



THE LAST STEP

A MURDER SQUAD DETECTIVE
JOSEPH LIND CRIME STORY

BY

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MURDER SQUAD DETECTIVES

JOSEPH LIND,
SHELLEY ANNE SHIELDS

AND

AND PROBATIONARY DETECTIVE
FREDERICA 'RICKIE' STONEFIELD

THE LAST STEP

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This the 53rd Novella in the Series detailing Detective Joseph Lind and his partner, Detective Shelley Anne Shield. The pair were selected to mentor the young Probationary Detective Frederica Stonefield. She was selected from the substantial number of Probationary Constables at the Goulburn Academy because of her many excellent traits. Many thinking she would make an excellent Murder Dee. She did not disappoint but found herself on the wrong side of Detective Lind because of her inexcusable behaviour at a Youth Suicide death scene.

Synopsis

The Findings of the Royal Commission into the Institutionalised Abuse on Children within Australia shocked and astounded all caring members of Society. Right around the World, investigations into the sordid secrets of the Roman Catholic Church saw vast numbers of Parishioners turn their back on the Church they had loved, trusted, and cherished at one stage.

Here in Australia, the wretched behaviour of Church Elders was astounding. Approximately 61% were members of the Catholic Faith; 17% the Anglican Church and the remaining 22% were other Denominations and State and Federal Children “Homes”.

Over 3000 children were involved. A staggering amount who have never gotten over their grisly experience at the hands of trusted members of the Church.

The Royal Commission while brave to point the finger squarely at the Catholic Church for such horrendous acts by their Clerics and Teaching Brothers, could not assess the suicide rate of these child victims except to state it was above the National average.

While most Denominations attempt to cleanse themselves of further perverted actions, there are still Denominations who operate in an air of secrecy, even though this was one point the Royal Commission stated must change.

Several Denominations still conduct what could be termed as “Wellness or Worthiness” Interviews. These dialogues are conducted on 11- and 12-year-old youths and can continue in certain cases up until the child is in his early 20’s. The basis of these discussions is to cleanse the child of evil, unworthy and ‘wayward’ thoughts so they may be accepted into the Church of Their Lord.

Some suggest it is ‘Gay Conversion Therapy’ given another name.

As all Religions cannot accept masturbation or homosexuality within their Beliefs, saying that those thoughts and other not as radical urges were choices that the individual permitted the Devil to insert, with prayer and meditation, these thoughts and urges can be reversed, and expunged.

The young teenager is confused and vulnerable, now seeing that Society accepts the LGBTI community while the Church shuns them and continually applies pressure for the youth to abide by the Teachings of Our Lord which excludes the Homosexual fraternity.

No-one is certain on the suicide rate of this portion of Society, and it matters little as the Church Members cannot be brought to justice in causing these suicides deaths...and the cones of silence continue in all Religions.

CHAPTER ONE

“Sorry guys, I have a live one for the three of you. A teenage suicide. Sorry. We have been going easy on you, mate since you came out of Hospital...but that is now over. No more Mister Nice Guy for you”. This said with a smile on his face to soften the stir.

“Bloody Hell!” I retorted angrily. The show of animosity a charade to give our illustrious Head Clerk a back stab! “What with the bungled Sydney Jihadist Attacks, the ‘Bodies in the Bath’ Case, the Pommy Backpacker Murders, the Thallium Murder Case, and my personal investigations into the death of my AFP mate Knackers, I do not feel as though I was having a bloody holiday since I came back to work...fuck off, Hendo! Give that case to some-one else, will you?”

I knew in my heart that this hollow display of opposition and anger was not going to get me anywhere. Hendo had decided and there was no getting around the man. Not even a decent bottle of Red at Christmas time.

As Murder Dees, we were expected to attend all sudden and unexplained deaths to write up a Report to hand to the Coroner. This also includes Suicides, a situation neither Shelley or I enjoyed as usually there was no end play. Often than not, we are left to scratch our heads, unsure as to the reason for a person taking their own life. It is only a small proportion who leave a note to explain their decision to take the last step...the far greater majority we cannot ascertain why that last step was necessary, even when all family and friends were questioned. There is little satisfaction or closure for us...youth suicides are the worse. A young life shut done, often for no discernible reason that we could fathom.

That leaves us cold!

Hendo plopped the new Murder Book and details on my desk as Shelley and Frederica stood to walk up to investigate what we had hooked. The man was always on the wrong side of

insults and disparaging remarks whenever he felt the need to dump a new Case onto anyone of the Murder Dees' desks. It was incredible that he was still here after all that...over thirty years in the one job getting nothing but insults, so it seemed!

To his credit, he and Clive Butler, our Boss, never loaded one team more than another. Trying their best to even out the load. This at times was difficult as your time in DPP meetings after a Case has been resolved, Bail Hearings, Preliminary Trial Hearings to gauge whether the Case can go to Court, Trial Court time and the myriad facts and follow-ups that are required on any one Case can mean that you have on-going work on a particular Case stretching for several years. These things are not taken into consideration when a new Case is being handed out. The criteria purely based on the number of 'working' Cases one has where the alleged Perp has yet to be charged with a crime.

"Sorry mate, truly, but we have had a glut of murders over the past couple of weeks. We are no better than a lot of those Middle Eastern countries where to solve a family difference or disagreement, we point and shoot...or stab!"

"I guess we are still better than the Yanks. They're the ones who have the figures to confirm your theory, mate". Shelley smiled. "Another one this morning. A bloke goes mad with a shotgun in a Newspaper Office because he had a grievance against the Paper...five dead. All innocent people. Apparently, the two who were instrumental in getting the Shooter off-side with a damning Article had long left the Newspaper...proper homework is what the bod needed to do before he goes and shoots up the Newspaper Office...you hear of it too many times over there, huh? They are averaging one mass shooting *per day* across the U.S. It can't be that hard to realise that if guns are freely available, it will always be the sick son of a bitch who takes out his vengeance on innocent people with armament that was so easy for him to obtain. No questions asked...or very few penetrating questions".

"Yanks...when will they learn?"

"Don't want to go there, Shells...you make guns freely available to the masses, you were always going to be in trouble...now, there are so many guns out amongst the populace, even if you completely ban all sales of firearms in the Nation as of tomorrow, you will still have the problem. Yanks have got used to killing one another...and it won't stop...ever! In fact, under Trump's guidance, the country...and the World for that matter, are going to Hell on a fast Packhorse".

"Okay...yeah...I agree...What have we got, Hendo?"

I didn't necessarily believe in that viewpoint. Humans have an incredible way of overcoming adversity. May be if you add in Climate Change, over-population, and freshwater supply

problems for the masses, you may have a bit of a problem...but going to the Devil on a fast Packhorse? I don't know!

"A simple one so it seems, to get the old man into gear...he must be rearing to go...seems like a suicide. A young guy found hanging in the family Garage about half an hour ago. Local guys on site, Forensic Trace and the Morgue Team heading out that way now...close to your place, Rickie. Same suburb...you may know of the family".

She shook her head.

"No". She said forcefully "Suicide is not a subject that we encourage...or talk about. I doubt I would know the family...it's a diverse suburb".

I glanced at my watch. It had barely gone past nine. What a wonderful morning, I thought sarcastically to myself! A glance out of a nearby window to discover a glorious, sunny day. Just the day to end it all! The weather is never a factor so I thought...

"Bloody Hell! A teen-age suicide! I know it is a world-wide problem, but I read somewhere that the teenage suicide rate in some remote Aboriginal townships in far northern Australia is the highest in the world..."

"God has not found them..." Frederica muttered as she lowered her head. Afraid that her opinion may cause a response that she did not want to know about. I glanced over at her, then at Shelley who was frowning, not wanting me to reply but I could not let it go without a response. It just wasn't in my make-up. Shelley's frown deepened as I opened my mouth to reply.

"I don't think that is the problem, girl. More the opposite to my way of thinking where the white man's religion banned the Aboriginal tribes from retaining their own language, art, culture, and religion...and had their tribes dissolved into a mass of mixture to gather in Church-run Schools and Missions. They are now caught between the two worlds...and their lost world".

"That and the Charity Hand-out Merry-go-round...and the constant thirst for alcohol". Hendo interjected. "And their want to remain 'in country' while complaining there was no work for them to do out bush...which they do little to overcome their problem, so it seems to me".

"Maybe they could cultivate bush tucker plants in farms...there is a growing demand for that stuff, isn't there?" I added, wanting to continue with the subject. My eyebrows raised in jest.

Frederica stepped forward to continue with her two-bob's worth before Shelley abruptly broke up proceedings by suggesting we get to it...the day was vanishing fast. I gave her a startled look at her sudden interjection, blinking several times to show my surprise.

Hendo smiled as he walked away leaving the three of us to gather up our things and transfer the Case Information across to our iPads, creating another file to work on.

The juices should have commenced to flow as we headed towards the Lift Lobby...but they were languid, in fact. There was no enthusiasm as I gathered up my Glock, ID, and iPad, commanding the two women to hurry along. Shelley glanced at me, concern written on her face as the fire was lacking, noticeably so, just in the tone of my voice!

CHAPTER TWO

The three of us climbed from our Unmarked and strolled over to the First-on-Scene Officer who was now responsible for the Crime Scene Register. We signed on, saying our g'days and nattering about the lack of rain not washing away the plethora of viruses and germs that were starting to lay people low. We had an almost fifty percent sick leave ratio with every one of them having some sort of Flu or viral infection. It made things a little difficult with those who were well enough to make it to Work feeling the weight of the additional Cases placed on their shoulders. I mean, you couldn't very well refuse to take a Case. A dead body is a dead body that requires an immediate response no matter how you may be feeling that bright, sunny morning. Still...feeling 'off' was not the way to front a new case, no matter what the weather was like...and I was feeling off with a slight case of the Man Flu...an imaginary disease that will leave a man bed-ridden for weeks. Being nursed by a frazzled wife who must battle on even though she has the fair dinkum Flu!

I was still stewing over that fact as I strolled towards the rear Garage. Treading quietly down the side of the house that looked as though it had just had a new coat of paint on the gutters and eaves.

The house was a double fronted, brick-veneer joint that was in good nick and well maintained. The front yard and minimalist garden area neat and weed free. There was no front fence which gave the impression that any visitor was welcome. We walked down the side of the building towards a free-standing Garage that was one and half times larger in width and depth to a standard single Garage. The front Roller Shutter was up part-way and bright light leaked out through what opening there was. We bent down and went in under the Roller Shutter, purposely set at this height to stop passers-by from seeing into its depths.

“Joe!? You’re back on deck. Welcome back...a simple suicide case to get you into gear...good to see you back”.

All the Forensic Trace and Forensic Pathology teams echoed their welcome in pleasant tones. A little sick under the circumstances so I thought. It didn’t matter that I had been at work for about seven weeks...you don’t get to run into these guys that often...and it was usually over a dead body where small talk was hard to generate at times.

“I’m yet to figure out whether I’m glad to be back...”

“C’mon, Joe. You could never get the ‘bug’ out of your system. They will be dragging you out by the boot laces, that’s for sure...”

Isn’t it off-putting when people seem to know more about you than you knew yourself? They could ‘bang on’ about your future when I had no idea what I wanted for Lunch!

“They almost did...” I jokingly replied, the truth stated good-humouredly.

“Yeah, so it seems with it touch and go for a bit. Seems as though Shelley refused to let you die so the grape-vine whispers...takes a bit more than that to kill off an old brown snake!”

I gave a chuckle...it was the first time I’d been called that. I wondered on the implication of the statement. I shook my head to rid it of the uncertainty, the insecurity that showed up as my response.

“What have we got, then?”

“Jason Joshua Foster. Aged sixteen. Year Ten student at the local Public High School down the road. Probable time of death between eight and ten last night. He took off his shoes and stood up onto the Work Bench here before scaling up onto the rafter line. Tied a rope around the ridge beam with just enough length so that when he stepped off the rafter he was standing on, he would still be above the concrete floor level by just a whisker...as you can see, he worked it out to the inch...a long last step”. Andrew Waller, a recently appointed Forensic Pathologist Two, shook his head. He had been Bree Wzerlic’s First Assist for quite a while. “A waste, eh?” He philosophised, a genuine air of sadness in his tone.

“Would he have taken long to die?” Shelley asked. There was a flatness in her voice. These teen suicides affected her more than any other type of death.

“Arrh...I don’t think he died of strangulation. The signs aren’t there. More than likely, he separated a few vertebrae in his neck as he fell which caused detachment...severed his spinal

column...um...that will need to be confirmed with X-rays and an autopsy examination. The knot he constructed hasn't tightened sufficiently around his neck to cause strangulation...well, that is not factually correct. There would be sufficient weight in his body to cause the noose to be tightened across the front of the neck region to cut off the supply of air...if he had swung there without a broken neck..."

"To paraphrase...he did not die of strangulation but by the apparent severing of his spinal cord when the weight of his body on a downward trajectory was violently stopped. Fair enough?"

I looked across at the new FO2 who was now embarrassed beyond words. I held up my hand as a way of apology, patting him on the shoulder and shaking my head as I walked around the body still hanging in the brightness of the portable forensic lights which seemed a little surreal.

Sixteen!

Fuck!

When I was sixteen, I don't even think I knew what suicide was! It was way too early for a lad of that age to take his own life for whatever reason...he sure as hell must have been copping hell from some-one...School more than likely as that was where a bullying syndrome would fester amongst fellow students. Boys who often do not start out to concentrate on a particular fellow student, but when together with mates, it becomes a kind of challenge to be the leader...to be the smartest...the one with the cleverest tongue and wit to deride their choice of subjects. Usually those who either show a sign of opposition or who cower away from the taunts that shower over his body are the ones who cop it the most.

"Any obvious reasons for the lad taking his own life?"

The Forensic Pathologist shook his head, shrugged his shoulders.

"Any form of suicide note, to lend some light on why the lad took such drastic actions?"

"Arrh...you'll need to speak to the father, Joe. Can we take the lad down?"

I turned to Shelley, noticing Frederica standing nervously near the half-opened front Roller Shutter door. Shelley nodded her head to indicate she had seen enough.

"Yeah...he's been swinging long enough..." I muttered as I turned slowly away from the macabre sight.

“Excuse me, sir? Would I be allowed to say a few words over my son’s body before you take him away?”

I turned back around to see a short, slightly overweight man with a receding hairline and a salt and pepper tainted moustache standing at the side door into the Garage.

“Arrh, yes, surely sir. We will place him on a gurney in a Body bag but with his head exposed if you would prefer...we’ll leave the Garage to give you some privacy, sir. Afterwards, we would like to have some words with you if we may? You are his father, are you not?”

“Yes Detective, but I doubt I can add any more than what your colleague had just divested...but if it helps, surely. I understand that is the way these things are conducted...”

I was surprised by the man’s demeanour as though we were discussing the weather and not the formalities over the way we conducted such a Case...the body of the boy still swinging slightly as the Forensic Pathologist and two Morgue Attendants struggled to lower the now loosened body. Rigor had long left the young man’s body. The man watching our every move. I leant in to lend a hand as a dead body is difficult to manage.

His son’s body!! He did not offer to help in any way...

I bent down to exit through the Roller Shutter wondering why these people needed to pray over the cadaver. To them, from what I understand, his soul exited his body as the last sign of life was experienced. What lay before them was not the person they knew but just the earthly ‘shell’ that his soul had departed from. I scratched my head as I thought this...I too, would pay my respects to a cold, dead body regardless. Why? As an Atheist praying to a God that doesn’t exist seems a little...stupid! It goes to show how things picked up in some Church when I was but a mite still resounds so forcefully which says a lot about brainwashing and control even in a person who has totally rejected the concept of a Higher Being and all religions!

CHAPTER THREE

We solemnly followed one another out of the Garage to stand at the front corner of the house as Mister Foster prayed over the body of his son lying on the Morgue gurney half exposed out of a body bag. It was moments like this that most of us would light up a fag. Now, not one person took the opportunity! We stood around sheepishly with nary a glance or a locking of eyes noticeable. It felt strange with small talk difficult to start and to continue. It was

strange because that small talk, that repartee often occurred as we stood viewing a body, either mangled and blood soaked or not...it didn't matter!

Silly, huh?

Times have changed in a lot of ways, but I still patted my coat pocket looking for that dreaded packet of smokes...it has been almost ten years yet there were still occasions when the mind slipped and longed for that lungful of bloody, evil smoke. Go figure!

I wondered on the veracity of prayers over dead bodies...it was close to twelve hours ago that the last vestige of life was taken from this boy. I would have thought it a little late to pray over the body...because he committed suicide according to most religions that I knew of, he was excluded from entering through those Pearly Gates...so why the prayers? Was it more for the father and not his son?

I glanced back to the now open Garage to see our young Probationary Constable, Frederica Stonefield also in earnest prayer. Standing beside the man as they muttered some learned mumbo-jumbo for such a grim occasion.

"She lives around here..." I mumbled into Shelley's ear as I leaned into her. It was not a question but more me confirming the fact to myself. "She is religious, so you tell me...what are the chances of her knowing the Deceased and being a member of the same congregation as the Foster family?"

Shelley looked away without replying. Glanced towards the open Garage. My blood pressure ramped up a notch or two. If that be the case, she should have informed us of that fact as soon as we arrived at the address so we could excuse ourselves from the Case before we became mired in it.

I was not impressed.

"Don't jump to conclusions, Joe". Shelley softly warned, whispering into my ear.

"A ten-dollar bet, eh?" I countered, a sly smirk daring her to up the ante.

"I'm not going to equal that or up the bet..."

"That's because you have an inkling it could be close to the truth, huh?" A grim smile as I responded a little angrily. "Yer not likely to want to bet against a certainty, huh? You never do!"

She looked at me, that tight smile accompanied by a frown.

“Detective?” Mister Foster stood upright and began walking towards me. “Thank you for that...um...that moment...you can remove my son’s body now. When will we be able to bury him?”

“I don’t know the priorities or workload of the Morgue, Mister Foster. Usually, a Post-mortem is conducted within a forty-eight-hour period. If that is possible, I guess you may be able to claim his body after that day...you will be requested to confirm identification at the City Morgue either this afternoon or tomorrow. They will ring you. We would like to ask you and your wife a few questions if we may...after we have carried out further work here”.

“Certainly, yes. Come into the house when you are ready. I understand that a Forensic Team will need to look in Jason’s Bedroom...what they think they may find, I have no idea”.

“We also would like a ‘once through’ of the lad’s bedroom...to get a feeling for the lad...if you know what I mean. Does he own a Smartphone, an iPad, or a computer? Laptop or desktop?”

“Um, yes to the mobile phone and computer...kids that age today think it is a requirement to assist in their very existence. Um...yes. Certainly...follow me into the house when you are ready. Can my wife get you anything to drink? We do not have Coffee or Tea in the house...but lemon water perhaps?”

“Arrh...no thanks to that”. I looked at Shelley who shook her head. I was buggered if I knew where Ricki had disappeared to.

About half an hour later we followed the man’s footsteps into the house. He showed us into the Family Room and asked us to sit. His wife sat in an old fashion rocking chair slowly rocking back and forth, staring at a spot on the wall above the large TV that was a blank screen. Ricki was seated beside her holding her hand. She gave us a nervous smile as she patted the woman’s hand before breaking the contact nervously.

We waited some moments before Shelley opened proceedings.

“Do you have any idea why your son would want to kill himself?”

Both adults shook their heads in unison though their gazes never broke from spots on the wall opposite them.

“Is your son having any problems at School?”

Both parents glanced up at her and then bowed their heads. That was enough evidence for me. The lad was being picked on at School.

“Is your son experiencing sexual identity problems?” I didn’t expect Shelley to ask that question so early, if at all but because of the reaction to the previous question, I guess it was the next obvious question to ask. I bowed my head to hide my surprise.

They both jolted upright before Mister Foster angrily denied the allegation. I nodded my head, glancing at Shelley to see her nod her head slightly. I saw Rickie out of the corner of my eye looking quite startled at the accusation.

“Um...what School did your son go to?” Shelley continued.

“The local Public High School just down the road. He walks to School every day.

“What Year was your son in?”

“Year Ten...”

I excused myself and walked briskly from the room. I would make arrangements to interview the Principal of the School in a couple of hours.

“Did he have a favourite subject?” This merely an endeavour to keep them talking as they had shown scant enthusiasm to do so up until then.

“Maths, English and Science...they were his favourite subjects. He was good at them...Dux of the School three years running”. Mister Foster added more as an afterthought with no sense of pride in his mien or tone of voice.

Shelley nodded her head, more to confirm to herself that she had got them talking at last.

“A Student who obtained good marks in the important Subjects by the sounds of it. You must be very proud of him...” A warm, broad smile.

They bowed their heads again just as a Digital Forensic Officer stepped into the room, holding a Laptop, iPad, and a Smartphone in his gloved hands. He nodded his head at me as I walked back into the room. I looked at Shelley to indicate I had made an appointment to sit with the Principal of the School in an hour or two time.

The FO asked for me to accompany him after he had obtained confirmation from both parents by a nod of their heads that the three implements were indeed Jason’s property.

I followed him into the boy's Bedroom which did not correspond with my pre-determined idea of a sixteen-year-old boy's inner domain. I suspected his mother may have tidied up before our arrival...or as her husband was calling the Police. No boy of that age would or could be this tidy, I thought. What else has been tidied up, I wondered. I opened several drawers that displayed a neatness that I would never achieve. I opened a Wardrobe to find several coats, jeans, shirts, and T-shirts all meticulously hanging in the correct order with not a piece of clothing hanging where it should not be hanging. All the clothes hangers were of the one style and colour.

I let out a low whistle.

I went through desk drawers to find everything in its place.

"This guy is a definite OCD freak!" I muttered as I looked at several posters blue-tacked on the one spare wall. Even these showed signs of deliberate placing to create a tidy montage. Boy Bands mostly with an occasional female singer scantily clad as they all are these days. I wondered about that and what his parents may have opined taking into consideration their obvious religious convictions.

The FO seated himself on the side of the bed as he played with the smartphone, iPad, and laptop.

"Several large files have recently been deleted from both the Laptop and the iPad. I suspect his Smartphone may also have been juggled with. Can you obtain the parent's fingerprints?"

I scratched my head, pulled at my earlobe. A characteristic action for which I was known.

"Arrh...there is no evidence that the parents were involved in their son's death. We just cannot do such a thing without 'Due Cause'. They may be guilty of tampering with evidence, but we will not know this until we examine that information and determine whether it is relevant or shows they were involved in the boy's death which I don't think they were. Maybe they were involved in a way, but it was two steps back. That's the problem with suicides. You may be able to determine why the youth did commit suicide and what actions by what persons had placed him in such a precarious position, but it is obvious that no-one could be charged with any offence. All persons involved as I said before, are two steps off the crime of suicide. The Law considers suicide a crime within itself. A left-over from more rigid religious days. Um...are you sure of the deletion occurring this morning?"

"Yes sir...I'll lay a bet and say it occurred around the time the father dialled Triple '0'..."

"Mmm...the Forensic Trace people still out in the Garage?"

“Yeah, I think so...”

“Get the Fingerprint guys to do a search and lift of fingerprints around both sides of the family car...both near and off-side doors, above the door and around the handle and windowsill...we should get prints of both adults amongst the lot...the old man would be the driver while the missus sat primly in the passenger’s seat, I reckon. What, you have a clear print on the ‘Delete’ button of the digital devices?”

“Yep...on all three implements”.

“Okay, organise it. Can you still retrieve the lost Files?”

“Easy as...gives us a week or two. The person who did the deleting is not a Digital Expert I’d say. If you delete, it does not mean it is gone. Quite the contrary, in fact”.

These guys think they are the Da Vinci’s of the Computer Age. No-one else comes close to their expertise in all things digital. That pseudo-cleverness shat me off!

I nodded my head as I went to leave the room. I stopped in my tracks turning back to the FO. I was frowning with lines looking like deep crevices on my brow. My biological father had similar lines when he frowned. Hereditary factors sure make you think, huh?

“If you find evidence on any of the implements that would help us understand his actions, we may have ‘Due Cause’ to then obtain the parents’ fingerprints which could indicate which parent found it necessary to delete such information. To be clear-headed enough at the time to do such a thing may be illuminating. I’ll lay odds on the father. I don’t think the mother was thinking straight enough to do such things”. I muttered to him. “Let us know as soon as you can, will you?”

He nodded as I followed him back out into the large Family Room. The Technician stuffing the implements into Evidence Bags and sealing them. I was surprised to see Rickie now sitting beside Missus Foster on a two-seater Lounge sofa. Her arm around the older woman who was now sobbing silently. Mister Foster sat as though now cast in stone, looking at nothing in the middle distance.

I was appalled at the young lady’s actions. It was just not on!

We stayed for another forty-five minutes about, asking questions with answers hard to come by. They were not exactly cooperative parents that was for sure. Neither did they show any pride in their son and their attitude, enthusiasm and demeanour did not change for the entire

time we were questioning both, though it would seem the missus was the most effected by her son's demise.

Shells excused herself to rummage around in the lad's bedroom with Rickie. I was left alone to try and encourage the two parents to offer some insight into why their teenage son should do such a terrible thing. I was sure it was not shock that was affecting their reticence but for the life of me it was worse than pulling teeth trying to get them to interact! I obtained little that may have helped us in understanding the youth's motives in carrying out such a terrible thing.

It appeared to me that a rise in Youth Suicide corresponded with to-day's youth accepting the various Social Media outlets. All to-day's teenagers were constantly accessing each other on these forums with enthusiasm and total innocence as to the hidden dangers of what lurked within.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Shells? Pull over at that Park there, will you..." I pointed to the large Park ahead of us.

As the Unmarked came to a slow halt, I twisted in my seat to look at Frederica sitting behind me. She looked small and vulnerable.

"C'mon, Stonefield. I think we should go for a walk. Have a bit of a talk, don't you think?"

The Park stretched from one street to the next with a Cul-de-sac denoting the halfway point in the depth of the grassy, treed area. A lovely Park. We walked slowly along the winding path where beautiful large trees gave dappled sunlight. A large Playground was around somewhere going on the shrieks and screams of young kids. Perhaps a Pre-School that used the Park on occasions. The clank of skateboards could also be heard letting me know that a Skateboard Park was somewhere up ahead. I steered my young Probational Detective towards a seat that had no graffiti noticeable. I sat with a sigh saying nothing for several moments, instead looking around at my surroundings. Very nice, I said to myself. Very nice indeed.

"Joe? I know what you are going to say..."

"I don't think you do lass, going on your actions of this morning..."

She turned to face me, a look of anger...and something else on her face. Resignation perhaps, but it was obvious she was not going down without a fight.

“I’ve known them all my life, Joe. I couldn’t just ignore that fact. They are very prominent in my Church. As the Youth Fellowship Leader with my sister for many years, I watched Jason grow up and wrestle with his demons...I knew of them. He had confided in me several times. He was absolutely confused because he could not let God into his heart unconditionally. That is what you must do if you seek help from Our Lord. As the Youth Leader, the younger ones often confided in me...of their battles and constant struggles to expel the demons. I tried to help but failed so it seems. I did not pray earnestly enough. I will live with that as a burden to bear and a lesson of how hard it is to shed, to expunge the Devil’s work that has entered at a rare moment”.

This belief...this attitude irked me. She was now martyring herself thinking she had failed both the boy, herself, and her God. It was almost a ‘Jew type’ persecution complex where they believed they carried some form of guilt for all humankind that only they could see or appreciate.

“All the more reason why you should have told us...as soon as you realised you knew the family when we pulled up...or I suspect you knew before that when we were discussing the Address...you should have informed us of your personal dealings with the family so we could have excused ourselves from the Case...immediately! That was expected of us...it is the rules, the protocol written into our Policy and Procedures Manual, girl”.

“I thought I could be of some use both ways...I have intimate knowledge of the family and their goings-on”.

“You should know the Policy and Procedures Manual as well as me, young lady”.

She sniffled; blew her nose into a tissue she had retrieved from her shoulder bag.

“He...Jason...he didn’t try hard enough to expel those abhorrent thoughts from his mind...he did not allow Our Lord to save him. Now, he will never be accepted into the Kingdom of God as he has taken his own life...a terrible sin in itself. Homosexuality is an abomination of weak and sick minds that has no place in our Society...everyone has a choice with those unable to repel the Devil and his evil work forced to do his work for him for eternity. They were not worthy of entering the Kingdom of God...or worthy enough to marry into the Church”.

I almost stood to walk away as I was at the point of exploding.

Instead, I sat there, my whole body in some sort of rigor mortis. Silently counting to ten thinking I may need to make twenty before my heartbeat slowed. I looked around at the vast expanse of open space in the middle of suburbia...beautiful. The mature trees were plentiful and because of them, I could hear the incessant chatter of several different bird species. Listening to that allowed me to calm myself down...a good thing. I adjusted my sitting position to a slouch to appear to be relaxed.

“Young lady, I have no intention of discussing the rights or wrongs of your beliefs...or the standing of the Homosexual faction of society in depth...or how one becomes a gay person...”

“How can you discuss my Beliefs?” She spat out. “You have no beliefs! I’ve heard you and Shelley discuss stuff while I sat silently holding my tongue...”

“I have no intention of discussing Religion right now, the pros and cons...or my Atheist Beliefs, but what makes *you* people think you have a monopoly in the Belief Department? Un-bloody-believable! Just because I do not follow your thinking does not mean I do not have a belief in what I consider as an alternate answer...”

I had raised my voice, something I had not wanted to do. I took another deep breath and tried to relax my body a bit. I was all tensed up, at boiling point. I needed to start again and keep on the right track.

“Young Lady, we enter every investigation...every Case with what some people would accuse us of as an aloofness and a dispassionate and impartial attitude. You showed none of those traits this morning...” I cooled, hoping I could steer the conversation away from a personal opinion. “We must maintain a detached stance on every investigation...it is imperative if we are to look dispassionately at the facts and fiction of any investigation...”

“I know those people...have done all my life...their hurt, their feeling of disappointment was mine too...”

“That is what I am talking about, Rickie. You could not look at the Case with an impartial eye as you should in all instances. Look, I am sorry, but you leave me no alternative but to report this to the Boss. As a Probationary Detective, there could be dire consequences, the least having a blot against your name forevermore...”

She stood to look defiantly down at me, flicking the edge of her shoulder-bag strap nervously.

“I can walk home from here...” She eventually muttered. “It’s that street at the end of the Park. I will pray for Jason...and you”.

She strode purposefully away from me, sure of her opinion and beliefs. I watched her go thinking I should respect her for her depth of belief. Instead, I stood, shaking my head wondering how thinking, intelligent people can make themselves believe in bullshit...as though I knew the answers of the Universe better than others.

I didn't of course.

I wondered why I had got myself into such a pickle. Was it because of Rickie's show of compassion...her depth of belief...her complete disregard of the Policy and Procedures Manual...her willingness to place her position in such a compromised state...or was it my ability to reject such strong beliefs in such an awkward position?

I didn't know but the walk back to the Unmarked was long and slow.

CHAPTER FIVE

"How do you feel?" Shelley asked as she accelerated up the street.

"Shitty...this is a part of the job I really hate but as a Grade 4 Lead Detective, I've got to cop it. By informing the Boss of this morning's carry-ons, I more than likely am causing her career in the Police Force to crash..." I was silent for some moments trying as hard as I might to resolve the situation in my head. "She allowed her personal views and beliefs to overshadow her impartiality while on-site at a death scene...she knows the rules".

"You think so? That it will be grounds for her to be shoved aside? That's a bit heavy, Joe. She is a good operator. A quick and resourceful mind. Intelligent. She could be a good asset in another part of the Force, away from direct contact with the Public...or given another chance with us".

"It's not my call, Shells, but yeah, I've seen people given the shove for less, unfortunately..." I sat with a heavy heart not wanting to do what I had to do. Shelley broke the silence.

"So, she has taken the rest of the day off...that's official, huh?"

"Mmm...that's the least of her worries...jeez, the kid had to walk a fair way to School every day".

“Mmm...yeah, I guess so...but not as far as my father who would often say he had to walk bare foot for miles to get to School because they were so poor, they could not afford shoes. What shoes he had were ‘hand-me-downs’ from his older siblings that never fitted properly...hah, jeez, it’s been a long time since I last thought fondly of my old man...a bloody miracle!” She fell silent for some moments also, giving a little chuckle at her reminiscences. “Mmm...a parking spot...might be hard to come by...oh, no. we can park on site. Here we go...Official parking spot...put your sun visor down, Joe”.

The Sun Visor had an NSW Police Force Logo and “Police Business” in large enough letters for all to see if they so wanted to notice.

We wandered around for some time until we were given directions to the Principal’s Office.

“Please, come in. I’ve been expecting you. A nasty business all round. This is the third suicide of a School Pupil in the last eighteen months, I’m afraid”. He looked troubled as though he had only realised that fact in the last moment or two. “It doesn’t look good, and I am not proud of being the Head of a School where such numbers exist...” He skirted around his desk and offered us to sit opposite. “Growing up...going through puberty and beyond is becoming more difficult by the day. Who was it who said knowledge is power...he obviously wasn’t aware of the current climate with these Social Media sources abounding where fellow students can insult some-one, anyone, which is usually a fellow student within the confines and safety of their own Bedrooms in complete privacy, but it spreads, becomes common knowledge where it snowballs of its own accord. Kids find it hard to conceptualise the damage they do when they put negative things up on those sites for all to see...once upon a time, that type of insult and bullying tactic remained the product of the speaker and his object of abuse with nary another kid being privy to the comments. Now? Jeez, it is out there for the entire world to take notice...which is downright cruel...but their social graces have not matured enough for them to realise the damage such carry-ons can do...a real pity, but what do you do? Not even parents are aware of what their sons could be going through...on the internet”.

I nodded in agreement.

“You mentioned three student suicides...all around the same age?”

“Yes, unfortunately. Sixteen, seventeen. Around that age. All boys”.

“Any of the others? Would they be a member of the same Church that Jason Foster belonged to?”

“Oh! I really don’t know...should I find out for you?”

“Arrh...yes, if you could...”

The man slipped out of his Office muttering that he wouldn't be long.

“What's the relevance, Joe?”

“Of their religion, you mean? I don't know, haven't a clue but it could make for interesting reading”.

She gave me one of her looks as the guy hurried back into the room.

“Um...Paul Cutler wasn't, and he was the oldest of the three. He died of an overdose of his mother's sleeping tablets around four...five years ago. Matthew Kasich was a member of the Church...he committed suicide in a similar fashion as Josh Foster has...by hanging himself but in the local park just up the street. Flung himself off a tree with the branch breaking from the force...but Matt broke his neck...killed him outright. A sad episode as he was an exceptionally good Cricket Player though he tended to be a little aloof...the same as Foster, I guess. He didn't mix that well with other students. They were subject to internet bullying, so it seems which we were not aware of until after the deaths...but how do you stop it when it originates after-hours in a bedroom with the door closed and the parents having not a clue on proceedings?”

He was trying hard to distance himself and the School from the tragedies.

“Would you have an address for the lad? Matthew Kasich”.

“Yes...hold on”.

He tapped away on his keyboard to eventually give us an address, two telephone numbers, the parents and two siblings names.

“I'm uncertain, but I don't think they are now practising members of the Church. The boy died some three years ago, and I had to attend the Coronal Enquiry earlier this year to give evidence...”

“At Glebe Coroners Court?”

“Yes...um...Parramatta Road. A terrible business that I think I will have to repeat for Jason Foster's Enquiry. Something I am not looking forward to. A cow to get parking. Sorry about that...yes, Kasich was a member of the same congregation. The Church is just down the

road...we had the Pastor...he used to visit the School for our Moral and Ethics Class...and the Religious Class..." He fell silent, looking away from us in embarrassment.

"And?" Shelley urged.

"There were those who felt he came across a little heavily during the 'Same Sex Marriage' Debate. He may have been a little too biased and too forthright in his own beliefs on the subject. You know, the Church's stance was against any form of the SSM debate becoming law. Several parents complained to the School Board and things steamrolled. We had to ask him to leave the Classroom. Truly, a lovely man if not a little...um...too enthusiastic for his cause, if you know what I mean..."

We both nodded. Isn't it funny how we make allowances for a person who shows an almost fanatical stance when they purport to be Christian, but we can't make the same allowances when the person is Muslim?

I smiled at that thought.

"And Jason Foster?"

"A good kid...scholastically he was above average with him being Dux of the School in Years seven through to nine. He was going the same way this year..."

"Was that why he was bullied?"

"Who said he was bullied?" He replied, quickly looking up at me. A surprise expression on his face.

"We got that impression from his parents..." Shelley smiled.

The Principal nodded. Smiled sadly.

"Mmm...It's a lot harder for kids today as I said before...we are only just catching up with LGBTQI issues and trying to include tolerance and respect into the curriculum...kids will be kids, the world over. If anyone is different or shows any inkling to be a softie, a Teacher's Pet, or is a different colour or race, or shows aptitude in scholastic matters, the kids zero in on them. We now tutor these kids from Kindergarten onwards on the meaning of getting along, with bullying and intolerance not good news but it really means little if they constantly have the opposite displayed in their homes...it will take several generations before we begin to get on top of the situation...if we ever do".

“Jason...” I reminded the man. I felt this was one of his favourite subjects to which he was just warming.

“Yes...he is a very smart boy. That is one count against him...a smarty-pants...the other? He shows a delicacy...a sensitivity...there were those who thought he could be gay...or even more radical...a transgender boy...as they like to call themselves. Either way, that would not be...arrh...acceptable to his strict religious family. That was obvious on those occasions they came up during the Parents and Teachers nights...and I had several private discussions with them. They felt the School was encouraging his...um...as they said, their son’s abnormality flirting with the Devil”.

CHAPTER SIX

Shelley sat heavily in the driver’s seat of the Unmarked. Angrily inserted the key into the ignition before she slumped back in the seat with a heavy sigh. The engine idling with the A/C full on to chill the inside of the vehicle.

You knew by her body language that this Case was getting under her skin.

“Yer wonder...” She looked over at me. “After all the hoo-hah and hullabaloo involving the Royal Commission into Institutionalised Abuse of Children...and all the publicised details that went with it every night on the TV News...and similar reports worldwide of abuse in the Catholic Church...and the recent Same Sex Marriage Debate and its successful vote with that highlighting the large presence of gays and lesbians in society...and the general acceptance of that Army Transwoman...you wonder why this still goes on at the grass-roots level. I mean, according to the statistics, almost a third of all youth, boys and girls, between the ages of eleven through to eighteen, have questions...serious questions about their gender and/or sexuality...about fitting in with peers...about being liked by their peers...about having zits and whether they will leave bumps and puddles on their faces...about their misgivings and insecurity when they are shunned...about masturbation and how, if it feels so good, why it is a deadly sin...that it is not an abnormal thing. It makes you wonder. Not all youths at that age experience such questions, but there is a substantial number who do. It is a part of growing up”.

She shook her head and rested it on her arms as she held the steering wheel.

“Sure, the incidence of LGBTQI people in the community is about three percent...which surprisingly, is more than the number of First Nation people in Australia...or the number of

Muslims or Jews in the country...but during those rocky teen-age years, the number of kids wrestling with those issues, and more is around one in three...yet we still have this..."

She flung her hands out to show her anger...her disbelief. She shook her head slowly.

"He committed suicide because of outside influences...not being accepted by his family or friends within his Church, or his peers at School, not being accepted by his Religion as a worthy person and thus, not being accepted by himself because he *did believe* in his God who according to his Pastor or whatever, had now deserted him and his secret evil ways...he felt he had only one way out even though in his heart of hearts, he knew he would not be accepted through those Pearly Gates...sad, huh, in this day and age. We have not evolved that far, have we?"

She half-turned in her seat to look at me.

"What shits me right off is all Religions still demonstrate their disbelief and tacit ignorance of the Findings of that Royal Commission and remain bloody silent on wanting to change a bloody thing. Their acceptance of only those who show the outward signs of normality even though statistics show that a high proportion of those "normal" people in Society are wife and children abusers...I mean, you can't tell me that those who go to Confession do not open up with their Priests...or whom-ever, on what they are doing or are being subjected to in their marriage and homes...yet those fine upstanding "Dog Collars" are still not willing to report such cases to the Cops because of...because of their own Teachings and belief against such things. It is as if *all* Religions have always protected the guilty and not the innocent!"

She sighed deeply.

"I hate this type of shit...it is so...laughable and smacks of duplicity and double-talk! Know what I mean?"

She angrily swiped at her eyes and looked out the driver's side window. There was silence for a while. She then half-turned back to me, her hands clenched into fists, spittle flying from her mouth as she spoke. She was sure fired up!

"Know what I mean...that Royal Commission showed the Catholic Church especially, ignored child sexual abuse within the Church and its subsidiaries. For how long only their God knows but I'll take a bet and say it manifested itself when the Bible emerged as their Gospel in the ancient world teaching of a merciful God and that is why there is this wall of silence to protect them throughout history. Protect that paternal Order that they constructed for themselves. Able to do as they liked behind that veil of secrecy. But it's just not that. Imagine how many women sat in silence because their Priest, in a Confessional, made the

woman feel as though it was her fault when her husband hit her! How many, huh? Take a guess! Fuck! Three Hail Marys should absolve the Priest of any responsibility, ignoring such behaviour to minimise his responsibility...and that of his Church...and to protect the paternal lineage and standing within that closed Society and Society in general. Give me strength!"

I had nothing to say in response which was a rarity for me. We sat in silence for some time, watching kids and Teachers walk briskly from one building to another, from one Classroom to another. The pedestrian traffic seemed nonsensical and chaotic to me.

I broke the silence.

"I never had those thoughts when I was a teenager...you know, wondering whether I was gay...or even locked in the wrong body. Now that would be close to torture, I reckon...I do not even think I ever preferred boys over girls...the complete opposite in fact. I never had that question mark hanging over me...always uncertain as to where I fitted in Society, in the family strata and with my peers...that would be hell! In fact, I cannot remember ever being bullied...it may have been the other way, in fact..." I chuckled. "...and masturbation? It was never something I liked to do...does that make me a rarity as a teenager?" I offered, a smirk on my face at having to admit I may have been a bully during my school days so long ago.

No, I told myself. I was a model student right through school!

"Mmm..." She glanced at me. "A fine upstanding example of one of the two out of three youths who are considered 'normal'..." She chuckled at that. "Normal! Check it out, huh? Dah-da-dee-dah!" She beckoned with both hands, offering me up as Mister Normal.

I was not amused, saying so which only made her giggle!

I wondered why she found that comical.

"Yeah..." She continued. "...and to those kids caught in that world, that world in between, it must be torture...most of the Churches will nod their collective heads in unison and spruik words of understanding and contrition, promising to clean up their acts but they will all continue on their merry way. Look at the Catholic Church! We all know from that Enquiry they were by far, the worst offenders when it came to Child Abuse. The Catholic Church having around 61%, then the Anglican Church with 17% and other religions, Government Establishments for kids and Sporting Bodies making up the rest as far as child abuse was concerned. What have the Catholic Hierarchy done? Appointed a Committee, chaired by a non-Church member, to prepare a Report *in response* to the Final Findings of the Commission. That one-thousand-page Church Report has been completed would you believe. It will *never* be made public according to the Higher Clerics of the Church...why? A cloak of

secrecy still pervades the Church. Every Diocese across Australia is not willing to go against the sanctity of the confessional...yet it was one of the *main* points that the Commission said was necessary to enable Priests to report to the Police any indications of any form of abuse and Domestic Violence...so you can bet all priests will be averse to reporting such carry-ons by fellow Priests to little kids, so we have exactly the same environment that existed prior to the Royal Commission.”

She paused and breathed deeply several times.

“After millions of dollars, the bravery of the Abused to come forward, and a lot of hard investigative work by a lot of good men and women, the same rules still apply. These fucking Churches think they are above the Law of the Land and answer only to a higher being! What does that remind you of!? Those fucking young jihadist terrorists of the other week!! We severely criticise them and imprison them for life because they are in your face and killing us...but the scourge of Religions continues to do the same thing but in a more insidious, pervasive manner...fuck it makes me mad!!!”

“Okay, Shells, I get your point, calm down, huh?”

“C’mon Joe. This is not the first suicide we have attended where the deceased’s religion has a bearing on how the youth sees himself which causes him to take that last step...and I can tell you now, it won’t be the last!”

I nodded slowly in agreement, thinking of how Frederica had spat out the words that homosexuality was an abomination. An intelligent, well-educated young woman who could still be so easily swayed by such nonsense that is her religion...in all religions.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Back to the Office?”

“Narh...I need the fresh air...how about lunch beside the river. We aren’t that far away from it, are we?”

“Mmm...no...or the Panthers Leagues Club. They do a good lunch. We’ve been there before, remember?”

“Mmm...The Church...where Jason attended Sunday Services, I presume. It’s around here somewhere...and the address of the Kasich family. They must live around here somewhere”.

“Google it up on Google Earth...and then just compute it into Miss GPS to direct us to the spot...and not somewhere in Darwin...or Brisbane”.

“Perth? You’ll accept Perth, I see. Melbourne and Adelaide too! I hope you have a change of underwear with you...it’ll take a couple of days...about four or five with us taking turns at driving”.

I heard her sigh in exasperation.

I stopped and looked down the street on which we were parked. Typical suburbia.

“Why didn’t you fill me in, Shells? You know, about Rickie and her...um...the depth and feeling of her religious beliefs?”

“First up Joe, it is none of our business if we want to stay away from any accusation of discrimination and be tarred as racial and religious mongrels and intolerants...and up until today, it has not been a problem. Sure, there has been moments...but you can overlook them. Secondly, knowing you, if I had been straight with you about her beliefs, I feel sure that you would have goaded her at every opportunity. You are somewhat of a zealot yourself, in your atheist views...”

“Thanks a lot”. I sat mulling over her words. “You really think that? That I would have ridden her into the ground you think!? I don’t know”. I muttered more to myself.

“Yes and no. I know you wouldn’t have picked on her as such, but you would voice your opinion at every opportunity...” She looked over at me, that patronising grin a mile wide. “Joe? I was protecting you. The first words you spoke that would challenge her beliefs, she would have been onto the Ethics and Standards Committee making a formal complaint against you...lay odds”.

“You reckon?” I thought about it. I would, she would have and then I would have been in all sorts of poo. I really didn’t need another black mark on my Personnel File, and you can bet a packet, Rickie would not have been backward in coming forward. “Yeah, you’re right, Oh Wise One...again...but look at the other side. If she had ridiculed *my* beliefs, would the Ethics and Standard guys uphold my complaint? I do not think so...”

She gave me that tight condescending smile again. She’ll do it once too many times and I’ll be the one to stick my Glock up her nose...I smiled secretly at the thought.

“C’mon Tonto, find out where that bloody Church is, will you. The Kasich address may be on the way to the Church...hurry up, I’m starving”.

CHAPTER EIGHT

We knocked on the door of another typical suburban home where the occupants took pride in the neatness of the place.

“Who’s there?” A muffled voice from behind the closed door.

“Arrh...I’m Detective Joseph Lind with my partner Detective Shelley Shields of the NSW Police Force”.

“Is this a joke or something?”

“No, Missus Kasich...it is Missus Kasich I am speaking to, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but why do you want to speak with me?”

“Missus, we are from the Murder Squad based at the Police Building in Parramatta. We are investigating the suicide death of Jason Foster yesterday evening...he was found this morning by his father...you may have heard through the grapevine...or watched it on the News last night...”

“Jace!? No! Jason Foster? No! He has committed suicide!? No! Oh, Dear God”.

The door was hastily opened. She was a mass of nerves and had to try several times to unlock the Security Screen door that still barred our entry. She eventually swung the door outwards, asking us to come in after she had a look at our ID Cards.

“Come through. Come through. I was readying for work...but I don’t think I could go now. Will you excuse me while I ring work...and make an appointment to see my Doctor...Jenni will be extremely upset. She is my youngest daughter. The same age as Jace. He and she have been firm friends forever. He was gay...so Jenni thinks. That bastard Church and the slimy Church Head. He is the culprit...I’ll just make those calls”.

I could hear her on the phone. She also rang her husband and the School, asking that her daughter Jenni Kasich be permitted to leave at this time and come straight home. I also smelt

the rich aroma of coffee beans. This woman had her priorities in order. She eventually carried mugs of beautiful aromatic coffee for Shells and me. She ducked back into the Kitchen to grab hers, a sugar bowl, and a carton of milk.

“Help yourself”. She uttered quietly as she settled in a chair opposite me. “Okay, what happened and why have you come to me with this tragic news”.

I explained the situation with the Head of Jason’s High School knowing she had lost her son, Matthew to suicide as well...and it was noted that she and her family were of the same faith.

She shook her head, looking into the middle distance, her hands cupped around the steaming mug of coffee.

“Yes...we were once a part of the same congregation as the Foster family. My other three kids including Matt were several years older than Jace. But Jenni, as I said before, was the same age as Jace. As we knew of Matthew my son being gay, we also knew Jason was gay. It was as plain as the nose on your friggin’ face. Both Jace and Matt were gifted pupils...destined for greater things...until that arsehole talked us into allowing Matt to be included in the ‘Worthiness Interviews’. While it may sound a little strange that we accepted Matt’s...um...gayness, it was against the Teachings of the Church. I think it may have taken that AO eighteen months, close to two years to destroy...demolish Matt’s love of life and acceptance of who he was. He became morose, nervous, fidgety, and completely lacking any enthusiasm. Depressed most of the time with that brilliant smile and contagious laugh all but missing. Both me and my husband had it out with the AO, telling him we were taking Matt away from those weekly Interviews. His response was that Matt would wallow around in the ether not being accepted into God’s Kingdom...and stuff like that. All that did was get me mad!”

She took several sips of coffee.

“We didn’t really realise how down Matt was...until he committed suicide. He left a note on his iPad for us...he was caught between a life with God and a life without God and being gay as well...this was well before all the LGBTI business, Same Sex Marriage and gays being accepted by the wider community”. She shook her head and swiped away a tear. “All that stuff came a bit too late for Matt. The Detective who interviewed us? A woman. Genuinely nice. She felt our pain...um...Peta...Peta...”

“Peta Daniels”. I offered.

“Yes. That’s her. She had left the Force before the Coronial Enquiry was held, but she showed up to help us through it...it surprises me that the Law cannot charge the AO with any crime

or having a connection in the death of my son. It's still the same, isn't it?" She didn't wait for me to nod my head. "None of us...my entire family decided to turn our backs on that AO, the Church and religion in general. A God of Mercy who loves all children? You gotta be fucking joking".

CHAPTER NINE.

It was on a corner block, two streets over from where we were parked in the School yard and one street over from the Kasich home. A low-slung building with a modern steeple rising from the front façade. A large parking area come Basketball Court off to the left.

"Why do they still do that? They aren't permitted to ring a bell for Service anymore, are they? Sound pollution or whatever..."

"Mmm...don't know...ask the Architect...there's a bloke working in the garden. He may know where the Head Honcho guy hangs out. What would he be known as? Padre, Pastor, Father, Elder or Big Daddy?"

"A Gardener, as far as I know...as he is working in the garden". I replied deadpan.

That earned me a painful wack across the chest with a straight arm for which I was not ready. I felt a moment of sheer panic, worrying about the heart that wasn't mine, giving up on me. Like a true trooper, it kept on beating at an easy tempo...

"Steady on, dear girl. You could wack my heart beat out of sync..."

"Yesss...if only!"

I tell you...one of these days she will go that one step too far!

I felt I would have a bruise for weeks to come. I wondered whether her action could be construed as an assault...or just a way to shut me up. As I went to alight from the Unmarked, my chest hurt and I had trouble breathing...bugger me, she *has* hit my heart out of rhythm, I thought. As I stood, the pain went away...just as well...

Shelley sighed in resignation as she alighted, slamming her door as she walked away, shaking her head in exasperation. She walked steadfastly to the figure kneeling alongside a flower bed. Blooms of assorted colours brightened the austere shape of the Church.

“Good afternoon, sir. Would you know where the Bossman is? I do not want to sound disrespectful, but I do not know the correct...arrh...you know, how the Head guy of this Church is addressed”. She smiled to show she wasn’t trying to be a smart-arse.

The guy struggled to his feet, arched his back several times before he took off the right-hand dirt-stained glove and offered his hand to Shelley.

“Henry Farmer. You have a choice. Either Henry or Elder Farmer. I am the Bossman as you named me, of this Church and Parish. What would you like to know?”

“You love gardening and have a green thumb, so I see. The gardens are beautiful”.

“Thank you. I enjoy the solitude that gardening permits me when some of the Parishioners aren’t helping. Don’t get me wrong, I love it when they pitch in...but I am able to think more clearer while I toil away amongst some of God’s most perfect creations. What can I do for you?”

By this stage I had come to stand beside Shelley, offering the man my hand as I took out my ID Card.

“Jason Joshua Foster. We are investigating his suicide of last night...he was found this morning by his father hanging in the family garage. Mister Foster was heading out driving to work...he called in sick, unable to look at the day”. Shelley stated as she shielded her eyes from the mid-day sun.

The man nodded sadly. Looked around at his surroundings. Took his other glove off and ran his fingers down either side of his chin.

“Yes...Jason. A sad event. His mother was devastated. I was with them this morning to offer them comfort and to pray with them. I must have just missed you at their home. They will need my sympathy and understanding over the coming weeks and months...possibly years. Our Lord will walk with them to give them strength...”

“Is there somewhere we can talk?”

“Yes, of course. How rude of me. Come across to my home. My wife will make us some beverage and sustenance. Yes? That house there. It is on the same block of ground as the Church. Come. Follow me”.

CHAPTER TEN

“The Foster family have been a staunch part of our congregation for a long time now. A lot of years. They were a founding family in this Parish. A tragedy has struck them, and they deserve our prayers...”

“Were you aware that Jason was gay?”

“I was aware that he had allowed those thoughts to enter his mind. With prayer, meditation, and strength, he was overcoming those evil thoughts...to permit him to be welcomed into God’s Church...and to make him a wholesome person to be able to marry within the Church...another Church member of his age, and yes to cleanse him so he will be accepted by our Lord, Jesus Christ”.

“Evil thoughts?” I looked around at the bare and austere room displaying no warmth or friendliness, a smile beginning. “Hah...he believing he was gay is evil thoughts to you and your kind?”

The man looked across at me. There was genuine sadness in his eyes.

“As a member of Jesus’ Flock, we believe that homosexuality and other such animal bestialities is a mortal sin in the eyes of our Lord...it is a choice of lifestyle that can be altered...changed...removed”.

“As written in a book of around two thousand years ago well before Medical Science was two words, let alone a major component of modern living...latest research shows that the question of sexuality and gender manifests themselves in the first and second trimester of the pregnancy of a woman”.

“For some that maybe an alternative but the Bible is quite clear...there is more scientific research papers that conclude such behaviours are a matter of choice for those who wish to allow such desires to take hold”.

“Outdated conclusions usually written by persons who have similar beliefs that have been disproved by modern research...”

“So, you say, Detective...so you say”. He nodded his head, a smarmy smile that was supposed to display a sense of superiority. To me it was a false smile.

I wondered whether he believed in Climate Change. Probably not, wanting to believe the one-point five percent of those scientific people who debunk the theory. Ignoring the other ninety-eight-point five percent of Scientists in the Earth Sciences across the world who hold dire consequences for humankind if we ignore the symptoms and carry on regardless.

“It is an amazing period of Genetics and Hereditary Research...”

“That still will prove in the end, the truth of His Word...and not the mumbo-jumbo that so-called experts spit out that is contrary to His written word”.

“You seem to poo-poo what can happen within the womb of the foetus. Hair colour, eye colour, left or right-handed, a tendency towards certain ailments...and the list is endless”.

He looked at me with a slight smile without commenting.

“Were you helping the young lad with his...arrh...problem?”

“I see Officer, that you do not follow the word of our Lord...it has relevance to-day as it did when first written with the help of Our Lord and yes, I was there for Jason in his time of need...”

“You are a trained Psychologist? A Psychiatrist or Counsellor, perhaps?”

“I teach the Word of our Lord and seek his guidance in helping members of his Flock...”

“So, you have no educational or professional qualifications?”

“I was selected by others who in deep prayer, gave me leave to lead this congregation in Praising our Lord...in spreading His Word...and in helping our young ones overcome sordid thoughts”.

I nodded, already tiring of his condescension and piety.

“How long had you been helping Jason? Arrh...with his *minor problem*?”

“Since pre-pubescence. We have counselling sessions with all our young folk from around the age of eleven or twelve right up to early twenties with some of the youth. Those that show difficulty in overcoming their neuroses and evil thoughts”.

“You do? Without anyone else being present?”

“I have the full approval of all parents. It is a way of judging whether sinful thoughts are being allowed to enter young minds...as those thoughts can enter the mind at an unguarded moment, we can reverse those evil thoughts and banish them forever from their thoughts...making them wholesome and pure to accept God’s Word...all in prayer and meditation”.

“Eleven or twelve!? Young children!? Are you aware of what occurred during the Royal Commission into Institutionalised Abuse of Children?” My blood pressure had stepped up a notch or three. I spread my legs as though readying myself for physical violence. Wanting to immediately spring from my chair. “You discuss things such as masturbation...arrh...lusting after some-one of the opposite sex...having erotic dreams? Stuff like that? So much a part of growing up!? You introduced those terrible thoughts to young ones who may not have even thought of those things...you do realise that?”

He ignored the assumption as though he was innocent of all possibilities not of his making. He was the instigator of pure thoughts...yet he knew of the other side and the devil’s work!

“You may claim that it is a part of growing up. To us such thoughts are the work of the devil, sir. All youths require some counselling, some more than others...”

“Says a lot about how they were reared, I would have thought...you know, if these thoughts are considered incorrect...a mortal sin, perhaps you should include similar interviews for the parents. Seems to me that a good proportion of God’s Speakers...Church hierarchy of the many religions were also harbouring inhuman thoughts...infused by Satan into these upstanding Church members...and actions according to what the Royal Commission uncovered...it was also found to exist in your Church too. Why would that be so?”

“That Royal Commission was a witch hunt devised by an Atheist female Prime Minister of Australia to undermine and sap the power of Religion and the Church in this great country...and His Word in this country. Nothing more, nothing less...it was a step backwards when Tony Abbot was removed as Prime Minister of this country!”

I almost stood to walk out of the house...or belt the stupidity from his mind. I did neither, sitting there seething at a man who felt himself and his Faith above the Law.

“So, you find all that was exposed during the Enquiry of no importance?”

“It showed that there were some sinful persons hiding behind the words of our Lord as there will always be those who are swayed by the Devil’s word”.

“Some!?!? It is estimated that two out of every five Priests are Child Abusers and Paedophiles...that’s a worldwide figure! The Head of the FBI in the U.S. suggested that the

Roman Catholic Church worldwide was the largest ‘gathering’ of paedophiles and gay persons in the world after the Archbishop of Boston was imprisoned for past paedophilia acts against his young Parishioners ...which is incongruous as the Pope last year expelled a young Priest from the clergy in Rome for declaring publicly he was gay...”

“They belong to the Devil’s Church that practises ancient pagan rituals, custom and dress...our Lord Jesus Christ always dressed as an ordinary man, not wrapped in the colours of Satanic worship. This is the *one true* Church”. He swung an arm wide. “The one true Church that the Lord has blessed. As is written, we question the youth of our Church to consider their worthiness. Unfortunately, Jason Foster permitted evil thoughts to enter his mind which began to take over his very being. We really had to work hard, but it is sad that Jason was not up to the important challenge to cleanse himself. To permit him to wed and have children as the Lord teaches...within this Church”.

“It’s funny, isn’t it? But all Denominations of Christianity believe they are the one true Church. Confusing, isn’t it? They all worship the Bible. The same Bible only amended in minor detail is the Bible that all Christianity worships with. The one that is based on the original Roman Catholic Bible. All Christian Denominations spread from those beginnings”.

“That is correct in a general way...but we also have a second book that is Jesus’s experience in the New World. Through that we know we are the *right* Church. The Church that Our Lord has blessed”.

There was no arguing or trying to make sense with this man. It was useless. Shelley’s expression showed she agreed.

“The elastic bands around Jason’s wrist and the signs that he would stretch the bands to snap back and hurt himself...you were conducting Gay Conversion Therapy on the lad? Weren’t you? For how long?”

“I do not believe in that form of Therapy. What we do with every child in the Church when they reach eleven or twelve is conduct an interview that we call ‘*Worthiness Interviews*’. With Jason, those secret and evil thoughts manifested from his early teen-age years when these inner urges were becoming stronger in the boy...the elastic bands a way for him to admonish himself when-ever those evil thoughts manifested themselves...appeared in his brain”.

I shook my head in disbelief. What I was hearing may have sounded logical to a less educated gathering in the Eighteenth Century in rural America, but it failed to impress me in the twenty-first century.

“Still a form of Gay Conversion Therapy”. I replied. “Do you realise that such Therapies have been debunked by much of the Psychiatric fraternity as being counter-productive? And that these practises are becoming illegal as most States of Australia legalise against their usage...doesn’t that tell you something?”

“Some, not all...and it is not illegal to carry out such practises in this State at the moment...we practise what one would call interviews to cleanse the child’s mind...which is not Gay Conversion Therapy...”

“A rose by any other name...” I uttered sarcastically. I shook my head. “Um...such manifestations of thinking the child is gay would be in the minority...the normal young teenage habits and thoughts would not require such stringent methods...that would be true enough, wouldn’t it? The vast majority of those that you interview would not have such radical thoughts...that small minority would be confused and vulnerable...more liable to self-harm than the majority...and yes, I will say that there would be one or two who could tamp down their innermost thoughts for you to be satisfied that they have overcome those secret desires. I will never call them sins or evil...but what a life living as some-one else and not yourself...I would imagine that be true torture”.

He looked at me with an unflinching glare. I was of the opinion he thought me a lost cause not worthy of saving.

“Those that conquer those evil thoughts are deliriously happy knowing they are living a life that Our Lord would treasure. They are the true Children of God as they have overcome many of life’s trials”.

A condescending smile as he felt he had said the Truth.

“Matthew Kasich? He was a member of your Church. He also grappled with thoughts of his own sexuality. He hanged himself in the neighbourhood Park...some years ago. Would that have been after he had a ‘*counselling*’ session with you?”

“That was several years ago now...I do not recall, but he along with Jason will spend eternity walking through the shadows, never being permitted into The Lord’s Kingdom as suicide is a mortal sin in the eyes of Our Lord. All we can do for those lost souls is pray for them. Perhaps God will show them mercy in the future”.

I had had enough. I stood, thanking him for his time but not shaking his hand as a show of respect. I had none for him.

I walked out into the sunshine, taking several deep breaths to calm down.

We both slumped into the car seats and sat there in somewhat of a shocked state.

“Do you think that an eleven or twelve-year old would confess to having unclean or dirty thoughts...like liking masturbation...or just playing with himself...or coveting the girl in front of him in class? I just can’t see it, frankly”.

“Yeah, I was thinking the same thing, but they must...maybe that Church teaches them about honesty...”

“Mmm...I can’t see it...for the guy to coax such information from a minor over several interviews would I reckon, be close to the legal interpretation of grooming”.

“Mmm...that again would be hard to prove especially when our star witnesses have committed suicide. It makes me think you were one of those with heaps of dirty thoughts when you were that age”. She glanced over at me, that tight smile again wishing I had another partner. She started up the Unmarked and asked which way to the Club.

“I didn’t tell a soul then and I have no intention of confessing at this late point in my life”. I murmured. “My thoughts are mine not to share now or any time soon”.

I headed towards the Club as instructed by that infuriating voice that lives in the GPS thing that I will blow apart before I take retirement...

“Yep...there you go...you have just proven how hard it would have been for a boy to confess to such habits...and thinking he may be gay...can you imagine the response from Farmer? I reckon he would think he had hit the mother lode...another kudo to help him to gain sainthood”.

“Nah...I don’t think they have saint hood in that Church...”

“You seem to know a lot about the various Christian Churches for one who is a confessed Atheist...”

“Mmm...one must study the subjects one wants to dismiss...”

“Yeah...well...I guess while you have zealots on *both* sides of the spectrum claiming their teachings are the right ones and above the Law of the Land, then you will never have peace...”

“Yep...well said, Tonto. Amen to that”.

We had Lunch at the nearby Leagues Club, leaving most of the plate untouched, our appetite having left us.

We hardly spoke, going back to work just for that afternoon swim and exercise regime. Hoping that the laps swum could wash away the dirt we felt clinging to our very being.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Christ! Don’t you wish you could press charges against him, and others like him? ‘Before or after the Fact’ because as sure as shitting, that man has the blood of two young lads on his hands that we know of”.

“He’d never see it that way, Joe. All he sees is him righteously carrying out the Word of his God. There is nothing we can get him on...and being a religious zealot is not a crime yet! What now?”

I sighed deeply wondering not for the first time what in hell I was doing here, working as a Dee in the Murder Squad. I knew we had no legal recourse and as the Law stood, there would never be charges laid against the man and others like him. They had no guilt feelings about losing two of their flock, thinking those young men were beyond redemption. A prayer or two perhaps and the matter is removed from their minds.

“Wait for the Autopsy Report. The Forensic Report and anything worthwhile that may be able to be pulled from those deleted Files on the lad’s laptop, smartphone, and iPad. I wonder who deleted the File? The mother of father?”

“The father...the mother was having one hell of problem accepting the death of her son...she was in no condition to do something like that. The father seemed like a cold fish to me...he hardly showed any emotion at all...except when he prayed over the body of his son. It was as if he believed he had done his bit and nothing else mattered in the eyes of his Lord. I found that hard to digest...”

“Me too. I got the distinct impression that he saw his gay son as nothing but an embarrassment...”

“Yeah, I thought that, but then he earnestly prays over his body...strange, to say the least. Okay...you really can’t put that in the Report that we prepare for the Coroner. We just write up the Report and hand it to the Coroner...another Youth Suicide to add to the growing list.

Bugger! Over three thousand suicides over the last twelve-month period nationwide...when the national road toll was half that, the Government brought in legislation to make Drink Driving and Speeding an Offence with dire consequences. All the proactive Laws has caused a drastic reduction in the national road toll...halving it. Yet bugger-all is done on the suicide prevention side of things...in fact it is worsening with much of the population turning a blind eye! Even the Pollies putting it into the ‘too hard’ basket”.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I was sitting in the Boss’s Office dreading the next couple of minutes.

“Joe, I’ve read your Report on Frederica. Are you sure you want to go down that track? It could mean she will be shot out of the Force. At best she will not achieve her goal of being a Murder Dee...she showed so much promise. A pity really but we can’t have that type of behaviour at a Crime Scene. Awkward questions could be asked, and it could have ramifications at Trial”.

“I really didn’t want to do it, Boss...”

“I understand. It shows up between the lines, Joe. Your impartiality not clouded by your Atheist views, eh?” He looked up at me, a tight smirk his only offering. He could see the irony in the situation...I couldn’t appreciate the fact.

“Now there’s a turn-around...the Age of Enlightenment has yet to arrive...it is us usually thinking a crime may have been committed along religious lines...now it is because of my atheist views I have it in for a religious zealot”. I shook my head and coughed up a couple of chuckles. “I thought hard, Boss on whether I should proceed with the Report knowing where it may lead for her...yes, she has shown a rare talent. Is quick, decisive, and intelligent...but...” I shrugged my shoulders. “I was astounded at her behaviour at the death scene. It showed a complete lack of impartiality which on another Case, could throw that proverbial spanner into the gears and cause a mis-trail with dire consequences for all of us...I could not in all honesty let it pass”.

“Mmm...okay. Shelley? You?”

“I was torn, Boss. Truly torn...but she cannot behave in such a manner. It could get decidedly iffy on a Case. Boss, it may never happen again but...she would have made a conscious decision in the first place of failing to inform us that she knew the family...and after that,

every move she made to offer comfort and understanding swayed her against being impartial and above the emotions that the Case should have engendered initially. She stepped well and truly over the line. Not once but for the entire morning. I believe she could be a welcome and beneficial member in some other Department...but not the Murder Squad, I'm afraid".

Clive stood, nodding his head. He went to the long narrow window to stand at ease with his hands in his pants pockets. Peering out at the Ferry Terminal on Parramatta River close to our building. Abbey, our former Boss used to do the same thing. There were no worries in getting mixed up with the two as Clive Butler was overweight approaching obesity. Abbey had been a trim sixty-year-old by comparison.

"I agree...but I don't like it. It could get nasty if she wants to object...all on the shaky ground of discrimination based on her beliefs...Religion...that is for the Ethics and Standards Committee to mull over I guess...until there is some decision made on the Recommendations, she will remain off-duty on full pay. Let's hope it doesn't explode, huh? For both your sakes. Especially you Joe, as your...um...your beliefs are well known and the question at the core of this problem is whether your non-beliefs tainted *your* impartiality on the way Frederica acted with you being aware of her religious beliefs...know what I mean?"

I nodded my head, sure of my position. I wondered whether I would be so certain if Shelley had not seen the incident as well. It then could have been very murky as the Boss intimated.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"Joe? I've just had a call from the Morgue. A Mister Alfred Sellwick aged eighty-two, died at his place of residence yesterday morning. An autopsy was performed yesterday afternoon...for once they are on top of things. A Prelim. Report and initial tox results show that the old man had an abnormal amount of a well-known Sleeping Tablet and an opioid Painkiller in his system. Enough for both types of pills to kill him. I should also mention that the man was transported home from the Hospital to allow him to die in his own home at the beginning of last week. Given no more than weeks to live. To die with dignity in his own bed was all he wanted. A Nurse would pop in each day to take care of the harder things that his wife could not address. We have a Case of Assisted Suicide here I reckon". He smirked thinking he was being so clever...he might be but I really didn't want a Case like that...there are no winners or losers.

He handed me a Case Folder with the name and date on it. This would be the hard copy details of the Case that would be made available to the DPP when the time came. I gave the Boss a

tight smile not wanting such a Case so soon after Jason Foster's death. Unfortunately, in these matters, we are never given that choice.

I walked back to my desk to pick up my gear and to leave the hardcopy Murder Book on my desk. We would use our iPads while out of the Office, transferring relevant material to our computer then a hard copy to add to the Murder File. This was the tome that the Boss would read to keep in touch with his subordinates and the Case.

"C'mon, Shells. We have another one".

"Shit Joe, I am only halfway through writing up my version of events in the Jason Foster suicide. Give me a break, will you?"

"Sure, at knock-off time this afternoon".

"Shit...one day...one day I'm gunna snatch that bloody one feather off you, Tonto. Just watch me!"

The address was at Willoughby, not that far from my place. We walked up the narrow pathway to a small front veranda. Knocked loudly using the brass knocker shaped like a Lion's head. After some moments, a grey-haired woman opened the door slowly.

"Missus Sellwick? A few words if we may?" We both showed her our ID Cards which she scanned carefully...

"Yes, young man. Come through...Police! That didn't take you long". She stated over her shoulder as we followed down a narrow Hallway. She leads us through the darkened interior of the house. It had that flat, slightly dank smell of a house that was rarely opened to the sunlight...or fresh air. We were sat around a small Kitchen table, the white-Formica surface yellowing with age.

"I will make a cup of tea for you...or perhaps you prefer coffee?"

"Neither missus. We are fine, thank you".

We went through ten minutes of small talk as the woman busied herself making a cup as though we had broken some type of ritual for visitors to her home. The way things were done when I was but a boy where the making of tea for the visitors was an unviolated rule to forever be observed.

"A biscuit...or piece of cake, perhaps?"

“No thank you, missus. Do you have a son or daughter...or a friend who can sit with you?”

“Do you think it necessary?”

“I think it could be a good idea...” Shelley smiled. This could take some time, I thought.

“My daughter...and daughter-in-law. They both will be home now. Both only live down the street. A minute away. I’ll ring them”.

She went to one of those old-fashion wall phones and speed-dialled in a number. Spoke for a moment before hanging up and speed-dialling a second number.

“They’ll be right here...” The woman was sound of mind and alert and for her age at seventy-eight, she was quite sprightly.

“Do you know why we want a chat with you, missus?” I asked as the woman added two more cups and saucers to the table. She had placed what remained of a large Sponge cake in the centre of the table. The cake she extracted from a small Fridge.

She looked over at me, nodded her head slightly.

“He was dying, Detective. In a lot of pain. The Hospital allowed him home to die as that was his wishes”.

The front door opened...a heavy-set woman swaggered down the hallway, breathing heavily as she entered the small Kitchen come Dining Area. She walked on the heels of her feet making it sound like a stampede of Elephants coming down the long Hallway. I tensed up waiting for her to appear wondering what her first gambit would be.

“Dorothy Cattrell. I’m Katie’s daughter-in-law...” She stated gasping for breath as she sat. Another woman silently came into the room behind the big woman. I had not heard her enter or the front door close. She kissed the old woman on the cheek and looked nervously at her.

“You okay, Mum?” She turned to Shells and me. “I’m Louise Saunders. Why are you here? Not to arrest her, are you? In this day and age!?”

“Sit, Louise and stop fussing. They are only doing their job as they think a crime has been committed. Isn’t that right Detectives? Euthanasia is not recognised yet in this country...one... two States have legalised it, but Assisted Suicides are a long way from being accepted into Law in this State. We are behind the times...is that what you want to discuss? Yes, I helped my husband take that last step and I am considered a criminal, isn’t that so

Detectives? I will be arrested, charged, and put on Trial. I will be found guilty and given some sentence which may be lessened because of my age...but then I have been given only months to live...I only wished my hubbie and I went together...that is what we had discussed on several occasions through the years”.

It had been less than a week since we had interviewed Elder Henry Farmer on the suicide death of Jason Foster. I was torn between Jason’s suicide and the crime that we would charge Katie Sellwick with while Henry Farmer roamed about as a free man as, under present Legislation, he could not be charged with any offence. It was likely he would cause the suicide death of other young, confused minds before his God took him from this Earth. A situation that caused my hackles to rise. He completely devoid of any guilty feelings as he would think he was doing God’s Will as written in his Bible. Trying his best to make a wholesome soul fit enough to be one of God’s followers as though it was a celebrated level to achieve...like a soldier attaining an SAS badge or a Violinist achieving virtuoso levels in a world renown Orchestra.

The autopsy on the elderly Henry Sellwick had revealed elevated levels of painkiller and sleeping tablet elements in his system. Enough to kill him...and a nasty example of a savage cancer throughout his body and in his organs that was terminal.

His death expected to be slow and painful. His death hastened to lessen his pain thresholds. To my way of thinking a suitable outcome for all involved...

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Are you admitting to assisting in your husband’s death, Missus Sellwick?”

“You don’t have to answer that, Mum!” Louise Saunders responded forcefully, holding tightly onto her mother-in-law’s hand.

“That’s right, Mum!” Dorothy Cattrell agreed. The teacup halfway to her lips.

“Please be quiet, you two. Cut the melodramatics. I am approaching eighty and am fully aware of what I am doing. I gave your father an overdose of Sleeping Tablets and some Painkillers which I crushed up together and put into the pap that he was having for sustenance. We both agreed a long time ago that is what either one of us would do if the other were in such a predicament. I believe my time here is short and do not want to remember my Beloved squirming in pain until he dies as my only memories that I have of him for the next couple of

months or years. Yes, Detectives, I gave my husband a potpourri of drugs that I knew would kill him...so shoot me!" She held out her spindly arms expecting us to handcuff her. I smiled at the theatrics.

I shook my head.

"I don't think that is necessary, Missus. What will happen now is we will take you into our Office at Parramatta to formally charge you with the homicide death of your husband. You will appear at a Bail Hearing either later today or tomorrow where you will be given Bail. We will not oppose that, and we will recommend that you be released into the care of your Son and Daughter. I would imagine the Preliminary Hearing into the matter will occur in the Magistrate's Court within the next couple of weeks. This is to ascertain whether a crime has been committed and whether it should proceed. If the decision is handed down that the matter be heard before a Trial Jury, that could occur about two years from now. If you plead guilty to the crime, then a Court Appearance before three Judges will occur. That could be in the next twelve months. Do you understand that Missus Sellwick?"

"I understand perfectly, Detective. Girls? Will you lock up as you leave, please? I am being used as a sacrificial lamb to a Law that is stupid and not in keeping with the way Society thinks nowadays".

"Um...Missus? You may want one of these fine ladies to pick you up and bring you home once all the formalities have concluded".

"Yes...how long about?" We could have been discussing that proverbial ball of string!

"How about I ring when we have finished. Do either of you ladies have a car?"

"Don't worry. Ring my son, Dotty. He can bring me home. Lock the place up after we leave, will you?"

I doubted that either woman would be able to follow instructions. They were both crying gallons of tears!

Nothing about this gave Shelley or me any form of satisfaction. In fact, it was the opposite as I silently seethed at the Law as it stands now, considering it a horse's arse...and we were the poor dupes who had to act upon a piece of Legislation that was totally out of sync with common sense and the mores of modern society. We were forced to take this elderly woman into custody while that AO continued to practise questionable practises in interviewing kids of eleven and up on their 'supposed' evil thoughts and attempting to change what nature provided...to become some-one worthy to be accepted into The Lord's Kingdom...would the

poor Missus Sellwick find peace on the arms of The Lord or would she too be ostracised from the kingdom for eternity?

There is something drastically wrong with that!

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I read the transcripts taken off Jason Foster's laptop computer, smartphone, and iPad by the Digital Forensic people. A lot of it was the dribble of a typical sixteen-year kid. There were several poems, a grand attempt to enter literary fame and a full description of what the lad was going through with those 'Worthiness Interviews'.

What I noticed was the anguish, the uncertainty, the growing emotion of anger and hate for his own self as the years progressed. Made more acute after every meeting he had with Elder Farmer. At no time did he feel 'dirty' no matter how hard he prayed...and the Elder was beginning to lose patience with the lad...

In the beginning, the words spoke of salvation and acceptance into the Church of his God. As the months and years progressed, the terrible angst of a boy caught between the twix and the twain of his gayness and his inability to tamp down those thoughts, even with hours of earnest prayer. Then a secret awareness, questioning the ability of his God to help, even suggesting that his God had forsaken him...that was the final entry in his Computer.

All this filling out over thirty A4 pages and spanning his last four years on Earth. Again, beautifully embedded in a separate file called 'Jason Foster, Who R U.'

I placed the folder bound history onto Shelley's desk.

At the moment, she was attending a Specialist's appointment. She could read it once she returned.

I couldn't control my emotions, sitting at my desk fidgeting, not being able to relax. In the end I went for a walk down by the river. Coming back, I went up to the seventeenth floor to the Creche just to sit and look through a panel of one-way glass at my youngest daughter playing with other kids. Not a care in the world, a smile on her face, a bout of the giggles then an earnest conversation with a little boy...more than likely she objecting to his bullying or something.

I wondered what she would be like when she was older...gay or not...perhaps a knife-wielding mad woman. I smiled to myself at how my imagination could take hold and spin me into some sort of madman myself for thinking along those lines.

I wondered though, what would be my reaction if she chose to marry another woman. Would I become a small minded, suburban father who would banish his daughter from the family home...or would I be as I hoped, a caring and loving father who was just happy to see his daughter happy and not forever fighting within herself for an ideal that some unseen deity demanded of her. Somehow I doubted she would become a religious person as we didn't attend Church regularly or pray before each meal. In fact, my raving on anti-religious terms would ensure she too became an atheist...hopefully...if she were so inclined. It was a narrow path that us parents trod. If we preached the Gospel and attended Church regularly, it was a fair chance they would follow...and then the exact opposite. Our kids tended to reflect our views especially in believing that a Deity looked over this planet...or not.

What if she became religious? Now that would be a painful test for me! That could be too hard for me to manage...I harrumphed as I walked out of the Creche, unsure whether my role as a father was good enough to help her find her own way in life...

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I sat in the back of the Court Room wondering where in hell Katie Sellwick was, she who had confessed to helping her husband end his life. That was soon answered...

Her Defence Lawyer stood to address the Court.

"Your Honour, my Client cannot attend the Court to answer the Charges against her. She is at present in the Hospice Palliative Care Ward at the Mater Hospital at North Sydney. Her prognosis is not good; they informed me. The sweet old lady had less than a month to live".

I angrily rubbed my eyes, audibly groaning as I stood and left the Court Room. I wondered whether anyone in that room could see the irony of the situation. The woman, though charged but never found guilty or innocent in a Court of Law, would bear the black mark against her name for eternity. She would also experience a slow painful death where Doctors would continue to fight against that gradual and painful death, extending her painful existence for no known logical reason while she had helped her husband escape such a cruel fate scant months ago.

That last step for her a painful existence where she has no means of hurrying it along.

I sat out in the sun in the small Square where once I had choreographed a murder scene in the middle of the night trying to make sense of the shooting of a Federal Judge. I had been sequestered to the AFP to lead a group of Investigators formed to find justice in that Case. Surprising some and pleasing others so I was told, in closing that Case. Thinking about it, the Case seemed so long ago, almost a lifetime ago.

Justice I thought, could be a horse's arse I thought as I stamped my feet in a mild fit of anger.

Instead of returning to work, I went home and got blind drunk, falling asleep I think where I had fallen in a drunken stupor. Waking the next morning feeling worse than I did the day before. At least it was a weekend where I could recuperate.

On the Sunday afternoon I bought a bunch of flowers and headed to the Mater Hospital. I stayed but minutes, but I am sure the lady knew of my existence and my genuine sorrow for her plight. The gesture did not make me feel any better, only worse. I returned home, Tellie trying her best at first to tippy toe around me than attempting to get to the bottom of my morose state to no avail. I eventually opened up after Tea on Sunday night after we put the girls down for the night. There was little she could say...and she really tried hard. Getting upset herself for failing to lift my spirits. We went to bed curled up together.

I eventually gently removed myself from her embrace to sit all night out on the deck.

Thank Christ it was near Summer!

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I didn't feel that good, taking longer to get over a blinder than when I was young where I could do it on Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights and still bounce into work the following week in love with life!

I have no idea what happened to my constitution as I grew older...it kinda hit the road and just kept on going!

I was nervous as I sat alone in the small Ante Room awaiting my turn to front the Standards and Ethics Committee on the Frederica Stonefield business. I was instructed to appear at ten hundred hours on the dot. I had sat there nervously as I have said, slowly watching time drift

on, becoming less nervous and more impatient and angrier. This had been a tactic used by the Panel previously, wanting me to be buzzing with anger and frustration by the time I was called. Expecting me to go for the jugular when the correct strategy should be a “Mister Nice Guy” approach, waiting politely as each question was flung at me. Replying curtly but honestly.

Yep, I had their measure, I confidently whispered to myself.

They can continue with this childishness, but it was not going to faze me as it had in the past; earning me ‘black marks’ by several Panel Members for the rest of the World to see. My Personnel File sure would-be good reading for some-one in the future. I smiled at this thought as the door into the Interview Room swung open. A head I faintly recognised seemed to appear around the door edge like one of those puppets on Sesame Street did all the time.

It was just on Twelve Noon.

“Detective Lind? You are not required at this time though you may be called later to help in these manners. If you have plans for Interstate or Intrastate travel in the next two weeks, I suggest you cancel them to ensure your attendance...if necessary. Thank you for your patience”.

The door closed silently after the head disappeared, a trick by a clever Puppeteer I suspected! Thinking stupidly allowing my slightly slanted sense of humour to come to the fore.

Thank you for your patience!?

You fucking prick!! I had no fucking choice, I wanted to shout out. Instead, with tail between my legs, I silently left the Waiting Area.

I was that close to springing across the room and opening the door with force to ask did they think I had nothing to do for the next umpteen days...and who the fuck they thought they were in trying to arrange my travel itinerary...

That close...very bloody close! A voice of reason jumped into my brain. Shelley uttering soothing words of wisdom about cooling down...take a deep breath...karma...it’s all about karma as the turd would get his come upmanship sometime in the future. That almost made me laugh out loud and as I walked from the room thinking I would never be around to see that day, that voice sniggered at me and told me to be patience as it was written in the clouds.

That did make me laugh, causing persons to veer away from me as I stepped down the wide marble steps onto the Ground Floor of the Police Building in Collins Street in the city.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I purchased a Salad Sandwich and an Ice Milk Coffee before I entered Hyde Park looking for somewhere to comfortably lay on the grass in the warm sun and forget this morning. Office Workers had chosen the best spots, but I eventually found a spot on a Park Bench that was neither comfortable nor in the warm sun.

“Not a good spot, huh? But patronage is up. You can tell the warm weather is upon us, thank God by the number of Office Workers out here enjoying it. I looked around for that spot in the sun before I realised, I would have to relent and take this as a poor second”.

I turned to look at the person whose cheery voice had broken my thought patterns of this morning’s debacle. Her voice taking me back to another time and place when I had first met Penny on the Manly Esplanade. For one disjointed moment I thought it was she...aged but still beautiful. My heart skipped a beat before I stepped back into present time.

“Yes, beggars can’t be choosers unfortunately...” I remarked pleasantly. “Though I seem to have gotten lucky to sit beside such a beautiful woman...”

“Hah...now, now, slick words. A Hunter still I surmise, though thank you for your kind words. Perhaps a little out there in this politically correct world, but I enjoyed the compliment, thank you. Yes, I thought about laying on the grass, but how do you explain grass stains on your best outfit...”

“Huh...you need a suitable story...like...you tackled a young bloke who was making off with a Laptop he had taken from a Lunchtime geek who had fallen asleep under the sun who cannot give himself a proper break from Work...”

“Yes, I was surprised that the geek had come out into the sun for his lunch break at all. That kind normally basks in the brightness of Office Fluro lights...was there anything important on the geek’s Laptop?”

“Oh yes, all the answers of the Universe that one asks incessantly...he is pure geek wanting to keep such knowledge to himself!” I chuckled as this absurd conversation unrolled. “Who cares but one good looking female who should have known better than trying to tackle the alleged ‘Taker of said Laptop’...obtaining grass stains for her effort. Having to pay her Dry-Cleaning Bill to remove said stains with no avenue of recompense. There you go, you have that reasonable story to tell...they always will cost you money”. A grin on my face as I turned to her. “It’s a worry isn’t it. There should be some sort of Account where one can obtain recompense for the damage done by such a heroic action...”

“Except everyone who knows me, knows I couldn’t tackle a Tim Tam with any force...slow and careful to fully appreciate such a flavour. Maybe a more accurate story maybe I had a torrid sex act with a stranger on the grass...doggy style with everyone watching on”.

“Whoa...a secret desire of yours?”

“Yes...you must have one to share...” She giggled.

“Oh...to walk through this Park in a beautiful Wedding gown with a train that requires six flower-girls to carry...I’ve always wondered why they call it a train when they are made of the most delicate material...hardly train material, don’t you think?”

“What a strange man I am talking to...”

“No stranger I think, then the woman I am conversing with...who wants to do abnormal things watched on by hundreds of people...before the members of the ‘Can’t do that Type of Thing’ Squad prevents you from doing other wonderful but frowned on things...”

We both laughed thinking of our nonsense conversation.

“Mmm...getting back to your problem. Rolling around on the grass is out of the question...as you already are completely satisfied, so it seems...just by the thoughts whizzing around in your head...”

“Ha, Ha, and Ho. Completely satisfied? I think not until this story is finished. Have you ever wanted to do that? Have sex in Public...like in this park right now? No!? Mmm...you’re right, that is for the absurdly young but brave souls who have nothing to lose...me? I have a very responsible job that dictates my complete maturity...a pity, hmm? My mother always told me to be suspicious of strangers...especially one carrying a gun...or suggesting I roll around on the grass with him...I mean, I do not even know his name. My Love or Dear seems so hollow...no...like cheap talk in that moment”. She chuckled. “Your clothes are not Saville Row, so you are not a Hood or one of those well-known Racecourse Identities...you’re a cop, huh? One who specialises in Court drama, perhaps as we are near the Court Precinct”.

“The clothes maketh the man, so they say...and a cop’s salary forbids anything more fashionable than a Lowes Menswear Shop suit. I have failed dismally to become your Knight in Shiny Armour, I see. Lowes were out of stock of shiny armour when I asked...and yes, if I give your suggestion some thought, we are far too old to cavort in such a manner...my knees would play up...and my back? Let’s not go there, huh? But it is good to dream, huh? And chastise oneself for having missed the opportunity when young...although I would imagine

such strange carry-ons would give you a Jail term at worse...me as a Public Servant would never be able to be a successful cop...I wonder what I would have become?"

"I wonder too, if that little, but excitable act had occurred". She gave a half-giggle. "You wear what you can afford. My stuff is only David Jones. I could afford better, but I can't see the sense in wearing such things to the Office. Clothes take a battering in the work environment...your suit isn't that bad for a Lowes creation".

"An eye for fashion, eh?"

"Common sense without that bottomless purse..."

"The scourge of the Working Class".

She smiled as she stood, offering her hand to me.

"I must report back to the grindstone though there are better things I could think of doing on this fine sunny Spring day. Thank you for this brief interlude, Mister Policeman. You never know, we may run into one another again in the future".

And then she was gone. I smiled to myself, looking down at my sandwich. I hadn't touched it. Even at my age, one of the more fundamental human requirements is forgotten while bantering with a beautiful woman. I doubted Tellie would feel comfortable with this little flirt. There was nothing in it with no future beckoning, but she would be mad as a cut snake that such an episode occurred at all! What could she expect of a good-looking fellow who had the gift of the gab...well...a gift of the absurd would be closer to the truth.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I was about to stand and make my way to the nearest garbage bin when my Mobile began its annoying ring. I plucked it from my coat pocket wanting desperately to fling it into the garbage bin as well located on the opposite side of the wide walkway. That is until I realised who it was on the other end.

"How you battling on without me?" Shelley's cheerful voice.

"I've had to get my own coffee...and nobody can sharpen lead pencils like you".

“Ho, ho, and ho...you tidy up the Prendergast Suicide out west?”

“No...yeah...not really. I’m afraid the local guys are going to do the honours with a homicide murder charge being laid against a person. I know who the culprit is I think, but it will require a lot of shoe-leather to set the Case in concrete...and a slip-up by the culprit being my best bet”.

“You’re saying it wasn’t a suicide? How did the locals take to that?” She retorted. I heard laughter in her voice.

“Not kindly...”

“They weren’t comfortable with you trying to prove them wrong, huh? Look what happens when I leave you alone for five minutes...”

“Yeah...two weeks actually...something like that. At one point I thought they were readying to draw and quarter me before tar and feathering me and running me out of town on a rail! My superb negotiating skills saved my bacon...how are you?”

“Arrh, what a beautiful picture you render with words”. Her contagious giggle came down the line. It made me smile. “Your superb negotiation skills my arse...how am I? The same as I was last weekend when you came out to visit. Bored shitless. My Veggie patch will be able to feed half of Sydney this Spring, I reckon. Mum has sure taken the bit between the teeth and almost doubled the size of the garden. I have approached several charities and Retirement Villages around here trying to give the stuff away. The trouble is they all have their usual Providers who supply them every week or two...a contract, so in me providing my stuff for a couple of months doesn’t suit them...”

“Try a Farmer’s gate on the weekends. That might work”.

“Brin said something similar...I don’t know...to sit there all weekend waiting for a sale doesn’t sit well with me...”

“A couple of local kids...one third of the total money taken in is theirs...worth a try especially if you reckon you will have a bumper crop of various salads and vegetables...”

“Mmm...there is a couple of local kids who check in on the animals during the week when both Brin and I are working longer shifts. I might put it to them...I have had a lousy morning...sharpening bloody pencils to an inch of their length...no, not really...but I sat for almost two bloody hours on a conference call and video link-up with the Standards and Ethics

Panel this morning. I'm about to have a lie-down to get over the silliness of it all. How did you go?"

I gave her a precis of my morning, laughing that it more than likely was her fault for me not getting a shoo-in with the Panel. A pleasant surprise at it being she who had more than likely saved me from an interview with the Panel. A part of the job that no-one liked as you walked into the room feeling as though they had you pinned to the wall already or being shoved halfway out the door before you even started in on your defence.

"Don't hold your breath waiting for an invite. I got the impression they had already made up their minds before they even began to talk to me...she will be given options of White-Collar Crime, perhaps Robbery, maybe Cybercrime would be more her go before they offer her a position in either the AFP or Border Security...that's if she wants to stay in the Law Enforcement field...but away from the Public domain where she won't get herself into trouble with her rabid religious views. Isn't it funny how things have turned full circle? Here we have a devout person being criticised for her beliefs..."

"Yeah...the circumstances have been reversed with religious zealots being in the minority...well, in western democracies at least. She'd throw the lot away, you reckon?" A pang of guilt passed through me.

"Depends, but that is how the book is running".

"Oh...you seem rather well advised..."

"The Boss. He got on to me straight after I finished...he must have had a call waiting or something that makes my phone connect to his, the moment I hang up".

"Yeah...we all have that ability on the landline...and I think you can do it with your mobile as well".

"What-ever...now Joe, don't go crook on me but I have been doing a bit of research while I've been off at home. I do the Veggie patch with Mum in the morning and muck about with the animals...by Lunchtime I need a rest..."

"So, you lie in the sun under the veranda in the afternoon. Instead of a little snooze as you should be doing, you delve into the Internet on your computer. Right?"

"Joe? If I had a quid for every time I have blasted you for doing the same thing when you should have been taking it easy, I'd be a bloody rich woman..."

“I don’t have a veggie patch...or a ménage of animals crawling around my feet...what are you talking about?”

“That’s got nothing to do with it. Just listen, will you? I have spent the last week since I came home from Hospital ploughing through the Suicide Cases in all States. It is sad when you realise the suicide rate in this country. Around *three thousand for each of the last three years!* That’s more than double the total road deaths for the same periods right across the Nation. At least double the numbers which is really shocking. Suicide in the United States is around *seventy thousand a year*...now that is a sit up and take notice kind of statistic, but they are doing even less than us on that battleground. Much the same as their gun laws. I would imagine it is not that different from other countries per capita around the World, but jeezuz! Remember when Road Deaths had reached a climax in the Nineteen Seventies, the Federal Government stated enough was enough. They legislated for safer cars, installed sash belts then the way they are now, increased speeding fines and started in on driving under the influence. Now because of that world-wide statistic, here in Australia we have reduced the national death toll to around a third of what it was in those terrible years...but nothing is done...or planned to be done in reducing the suicide rate...”

“It’s not an easy thing to get on top of as there are so many variables...human nature gone wrong and we haven’t progressed to Nineteen Eighty-Four as yet where we are all fitted with tiny transmitters that broadcast our very thoughts to Big Brother...a while to go, I reckon which unfortunately, may be the only way to get on top of the situation with a red light blinking every time a suicidal thought enters the brain of a citizen. The Thought Soldiers are despatched to the correct address where they inject the happy juice into the morose member of the public. Another one saved. That sounds like a world I’d be happy to live in...not a care in the world and everyone smiling...jeezuz!”

“Now how do I know that is absolute BS. You were being your most sarcastic best. That type of world would have you spinning about, your veins full of happy juice but you would still hate it! Who once said you can’t have a decent conversation with the man! Jeez Joe, you show the same kind of response as so many who think it is an insurmountable problem that will never be addressed satisfactorily. It is a harrowing exercise, but the future offers hope, I reckon. I narrowed the field down to self-inflicted deaths in the fourteen to thirty age group in every State. Then I further narrowed down the numbers to include which religion was noted on the individual Case Histories for all those people...most were male, by a long shot”.

“Bloody hell Shells, you should not be doing so much work, especially in your own time...”

“Listen to him. The mongrel doesn’t ever take his own advice but batters yer around the head for doing the same...” Shelley quipped.

I shut up as I knew I was never going to win.

“I spoke to two gents whose identification will never be revealed, but they were Investigative Officers in the recent Royal Commission into Institutionalised Abuse of Children. They were interested in what we were doing. While they admitted they did not extend their investigations into child, youth and adult suicides that may have been caused by certain zealous Church Officials’ prying questions into the child’s most inner thoughts and then applying some sort of ‘Gay Conversion Therapy’ to rid them of those evil thoughts of masturbation or other such musings of wondering on their sexual and gender leanings, they both thought it would open up another can of worms...especially when those ‘sessions’ were conducted in a room with only the child and the Church Elder or Priest, Padre or Father were present. These practises continuing with the children from pre-pubescent age right through to late teens and early twenties in some cases. It could be concluded in some instances to be verging on child mental abuse. They were interested enough to want some feed-back on my findings. Interestingly, they seemed to think that the Confessional in the Roman Catholic Church could be a parallel form of the same ‘Wholesome or Worthiness Interviews’ that both Jason Foster and Matthew Kasich were subjected to...I hadn’t thought of that. That one-on-one conversation where the Priest can pry into the mind of the Confessor...what do you think?”

I could hear the smugness in her voice.

“Yeah...I’ve worked hard when I needn’t have...I can hear you thinking it, Joe...arrh...while there appeared to be no concrete evidence that these practises were still being conducted. None of the people I spoke to in the mainstream religions were willing to *deny* or *declare* that the practise continues today. The second tier Religious Groups like Seventh Day, Witness, Mormons or Scientology also stated that it was a practise left mainly to the Parish Priest or equivalent, but yes, it was one of those practises carried out within the Church as was written in the Bible where all children of a certain age were interviewed about satanic thoughts that may have entered the child’s meditations...read into it that most Religions still tolerate and actually undertake the practise covertly.”

“Shells? I applaud your industriousness but there is one major problem. Connecting the actions of say the Priest, the Bishop, Elder, Pastor, Father, Padre or whatever else they like to be called...to the suicide of a young adult? There is no intent noticeable nor his direct connection, assistance, or aid in the act of suicide by any of these youths. There’s the rub. That is the problem of levelling culpability onto the Church Official. I am sure in the eyes of the Law the only crime is one to do with the Church Official conducting such interviews in privacy and conducting such interviews as a Psychiatrist, Social Worker or Social Counsellor while not having any such Degree or necessary qualifications...but if the parents of said child gave approvals for the Bossman to conduct such interviews, you have bugger all to stand on or make a case against...understand? And my understanding is that parents gave written

consent with a degree of encouragement and happiness for the ‘Interview’ to proceed, which reduces the culpability of the ‘Bossman’ if something goes wrong...like...say, the suicide of the young subject. The upside as far as these people are concerned is that their ‘little Johnny’ is cleansed to a level that is satisfactory to their Lord, their Church and themselves”.

“Unless we can find a pattern...”

“Even then Shells, we would be on extremely shaky ground as far as culpability and guilt is concerned. Sorry”.

I may as well have not said a bloody thing as she doggedly continued. This will give her endless nights of lost sleep and worm itself into her heart. A noble subject no doubt, but one that will never expose the real culprit to bring to justice.

“Henry Farmer? He was the Bishop of the local Parish Church in a suburb of Adelaide. Two suicide cases during his stay at that Church. He moved to a newly constructed Church building in Wagga Wagga. Three suicides and two attempts in a twelve-year period. He is moved to his present lodgings. Four suicides within this ten-year tenure so far...inconclusive and unsubstantiated evidence? There is a pattern, Joe. As clear as mud! I can see it same as you so why can’t we arrest the bastard? It definitely reminds me of the Catholic Church and their organised arrangement of relocating a priest or Teaching Brother who has gathered a reputation as a Paedophile...tell me the difference...”

By the tone of her voice, she was getting a little hot under the collar. I guess I would too if, after doing all this work, it amounted to nothing with my partner giving scant encouragement and enthusiasm!

“Shells?” I shook my head. “Shells? The difference is our dirty priest leaves his victims to talk of their torture several years later while that Elder loses his victims quickly as they commit suicide. There may be a link, but I say again, unless the guy pushed the youths for that one last step...and we have proof of that fact, he cannot be brought to account for those sins he has clearly committed *in our eyes*...I wonder what he personally feels about the link between the deaths...the suicide deaths of some of the youths who were under his ‘guidance’. I’ll bet he blames the youths for giving in to temptation and not praying in an earnest way. It looks as though the Church hierarchy could connect the dots and that is why he was moved on from one Church to the next...but again, I state that we could not hold the man on any charge. Sorry, Shells...it’s a bugger, I know. Look, send everything across to me so I can compile it into Foster’s Murder Book and act on it if I think things can be done...look...I’ll have a word with my son Billy who should be up to date on all Criminal Court matters and Sentencing words. If not, he should be able to obtain Counsel Opinion from the DPP himself. He is the blond-headed boy right now”.

“Don’t you go doing anything on that case until I return to work, boyo. Next week says the Doctor”.

“Okay, okay. I will curb my enthusiasm for the Case until your return, promise”.

“Yeah, yeah...as if sharks have principles...”

CHAPTER TWENTY

I thought that I would need the Boss’s approval to return to the Bush to finalise the alleged suicide come homicide of Archie Prendergast that was half-finished as I was required back in Sydney. The matter in the hands of a couple of inexperienced local people.

“They have the hide to prevent you from performing your duties. If you go, how long do you need out west?” The Boss asked.

“Um...Shelley says she’s back on deck next Monday. We can fly out on the Tuesday and wrap up things by the end of that week, Boss”.

“Mmm...funny how that corresponds with the edict of the S and E Hearing regarding time staying locked to your desk. Chained. No ulterior motive, Joe? No wanting to get up their nose? No wanting to place your Boss out on that proverbial limb, huh?” He chuckled. “Fuck the Committee...they have more than enough facts to be able to make a decision on Rickie’s future. Just reading your Report, Shelley’s and my addendum to the Report should be enough for them to make a decision. I believe Rickie has indicated her willingness to be transferred across to Cybercrime. That should give her analytical mind satisfaction and keep her two paces back from actual public involvement. A win/win situation as far as I can see...the end of next week, Joe. We can make a decision by the middle of the following week if you need an extension”.

As I walked from his Office, I felt his hand in Rickie’s choice of a solution. He would have offered his recommendations as a father giving advice to a daughter. There was a genuine side to the man that I admired.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

We were back in the Office the following Thursday week having a confession and a reason for Archie Prendergast's death out west. Again, the locals show scant respect for our investigative skills but begrudgingly admitting to the alleged perp.

We changed our flight arrangements back into Sydney, instead taking a small, single engine plane ride down to Wagga Wagga. Flying into Sydney from there in a two-engine plane that had a pressurised cabin and did not alter altitude every time you coughed. I think I have said it before, but this will be my last...very last flight in a small, single engine plane anywhere!

Never again!!

We hired a vehicle at Wagga Wagga Airport as the sun was setting. We drove to the Town and Country Motel where we would obtain a twenty percent discount for being State Public Servants. We booked in for two nights, had a quick meal and headed towards the first address we had of the three suicides and two further attempts associated with the Church of Elder Henry Farmer. With the help of our delightful and pleasant bodiless voice in the GPS thing-a-ma-jig, we surprisingly found the first address without any difficulty.

"Missus Vander?" I asked the woman who answer my knock. I showed her my badge. Shelley did likewise.

"Detectives from Sydney? The Murder Squad? I don't know whether I can help you..."

"Your son, Michael? He committed suicide some thirteen years ago now...you were members of Elder Henry Farmer's congregation..."

"Huh...A smarmy snake oil seller. What is it you wish to know? My son was a beautiful person regardless of what that smarmy bastard said". She looked up and down the street. "Look...I'm sorry. Come inside".

We followed her into the dimness of her house. The only light on was the Kitchen light. The large flat-screen TV was on but the sound was down low.

We declined the offer of coffee and biscuits but were invited to sit in a comfy lounge.

"We are investigating the death of a young chap up in Sydney about six weeks ago. He hanged himself. He was involved in a 'Worthiness Interview' with Elder Farmer and had been in 'The Program' since he was twelve-years-of-age. Going on what he transcribed onto his Laptop,

he was having more and more problems accepting what was correct especially when you looked at Society and its changed mores. We were surprised when we began to dig, that there are several more youth suicides with connection to your Church and to Elder Farmer...”

“That ain’t our Church no more!” Mister Vander I assumed, stated forcefully as he came into the room. He shook my and Shelley’s hands before sitting in a Sofa Rocker opposite our position.

“A snake in the grass who seemed to absolve himself of any responsibility for Mike’s death. He stated all he was trying to do was to expunge evil thoughts that Mike had whirling around in his brain. This needed to be done according to him otherwise he would not be welcomed as a worthy person into the Church or into God’s realm. Mike had thoughts typical of about every teenager...he was into head-banging hard rock...he liked to go to Concerts even in Sydney when such music was played live. I don’t think he ever tried drugs...but then, who really knows. I know he did drink alcohol which was totally against the Church’s laws...also any sort of...you know...with a girl. Mike liked to experiment. He was ‘out there’, and he would often say that the youths of his age within the Church were so uncool. Like half-dead zombies...goody-goody two shoes the lot of them. He had no real friends in the Church as he told us one time, such head-banging music was frowned upon...so was the Beatles when they first emerged...go figure”.

He shook his head, blew his nose before settling down again.

“To be honest, we were getting a little worried, thinking he had hooked up with the wrong crowd...not Church kids...but outsiders...and he had a girlfriend who was not a Church member. Heavens forbid, that was his greatest sin according to Elder Farmer. Yes, we approved Mike participating in these ‘Worthiness Interviews’ with Farmer. All that seemed to do was to confused Mike even further. He became nervy, couldn’t sleep. He wanted to be accepted by his peers inside the Church but as long as he had that girlfriend, he was never accepted because she wasn’t accepted. Yes, he hung himself and we blame that smarmy snake-oil charmer. He came into the house after the Police had left. All sympathy, empathetic yet non-committal, saying maybe it was best this way as he doubted that Mike would ever be accepted into the Lord’s Kingdom...” He stiffened in his chair, his face reddening. “That grated on me knowing how he treated Mike earlier. With fire and brimstone that had Mike in two minds. He had Mike on a regime of hitting himself every time he thought of his girlfriend and all his non-religious mates...they were good kids...and his girlfriend? She committed suicide because of Mike’s death a couple of weeks later. Such a bloody waste. We have not trod foot inside the Church since that day...um...a similar thing occurred with another Church goer...their daughter. She was gay...a lovely girl who often came here as Mike accepted her. The Church didn’t. She slashed her wrists...another waste of a beautiful person. She was a couple of years older than Mike, but they got along fine...except it wasn’t permitted by the

Church and all her friends inside the Church were constantly decrying her sexual choices. Kids her own age, for Christ's sake. Her family moved out of the area and away from any Church".

"Our investigations indicate three deaths of youths involved in the Church at that time in this City...and several attempts..."

"That's right...Farmer was relocated around that time. That is not a bloody coincidence and I always have wondered why these deaths were not a part of that Royal Commission into Institutionalised Child Abuse...it was a part of the way the Church kept a tight leash on their congregation. The deaths? Incidental to them. They said it was because the poor persons involved had not prayed earnestly enough...or they were not open enough to those attempts to purify themselves. Why are you investigating these incidents? We were told that Farmer could never be charged with any offence relating to those deaths and suicide attempts..."

"We believe that if we can show a pattern with Farmer the central figure, we may be able to press charges..."

"Maybes and ifs...you are not confident, are you?"

I looked down at my hands, shook my head as I looked up at the man. You could still see the hurt in his eyes after all this time. I would very much like to proceed with these cases to give some foreclosure to these families still struggling with the deaths of their loved ones. We may not succeed, but at least it will be registered.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

One of the other addresses we had also gave a similar story. A confused young kid driven to further confusion by these one-on-one interviews. The unflinching beliefs held by the Religion in total opposition to what Society was telling as the truth. This further confusing with the LGBTQI movement coming to the fore. On one hand, he is being told that such matters were evil and would ensure his future in hell if he could not overcome them and on the other, Society and Schools were rejoicing the attitude of acceptance and tolerance on a national level.

One hell of a quandary for a young bloke to take in and somehow come out a better person!

The third family had not lived at the address we had for them for some five years.

“Skipped to Queensland...” The older bloke stated as he closed the door on our faces.

“I reckon that any Religion, any of them that involve themselves in such matters where the object is to change, manipulate or take control of the personality of one of their Parishioners, the essence of a person, is nothing but a bloody cult!” I stated angrily as we drove away from the last address.

“If that be the case, Joe, I reckon all Religions that exalt that esteemed figure as a God, is a cult in your estimation”.

“Amen...” I said quietly. “Amen to that”.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I was glad to be back home, having enough of sleeping in a strange bed and having meals whenever the opportunity arose. Tellie laughingly commented that that was a sign of old age. That a person could not sleep comfortably in anything but his own bed was one of the first signs.

“And a complete loss of libido?” I asked light-heartedly, a smile on my face.

“Don’t you dare...” She turned to face me. “Have you, Joe? Is it time for those little blue tablets?”

“If I require those as a heart-starter, I reckon I would be entering old age...have we enough time?”

“I’ll put the girls down a little earlier. You keep that thing primed and ready. See you in our boudoir...five minutes max.”

It was sometime later that she brushed her fingers down the side of my face and murmured into my ear that I was forever improving with age. No doubt about it, she could always say those things that made me feel better...every time.

How shallow am I?

“So, what has got inside your head this time, my love?” She murmured as she cuddled into me. I rocked my head back and forward as I tried to put into words what was troubling me.

“You tell me that type of thing...a practise from the Middle Ages...still goes on. I was never aware of those things...I guess most of the population are in the same boat...with all windows shut and screened. To cleanse the youth to be ready for the Kingdom of God. To make them pure and chaste to be paired with a like-minded virgin to help populate the Church of the Children of God?”

“Well, I would not have put it so succinctly, but yes, it goes on in some form or other in most Religions, big or small. The percentage of those being put under the microscope who are affected so much they commit suicide is a small percentage by far...but still, those Church members who conduct these...arrh...”

“Witch hunts...”

“Yeah...kinda...they hold no responsibility or culpability in having these youths commit suicide, as though there is an acceptable *wastage*...we’re dealing with young, impressionable aged kids. From my perspective, I don’t think I ever mulled over masturbation, coveting my Teacher in a carnal way, or even thought about pinching money from Mum’s purse...but there are those who did and are frozen in the spotlight of these Interviews...did you have any such thoughts in your early pubescent age?”

“Me? Most certainly...the boy next door. The paperboy and the Milkman’s son...and yeah, the boy my age from across the street...and my first cousin. I would lie in bed playing with myself conjuring up one of them in my imagination as I did”.

“Fair dinkum!?” I half sat up leaning on a bent arm. “You serious?”

“Just as well I was reared away from the horrors of the Catholic Church...or the Mormons...or the Adventists...I mean, I was raised as a Roman Catholic...and yes, I can remember some embarrassing moments in Confessional where the old Priest asked about my sex life, whether I masturbated...stuff like that. I was sure he was feeling himself as he asked. I think that may have been the last time I went to Confessional...or even Church...I figured it was none of his business...he was just a dirty old man and some of my friends said that he had played with himself as they were confessing to coveting the boy down the road and how good that feeling was when they played with themselves. How in hell can that be wrong?”

We fell silent lost in our own thoughts.

“What is troubling you the most Joe, is that you cannot charge the Bossman for having anything to do with the occasional youth suiciding...totally confused and lost in a world he should never have been introduced to...pity...but...remind me again why we will never have our two girls christened”.

I turned out the light as Tellie began to giggle before she let out a growl that came from the bottom of her soul.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Clive Butler listened respectfully as Shelley and I laid out the life and times and sins of Elder Henry Farmer and the number of suicides and near suicides he personally had caused. He sat for several minutes with his head back against the head rest of his Executive Chair. His eyes closed, deep in thought before he leant forward to place his arms on the desk.

“What I find interesting about the Royal Commission into Child Abuse was that the majority by far were of the Catholic faith. Priests, Teaching Brothers, or others...and most cases were what they called Historic Child Abuse Cases. By far the largest guilty group were born between the Wars. Why I do not know, but it would be of some interest for an Investigative Journalist, I think to delve into that aspect. Most would have been old enough to enlist during World War Two I would imagine. Did they become Priests to escape Service...who’s to know! But why so many of a certain ilk at the one time? In the same period in history? It was also a similar pattern in most overseas countries as well who have done a similar exercise as us. What the Royal Commission also highlighted was the number of victims who committed suicide. Well above the National average...but while there were quite a few guilty men sent to trail for their heinous and unnatural habits, not one was ever convicted of *causing* the suicide death of one of their victims”.

He again leaned back against the back of the leather chair, resting his hands clasped together on his ample stomach. He coughed, then continued.

“Interesting huh? It can’t be just me who appreciates that anomaly”. He coughed again as though he had a tickle in his throat. “I’ll allow you to present your case, as you have just done with me, to the DPP. I want to be present, hear me? I doubt very much that the Law will permit you to bring charges against the guy...like...your case of Assisted Suicide. You know, where we charged the woman on her helping to...no...on her killing her husband. She died, didn’t she?”

“Sellwick. Katie Sellwick. Yes, she died. That Case affected me as a parallel Case to the Jason Foster Suicide Case. Poetic justice in a way...and that is what is wrong with the Laws as they stand. We could charge the woman who was merely helping her husband die with some dignity...and to lessen his pain...but...we cannot charge a man who has, on multiple occasions, caused deep grief to his young charges that caused them to take their own lives...no...I already know what the DPP will say. I’ve had a talk to several of their members”.

“Your son?”

“Yes...and several senior DPP Officers...a lost cause”.

“He is right, of course. Unless there is some evidence that showed Farmer was instrumental in the death of those boys...which there is not because he stands two off from the act...then there is nothing that can be done”.

“Harass the bastard!” Shelley quipped angrily knowing the suggestion would only get her trouble. Like me, she wanted some closure on the Case knowing in her heart that would never be achieved. That this ‘Practise’ goes on to-day shows the cult-like stance of a lot of religions and their determination to practise under that cone of silence.

“No, all that would do would be for the two of you to get into hot water...that type of zealot only sees himself doing God’s work. Any defeats such as suicide of one of his Charges would be their fault...them not being strong enough or not allowing God to help as the youth had not prayed sufficiently. Sorry guys”.

I would have nightmares for months after the event while that smarmy, snake-oil charmer continued with his services to his God, no matter what the collateral damage might be.

We walked out of the Boss’s Office slap-bang into Hendo, our Chief Clerk who stood there holding the details of another murder requiring our attention. We did not have time to think about what would, may or could have been.

We had work to do. However, our nights would be regularly interrupted by the ghosts of those who had thought they were not worthy enough to live.

Instead of disappearing out the door to confront another Case, I sat heavily into my desk chair. Blew out a stream of air and ran my fingers through my thinning hair.

“You too Joe...sometimes this job really shits me. This is one of those occasions...yeah? Come on, a dead body awaits our attendance. We can cry ourselves to sleep in the privacy of our bedrooms...”

“It’s not that bloody private, girl”.

“You call me that one more time tonto and you’ll have my Glock up your nose...”

Good...things were back on an even keel.

pcb10/11/2018

Author’s Note.

As at the time of writing this story Gay Conversion Therapy practises were not illegal in Australia.

Since that time Queensland, Tasmania, Victoria, ACT, and NSW have outlawed the practise. The Royal Commission into Institutional Child Abuse in one of its Findings stated that the Catholic Church should cease the practise of The Confessional and the Cone of Silence.

Since then, most Religions have stated they are following the Findings of the Royal Commission but still most Religions continue to practise some form of ‘Wellness’ or ‘Worthiness’ Interview with their youth.

Gay Conversion Therapy by any other name...

pcb 2024

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