded and looked the same. Yet the comparison between Caitlin and Chrissie was eerie. Above average sportspersons for their age. Colouring, height and beauty, personality and popularity were very similar.

I was suddenly scared for her future.

"Anything yet?" I asked Devlin. "You taking Lead on the Case?"

"Nah.....but I'll oversee the investigation. Dave Mills is off and I do not know at this stage when he is likely to return...I think it will depend on a mental health report. Thought you should know. I'm getting the original group together who participated in the Suffolk disappearance".

"I think I may come up tomorrow morning. Would you object to my presence?"

"Nah... yes...please do...we can do with all the help we can get..."

"OK...Sure. Thanks".

I rang Shelley to fill her in on the development.

"Sorry, Joe. I can't really make it tomorrow. As much as I would like, I can't break a promise. I'll be with you Monday morning though..." I thought as much.

Shells' weekends, I knew were usually booked solid with various things. Usually revolving around deserted and cruelly subjected pets of all types. Her Hobby Farm home to about enough animals to fill the Ark! I didn't know how she managed to do all she did in the hours available to her. The stories she told only made me angrier at human nature. Not only what we did to one another, but what we did to defenceless, dumb animals. I wondered where we were going!

I rang Sasha.

"You got approval from the Boss, Joe?"

To tell the truth, I'd forgotten all about obtaining approval for a weekend shift out of the blue.

"No... regardless, I'd be going up in any case..."

"I'm with you Joe...say around 0630 to 0645 at my place, okay by you?"

"Fine. Yeah. See you then".

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

We had settled Aleesha. I had the magic touch over Tellie's vain attempts with her burps coming easy when I had her.

Something to be proud of, eh?

The champion burping your daughter so that she settles down calmly for a good night's sleep!

Tellie was tripping around like Kate Bush dressed all in red. Her voice lacked the ability to hold those high notes but it was a sight to see especially as her bump was now clearly showing!

My mobile sounded Big Ben again.

Tellie gave me a filthy look meant to do me harm! She collapsed onto the bed. The moment lost!

"Bloody hell, Joe, here I'm trying to serenade you before I ravage your body and your bloody phone breaks the spell..."

"Your voice was competing rather well, too!" I mused, which caused several lounge pillows to come sailing my way. Her joyous laughter following straight after.

"Joe? She's been found...a complete breakdown in communications between Chrissie's mother and the divorced father. He's a Merchant Seaman. A week's shore leave. He had checked with his former wife earlier in the week if it was OK to take Chrissie out for tea after the game. Happened a lot apparently. Unusual and intermittent time schedules meant that regular visitation rights were not possible. Father and daughter completely unaware of the panic caused by her going missing...I guess so close to Caitlin's body being discovered, all are on edge, including me and the team. Father got Chrissie home, to be confronted by two of my colleagues detaining him...seems that the missus at some time realised the mistake but was too embarrassed to come clean to tell us...no matter. All's well that ends well. You can delay your trip north...eh?"

"Phew...thank Christ. No... yeah... we'll be up on Tuesday in any case to continue as I think by then we will have done as much as possible at this end. We still have what? Five persons to interview out of that forty-odd...we'll more than likely be staying overnight up there to again try and pick up those who we can't talk to during the day..."

"Have you got any 'possibles' firming to 'suspects'?"

"Between you and I, no... but that doesn't mean much in an investigation like this. I think if nothing strikes us by Wednesday, we'll be bringing in the AFP and their expertise in Paedophile Rings and mystical ghost riders that piggyback FB followers with the adherents leaving only a slight 'shadow' as they call it, of their existence. Frankly, I should have called on their help earlier in the investigation then this...but we've had our digital forensic people on the trail now for what? A week?"

"Apparently, that is not long according to those in the know. I had a talk with their Head Honcho early on when Caitlin was just missing. These investigations into Internet stalkers...identifying them, can take for-ever. Don't beat yourself up, Detective...it will only send you around the twist. Give you sleepless nights".

"Mmm...thanks for the information...at least I should be able to get a good night's sleep now".

I glanced over at my wife who was becoming impatient. "Mmm....maybe not!" I said as I hung up, wanting to also play the charade game that Tellie loved so much when she was in one of these moods. Her pregnancies played hell with my sleep patterns!

She turned up the volume that to me sounded like two tomcats having a squabble with each other on the back fence! Others thought it a break-through Album when it had been released. For Tellie, it was one of her all-time favourites. Songs about periods didn't really turn me on!

Go figure!

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

"Who-ever held Caitlin for that week, had to have had a remote address..."

"Or a cellar perhaps..."

"The only one who lives in a remote location is Jack Barnett who we haven't interviewed as yet. Remember? We were otherwise interrupted by the appearance of Kevin Yardley entering Stage left...our unexpected appearance up that dirt track must have spooked him".

"Mmm...anything come up on the background check on the man?"

"No... nothing suspicious...he was a former Coach of the Berkeley Barkers...a founding member, actually...no reason given for his stand-down but Suffolk took over the role seamlessly from that point when he and his family moved up from Benalla in northern Victoria. Arrh...two years ago now...written up in the local Newspaper. Suffolk came with top-notch references".

"It'd be nice to know why he stepped down...Presner. Mallory 'Mal' Presner..."

Shelley glanced at me. Sasha coughed.

"Who's he?"

"A name that some-one mentioned the other day. He was one of those Paedophiles pulled in and questioned when Caitlin first went missing. I felt that I knew the name...it kind of stuck with me, that's all".

"And?" Shelley added. She again glanced over at me as she slipped to the outside lane of the Motorway to pass a slower vehicle.

I shook my head.

"Could be his father, I suppose. A relo, perhaps". I murmured to myself.

Shelley shook her head. Sasha went to say something. Shelley held up her hand advising her to cool it as no-one, not even the great man himself, knew what he was going on about.

"He often talks in tongues, Sash. You'll learn quick enough".

Tapping on her Laptop, Sasha asked for the correct spelling. She opened the Criminal Register File that was available to all Police Departments across the Nation. A recent agreement that made a hell of a lot of sense to everyone! One wonders why it took so long to implement across the Nation...except maybe State jealousies.

"P.R.E.S.N.E.R... mmm... arrh... a minor incident in terms of paedophile charges. When he was seventeen years of age he was a Life Saver at Ocean Beach. He was caught exposing himself to several six-year-old boys in the Change Room...a second similar charge at Broadbeach when he was up there for a Surf Carnival later the same year. Given a 'Good Behaviour Bond' of two years. That was in 2003...nothing since..." Sasha spoke with an even tone to her voice.

"He'd be what? Thirty years of age now...a little young. His father more'n likely in his fifties...mmm...maybe a little too old. Sash? Can you check on his family tree including male cousins? Uncles? Brothers?"

There was silence as we drove through Mount White except for an occasional cluck of the tongue as Sasha tapped away on her Laptop. The power lead and USB snaking into the front consul.

"Older brother. Clem Presner. Low class dirt bag without a brain in his skull. Nothing serious but is known to the local Police as a bloody nuisance..."

"How old?"

"Three years older than Mallory Presner..."

"Not old enough".

Shelley glanced at me. A smirk on her face.

"What? Your Creep in a definite age bracket, huh?"

I shook my head.

"An Uncle, perhaps...maybe an older cousin...nah...he has nothing to do with the case".

I immediately forgot the name. Shelley let out a harrumph. Shook her head.

"You have us tripping over ourselves about a name that you now think has nothing to do with the case and you immediately forget about it, huh? That's so like you, Joseph Lind! An absolute bloody headache at times, you are!"

"Charles Presner...once a well-known Fence and Pawnbroker. Done time for Receiving and Selling of stolen goods. A short stint. Seriously hurt in a prison brawl..."

"That's him...how old? You got an 'LKA'..."

"What's that?" Sasha muttered from the back seat.

I raised my eyebrows.

"Last known address". Shelley offered quietly so as not to upset her senior partner so it seemed.

"Sash? Don't waste your time on it, okay?"

"It's funny how the apple don't fall far from the tree..." Sasha offered quietly. "Plenty in the family tree have done time or community services..."

"Yeah...a common thread as though there is a 'bad seed' entwined in the family DNA...makes you wonder, eh?"

There was no response from either female.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

"I reckon it's the Groundsman". Sasha suddenly piped up from the back seat.

"Why?" I asked, half swivelling around in my seat to look at her.

"He's always there. First on scene. Last to leave. People so accustomed to seeing him about the Playing Fields, he's almost invisible..."

"Go on..." I urged the young Detective.

"Well...it has to be some-one like that who all the kids know...Caitlin would not have just hopped into any car...that afternoon...she goes back to get her Training Jacket. He's locking up...sees Caitlin jogging towards him as he is locking up the boom gates at the entrance into the Car Park. Offers her a lift back to Maccas as he knows that was where they were all heading. He'd overheard them talking about it earlier. She accepts and as she goes to retrieve her Jacket, he spikes a bottle of water. She hops in the front seat completely at ease...is offered the bottle of water...she's thirsty after her run back to the Grounds...he makes an excuse to re-check something. When he comes back, she is out cold. He lays back the rear of the seat so it looks as though he is alone, and turns away from The Entrance Road as the Pub security cameras indicate..."

"Mmm...was there any sign of a strong sedative in her system?"

"Yes...to keep her quiet and non-resistant, so the Report indicated...but as far as an initial dose...that would be hard to assess..."

"Unless it was of a different type. Fast acting and strong...perhaps they should run another tox to try and isolate such a sedative...you know, like Rehypnol or similar".

"Good point".

I nodded making a mental note to check that point with the Forensic Pathologist.

"It was eight days from when she went missing to the day that her body was discovered...it was estimated that she had died less than twenty-four hours before being found...such a drug would more than likely be out of her system by then..." I commented.

Shelley nodded in agreement.

"We still should check, though Sasha. Good point. That stuff is not that easy to get hold of..."

"It all fits, Sash". Shelley encouraged. "Except for the fact that Charles 'William' Wallis did not drive to the Grounds. He lives with his backyard abutting the Playing Fields. Um...his street goes off Passage Road. He has a rear gate in his back fence straight to work...that'd be great, don't you think? He was questioned extensively on two separate occasions by the Uniforms after Caitlin went missing. His house searched. His knowledge of all things digital and his use of his computer is only average... he wouldn't know how to keep his mouth shut and just sit and watch teen-age girls converse on Social Media sites...it's not in his DNA...but a good hypothesis...it did tick every box...except for his ability to hide a body for a week..."

There was an audible sigh from the back seat.

"He has priors....and maybe that Amenities Block? Or the larger one at the rear Playing Field". Sasha continued doggedly.

"Yes, we know of his 'priors'. He went off the rails a bit during his teenage years. Minor stuff. The most important point is that he lost his license three times. Speeding infringements...and carrying an amount of cannabis construed for personal use. A bit of a wild one back then...twenty years have passed. He's now a loyal husband and a proud father of two...a nice bloke". I stretched before looking around at our young partner. "Both Amenities Blocks were forensically examined for nil results....and both are used extensively on weekends and during the week. During the days and at night-time...and Caitlin was bound and gagged for most of the time she was missing...which meant a weekend was in the middle of her incarceration

with not a skerrick seen of her during that time...that's not possible if she had been held in one of those Amenities Blocks".

"He is one of the lucky ones who made it out the other side". Shelley commented.

"Don't get disheartened, Sash. You should know by now that on homicide investigations like this one, we will offer up a squillion theories that we think at the time of opening our mouths, ticks all the boxes...then the goal posts are moved...goal posts...movement...goal posts".

My voice trailed off as I seemed to nod off. My mind was spinning at a million miles per hour, trying to snag that once piece of information that consistently stayed out of range!

"Maybe a Coach? An Assistant Coach? The guy who buys and cuts up the oranges..."

"They don't do that no more...something about Health and Safety...I don't know".

Sasha noticeably deflated as we sped north. She remained quiet in the back seat for the rest of the journey.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

My mobile started the first chords of Rod Stewart's *To-night's the Night*'.

I listened silently to the Caller.

"Another one gone. Thanks for that, Detective...what happens to his body? Yes...I understand. Well, there goes a trip to Darwin under extradition procedures...Sure, I'll look you up if I'm ever in that neck of the woods...you do the same. I owe you a beer...yes...I'll keep you to it. Cheers...and thanks for your cooperation".

I hung up letting out a stream of air in exasperation.

"Bugger!" I exclaimed out of sheer frustration.

"Dyson Bell?" Shelley glanced at me as we began the descent from Kariong down into the Gosford basin.

I nodded my head.

"Oh, how I'd love to be there. A life after death where these bastards are hung on a cross until death. I've been told that it is a nasty way to die..." I muttered, anger in my voice. "These bastards need to be punished, not die without any form of retribution".

"Yeah, well... where do they go to after that? If there is life after death in your narrative? How many chances do they get in your scenario? You know, die and then is alive again. Dies and is alive again like Groundhog Day..."

Shelley was playing with me.

"Their sins are washed from their bodies and they become reclaimed humans...following in His footsteps". Sasha stated firmly from the back seat.

I almost burst out laughing.

"Hah! I'll have to get a supply of good quality Jesus sandals if I'm meant to do a lot of walking up there. Public Transport appears to be non-existent according to all the paintings that I've seen, the condition of paths and roads up there don't appear to be that good".

I raised my eyebrows and glanced at Shelley. She had a smirk on her face. I expected something more from her.

"Donkey travel is what you can get...if you can afford the fare..." Shelley kept it going.

"We've got a live one here, Shells". I murmured out of the side of my mouth. She also was on the verge of laughing.

"So, what happened?"

"Dyson? He was doing fine. He died a couple of times. I wonder if he saw anything worthwhile reporting on. I guess we'll never know, huh? Awoke from his coma with all vital signs intact. Things were looking pretty good for a complete recovery...then he contracts one of those super-bug strains that are rife in hospitals today. Went downhill pretty quick. Died early this morning. 0245 their time...bugger! I wanted him!"

"You don't always get what you want, Joe".

"Yeah...the Rolling Stones song of note...he doesn't even deserve a second chance on a life after death". The double meaning not lost on Shelley though Sasha sat silently in the back seat of the Unmarked as we pulled into the underground parking area of Gosford Police

Station. I was unsure whether her silence was due to she thinking we were taking the mockery out of her...or there was nothing further to add!

CHAPTER FORTY

We had just grabbed a coffee and sat down with Senior Sergeant Devlin when my phone rang.

I stood as I answered and wandered to the bank of windows that gave views over Brisbane Waters.

A beautiful scene.

"Joe? Dee Dee...I hear that you are spending a few days away from home...away from your horny wife and bubbling daughter...it's just as well as it's a veritable Commune at your place for instant baby-sitters and helpers..."

"Arrh, Dee Dee...and your point?"

"Wish I had similar arrangements...and the point of my call? Um...we've done a complete examination of the plastic sheeting that wrapped the body...Caitlin Suffolk...not much. A standard roll of Builders' Clear Forticon. Can be purchased in most Building Hardware places...you'd be chasing your tail trying to narrow the purchase down to any particular Retail outlet. Minuscule remnants of wool that is commensurate with vehicle floor matting. Made by a Company in Geelong for the four major Vehicle Manufacturing Companies. I cannot narrow it down to a vehicle make or type. Sorry. Um...dog hair also found. A Labrador and a Maltese Cross...neither pure bred...can't provide their names or residential addresses. Sorry. Some tiny remnants of wool that possibly came from a woollen blanket. Low quality. that's about it, sorry. A full written Report within five days on your desk, if you happen to be there..."

"It's a start at least. I suppose...and Dee Dee, I miss them as much as they miss me, let me tell you...and you are welcome to help in any way you can..."

"Tellie and I are definitely not like that...we are just good friends, but I'm over there to-night to keep your lovely wife company...and to nurse your darling daughter to sleep".

"I sometimes wonder the way the two of you carry on. Goodbye, Dee Dee. Thanks again".

I didn't want to get that lady off-side as she was Tellie's most trusted and truest friend.

I wandered back over to the table to fill them in on the findings.

"A Labrador and a Maltese Cross...doesn't ring any bells, Joe. Not that combination at least and we've visited a fair few houses over the past month since Caitlin went missing, let me tell you. What's your agenda over the next two days?"

"Um...we have five more people on our list...and four others who were not at home at the time of our last visit. We'll go by those addresses after say, seven to-night...and um...there's something..."

I shook my head hoping to turn loose that thought that had whizzed around the other day.

"Devlin?" I asked unexpectedly. "Presner? Does that ring any bells with you?"

"First name?"

"Don't know.... would have to be in his late fifties to late seventies I think".

"In the system?"

"A younger chap is...possibly the son...nephew...and possibly the father going on the age. The chap who is causing me sleepless nights must be either a cousin or a much older brother of the young bloke".

Devlin shook his head.

"I'll ask around, okay?"

"Mmm... yeah, thanks".

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

The woman opened the door to Senior Constable Devlin's knock.

"Hello Peter. How are you?" A smile and a delightful beginning.

She tippy toed to kiss him on both cheeks.

"Oh, you with company". She stated. "How embarrassing".

A smile on her face showed that she wasn't at all embarrassed.

"Um, your father in?" He turned to us three and introduced us to Jack Barnett's daughter. "Um...Darna and I were an item...isn't that what they say now? Back in High School...ancient history". He gave a chuckle.

"You make me seem so old, Peter. Sorry to hear that you and Terrie have separated. Come over for Dinner some time..."

Darna rubbed the back of her neck, looking sheepishly at the ground. She now was embarrassed.

"Come through. Dad's out the back mowing. I'll call him in. Make you a cuppa. Expect you want to speak to him about Caitlin's death...how horrific. I know that Paul Suffolk and his family are suffering terribly. First his mother-in-law. Then his daughter...and all that stupid nonsense about him being a child abuser...from one person who had her nose out of joint because her kids weren't good enough for the Soccer team back in Benalla...how sad...especially as there will be people who do not believe the retraction through the Police Media release...um...come on through".

That wasn't exactly the reason for the woman getting her nose out of joint but it shows how people interpret the News so differently. People will believe what they want to believe and interpret that same piece of information in so many ways. The only way that you will have consensus is through mass brain washing, so it would seem.

We followed the woman through the large house out onto a rear covered deck that had views of a full-size Tennis Court and a large kidney shaped pool.

"A fantastic set-up!" I exclaimed, jealous of the acres of land that was the back yard. An elderly man sat on a ride-on mower slowly proceeding across the landscape. Flat as a tack except where groves of trees dotted the immaculate lawn. These copses surrounded by large, mulched garden beds. Coloured blooms dotted these areas.

"My type of home". I muttered.

"Yes, we've been lucky. Dad purchased and started building here when I was around a year old. One of six kids so we had a joyous time growing up. Swimming. Tennis. Golf. Dirt bike

riding...I've banned the bike riding for my kids...eight of them...I'll get that coffee. Dad won't be long".

I looked at Pete Devlin.

"Darna's oldest brother was killed when he came off his dirt bike at speed...ten years of age. Here. In the back yard...well...acreage for a back yard would encourage that behaviour in the young".

I nodded my head as I watched the old man hobble towards us. A Labrador heeling at his master's side.

"Quite a contingent...hello, Peter. Been a while. You must come over for tea one night. Heard about your separation from Terrie. Sorry...a rough time, huh?" Jack Barnett commented as he was introduced to us by Devlin.

The old man slapped the Chief Constable on the shoulder.

"Seems to be a contagious event in at your Station at the moment...what with Dave Mills nasty break-up..."

"...and several of the Uniforms are in trouble too. Not the career path one should chose if one wants a stable and happy relationship". A smile tried to surface...it was a little too hard...

The old man nodded his head, a little embarrassed at opening *that* can of worms. He glanced up the backyard. Swiped his brow with the sleeve of his shirt.

"Getting a bit hot...haven't seen you around for a while. You going to the Netball Prize night?"

"Yes...my daughter is up there for a gong, so I have been told".

We were invited to sit around a glass-topped table.

Coffee and biscuits bought out in a flurry of activity.

"So?" Barnett took a sip of coffee. "What's this all about...Diddums, sit!"

"Is that a Maltese cross?" I asked.

My excitement rising.

A Labrador and now a Maltese.

"Diddums here is a pure breed. Unfortunately, she was the runt of the litter and came out with a badly deformed hind leg. They were going to put her down. Darna objected...it's her sister-in-law who breeds them. My son. Down Goulburn way. Is one of the country's top breeders. The poor thing was in a splint for almost six months but when the cast was removed, she was as good as new...she rules this house...don't you, Diddums?"

"Could we ask you a few questions?"

"About poor Cattie and her father..."

"You where the Coach of the team..."

"From Under Fives when they couldn't even kick a ball properly..."

He shook his head and beamed at the memories. Chuckled to himself. Bent slightly to pat the Maltese. The Labrador watched on, unconcerned that she was missing a bit of attention...she wanted a biscuit off the table...

"Good fortune when Paul came on the scene when he did as I had to give it away. A Hip Replacement operation that went slightly skew-if...Paul took over seamlessly with his daughter slotting in perfectly with the team. She was one hell of an athlete...there was big hopes for her...a bloody tragedy...a terrible, bloody tragedy".

He shook his head sadly.

"You had no objections?"

"What? Objections? No... on the contrary, I sighed a sigh of relief as it looked for a while that Brendan Rourke was going to be asked to fill in... he's not brilliant with kids...hasn't the patience..."

"Who is he?"

"He's now the Assistant Coach for the San Remo Rhinos. They played the Barkers in the Grand Final two weeks ago".

"If he's the Assistant Coach..."

"He'll never hold down a coaching job as long as I'm alive".

"You were at the Grounds the night that Caitlin went missing..."

"Am I a suspect?"

"Everyone is at this point in time..."

"I still help out...as long as I can sit down...can't stand for half of a half. I help with the taking of the stats...you know, breaks, shots at goal, tackles, penalties and who causes them. Stuff like that".

He took a long draft of his coffee.

"For the Under Twelve side?" I asked incredulously.

"Yes...it's starting to get fair dinkum by that age...it's not just a game to enjoy any more but a game that is enhanced when you win..."

"You still live here?"

"I set up a little Flat in one of the double garages when Darna and Tod outlived their previous house when they had their sixth...it's now eight thanks to an unplanned birth of twins. This joint was always going to be too big for just me once the missus died and all the kids fled the coop...it was only natural. I stuck on a dormitory style extension..." He gestured with a wave of his arm at a section of the house that came off the main length creating an L-shaped plan and the enclosed veranda deck that swept around the pool. The Tennis Court behind it.

"Will sleep up to a dozen just in that area and regularly did when my grand-daughters were going through those 'sleep-over' stages...hectic times".

He was the kind of man who loved being surrounded by kids. People. The more the merrier.

"Peter? You going to the Presentation Night next weekend?" Jack Barnett asked.

He had already asked that question though everyone seemed to accept that the old man habitually repeated himself.

"Um...yeah...maybe...if Kylie wants me along. Her mother...Terrie...you know..." He trailed off, not wanting to elaborate.

Barnett nodded his head knowingly.

"I might see you then? Come along. I'm sure your daughter will enjoy seeing you there. You can sit with us. Darna and the mob".

"Yeah. Sure. Thanks. Maybe". Peter Devlin replied as he stood, indicating that the visit was over. I was less certain of that fact and had wished to ask further questions of the man and his daughter. We were escorted through the house and out onto the wide front veranda. Darna again kissed Devlin on both cheeks and held onto him for a tad longer than necessary. We turned to head towards our Unmarked. A sad look on his face.

First Dave Mills and now the Boss. Not a good place to work in when it gets that intense, I thought to myself.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

"Whoa...I got excited there for a while..."

"Yeah, I know. I could hear your heart rate go up. Your artificial valve commencing a-clicking". Shelley responded.

Sasha tried to hide a giggle causing her to swallow the wrong way. She shed tears as she gasped for air...I was on the verge of twisting her to hit her on the back...then thought better of it. She settled down without any help from any of us.

"Jack Barnett? Not on your life. A true gentleman and one of the Coast's true volunteers. Has done so all his life, being involved with kid's sports from the time that his kids first started participating...around five years of age for the eldest...and the lot are now all grown up...who next?"

We were all standing around the Unmarked like a mob of Brown's cows, waiting for the first person to open one of its doors. It was a nice day.

My Mobile buzzed out its choice of opening chords.

"Joe?"

"Dallas, my friend. How are you?"

"Good...very good, as a matter of fact. Malisa has just told me that you are an expectant father again. Congratulations...um...when's it due?"

"A Summer baby. Middle of January next year..."

"Yeah...well...that figures, the cold nights of Winter cause couples to snuggle up a bit more... look, I won't keep you. There has been a spike in Internet traffic after Caitlin's body was discovered. The paedophile rings have been working double time. We've tracked down six girls who have a 'Ghost Rider' attached to their accounts on the Central Coast. Above average height for their age which is thirteen to fifteen. Slender. Blonde hair. Athletic. The 'Ghost Rider' has similar properties for all six girls...he merely watches. Stalks. Sits in silence. There is another dozen who also scan over these girls but we have identified them...all are well outside the Central Coast area so we have dismissed them...our POI appears to live thereabouts but we still have a problem trying to narrow down his location...we'll keep on it. Enjoy the weather as there's another cold front and rain heading our way for the end of the week".

"You're a champion mate. We'll be back home by then, Dallas. Keep on it, will you".

I had hardly hung up when my Mobile squawked again.

"Detective Lind. This is Anthony Burton, Digital Analysis Section. You've had us on the trail of several 'shadows' that were stalking Caitlin Suffolk before her death...we have isolated the POI with an address on the Central Coast...his ISP he changes more regularly than his underdaks more'n likely but he operates in the Blue Haven to the Caves Beach quadrant".

"You can't narrow that down?"

"Not without him being on the trawl at the same time that we are...we have just got to be patient. He has been quiet these past couple of days. I'll let you know of any further developments. We are looking at coming from another direction to snatch him. Through his Smart phone if we can snag it when he is on it and on Face Book at the same time. We'll narrow it down eventually. Let you know. Cheers".

"Thanks for that, Tony".

"Anthony, Detective. Anthony".

"Yes...sorry Anthony. Thank heaps for that information...we're onto him..."

I hung up shaking my head. I let the others know what both conversations were about.

"It could be assumed that the two areas are having a race to see who can ID the perp's location first..."

"I haven't got a problem with that as long as we can get him quickly. I fear he may strike again very soon, in fact...we have a location in the Blue Haven to Caves Beach quadrant, whatever that means".

"Pre-determined triangulation based on the position of certain mobile repeater stations..." Sasha stated.

I nodded still none the wiser.

"Nothing more accurate?"

"No, though they say that a location could be determined if they come across his Smart-phone frequency at the same time that he has it on..."

"Ain't the digital age wonderful?" Shelley lamented.

"It is if you are a civilised, God-fearing, model citizen it may be!"

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

"Bloody dog hair!" Senior Sergeant Devlin complained as he plopped back into the rear seat of the Unmarked beside Sasha. Vigorously brushing the legs of his pants as he complained saying that the material the standard issue uniform was made of, must have magnetising fibres.

"Um...before you move onto your next suspect, can you take me back to the Station?" Devlin suddenly asked though no reason was given.

"Sure..." Though it was miles away and in the opposite direction that we had intended to take.

"Um...I'd like a word with that Assistant Coach...Brendan Rourke, wasn't that his name? He lives up San Remo way, doesn't he?" Trying hard in a diplomatic way of telling him we wanted to go in the opposite direction to that of driving to Gosford Police Station. Devlin nodded his head, still insisting on returning to the Station first. The trip back to the Gosford

Police Station was one of silence. I felt that Devlin may have cottoned on to my opposition of conducting such a huge detour.

Never mind, it was a clear, sunny day so the trip went quickly.

We grabbed some sandwiches as we headed north again to Rourke's address.

"Peter Devlin was a bit uptight, wasn't he?"

"Yeah, he seemed to be...he's in the middle of messy divorce proceedings from his wife and kids so I was told when we were at the Gosford Station earlier on. That would upset anyone...but if he is a little anal attentive, then dog hairs on his uniform pants would seem like a huge problem for him...he must have picked up the hairs while we were at Barnett's place".

"Where's he living?"

"Don't know...oh, I've got his family home address and telephone number, but since he separated? Nah. Don't know...I have his personal Mobile and his Office Mobile on my phone...I gotta clean out those contact numbers as I've been saving them for years".

I shrugged my shoulders. Twisted in the seat to look back at Sasha in the rear seat.

"Why?"

"Mmm..."

We stopped down the road from Rourke's address to purchase some take-away coffees. Most of which we poured out in the gutter. It was dishwater!

Rourke was lounging on his front veranda catching the weak winter sun rays.

"A busy day, huh?" I muttered good naturedly.

"You're the cops...yer want to ask me where I was when Caitlin disappeared. I've had a few calls..."

"Oh? From whom?"

He shook his head.

"No matter then...what were you doing down at Pat Morley Oval on a practise night of the Berkeley Barkers, who happen to be the competition leader? The team that the San Remo Rhinos played in the Grand Final..."

"We knew that we'd be playing them in the Grand Final...just looking to see how they were going. You know, how they were gelling as a team. Their enthusiasm..."

We stood at the edge of his veranda for nigh on thirty minutes. He hardly moved from his prone position on an old Recliner chair that had seen better days. I could imagine the old bloke sitting out here regardless of the weather...a lazy way to fill in a day watching the traffic and pedestrians walk past.

There was an edge to the man. Kids would pick up on it regardless of it being a deliberate put on or not.

We thanked him for his time and started to head for the Unmarked.

"Oh, by the way..." I began as I turned back to him. "You got any dogs?"

He couldn't understand the relevance of the question and gave me a quizzical look.

"Yeah...an old Lab cross...who walks slower than me! And a Blue healer that should have been put down ten years ago...but I just can't get to that decision...huh...too hard..."

He gave a chuckle.

I nodded. Gave him a toothy smile which looked more like a sneer. Thanked him for his cooperation and walked swiftly across the front yard to catch up with my two colleagues.

As we drove away I couldn't help but think of the importance of the two dogs. As there was forensic trace of these two breeds on the plastic role that had sheathed Caitlin Suffolk, I thought it a reasonable question. Shelley thought otherwise.

"What's with this two dogs per family up around these parts?" Sasha asked as we settled back into the Unmarked.

"Pet lover's paradise". Shelley shot back.

"Huh...keeping up with the Joneses". Sasha remarked from the back seat.

"Yeah, well...I'm satisfied with one dog, thank you very much. AU2 is it for me!" Just as well I couldn't look into the future...

"In that case I beat you by the proverbial country mile". Shelley glanced over at me. "Last count we had six...that could have doubled by now as I haven't been home to check. Brin seems to pick up any stray dog that he sees...that man has a heart of gold. Too good to be a bloody Uniform cop, I reckon".

She smiled to herself as she started up the Unmarked.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

"We're at that proverbial dead-end". Shelley muttered as she did a U-turn in the street and accelerated away from the Rourke residence.

"We've still got what? Seven addresses that we need to approach later to-night...something may come of one of them...patience...that's all we need..."

"Do you want to go to the Club for tea?"

"Bloody hell, we've only just finished Lunch..."

"Bad reviews on the Club meal." Sasha commented. "According to a couple of the Uniforms that I was talking to this morning".

"I've often wondered what the pick-up line was these days...places to eat, huh? Nothing about favourite bands or singers huh?"

Sasha turned a brilliant red burying her face in her hands to hide the fact.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

"They're a match, Joe".

"What's a match?"

"Dog hairs..."

It was the following week and nothing new had wormed its way out of the woodwork. We were waiting for a breakthrough in the forensic evidence or from the Digital Analysis Group or the equivalent Area within the AFP...maybe an anonymous tip from a member of the Public through Crime Stoppers...there was nothing else we could turn to...

"You're talking in riddles, girl".

"Yeah...umm...I... remember the other day after we interviewed...Jack, wasn't it? Jack Barnett? Peter Devlin complained about dog hair on his standard Uniform pants. He was sitting in the back seat desperately trying to brush off dog hair from his pants. That material on our standard issue gear is like a negative charge. I remember when I was in Uniform. My cat would leave its hair all down the front of me...it could be embarrassing at times looking as though my pubes were malting".

Both women laughed at that comment.

I looked at my young charge for some moments.

"White haired pubes? Now there is something to see...You parcelled up some of those loose hairs and had them analysed? Without telling either one of us...why? I hope you used the correct Responsibility Codes for the job to be undertaken young lady..." I was not impressed with her going it 'alone' without telling us of her intentions.

"I thought that you may laugh at me".

I shook my head.

"Sash, no matter how implausible a thought of yours may seem, it's still a thought that shows you are thinking about the case...yes, we may laugh at you, but that gives you the right to laugh at some of our imbecilic thoughts. Okay?"

She nodded though I wasn't sure if she believed in my suggestion.

"Now, you have a match on dog hair supposedly taken from the pants legs of Devlin...what would that indicate to you?"

"That he has a Labrador and a Maltese cross making him a possible POI".

"Yes...or it could mean that he picked the hair up from the chair that he sat in while we were interviewing Jack Barnett. They had a Labrador and a Maltese...or he inadvertently sat beside the actual perp without knowing and had a transfer of dog hair...or a thousand other scenarios that would fit that does not make him our Number One POI. Are you suggesting that the Station Commander could be our perpetrator?"

I turned to look at her, an incredulous expression on my face. Then I relaxed, as us coppers are not above suspicion.

"And there was another dog there as well. I'd say in Barnett's quarters. I heard it bark a couple of times. The yelp of a little dog...perhaps another Maltese". Shelley added.

Sasha's shoulders slumped. It hadn't gone as planned.

"Don't get disheartened. What you did, shows that you are thinking. You'll never be crucified for that. Good work. Did you ask for a DNA check against the samples that we already have?"

"Yes".

"Good one. Well done. That test will take a couple of weeks. In the meantime, I think we need to have a talk to the local Commander of the District. Soon. Very soon".

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

"Detective Lind? This is Senior Constable Garret. Pete Garret. Gosford Central. I thought you should know; we have another missing girl. Taken last night. Sarena Vartook. Fourteen years of age. Netball practise up Hampden Terrace way. A remarkable similarity in appearance to Caitlin Suffolk."

"Shit...is to be expected I guess...we better find her quick. Dave Mills?"

"Um...still off on sick leave. Um...the break-down of his marriage has hit him bad...really bad apparently...I'd say it is only a matter of time before he goes out on medical grounds...a sad case..."

"Senior Sergeant Devlin?"

"He's taken a couple of days off himself as his divorce proceedings are getting a little hairy, too".

"Yeah? I can sympathise with them, I guess. A bad time. How long has it been going on?"

"Around three...maybe four months for the Sergeant. Thereabouts. He adores his kids but his missus is trying really hard to stop him from seeing them...and Devlin has been in and out of Court for almost a year now..."

"Shit...that sucks. Why?"

"Don't know the ins and outs but he left work here last week close to total collapse...a real shame as he is a beaut bloke...anyhow, we have another one...do you think that you may come back up?"

"Arrh... well...it's not a homicide...yet...but we just may...um...by the way, do you have any dogs?"

"Me? Dogs? No, why?"

"No reason...how about Devlin or Mills?"

"Um...I don't know...no, I think both may have dogs. Mills would often joke that that was all he had after fifteen years of marriage...two bloody dogs that he was permitted to keep with him thinking they would prefer to be with his missus and kids the way they carry on sometimes...at least he can still laugh about it, eh?"

I nodded. Chuckled.

"Um...yeah...we may see you tomorrow". I hung up slowly. That synapses had lit up.

I walked into the Boss's Office and explained the situation.

"Why can't you leave it to the local lads?" He asked as though he was paying for the petrol!

"Because I reckon we'll end up with another young girl wrapped in plastic..."

"And your suspects?"

"Um...Yes. Three that I could name right now".

"Okay...get the Murder Book up to date. You have Court Time this afternoon, haven't you? You can go up straight after that. I'll give you until the end of the week...that's four nights for the three of you. You're gunna blow our Overnight Stay budget for the year".

He waved me out of his Office with an angry flip of his hand.

Not the blonde-haired boy at the moment, was my guestimate on the gesture.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

I had filled in Shelley and Sasha on our approval to stay up on the Central Coast until the end of the week. Shelley arranged with Hendo to organise accommodation, preferably where we had stayed previously. It was more a Serviced Apartment building with three separate bedrooms which suited us fine...more so the girls who insisted that I snored loud enough to scare away any evil spirits that maybe lurking.

My mobile rang as we walked quickly towards the Court Building.

"Detective Joe Lind? It's Anthony Burton, Digital Analysis Section again..."

"Yes, Anthony. Got good news for me?" I remembered that he had corrected me previously when I had called him Tony instead of Anthony.

A sensitive type of bloke, I assumed. I may just correct him on calling me Joe instead of Joseph just to get up his nose again.

"Maybe yes, maybe no. We have another spike in Digital traffic again. On those sites that we have been monitoring with the 'shadows' on them. I understand that another young girl has gone missing..."

"News travels fast. Yes, that is right. Taken last night I'm afraid. Late yesterday afternoon. We are heading back up there later this afternoon..."

"A location. GPS coordinates..."

"Hang on mate, I'll need to write those down..." I stopped to turn Shelley around so I could write the co-ordinates into her iPad. "Okay, fire away".

Shelley jiggled about as I tried to write the GPS coordinates down in her iPad. I said them back to him for confirmation.

"That's right. A dirt road leads off Sharpes Road near the small airstrip. Western side of the Strip. Several dirt tracks lead off into the bush. From a Google Earth Search it is a large Barn-type structure nestled into the bush. Hard to spot from the air. I have not followed up on ownership or current residents but that is where...I am certain...that is where the Internet connection originates from. That is the centre of all these 'shadows' or 'Ghost Riders' as you have called them that have been evident on both Caitlin's and now Serena Vartook Facebook pages. One hundred per cent. That is where the chap stalks from...we've cross-referenced his smart phone with the connection back to his computer. These bastards forget that that connection is very visible. The mobile phone...and so is his location when-ever his phone is on. We did not need to try and track him through the Social Media sites at all...not now, in any case...and I must admit that when we did, there was very little traffic coming from anything within cooee..."

"Hang on...you're saying that you have isolated this position by the way that he uses his smart-phone...but not his computer...that doesn't make sense. We know that there are several very real Ghost Riders on not only Caitlin Suffolk's FB site, but also on numerous other young girls within that sphere of friendship and/or team members...is that right?"

"Arrh... yes".

"Then where is the connection between the two?"

"Purely digital...as I have stated, while the computer shadows are hard to decipher, once the smart-phone is used as an internet connection, it speaks to us very clearly...and concisely as it actually goes through the parent computer logarithm...when it is in range...say, while he is within range of its Wi-Fi connection to the two digital instruments...thus we have clear and concise positional information. This bridge between the two has only occurred once since we have been monitoring the situation so it was by chance that we were able to latch onto the signal".

"Okay...Good work...it's getting way beyond my understanding, but you'll be pleased to know that you are way ahead of the AFP investigation into the likely location of this fellow...again, good work".

I could almost hear the guy puff out his chest!

"Could you go through your methodology again for this slow coach".

"Yes. OK. The shadow has an exceptionally low digital footprint. Almost none. With a constant zero in on a particular victim, we may have got lucky when the Perp zeroed in on the same Vic's site. Most of these guys have quite an involved computer set-up. Multiple screens and so on that they would have in the old days, sat at for hours on end watching and waiting. Possibly stalking several subjects...and not saying a thing. That is not an offence if the Subject has ignored the offered security arrangements and instead, has conversed on-line out in the Public domain. The conversation becomes public property. Understand, the security 'gates' offered on these sites, most of these guys can get around in any case with their eyes closed but to attempt to by-pass or indeed to by-pass these security arrangements to open a particular site that belongs to someone else is an offence and has prison time attached. Getting back to the shadows...or ghost riders as you labelled them..."

I coughed. Excused myself hoping that the interruption would hurry the chap along. It didn't!

"Of course, nowadays, these ghost riders, instead of sitting for hours in front of their computers will sit in front of the TV while they use their iPhone or Smart-phone to carry out the same stalking activity. This we don't mind as a Mobile Phone shines out like a beacon on those shadows. Leaving an Ident Code, phone number and GPS location details...that's how we think we may have him...though of course we cannot guarantee that it is the person who abducted and killed Suffolk and who has abducted this other girl recently...but this person we are locked onto has been busy stalking several young girls simultaneously. I'm sure of it".

"No matter, it gives us a direction. Thanks for that".

I hung up and let out a stream of air in exasperation.

"Some guys like to go into detail, don't they?"

"You asked, Joe. If I remember correctly. Come on, Joe. We're entering the Court building, so turn your mobile off, okay?"

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

"You understand, the Court, as part of the process in your parent's divorce, has appointed me to discuss your thoughts on the family life as you remember them. I am not interested in the fault or not of either parent, but on how you view the break-up. Understand?"

The girl nodded. Reached for several tissues. Took her time to begin.

"We always had a kind of free house-hold when we were young. During summer, especially hot days, we would often get around in the nude. Mum. Dad. Me and Josh. Thought nothing of it. We even had showers together. All of us when we were younger. I guess it stopped as I got older and started to...you know...my body shape changed. I can remember Dad coming in at the stupidest times, especially when I was getting dressed. I never thought about it much but it started to get a bit heavier when I started to develop...you know...breasts and stuff. Dad used to take me shopping. I wanted Sports Bras and stuff as I was playing Soccer and enjoying it, yet he always wanted me to have lacy bras....and see-through nighties. We used to laugh about it, saying that men didn't have a clue. Mum used to say things to him. Get angry at him....and especially about the time he spent on the computer. Longer and longer. Up most of the night. I complained to Mum about him coming into my room, wanting to cuddle me. Tickle me but he always managed to touch me...you know? He always apologised but he didn't seem sorry...and it got worse the older I got. I told Mum. They had some big fights and then Mum ordered him out of the house and wouldn't let us stay with him over a weekend...but she felt that the Court may over-ride that...but she didn't care. She ordered us not to stay overnight with Dad. I miss him. He wasn't a bad father. Sure, he had his funny little ways but it was mostly harmless, don't you think? Like most Dads, I think. A bit of a pain with Dad jokes and stuff, you know?"

"Do you think it was harmless?"

"Well...you know...like...are you going to tell the Judge? The Police?"

"Do you think I should? The Court has instructed me to have a talk with you and your brother. Both of you are old enough for the Court to take notice of anything you say...why would you be concerned about me informing the Police of our conversation?"

"You know...like, what has been happening about the place on the Coast. Two girls gone missing...one of them turning up dead..."

"Do you think your father may have had something to do with those disappearances?"

She shook her head, bowing it to let her long hair fall either side of her face to hide her emotions. She blew her nose. Wiped her eyes.

"Like...I love my Dad...and my Mum...but I heard Mum talking to a girlfriend of hers about... you know. She said that she thought Dad may have been involved especially with everything else he had done through the years... like...especially with me. That's why she was trying to protect us...me especially".

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

We zeroed in the GPS co-ordinates and let the polite voice of the bodiless person direct us to the road that was on the western side of the small airstrip.

Shelley turned off and immediately the area plunged into darkness as there was no traffic, no light-poles and bush and tall trees on either side of the dirt track.

"How about we call for back-up, Joe". Shelley murmured as we crawled along. The dirt track gradually worsened with ruts and washaways making progress difficult for the former highway patrol vehicle.

"That's a side road, Shells. Pull up".

"We are still not on the GPS co-ordinates, Joe. Another three hundred metres or so".

"I'm just going to double check, Shells. Stop".

I got out and walked back to the old farm gate. Shone my torch into an empty paddock. Eyes illuminated getting caught in the beam. I did not know whether they belonged to cattle, sheep, or bloody Roos!

As I came back to the car I thought I could see lights further down.

"Slow, Shells. Drive on".

"That's a dog barking in the distance, ain't it?"

"Stop the car and I'll be able to tell you".

I climbed from the Unmarked and looked around, focusing on the ring of light thrown by the headlights.

"C'mon Joe. I'm famished and most of the Restaurants will be closed by the time that we return to civilisation..."

"Hang on, Shells...just a bit further on".

I began to walk ahead of the Unmarked that idled its way forward following me. A plane took off from the nearby grass strip. I had thought that there were no night services from the small strip. I was apparently wrong.

A figure suddenly emerged from the gloom into the spread of the headlights.

Naked.

Frightened.

Bent over trying desperately to hide her nakedness.

A large kerchief hung around her neck as though at one time it had concealed her entire face. A length of duct tape hung from the side of her cheek...it had at one time covered her mouth...

She fell into my arms.

Sasha jumped from the vehicle, scrambling to help.

Shelley chucked the Unmarked into Park, released the boot, and plucked out a blanket to wrap around the girl.

"Serina Vartook?"

She meekly nodded her head.

"It's okay. We are the Police".

I let Sasha lead her kindly to the rear passenger seat. Sat beside her hugging her gently.

Shelley shut the boot after extracting another blanket.

Sasha gently placed it around the girl's legs.

The girl was shaking uncontrollably.

"Back out to the track junction and call it in. Get an Ambulance quick...and extra help".

Shelley obeyed without saying a word.

We parked across the mouth of the track, unsure exactly where we were. Shelley bought up the GPS coordinates and copied them down before sending out a 'mayday' call for extra police support specifically ordering no sirens when approaching the position.

Within twenty minutes we had three Highway Patrol vehicles and a Paddy Wagon.

We waited for the Ambulance, discussing strategies as we stood about. Three women cops were fussing over the young Vartook.

I wanted a forensic team to attend as well.

Serina stated that she was sure she had been left alone for several hours except for two or three dogs, one of which had snuggled into her as she laid trussed on a double bed. Several blankets thrown over her, her only warmth against the chilly night.

"I want an 'All Points Alert' out on him. Do not approach as he will be armed...in his state of mind there's no telling how he may react". I asked a local Officer to put out the news.

A 'clean-skin' Police vehicle slowly rolled to a stop beside where the three of us were standing. Senior Sergeant Devlin curled himself out of his vehicle and came to shake my hand. I had not expected to see the man and was surprised wondering how he had found this point so readily. I guess the local police radio channels would be abuzz with the news of the young Serina Vartook being found unharmed.

An Ambulance crawled down the dirt road to stop beside our Unmarked. We let the Paras do their job. The young girl transferred into the vehicle with little fuss. We get a chance to interview her to-morrow sometime...

I could hear Devlin issuing orders over his radio for the girl's parents to be taken to Wyong Hospital to be with their daughter. Two Uniforms would follow the Ambulance and stay outside the girl's wardroom.

"How do you want to handle this? Wait for more men?" he asked as he again unfurled himself from his patrol vehicle. He would have control over the situation as we Murder Squad detail

were superfluous to the situation. Devlin was a little apprehensive to give orders without discussing the situation with us first.

"I don't think he is at home...the way the girl was talking. She managed to free herself of her bonds and just walk out of the shed...it's a bit rough so she said, but it's set up as some sort of living quarters...and she stated that she didn't see any vehicle in the driveway or under a lean-to carport where he normally parks his vehicle. She doubted she could identify the man...she says there were two...and a woman was there for a short time...they whispered to each other most of the time. I don't want to go in all guns blazing as I want as sterile an environment as possible for the forensic team to work through. How about we just walk in slow like".

"Mmm...I'm worried about the safety of my men..."

"Understand...then me and my partners will do a recce first. Okay? You and your boys stay out here and stop anyone from coming down that road..."

"Um...Joe? You're going against protocol. You're putting not only your neck but Sasha's and mine on the chopping block. Hear me?"

"So, what do you want to do? Wait for the Tactical Response boys...another hour or two...or the forensic guys. Another hour. Hour and a half. We need to secure that site and we are sure that there is no-one within cooee of it. Okay? Do you believe the young Vartook when she says that no-one was in or around the dwelling as she freed herself?"

Shelley huffed.

Nodded.

Checked her handgun.

Suggested that Sasha stay out here.

"You go in, I go in. You get into strife, so do I. We're not doing this for Joe but for that frightened, shit scared young girl who just walked out of there, okay?"

"And for Caitlin Suffolk". I added in a whisper.

Shelley nodded as she checked for an additional spare full clip of ammunition.

Looked up at me.

Nodded again.

"You get in the poo, Joe? So do we!"

I slipped on a Kevlar vest that I had taken from the boot of our Unmarked, handing the girls their own vests. Checked that Shelley and Sasha put them on correctly. I went through the process of checking my handgun. Watched as my two colleagues did the same. I checked my ankle holster out of sight of most of the Uniforms. Those that saw the action had smirks on their faces.

I didn't care.

"Extra clips?" I muttered to both my colleagues.

They both touched the vests to ensure that they had extra clips just in case.

They nodded.

I'd been here before on plenty of occasions.

With just my partner, Barry Holtz in the bad old days...and me flying solo after Holtz left the undercover life. That didn't seem to affect my nerves...they were jingling!

I glanced at both woman. They were nervous but fully aware. Their eyes wide yet alert.

I ordered all lights out so that our eyes could get accustomed to the dark.

A half-moon gave some relief as we crept down the track single file. About a five-yard gap between each other. I noted Sasha bent over double as she walked. She was lower to the ground than both Shells or me. Her eyes alive. Her mouth set. Her Glock held in both hands with it pointing down away from Shelley who was in front of her.

The track did a right-angle bend.

I went first, following the timber line so that silhouettes didn't stand out to be seen. A clearing opened in front of us. A 'drive-around' area in the front of the large shed.

A building loomed out of the gloom.

Tucked under some exceptionally large and spreading gums. It would be difficult to see from the air. Power lines looped to the shed. Three large water tanks down both sides. Fairly new

so it looked in the dimness. It looked like an old Farm Barn. Corrugated iron sides and roof. Several different heights. Two roller doors. A large lean-to down one side. Concrete floor looked as though it was recently poured as a couple of new slabs. I thought of the roll of Forticon plastic which would have been laid out over the sand or gravel sub-base before the concrete was poured. Mud tyre patterns went from the bare earth onto the concrete floor which denoted two different types of vehicles had recently been here...one for sure a 4WD with the wider tyres.

We circled the building twice before standing on either side of a door adjacent to one of the roller shutters.

A dim light inside shimmered through several dirty panes of glass.

A doorway beside one of the roller doors.

Unlocked.

I opened it slowly.

Motioned for both women to stay outside.

A low growl.

A pair of dark eyes looked out from under a chair located near the door opening. A dirty white coat. A small Maltese Cross with its tail wagging nervously.

I was surprised that it hadn't erupted into a white bundle of barks.

It looked undernourished. Abandoned. In need of a good bath and clip.

One large, open area sectioned off into various uses. A bare concrete floor that had throw-rugs in different locations to indicate assorted functions. Second hand and throw-away furniture was my take on the decor. A Dining table and three chairs. A sofa facing a large TV sitting on a small table. A toilet and Shower cubicle in one corner. A very large bathtub filled up the corner open to view. Two 'alcoves' formed by curtains hanging from steel cable that went the length and width of the shed. These 'alcoves' barely furnished. A double bed in each. A rickety bedside table in one. A straight-backed Kitchen chair in the other.

It looked as though he had few visitors.

A large double bed between the open 'bathroom' and a curtained off recess. All on the far wall of the Barn-like structure. The other corner separated off by hanging double sheets folded over wire trace lines tied to vertical steel props that went up to the high, pitched roof line.

I slid opened the curtains.

A king-sized bed.

Restraining ligatures still affixed to each corner leg of the tailboard and bed head.

An old, chipped, and gouged table that held a good quality Laptop and two external hard drives. Another old kitchen hard backed chair addressing the table.

The centre of his world.

His Universe.

I turned slowly as I heard a sound behind me.

The hairs on the back of my neck standing erect.

It was a Labrador sniffing at my leg. Its tail wagging slowly. The little Maltese terrier stood back, nervously wagging its tail.

I holstered my Glock.

They needed a feed.

I walked back over to the Kitchen looking for some dog food. Ordered both animals to sit and stay as I filled the two dog-bowls with dry food, filled another bowl with fresh water. With a wave of my arm, I gestured for both to commence feeding. By the actions, I'd say it was the first feed they'd had for some time.

I called the girls in.

Shelley looked down at the two dogs as they gulped down their food.

"Typical Joe. Looks after the needs of the dogs while we are freezing our tits off outside".

Shelley couldn't help herself.

The three of us couldn't help ourselves.

We couldn't help but laugh. It helped to relieve the built-up tension that the past hour or so had produced.

CHAPTER FIFTY

Senior Constable David Mills was no-where to be seen though I guess common sense would say he would be elsewhere.

We remained at the Barn-like structure until a Forensic team arrived from Sydney.

I estimated that they'd be on-site for at least three or four days.

We managed to get back to our accommodation at The Entrance around midnight. Nothing open. Bloody take-away at midnight not my first option. I'd be farting all bloody night! We had to retrace our steps to sneak into a 24-hour Maccas. Not the first time and it certainly won't be the last time that we fell asleep on a meal of Maccas.

Something that I wouldn't recommend!

The following day we shuffled around the Barn getting in the road of the forensic teams. Another team had arrived from Sydney early that morning.

We totally frustrated as we headed towards The Entrance as the sun started its dip in the west.

My Mobile chirped its beginning.

A simple buzz.

Shelley gave me one of her looks.

"Detective Lind? We've located the suspect...um...at The Entrance Park..."

"Leave him be, but make sure that he remains there. We're heading that way ourselves..."

"I doubt he'll be going anywhere as he's with his kids. They're having tea together...looks like fish and chips...the seagulls getting most of the chips...our suspect looks as though he's been crying".

"Okay...as I said, stay your distance unless he tries to get the hell out of there".

We arrived there to see that a large Police presence was noticeable at every point of escape. His only reasonable route out was The Entrance Channel which was flowing quickly put towards the sea...a change of the tide. I reckon that the water would be freezing!

Shelley, Sasha, and I walked up behind the seat that he was sharing with his two kids.

He looked up at me as I placed my hands on his shoulders.

"Joe? These are my two kids. Cindy and Jake. This here is one good cop, kids. With his two colleagues. Partners...how's the case going?"

"Dave...an arrest is imminent..."

He nodded his head. Offered us some chips.

He looked up at us.

"Can you wait until we finish our dinners...we don't get much of a chance to do this much nowadays. When the kids were little, we'd come down here every weekend to have tea. An ice-cream. The kids enjoyed it".

We stood behind the man and his two kids who were conversing with one another completely ignorant of a blue line that completely encircled our position...except for the channel.

"Dad? There's a lot of cops standing up on the high side near the shops. Cop cars with their light bars a-blinking. What's going on?"

His son looked across at his father with a worried look chiselled into his brow.

"Can you see your mother?"

"Yeah. She's standing up there with cops around her...Dad? What's going on?"

"I think you better go to her now. Thanks for having Tea with me...it's been a while. C'mon, go up to your mother...give me a kiss first, huh?"

"You okay, Dad?"

"Yeah...no worries. Give us a kiss, eh?"

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

We sat down beside Dave Mills. Me one side. Shelley and Sasha the other.

He offered us a chip.

We shook our heads.

They'd be getting cold by now.

Nothing worse than cold chips though I doubted the gulls would complain.

"I used to come down here with the kids. The missus. Every Sunday afternoon for a meal. They were good times..." He mumbled.

He began to cry.

"I can't tell you what happened, Joe...or why...one minute I was happily married, the next I was a fortnight Dad with nothing but the two dogs to keep me company. They really belong to the kids but they said that I should look after them as I had nothing to keep me warm at nights. They sleep one on either side of me...and then..."

He shook his head.

"I don't know what happened".

"Why did you take Caitlin, Dave?"

"I used to watch what the kids were doing on their Social Media sites...you know...being a Cop you know the trouble that those sites can cause...it became...I... I really don't know why... I was driving out of the Parking Area as she was jogging towards me. I asked her why she had returned. She told me that she had left her Training Jacket behind. I offered to drive her back to Maccas...she agreed. When she hopped in the car, I went to turn left instead of right

up onto The Entrance Road. Why? I don't know...I truly don't know...the missus drove in front of me...stopping me from leaving..."

He bent over to place his elbows on his knees and covered his face with both hands.

"...but I knew that somehow, I had passed a point of no return. Cattie said something about the wrong way. I jokingly replied that I was gunna head towards Mingara Maccas instead of The Bay Village Maccas...you know...as a 'Dad' type of joke. Silly me...we both laughed...she hopped out of the car and went to hop in the missus' car...I wanted to yell out not to hop in as it wasn't safe...the missus...that's her brother's barn out near the airport..."

He went to stand. I placed my hand on his arm and gently pulled him back down onto the bench seat again.

He nodded Sniffled.

"We didn't touch her for at least the first day, but I realised that no matter what happened, we would have to kill her...I began...you know...I'm so sorry...that's why I kept her tied up for all those days...knowing that I had to eventually but unable to...you know...it was the missus..."

I nodded slowly, wanting to believe what he had just recounted...but it was a little too hard to swallow. There was a whole lot more that he wasn't telling us...at the moment.

He would soon enough. If he could.

"Um...I know that I'm not in much of a position to ask a favour, but...would you mind not hand-cuffing me? I'll walk with you up to your car without no troubles. My kids? I don't want their last recollection of me being led up to a Divvy Van in handcuffs...would that be okay?"

I nodded. We stood as one and began a slow walk across the park and up the slope to the line of Cops that were standing forming a cordon. A couple bowed their heads. Others saluted. An indication of how some still respected the man. The cop that he had been.

I walked casually towards Christine Mills asking her was there anyone who could take the kids. She nodded pointing at a woman who identified herself as Chrissie's younger sister. A Uniform escorted her to a Patrol Vehicle. The two kids were totally confused looking towards their father, then their mother.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

The next morning, we sat opposite him in a small Interview Room at Gosford Police Station. We would get to his missus later in the morning. I had my doubts as to the guilt of the two as I believed one was hedging for the other.

Mills was chained to a chair sturdily fixed to the floor. His legs loosely manacled to the chair legs. He was dressed in prison greens.

The irony not lost on me.

We went through the preliminaries of identification, his right to Counsel and the charges that would be laid against him.

A Court appointed Solicitor arranged for him as the only decent Solicitor that he reckon he knew, was a Divorce Specialist who had sold him down the river. He was not, he stated, a great criminal lawyer.

He seemed in good spirits.

The monkey was off his back.

He had divested himself of his demons.

"The missus? She couldn't handle it no more. She accused me of spying on my two kids whenever they were in the Bathroom...or getting dressed..."

"Did you?"

"I...um...no...but it was a feign for her to divorce me...she would go out at night without telling me where she had gone...or who with..."

He dropped his head.

"Caitlin Suffolk...and Serina Vartook...they look remarkably like your daughter...what she would have looked like around the same age...did you molest your daughter as well?"

"No... no..." He shook his head vehemently. "What do you think I am?"

I could have answered that but chose not to.

These guys don't think that they've done anything wrong. Maybe yes, maybe no. Maybe his alarming behaviour crossed the threshold with the breakdown of his marriage. The stresses built up and exploded to manifest in the behaviour abhorrent to most of us. Who's to know and who's to care.

As Dean 'Shep' Presner, a local Magistrate that I knew quite well back in the old days, had famously but onerously stated when a young practising Paedophile was brought before him, *'you should be castrated and lobotomised for your obscene behaviour'* adding that it was the least that the urchin deserved. That provoked a nationwide response that was swift and grating! He was given an early retirement date because of his outburst. The Chair must remain civil, with no opinion offered and at no time was a member of the Bar to express anger or frustration at a person brought before him. An exceptional corralling of emotions no matter what they were was the lot of all Magistrates and Judges!

The civilised left wing amongst the plebs bayed for the Magistrate's blood, even though there were plenty of people who agreed with the sentiment!

You can't state such a thing. He found out the hard way. He took an early retirement and immigrated to the south of France where such punishment was considered in some circumstances...or so he had stated over a last Scotch with me.

I doubted the validity of the statement but wished him well all the same.

Why this had exploded inside my head as a foggy memory I had no idea. When looking at it, it didn't have that much to do with the case...it had more to do with what I believed was suitable punishment for these AO's. I wouldn't be as forthright as the brave, elderly Magistrate, but I had to agree, I was with him on this.

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

Shelley and I took turns with young Sasha in interviewing Christine Mills for four hours that day.

We were all mentally drained having charged the man and his missus with a string of charges that would afford a twenty-year sentence for both...hopefully!

We walked up the internal staircase of the multi-storey cop shop to the large Lunchroom.

A reasonable Coffee Machine that any Barista would be proud of took pride of place. It served excellent coffee.

Three different beans to choose from.

We slumped into hard chairs at a table in the corner of the Room, in front of a window that gave spectacular views of Brisbane Waters.

We were drained. Not wanting to talk as we were all talked out.

"What do you think?" Devlin asked as he sat down beside us with a sigh.

He would have watched the entire proceedings from the behind the two-way mirror or from the Audio/Video Recording Room adjacent to the Interview Room.

I shook my head.

"We've got both tied up seven ways to Sunday...but there's something not being said. Bail Hearing by the end of the week on their own cognizance...the Crown will object stating that several persons could be at risk due to Bail being approved. Preliminary Hearing in say three months...trial time in say eighteen months. Forensics will take about a week to go through that Barn and surrounds with a fine-tooth comb and another two to three months to collate all the information. We'll spend another two to three weeks doing interviews of family, friends, cohorts, and colleagues. We'll be ready for the first DPP Conference after that. Say in twelve to fifteen weeks' time...I'll bet my coffee that traces of Caitlin Suffolk will be found inside that rough dwelling. Um...Vartook's evidence will be the noose around their necks. Thank Christ we were able to get to her before she was killed...I wonder on her sanity for the rest of her life, poor child. The things she endured makes you wonder whether death for her may have been a mercy sentence".

Devlin nodded his head.

"How do you guys do it?"

"By concentrating on the positives of the crime...we saved a young girl". Shelley remarked. "But we haven't got the right man for the crime..."

"These Social Media sites...everyone involved in this case, including all the friends of both Caitlin and Vartook, are fully aware of these creeps...what they are doing...what do you call them? Ghost Riders? They know that more than likely, everyone who uses these sites is or has been a victim of this type of stalking without them even being aware of the fact...for what-

ever reason. Yet I'll bet that to-night most of the kids and a fair few adults will be back on their face-page conversing with one another for anybody else to spy on...to look at and to become a possible target...of some jerk that they will never possibly see...or even suspect that they are indeed being stalked...being sized up, perhaps, for other things by these sick bastards...". I ran out of wind.

He shook his head.

"I know what you mean, but it wasn't just Mills use of stalking on FB pages that was the reason for this crime...sure, we uncovered some utter AOs who use these Social Media sites for their own ends...six? Seven will be charged with various offences including stalking in the washout of this case...most of them will be bought before the Court on those charges to get a slap on the wrist and a Good Behaviour Bond. They'll be back doing the same thing within days of being found guilty and paying the fine...the over-all problem is the very ease that these Social Media sites offer to those who want to stay hidden. That is the problem...and the fact that the day-to-day Users of these sites wish to remain ignorant...or think they would be a victim to those parasites of the true dangers that these sites engender...and you can't correct society of all its woes..." Sasha added.

I thought her grasp of the whole case was excellent for one who didn't have the experience.

"I reckon it would be a safe each way bet that one of those seven will eventually be found guilty of stalking, grooming, procuring, manipulating and luring their subject target figure to their death...you can count on it!" Shelley interrupted. "You'll read about in the Newspapers within a year or five!"

I nodded angrily looking over at Devlin who had a funny look on his face.

"Yes, that's right, but Dave Mills? No!" I looked up the Senior Constable. "Why did he do it? If he doesn't know, then I ain't going to take a stab in the dark...a brief moment of madness...of darkness from which he couldn't step away from...every one of us has that spectre, that ghost...that dark side that when accidentally unleashed, can't be put back in the bottle. Some life crises...such as he had, may have been the proverbial straw...I don't know...but something allowed those secret urges to take over his sense of right and wrong...you've heard people say that it was a voice inside their heads...that's not that far wrong...we all have the ability to allow the dark side to take over...and that will be his defence, is my bet!"

I scratched the back of my head.

Pulled my earlobe.

Took a sip of coffee that was cooling way too quickly.

"But...I don't know...as I listened to him talk on that bench seat last night, I almost believed him...that he had no prior knowledge of this phenomenon...Ghost Riders indeed...but I am supremely optimistic that the Digital Forensic people will find Dave Mills shadow on several sites...of quite a few young girls that are not dissimilar to his own daughter but a couple of years younger. And the Digital Analysis Team will find that he has been playing these games on those sites for years without showing himself...and I do believe there is a 'Club' of like-minded persons up here on the Coast...your estrange wife? Why did she separate from you? No...don't answer as I think I know already...unlike Christine Mills, your wife wouldn't join the Club...would she?"

I turned to Senior Sergeant Devlin.

"Um...we will need to collate a list of girls...say going back five to seven years who have that similar physical characteristics to Caitlin Suffolk, Vartook and his own daughter who play some sort of competitive sport...he was an Under Ten Soccer Coach wasn't he? For how many years? Did he do any other type of coaching? Have any interaction with kids...particularly the five to fourteen-year age group of girls in other team sports? That list we'll need to give to the Digital Analysis and Forensics people so that they can investigate those Pages. He's been stalking for that long I believe...and before these Social Media sites became the norm? He was doing it the old fashion way...you know, physically stalking. Looking in through bedroom windows. That's the old fashion version of internet stalking...cute, eh?"

I looked over to Shelley for some form of back-up.

She nodded her head and grunted.

"That will confirm that he is a habitual Ghost Rider who was slowly festering...playing with time. It was always going to end in this manner...it will blow his defence out of the water if we can identify his shadow on those sites and his habitual history on his computer. I... I have no sympathy for the man".

I found that harder to say then I thought.

"The bloke who thought up these internet sites. He never thought in a million years that his product would be so misused for evil deeds...I think he still doesn't really believe it himself". Shelley added.

"So, what do you do to change things?"

"Educate...keep an eye on the way your kids use these sites...if you permit them to use the sites at all..."

"But there'll still be those bastards..."

"Which means we'll never be without a job then, eh? And Senior Sergeant Devlin, I'll lay odds your DNA will be found in that barn...and one set of those tyre marks will match your 4WD...so keep close to the Station as we'll be back to charge you as an accessory before and after the fact...by the way...were you having an affair with Mills's wife...and who is the leader in this little sick band? You, Mills, or his wife?"

Shelley leaned toward Devlin, jabbing her coffee mug at him.

"I'll bet Christine Mills had you two wrapped around her finger...Mills wasn't going through the rigors of divorce...but was trying to cut himself free of the insane and senseless acts she devised to enact on the poor defenceless girl barely in her teens..."

Senior Sergeant Peter Devlin sat there like a stone effigy, unsure what his future held for him...but his private life would be rolled out for everyone to see...

Pcb 01/08/2016

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