

KILLING TIME



A MURDER SQUAD DETECTIVE JOSEPH LIND STORY
BY

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MURDER SQUAD DETECTIVES

JOSEPH LIND
AND
SOPHIE GRASSO

KILLING TIME

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This is the 66th Story in the series describing Murder Squad Detective Grade Four Joseph Lind's career and life.

It hasn't been long since the body of Lind's son William 'Bill' Lind was transferred from Melbourne for a burial service in Sydney. Joe's wife of many years Tellie is a little concerned at the lack of emotion shown by her husband as though he was holding the sadness in, hiding it from the world...not a healthy practise according to her beliefs. She came from a society in South America that found solace in shedding grief as a family tradition. Loud wails and even self-flogging were all an important part of the grieving process. The 'stiff upper lip' attitude was an English tradition, strange to many.

The trip to Melbourne by air to see their gifted daughter has become a monthly event much appreciated by both the family and their eldest daughter.

Life had returned to a normalised pattern...if that is at all possible for a Murder Detective...with the Covid virus taking a back seat in terms of societal 'shut-downs' even though the infection rates and death toll especially of the elderly remain high...too high!

Precis:

We all do it...that is kill time. In various guises and for different reasons we do it regularly throughout our lives. The older we get, the more scientific...the more practised...more serene and less physical the methods are to kill time.

Be it that habitual morning cuppa shared with like-minded persons at the favourite Café or the intimate sharing of views in the 'Secret Men's Business' meetings in an organised 'Men's Shed' atmosphere...or the 'Women's Weekly Club' Meeting or the many organisations that take on volunteers, usually retired people with time on their hands and a willingness to help anyway they can...just to kill time.

There are countless such Associations, all meant to draw older people out to socialise...to partake...to enjoy for no other reason than to fill empty hours. To make their lives more fruitful...more satisfying.

To be cooped up in a dark empty home is no way to kill time...but sadly, many lonely people followed that pattern...

Then for a few there is the other format of 'killing time'. The darkness of night encouraging those to escape the nest to kill unsuspecting persons...the true meaning of 'Killing Time' for a few 'sub-human' types...

CHAPTER ONE

I guess you could say he was killing time. That he had more time on his hands now since he retired so many years ago...in fact, he had more years as a 'Retiree' than as a working man.

A career man.

He'd walk around his neighbourhood for aerobic exercise so he would say. There were some who would say he was a true gentleman while others weren't too sure. 'A sticky-beak' putting his nose where it wasn't wanted...or needed others would scold. He's checking out which houses are empty during the day...even at night. 'Mister Light-fingers' his 'tag' by some cynical old 'nags'.

He saved his best 'good mornings' with a smile to the more attractive women...specifically young, good-looking women so some thought...the older he got, the more he flirted with these attractive women. With a smile he would say he was being friendly and there was no harm meant.

"I'm old enough to be their father...their grandfather...I'm just being sociable...something I couldn't be while I was working. Now it's a pleasure..." This pleasurable banter to will away the cynical view of some.

CHAPTER TWO

"Whew! I swear it's getting hotter every year..." Sophie lamented. "That old bloke over there...dressed up in a suit as though he is going to a funeral..."

"At least he's got a hat on...a wise old bloke". I replied. "Old people...they feel the cold. That's why you see them dressed to the nines on hot days...and in the old days you'd never leave the house without being dressed to the nines..."

"Mmm..." Was Sophie's response as we both watched the old geyser walk along the street. "I wonder what he planned for his retirement days. You know when he was a young blade. More than likely not what he is doing now...marking time...killing time...he would have planned for something completely at odds to what he is doing now".

“Harrumph...you reckon? By the look of him, he’s had plenty of time to kill...he’d have to be in his late seventies or early eighties...plenty of time to kill. A lot like many his age. Too old to participate...too young to die”. I surmised. “To me he retired yonks ago so he’d be well-practised in killing time...sad in a way, eh? Ex-Army I reckon”.

“Why?” Sophie asked as she turned to me.

“His back...ramrod straight. He walks with some purpose even if it has been reduced somewhat...to a hobble. Not as good as when he was younger on Parade Ground but he still has that walk...that mien about him...most ex-servicemen and women have it...”

“Mmm...” It was obvious that she disagreed with me on my assumption. She sipped on her Iced Tea so she wouldn’t add her opinion...so I thought.

We had managed to get a parking spot just opposite a Coffee Café that I hadn’t visited for some time. The Burwood Shopping strip was always busy. We sat in our Unmarked both enjoying a Chicken and Avocado Wrap and a coffee that had not changed in some fifteen years...it was still one of the best coffees in Sydney...and the chicken wrap? Amongst the best in Sydney...

We too were killing time...it was that type of day. We weren’t that enthusiastic to return to work, our lethargy contagious...or was it the old bloke’s attitude wearing off onto us?

“See the old bloke...” She tittered as she waved an arm in the general direction. “He’s dipped his hat at every attractive women and girl within eyeshot...the dirty old bugger!” Sophie exclaimed. “I’ve struck old men like that...they look at you as though they’re undressing you...it makes me shiver”.

“They’re harmless, Sophs... those old blokes. If you dropped your clothes in front of him, ten to one he’d not know...or couldn’t do what you’re talking about”.

“Bloody hell! Why on earth would I even consider dropping my clothes in front of him...he’s a bloody old man...now if he were...”

“We’re not going there Sophs. Jeez...a harmless old bloke. He’s just filling out his day...killing time before he drops dead...there’s a lot of people like that...treading water...and he’s of an age more than likely that wouldn’t know what to do with an attractive naked woman if she paraded passed him...that’s what happens to us men when we age...we become next to useless”.

“I’ll agree with that but I’d bring the ‘Age of Uselessness’ a little closer to fifty or thereabouts. A time to look forward to, eh Joe?” A menacing smile to go with the dig. “You’re not racing towards that time, are you? Whoops...you’ll never see fifty again, will you? You got your retirement all planned out? Like your old Boss who is going to places never heard of before...isn’t that right? He’s been on the road for what? Seven years and the whispers are he hasn’t made it out of South Oz yet...NSW and South Oz in seven years. He should have done the big one by the time you’re ready to retire, Joe. What a life...where-ever the wind takes you...”

“Hah...nah...they spent an entire ‘Wet’ hemmed in...at some waterfall in the Kimberley!” I almost burst out laughing. “He and his missus love it. They say they should have done it earlier...years ago...yeah, they’re in the Flinders Ranges in SA...they love it though it can get a little hot in the middle of summer...high forties...”

“Nah...that’s not my style...that’s way too hot! What worries me about that set-up is what happens when age catches up to them...they’ll be confined to the Motorhome somewhere in some Caravan Park in an outback township not able to move because of some old-age malady...”

“Since when have you become so negative? Besides, they still have their family home...if something like that happens God forbid, they will be able to get home...”

“If they can...”

“Jeez girl...Tellie and I have spoken about it several times...a lot really. If I go through to the age that I am expected to retire by, I’ll be seventy...too old to do what I would like to do...much the same as the old Boss, Abbey. Going bushwalking, hang-gliding, canyoning, sailing, fishing in crocodile infested rivers...I’ll be too old for most of that...and hiking through the bush which I have always enjoyed...too old for that too! If I retire earlier which would suit both of us better, the girls may not have settled into their own lifestyles...married or not...and the other problem we’ve got is that Tellie is almost twelve years my junior so if I retired at seventy, she will be fifty-eight about...she’ll lose too much superannuation if she retired early...so what am I expected to do to fill out my time waiting for her to retire...I’ll be in my eighties by the time she retires at seventy...that’s the kicker!”

“What!! Another fifteen...sixteen years for you before you reach the official retirement date? Aleesha, the youngest of your daughters, will be around twenty-four...Samantha eighteen months older and Dannielle...she’d be in between the two...I reckon they’d have backpacked Europe by then...they’d be old enough to live on their own. Stop using them as an excuse for your apprehension in not knowing what you want to do...but I can see your problem with Tellie being that much younger...”

That hit a nerve...her assumption that I was using the girls as my excuse for not really planning my retirement daze fully...was what she said right? Maybe a little, but whenever I thought about the future and my retirement days, I became stuck in mud...never sure on what I wanted to do to pass my time. I couldn't see me visiting a favourite Café for that morning fix...there wasn't one within walking distance of my place in any case...there you go...putting petrol on the fire!

I looked across at the old bloke as he took an outside seat and table at the local, popular Coffee Shop. He had difficulty making his way to the empty table and two chairs, sitting slowly. That was his day...a walk to the shops, buying the daily paper to read as he sat for an hour or two killing time...sitting around waiting to die...will that be me?

I hoped not...I haven't worked hard all these years to sit killing time waiting to die...or to take up voluntary work like some. I'd've spent over fifty years working at the job I love not wanting to begin a volunteering job when I retire. Not on. My time will be for me...

"It sickens me...when people ask me what I have planned for my retirement. Like...I'm twenty-three for God's sake...what do I want to do in another forty-five...fifty years!? Who fucking knows...I certainly don't...and I am expected to put aside the going price for my superannuation...twelve percent of my salary! Why? Because the Government figured out they could not afford to give out a pension to citizens as they aged as it would be too much of a burden on the system...but look what happened during the...what was it? You know that Depression...that worldwide financial slump..."

"The Global Financial Crisis. It started in two thousand and seven and plunged many national economies into severe financial strain for two years or more..."

"Yeah...my Uncle lost close to one hundred and fifty thousand dollars out of his superannuation fund. Just like that!" She snapped her fingers. "Where did it go? Who got it? Do you save all your life to have it ripped out of your fingers by unknown hands...and they want me to plan my retirement now...yer gotta be kiddin' me".

"I can understand where you're coming from but the way things are...you've gotta start planning at your age...you know...what you would like to do...where you would like to live and more importantly, what your hobbies and past-times would be at that retirement age...for you, that would be over seventy years of age I reckon".

"That's what I mean...I can't see me sweating over the twentieth re-birth of another MGA or B at that age...I could be bloody dead! Killed by a crazed drug riddled youth or have an MGB drop off its jacks squashing me to death! What's the good of putting away twelve percent of my salary if that is my plight? I've scrimped and saved for what? A fancy funeral!?"

I laughed as I'm sure I had a similar outlook at the same age.

"You could be married, had six kids and at your retirement day have twelve grandkids and six great grandkids milling around their much-loved Nanna..."

"Not fucking likely...marriage is not on the horizon for me at this stage. No way! Did I tell you I'm thinking of taking on a couple of Boarders...coppers I reckon would be the best deal don't you think?"

I nodded, surprised by this latest disclosure.

Sure, she had the room so's it wouldn't be that much of a hassle but...a big house now that the extensions had been completed. Three Bedrooms with their own ensuites unoccupied downstairs. Her Bedroom, Walk-in Robe and spacious Ensuite with a Study alcove all tucked up in the roof. A beautiful view looking down river to the Gladesville Bridge. A bit of a waste but she would have to be careful who she chose as housemates...coppers...that would be a safe bet.

"Your Mum...or your Uncle Dad? When they come to stay overnight...where would they sleep?"

"Thought about that. I purchased two double beds...those pump-up ones on-line. Mum can sleep with me or in my bedroom...there's enough room. Uncle Dad? He can blow one up to sleep out in the back Family Room...or out in the garage. Mum says she might have a problem getting up from one of those on the floor. We can swap...she has my bed while I sleep on the pump-up mattress on the floor...they're quite comfy..."

CHAPTER THREE

He sat carefully. Slowly which he finished off with a deep sigh as he sunk into the outdoor chair. Cold on his behind as they always were at this time of the morning. He nodded to several customers near him. A nod, a wave, or a smile his reply. He was known at this place. He carefully removed his hat as the sun didn't have a bite. Combed his thinning grey-white hair with his fingers. A certain vanity could be interpreted in his actions.

The attractive Waitress hurried to his table asking if he would have the usual...a large Flat White with fair dinkum milk, one slice of Sourdough toasted, with butter and vegemite...the butter had to be soft so as not to create divots in the toast as he tried to spread the butter onto

the slice of toast. Hopefully, the toast would be still warm to touch so the vegemite trowelled into the melting butter...that's how he liked it. Every day...each morning weather permitting, the old bloke would make the journey from his home up to the shopping strip. He would detour into the Newsagency to buy the morning paper...

He surveyed the outside customers, concentrating on an extremely attractive woman several tables from him. He caught her eye, nodded, and smiled at her. She returned the smile. If he had been younger he may have felt his heart flutter, his 'go daddy' begin to harden...now...there was nothing...not even a heart flutter. He did it because...well...because...was it an ego thing? More than likely as that was the only thing that he could feel. Ego at his age? Not really, but he liked the responses he got...even the ones who scorned him...it made him chuckle.

He was seventy-six, old enough to be their grandfather!

He wondered what she would think of that.

He knew it wasn't a flirt, just a harmless exchange between two people that meant little...his days of wooing the fairer sex were long gone. His libido had followed the same route when he was in his fifties. He had forgotten the feeling of arousal, of that sexual feeling that a beautiful woman would engender...and there lies the problem he mused. His attraction to women had been a purely sexual thing...all his life...a chemistry reaction with the right woman...like his ex-wife. Forty years of freedom from her biting tongue after a particularly nasty separation and he still had not lassoed in his selfish ways that had guided him from a young teenager to an old man. He needed that reaction...that instant sexual gratification in the emotional sense only as he would wait for several weeks into the blossoming relationship before he pressed for that sexual encounter...a period of true joy where every day with her was enveloped in love and warmth...after satisfying that urge, he would walk away from her leaving her devastated, heart-broken or knowing the truth...that he had wanted her for one thing and one thing only...sex!...and being seen with an attractive or pretty girl was an ego boost for him that lingered...

For the decade after his divorce, he drank from that well on many occasion but for the past twenty...twenty-five years there was nothing...except he singled out the attractive ones to tip his hat at, to nod or to affect a smile...a shallow, selfish pastime of an old bloke who never matured correctly...but now got his rocks off in a non-aggressive manner with the young ones.

He had often wondered why he had not matured in that way; why he had never had that emotional tie of mateship before the relationship developed into romance...and not just a

sexual thing. He didn't know but accepting it, knowing what it was, was a little too late to learn...to adjust.

Perhaps it might have been his Army days where separation was a built-in part of service...but...for most of his short-married life it had been good...hadn't it? He swished away those thoughts that always made him mellow...there wasn't enough time to be mellow...

His coffee came...then his staple piece of toast. He'd concentrate on the Newspaper and his light Brunch, usually taking several hours to finish all his habitual past-times. He would register the older women who scared him, promising himself that a lesson was to be learnt by staying clear of those old crones...he imagined them naked and shivered at the thought...a sight to run from! Again, it was a visual thing...if he met a woman who had aged gracefully and had an instant effect on him...he may...might consider the commencement of a relationship based on something more than sexual excitement...but there you go he admonished himself, the thought was still based on that visual excitement...the selfishness as though he was some Valentino himself...

"Hah! Did you notice that?" Sophie broke the silence with her question. Nodding her head in the direction of the old bloke across the street.

"No. What?"

"When those six women took the long table behind the old bloke, he moved one table over, taking his morning paper and coffee with him..."

"Well...yer can't really blame him now, can you? You can hear the old girls cackling from here, for God's sake...now there's a bloke who'll always doff his hat to an attractive woman no more than thirty...forty years old...but the old birds? They're not his style. I wonder if I'll be the same when I'm his age...sitting in the sun...he's just had his third top-up...killing time...kinda sad in a way, eh?"

CHAPTER FOUR

She woke with a start, fumbling around on her bedside table to get her glasses. Something had woken her. A noise that was foreign to the normal night sounds of suburbia. She was still half asleep as she focused in at her bedroom window to see a person in silhouette, standing out because of the nearby streetlight behind him...yes...a young bloke for sure.

She took a deep breath than shrieked out as loud as she could.

“Bugger off, yer little shit!” She screamed in an old crone’s screech. “I’m calling the cops!” She informed the figure as she turned on her night-light and fumbled for the phone.

A two-man Uniform team were there inside four minutes after receiving the call through Com-central. Because of a spike in the number of violent home invasions and house burglaries in the District over the past several months, Divvy Van patrols of the local streets had been increased. A second Divvy Van and a Fingerprint Specialist followed soon after.

She was a tough old bird who refused a night in Hospital and after the Paramedics had given her the once over they retreated, leaving the first on-site team to begin questioning her...though after thirty minutes little was achieved! While this flurry of activity was occurring, the second Divvy Van and its two-man team began a slow sweep of the near neighbourhood. It was close to 0200 hours in the morning when they stopped an old bloke walking his dog...a little unusual to say the least!

They pulled up beside him...

“Morning sir...a little chilly to be walking the dog this early in the morning isn’t it! Yer’d not see many like-minded persons about at this hour, would you sir?”

“Good evening Constables. Bill Loftus useta...yer’d be surprised...yes, Bill Loftus and I...we’d pass each other some nights...this useta be his dog. Poor old Bill got run over...skittled...the bastard didn’t stop and the old bloke bled to death on the roadway...he useta walk on the road...they’ve never caught the bastard who did it...useta tell him but he paid no heed...killed him it did. I took his dog...he was still holding the leash when he died...she’s a good dog...walks with yer not against yer...I’m not a good sleeper and I’s sleep in blocks of two to three hours apiece. If’n I’m awake, me dog is awake and the only thing that makes me and me dog tired, is a couple of circuits of the block...Jason Hegarty...lives one block over. Useta work nightshift somewhere...rarely see him now...don’t know what happened to him...old Harry Coombs...lives on the corner down the end of the street. Still see him regular like...him and his three dogs. Sometimes his missus would be with him...chattering away to herself...but she died some time ago...Grahame Hussey...his joint backs onto the park two blocks over. His missus died a while ago...says he still finds it hard to sleep in an empty bed so he walks...for hours so it seems. A real bonza bloke...we often walk together if we see one another...he’s a knowledgeable bloke...an interesting man to listen to”.

He was a little apprehensive...on edge so the Constables thought, the way he was all over the place. The old bloke was rambling to hide something. That raised the hair on both Uniforms' necks.

"You weren't peeping into a bedroom window of the local Women's Refuge up your street earlier in the night, were you?"

"A women's refuge? I didn't know that. Which...what house?"

"Two down from your place...on your side of the street".

"Yer learn something new every day...women's refuge you say? Where women run to get out of a violent relationship...sometimes they bring it on themselves, don't you think? Any Refuges for men?" A wheeze for a chuckle.

"I don't know sir. Your address, sir...have you any ID on you sir?"

"Oh no...I'm not that stupid. If'n I was attacked having my wallet on me, they could rob me blind and empty me home as I lay in the gutter bleeding to death".

That seemed an 'off' remark by the old bloke which further added to the coppers' suspicion. They weren't to know it was his sense of humour.

"Your address sir". The taller cop asked in a commanding voice.

"Yes...top of this street. Number 3...the second house on this side of the street. Been there now for forty years. Reared my four kids...the missus, bless her memory, has been dead for ten...fifteen years now...she was originally from Perth...she missed her family being over here...but she followed me like a good woman would..."

"You live on your own then?"

"Um...yes...no...um...will I lose my pension if I confess to having a lodger in the back Grannie Flat? Built it onto the house years ago for my daughter so's she could save for a home of her own...her and her husband...they moved to Adelaide...a beautiful old house they bought in the Adelaide Hills...his job keeps them there. Rarely see them now...me daughter always remembers me birthday...rings me to wish me well...and Christmas too".

"Hop in. We'll take you home..."

"I've only just begun my walk..."

“We’ll take you home sir...” More forcefully enunciated. “To check that is your home as you say. Hop in!” This was an order the old bloke couldn’t refuse. The dog would not hop up into the Divvy Van no matter how hard the old bloke tried to coax her. In the end, the ‘passenger’ cop hopped out and lifted the little Terrier into the old bloke’s lap...she immediately closed her eyes. The old bloke gave a chuckle and patted the little dog.

The two cops walked the old bloke up his driveway and up onto the front porch area. The old bloke extracted his keys from under a nearby flowerpot and opened the front door. The dog scampered into the warmth of the house. Both coppers nodded their head and were about to leave when the taller one turned back to the old bloke. Now considered just an old bloke who likes a bit of a natter...lives by himself so conversation would be hard come by.

“Your house key? Don’t leave it under the flowerpot, mate...that’s the first place they look. Put a length of string on it and wear it around your neck...that doesn’t tell anything about where you live but you know where it is...okay. We’ve had plenty of break-ins and home invasions around here in the last couple of months so take care huh?”

The old bloke nodded his understanding.

“Your Lodger? How long has he been with you?” An after-thought from the smaller of the two coppers.

“Oh...about six years...yeah...he’s been handy around the house. He mows the lawns back and front. Looks after the gardens. Has a veggie patch out the back. He built that double carport on the side of the house...took him awhile...yeah...has done a lot...”

“His name, sir?”

“Martin Taylor...lost his wife and kids in a car accident...he was at work...tried to end it but failed...that silly action left him a bit slow. He works at the Woollies Distribution Centre five days a week...as a Forklift Driver and general ‘yes’ body...a nice bloke but he doesn’t talk much...”

“Martin Taylor, you say. About how old?”

“Mmm...late forties I reckon...”

“Thank you sir...Oh! Do you know the woman in Number twenty-one up the street?”

“Whingin’ Doris...she gets her gander up at the slightest thing...that’s where all you people are now...what!? Is she complaining about the hoot of a Barn Owl or a Tawny Frogmouth?”

There are a few around here...I leave out some mince for them every so often. Doris and her sister go up to the local Café for a coffee once or twice a week...both talk too loud so's everyone there can hear their conversations. Not much depth but full of negativity...both are whingers of note. Killing time. Doris Canto and her sister Beverley Rossi...yer'd never get a laugh out of them...I bin thinking of changing Coffee Joints because of their loud, shrill banter".

This bloke is a neighbourhood stickybeak so thought the two Constables. They noted his name to run out a search of the man when they returned to the Station...before they knocked off. Because of other things piling up on them, they failed to run that search. Both reminding each other of the unfinished task that they would pick up at the start of the shift tomorrow night. There had been too many incidents to report on that morning. They never got around to it as other things seemed more important...

CHAPTER FIVE

It appeared to me these type of days were becoming more frequent...the want to not crawl out of bed and get going! Was it my age? Was it Long Covid symptoms? I had never contracted the virus and my second top-up injection had taken the number to two+two+the flu injection.

I have often wondered what the long-term effects were on us humans who were being encouraged by Governments around the World to add another Booster Shot...with babies over six months and kids now encouraged to partake in a foreign substance being added to an already large number of shots being administered. Measles, Mumps, Whooping Cough, Diphtheria, Polio and now Flu and Covid shots! Tetanus shots when required and if you were going overseas...another couple were required. The human body must have limitations and I wondered whether we had passed that point of no return. Sperm counts were decreasing...was there any connection? Had we experienced the vaccines long enough to ward off any side-effects over a long period? Say forty years...or several generations or was all this just my paranoid self, going into overdrive! I shook my head to rid myself of this latest conspiracy theory that I had developed. I smiled at myself for being a silly old bugger

We will always have covid or one of its variants hanging about. Like the cold and influenza, it would always circuit through societies of all countries the world over. Another infection...but it is doing some good as most deaths from the virus were old people...the annual pension bill must be dropping...

I alighted from the Unmarked and stretched, squeezing those thoughts from my brain. The sun was warm if you sheltered out of the biting wind. I had not unloaded my thoughts of the morning onto Sophie. If it were Shelley or Marge still being my partner, I think I would have burdened them with my paranoia. Sophs? She was a little too young to have to worry about these enormous loads...after a couple of years I may...if I remembered...

I acknowledged Doctor Imran Hirsi who responded with a smile that was all teeth...dazzling white teeth.

“Morning Detectives. It’s a little brisk is it not. Yes?”

I nodded. Sophie smiled in response.

No, Sophs was a little too young to have such a conversation that all these necessary injections were slowly killing us...or at least making us males sterile. Could it be a world-wide action of females...as a response to being second-class citizens for the last two to three millennium? A thoughtful quandary to think about over a well-chosen bottle of Red...an interesting conversation to liven up the meal we had just completed and were chasing it away with a Port of quality and an excellent coffee before we contemplated opening another bottle of Red...these types of conversations could lead anywhere...except a knife or a gun fired. We weren’t like that...just a series of conversations that could, as I have said, lead anywhere if it was accompanied by laughter...those were the best meals shared with Muscles and his missus Marge, my first partner when I was allocated a Dee role in the Murder Squad..

“How should we address you Doctor?”

“Mmm...out here in the field...Ian should do. In the Office Doctor Hirsi would be preferred, yes?”

I nodded.

“Okay...Ian it is...what have you got for us this morning?”

“An attractive young lady...a stab wound straight to the heart. Instrument used in the fatal assault? Yes? I have no idea at this stage except to say...um...the blade was quite long...and small in its sectional size. That will be examined further at the post-mortem stage to prove that point. An examination of the wound which I suspect is deep but a penetration hole...circular of around five to eight millimetres across...killed instantly as it looks as though the shaft of the implement passed right through her heart...the tip pierced the dermis of her back breaking through the left scapula...a hard thing to do. It was obviously thrust into her body with considerable force...a difficult blow to manage...there are no signs of a

struggle so the initial penetration was the killing blow...she may have reacted but it was without any force...um...killed within the last eighteen hours...closer to eight to twelve hours I'd say but will narrow that time down when we autopsy her..."

"Who discovered her?"

Hirsi shook his head. Yes, a silly question as the first on-scene would be the Officer to ask such a question. I nodded as I held up my hand in apology. Other Forensic Pathologists would have gleaned that information from who knows, but our new Doctor Hirsi had a lot to learn yet.

I walked out of the room looking for the 'first-on-scene Officer'. She was sitting on a comfortable looking outside settee on the front veranda that ran the width of the house. A light-weight aluminium 'add-on' roofline that did not look out of place. It shaded the large window-line of the Lounge Room from the western setting sun.

"Constable..."

"Shirley-Anne Conrads. Constable Conrads out of the local Station at Burwood".

She stood and held out her hand. I shook her small soft hand turning to introduce Detective Sophie Grasso. Not a handshake which I found unsettling. A nod from each was their introduction.

"Yes Detective, I was first on scene. The back and front doors were open...the house landline telephone was off the hook and there was no evidence of forced entry. We received a Crimestoppers call of a person lurking about the place..."

"What time was this?"

"Um...just after six this morning...the sun had not peeked over the horizon yet...it was still dark and bloody cold...no other information was given and there wasn't an ID provided. Male...elderly...that's all. I was finishing my trawl of the near neighbourhood ready to knock-off..." She glanced at her watch. "I can see a double coming up...please excuse me for sitting but I am bloody exhausted..."

"You say you were finishing your trawl of the neighbourhood...any reason why?"

"Yes...we've had a few BnE's, forced entries, and home invasions over the past month or two around this area...the number of patrols have doubled over the past month because of

pressure from the local inhabitants and the local MP who happens to be the Minister for Police...and lives in the area...not a friendly connection that should be ignored...”

“Anything concrete...descriptions...you know...”

“Arrh...no. Nothing to hang yer hat on...no”.

“Mmm...family members?”

“The young woman had taken up residence only recently. Um...the elderly lady...the owner of the house takes in Domestic Violence victims for a short period until the victim gets back on their feet or can be accommodated in a more suitable women’s refuge shelter. The old girl, Doris Canto...um...she lives in a back room attached to the Garage leaving the four bedrooms and the entire house available for emergency use by women who have been ejected from the marital home...at present three of those bedrooms are vacant...no-one else in the house”.

“The owner of the house?”

“Go around the back...I’ll betcha she is sitting outside her Grannie Flat enjoying the early morning sun with a large mug of coffee...as long as you’re out of the breeze it’s quite warm...Doris Canto...that’s the old girl’s name”.

I cocked my head at Sophie to follow me around the back of the dwelling.

“Joe? Stephanie Albright is the victim’s name...that’s not her married name but her family name before she married. I’ve done a search on her...four AVO’s out against her husband. The woman has changed addresses with her child four times but the husband seems to know where she is every time...causes hassles...arguments and an unsettling time for the one child...a boy of six”.

“Check to see whether she has a vehicle in her name. If she has, I’ll lay a bet that the husband has placed a computer tag somewhere on the vehicle. Also, check on the husband’s whereabouts and current home address for me. He’s our number One suspect...straight up!”

CHAPTER SIX

“Missus Canto, is it?” I asked of the woman who was napping in a chair. Her head lolling to one side. Her mouth open. The coffee mug she was holding spilling most of its content onto the grass. I cleared my throat hoping that would wake her. It did as she slowly roused. Sophie and me taking a chair either side of her at the end of the Grannie Flat out of the chilly wind. The morning was dull, a low cloud cover adding to the feeling of mid-winter even though it was nigh on Spring!

“Yes...” She replied without opening her eyes or changing her position on the chair. “You the cops who are going to investigate the death of poor Stephs. Go chase out her husband...he is a brute of a man and has hounded Stephanie out of four ‘safe refuge houses’ before she came here more or less as a last resort. Her little boy...six years of age...what a way to begin his life...it’s a cruel world. Why would anyone want to bring kids into a world like this...I open my door for the overflow of the victims of abuse mostly women...and their kids...people who are scared shitless of what their estranged partners are going to do to them when they find where they’re now living...AVO’s aren’t worth the trouble...they’re only good for husbands who will abide by the AVO’s details as law-abiding people should. They ain’t the bastards who will ignore the Court Document...it’s the other bastards who will ignore every Court Decree...who will go ahead and kill the estranged wife...and sometimes the kids as well...there’s gotta be a better way...”

She spoke in a whinging, whining way with no life or music in her presentation. An occasional sneer exposed itself. She spoke as though it was hard work to communicate and I wondered why she had opened her home to battered women...speaking to them when they were at their lowest ebb...castigating the husbands at every opportunity something most wives had done every day since their escape from an unhappy marriage and a dominating and manipulative husband. Despite these realisations, many of the women think they are at fault and another go at marriage will be much better...but that Tiger never changes its stripes...

Missus Canto couldn’t add anything more to the crime in the front bedroom of the house. We left her sitting there. I wondered if she would drift back to sleep...no, she got up and made herself another coffee before plopping back into the chair to slowly drift off again...loosing most of her coffee again.

I did my usual stroll through the house though there was nothing of the Decease’s to try to turn the house...or at least the Bedroom into her space. Few clothes, mostly having a second-hand look packed into an open, battered suitcase. The young boy’s bed tucked into a corner...a cot missing the rails and slatted sides. His clothes clean and new...if he was well clothed that was all the mother was concerned about...her appearance having little priority

though her hair was recently cut and styled. Fresh nail polish on fingernails and toes. She was clean and had a slight pleasant scent. A threadbare oversized T-shirt her night-dress...could have been one of her estranged partner's T-shirts.

I wondered where that thought had come from. I again spun around taking everything within the room committing it to memory.

"He's a smoker...or a person who is a heavy smoker has been in this room". Sophie offered as she took a strong breath of air. Her nose pointed towards the ceiling. She repeatedly taking deep breaths, nodding to confirm her conclusion. I was still none the wiser!

I shook my head as I couldn't smell the odour. I tilted my head to question Sophie's supposition.

"My dad was a heavy smoker. You'd never see him without a durry stuck out of the corner of his mouth. Lit or unlit. His pores used to ooze the smell...in his clothes...in his hair..." She looked away from me, a momentary sadness in her eyes.

As we strolled back to our Unmarked, Sophie gave me the latest and current address of the estranged husband Barton Fields. He had several strikes against him for not obeying Court Orders and AVO's...not a comforting thought. I glanced at my watch as I slumped into the front passenger seat. Computing the address into the GPS thingamajig to be given precise instructions how best to get from Burwood to Strathfield...one suburb over. How we easily get into the habit of not using our brain but instead, rely on these GPS thingamajigs and Microsoft Spellcheck and Editor to get us through the day.

Then again, I have seen Reports prepared the old-fashioned way of 'running writing' or on typewriters...horrendous! You can see why computers were invented...

CHAPTER SEVEN

It wasn't hard to pick out what house we were looking for!

Two local Divvy Vans, an Ambulance, a Morgue Van, a Forensic Trace, and a Forensic Pathology Van pointed it out for us. We added to the bottleneck in the street parking close to the cluster of vehicles. We made our way up to the front gate. Signing on with the Crime Scene Register I looked down the list of visitors. I scratched my neck wondering what we had walked into.

Doctor Bree Wzerlic came out the front door shucking out of her bio-suit and two sets of latex gloves. Tossing them into a nearby bio-bin.

“Detectives...I didn’t expect to see you here. A clear case of suicide...”

I nodded thinking straight up that we had found the killer of Stephanie Albright, the estranged deceased wife of Barton Fields. Found dead with a single blow with some sort of knife penetrating her heart. The next suburb over. He takes his own life after killing his ex...it wasn’t the first such case and it wouldn’t be the last!

Wzerlic stood on the top step of the entry steps onto the front veranda. She seemed uncertain as to what to say. Our sudden appearance had thrown her.

“Um...the deceased? Barton Fields?” She ran her fingers through her short bob cut. “He arrh...he cut his wrists wide open while lying in a bath full of water. I can’t give you a definite timeline as I do not know the temperature of the bath water when he first immersed himself. Suffice to say that the water is now cold. Two safety-razors on the floor beside the bath...the closest I’ll say to the time of the suicide is twelve to fourteen hours ago...um...eight to ten O’clock last night...jeez...” She took the last two steps to the front path. “I need a holiday”.

I shook my head frustrated with that outcome.

“Bree...we’ve just come from the ‘halfway shelter house’ where your deceased male’s estranged wife was killed sometime last night...stabbed...once”.

“And you’re thinking our Deceased here was the culprit. Does the deed and comes straight home to commit suicide, eh? A possibility I guess, but it will need more than your gut instinct to prove your hypothesis”.

“There’s no signs of a struggle or another person involved...”

“...and there is a suicide note...” Bree announced. “...there is no sign of a homicide here Joe. Sorry to disappoint you...we would like to move the body out of here. Have you seen enough? I’ll get one of my Assistants to take the plug out of the bathtub plughole, okay?”.

“The suicide note...” I asked. I wanted to read it...slowly.

“Um...the Lead Forensic Trace person has it. Joe, it hasn’t been signed and the SFO cannot say for certain that the note was written and printed off this equipment...sorry”.

I began to walk along the hallway with Sophie following me like a lovelorn puppy, almost colliding into Tellie in a full bio-suit.

“Arrh...you’ve never looked more beautiful, my love...”

“Yeah...right. You need to see this”.

The one page ‘note’ was now safely enveloped in a clear plastic evidence sheath.

“The mother of the Deceased has confirmed that while the note was prepared on a computer and then spat out of an attached Printer, it follows his speech tempo...and as you can see, it was addressed to his mother...”

“She here?”

Tellie nodded, pointing towards the rear of the house. I slowly read the note again before handing it to Sophie as I headed towards the rear of the house. I stopped and returned to my wife’s side.

“If it is a simple suicide, why the full bio-suits?”

She shrugged her shoulders. For suicides it was usually a beanie, shoe covers and a set of latex gloves...their gear this morning did not compute.

“Um...the Deceased’s mother? She was the one who discovered her son and called it in...a brave, stoic woman”.

The fifty-something woman was sitting sipping on a mug of coffee, a look like the thousand-yard stare that soldiers often suffered from after continued artillery barrages.

“Missus Fields? I’m Detective Joseph Lind. My partner, Sophie Grasso”.

She nodded, glanced up at me then settled on Sophie giving her a tight, quick smile. I turned to Sophie suggesting she ask the woman a few questions.

“Do you mind?” I asked her.

She shook her head.

“No...no, not at all”. She seemed to come out of her daze quickly. “Poor Barty...he couldn’t carry the load that bitch of a wife piled onto him...and yes, I’ve read the note and confirmed it is my son’s way of writing things”.

“You found your son?” Sophie asked gently as she sat beside the older woman.

“Yes...not a sight a mother should see...” She sniffled, swiped her nose with a balled-up knot of tissues.

“Why were you visiting him...you live...”

“Next street over...Regent Parade. I’d picked up Jason...Barty’s six-year-old son...he stayed with me and my husband last night as Barty had a work’s thing on...I drove over this morning. Josh was excited at seeing his father...I called my Dave, my husband. Barty’s father and Josh’s grandfather to come and pick up Josh immediately...I pretended that Barry was taking a bath and we’d have to wait for him to finish...I saw the note...” She breathed deeply. “He’d often spoken about going to Perth...or New Zealand...or Fiji...somewhere...just to get away from the garbage Stephanie sprouted. I’ve said to him several times that Josh was the most important person in his life and if he disappeared then all Josh would have would be the things that his mother continually said about Barton. If he stayed and was a constant in Josh’s life, then Josh would soon learn that his father was not the man described by his mother...” She again sniffled, reefing a fresh tissue from a box of tissues she cradled in her lap to wipe her eyes and blow her nose. She then slowly took a sip of lukewarm coffee.

“Your son has numerous fines against his name for not abiding by the Court issued AVO’s for him to stay away from his estranged wife...he continually ignored them. In fact, he was facing a jail term if he did not give up harassing his wife...”

Sophie was a little off with her facts but it didn’t seem to faze the middle-aged woman who nodded several times.

I glared at Sophie but then realised she may have found these facts out from her smartphone as we were in the house or walking here to the rear of the place. Women! They sure can multi-task a lot better than us men.

“Your son...he was facing prison time...not a good choice for a six-year-old boy to comprehend”. The woman nodded sadly. “Sounds like he is the stalker...the one who was the instigator...the one who ignored all the AVO’s issued against him”. Sophie was encouraging the woman to talk.

“Sounds like it, doesn’t it? Barty would ring up Stephanie asking how he was supposed to pick up Josh for his week if he had to stay away from her place of residence...no closer than five hundred metres...that’s what every one of those AVO’s stated. He suggested Stephanie take Josh to Maccas about halfway between their two addresses. Stephanie refused that suggestion stating she wasn’t travelling halfway around the State for him. *‘You come and pick*

up your son from here'. She'd demanded. She then would give Barty her address. When he arrived there at the agreed time, there'd be no clothes, no toys...nothing for a week! She'd ring the cops as my son arrived stating that her estranged husband was harassing her and ignoring the AVO conditions. The cops knew no better. They would read the conditions of the AVO and warn Barry he was in breach of a Court Order. A jail sentence could be the result". She shook her head. "Caught between a rock and a hard place all because of these mechanisations she organised. This happened at least half-a-dozen times. He was the one who ended up with red marks against his name...she moved four or five times for the same result...the Court never heard his side of the story...or how he knew of Stephanie's address change...she had notified him of the change so he could pick up Josh. In the end, me or my husband would go pick up Josh...not an arrangement I cherished but..." She tilted her head, raised her eyebrows. "What else can you do...young Jason would tell us after we picked him up that his mother was going ape-shit as we were not supposed to pick young Jas up...the Judge had said his father was supposed to do that".

"His father had his son for a week on...a week off?"

"Yes...we thought it a good idea when the suggestion was made...but there are no good ideas under these circumstances. His mother thinks little of Jason and uses him at every turn to make it difficult for Barton. We live close to Jason's School with his mother living about the same distance on the other side...but then she kept changing her address so it was difficult for Jason to continue at that School...all his friends...even street kids who were his friends lived on our street..." She shook her head as she began to sob. Again, wiping away the tears with the saturated balled-up tissues she held in her fist.

Sophie sat back looking up at me...what could I say? I nodded, thanking the old girl for her time.

"A bummer, eh? Now both parents are dead leaving little Jason's alone..." Sophie murmured as we headed towards the Unmarked.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sophie went to turn the ignition key but paused and sat back in the driver's seat of the Unmarked.

"I don't think Barton Fields killed his estranged wife..." She stated as she looked over at me. "Oh!? Why not?" I responded.

“Stephanie Albright was killed by a single thrust that impaled her heart...that’s not an angry assailant which you would expect from some-one like Barton Fields after what he has endured...you know...he’d be as mad as a cut snake...he would have stabbed her several times out of sheer anger...multiple times in a frenzied attack...and secondly, he does not mention her at all in his suicide note. If he had killed her...in anger...he would have blamed her for everything wrong in the world...and in his world...she’s not even mentioned...and he is sorry he has taken this last step and apologises to his mother who had pointed out several times that he needed to be around for his son’s sake...that is not a murderer’s reaction but is the reactions of a man who keeps his mouth shut for his son’s sake and allows the shit hurled at him to fester...to build up to a point where he takes his own life...as that becomes the only solution he can muster...not killing his wife which would have been abhorrent to him I reckon. Another scenario is that he found out his ex-missus was dead...that could have sent him over the edge”.

“Mmm...I agree with everything you say except you convinced yourself that he is not responsible for his estranged wife’s demise...he should still be the Number One suspect for that crime and should not be discounted until a more suitable candidate comes forward...if one does suddenly appear...never discount a suspect for personal reasons...but you’ve done good though, girl. Well done...keep thinking along those lines and you’ll do good”.

As she leaned over to turn the ignition key she tittered.

“That doesn’t leave us with any suspects for the killing of Stephanie Albright...”

“No...and without a clue on which way we should progress”. I sighed lethargically, wanting to be dropped back home to curl under the doona and sleep the rest of the day away. I wondered if I had contracted Covid...I’d had two plus two booster shots which would only dilute the severity of the virus...preventing me from dying or being a hospital patient so they say, but I could still contract the virus and suffer lesser symptoms. I swiped my hand over my forehead convincing myself I was near to dying...us men can be such babies!

“Sophs? Drive up to my place...I have a couple of RAT packets to check whether I’ve picked up the virus...”

“You think you have?”

“I don’t know but I think I should check...just in case. I’m over-tired for no reason and have a splitting headache...”

“Sore joints? A dry cough? A dry and painful throat? I’ll go via my place. That’s closer. You can check there. I have a couple of RAT packets. If you test positive, I’ve also got to

isolate...okay? I'm told it can be quite an experience which has you lying in bed unable to do a bloody thing...my Mum will come over to nurse me through it".

"Yer think that's a good idea? At her age!?"

"Mmm...not a good idea, eh? I'll just have to soldier through it..."

I leaned back in the front seat and closed my eyes. I was becoming impatient with these Cases. All the same but different. I pinched the bridge of my nose before commencing.

"We've gotta check whether either one of the Deceased was having an affair inside or outside the marriage which could point us in the right direction...where did Stephanie Albright's family live? We got a clue on that. No? We must have a talk with them when we find out their address..."

CHAPTER NINE

"Turn around".

"Sorry? What!"

"Turn around. We have been derelict in not pressing Barton Field's mother with more questions on her son's background...and she should know where her in-laws live...so turn around before her husband picks her up as she told us he would..."

"Yeah...I found that a little strange. Stephanie Fields nee Albright did not provide where her family was as next of kin on that Form she had to fill in when she first arrived at that Refuge place; instead, supplying her ex-husband's address..."

"I guess it happens more times than we think...a chasm with various members of the same family..."

"Yer reckon that was all it was...a simple thing that grew into something larger that both parties could not climb over..."

"I really don't know Sophs. We might find out more with a more in-depth talk with Missus Fields and her husband".

We retraced our route to luckily catch Missus Fields about to sit in the family car her husband was driving. I instructed Sophie to pull up beside them, asking whether we could speak to both about their son's suspect suicide.

The four of us once again climbed the front steps of the house to sink into the outdoor seating on the front veranda.

"Thanks for allowing us the time to talk...where is the young bloke...your grandson?"

"With my daughter's kids. He knows them well..."

"Um...I'll ask you the same question...do either of you believe that your son committed suicide?"

Both were adamant in their response.

"Never. He'd not leave his son alone like that...even if he had killed Stephanie...which again I doubt he did..."

This was the response of most parents in a similar situation...a sense of denial to the obvious.

"Give me some background information...when did your son couple up with Stephanie?"

"Kindergarten..." Missus Fields offered after looking at her husband for confirmation. He nodded his assent. "You see one...you saw the other...all the time. Um...plus two or three others who stayed best friends up until High School...and in a couple of instances are still 'Best Friends'. Um...several of the gang went off to Private Schools which broke that life-long link".

"Yeah...Roberta Papadopoulos...she also was a close friend to Steph and Barty right through Primary School. There were hints that her parents sent her to a Catholic High School to break up the friendships...they wanted their daughter to settle down with a nice Greek boy...who they had already selected still in Greece..." She glanced out to the street as a young yahoo sped down the suburban road way too fast. "I always said that Bobby...um...Roberta and Barty were better suited. Together there was an aura...a feeling of love that emanated from both when they were together. Bobby was more settled than Stephanie. When Stephanie went on her eighteen-month tour of hitchhiking through Europe, Bobby and Barty just drifted together. I thought they would get together but Bobby's parents were adamant about their daughter marrying a good Greek boy...which she did. After that, Steps and Baz tied the knot. I always thought Barty went that way after Bobby married that Greek boy...they weren't in love and he seemed...um...over possessive...and Bobby never looked happy when she

was with him. I don't have a clue where Roberta is now...the last I heard was that her parents moved to Cessnock as George Albright was hunted by one of the Mining Companies up there...but Bobby and her husband? I haven't a clue". She shook her head.

"George Albright? That's not exactly a good Greek name". Sophie offered.

"Yeah...I don't know". She shrugged her ignorance.

"Mmm...there was a reference in your son's suicide note about his marriage...his wife not worth two bob...the only mention of his marriage or his wife...could that have been an obtuse indication of his feelings for Bobby...Roberta? With your son thinking that Roberta was worth two of Stephanie?" Sophie asked quietly.

"That's not how Barty would write a note...sure, he wrote it but it was under duress I reckon". Mister Fields commented. Missus Fields nodded.

"An obtuse mention of Bobby...whom I'm sure Baz thought he had missed the boat on...he said to me once that he had missed the boat with Bobby regardless of what her parents wanted for her...we have to agree with him...there was a...". He stopped to wave away the thought. His wife patted him on the hand giving him comfort.

CHAPTER TEN

"What are you looking for Joe?" Sophie asked as she stood and turned several times looking at the bedroom. The second time that we had walked through Barton 'Barty' Fields' Unit. A double bed and a single bed half into a built-in cupboard to ensure there was walking space between the two beds. The boy's bed made, tidy with a pile of clothes neatly piled at the end of the bed and on a chest of drawers on the opposite wall under a window. His father's bed a bit of a mess with a pile of dirty clothes at the foot of the bed on the floor.

"Have you got any shots of the Bathroom where Barton Fields allegedly committed suicide?" I asked as I scrolled through what photos I had taken.

Neither Sophs or I were that accurate or conscientious with crime-scene shots at this site as we knew it was a suicide matter and out of our hands...still...it pays to look at the little things...things that don't add up...

“There!” Sophie muttered as she handed me her iPhone. I scrolled up and down examining the few shots she had of the Bathroom. I nodded as my suspicions were confirmed. Barton Field’s clothes were neatly folded and stacked on the toilet seat.

“Look...” I instructed Sophie as I handed back her phone.

“Yeah...yeah, I see what you mean. Where do we go from here if we now think it is not suicide but murder?”

“I haven’t a clue but perhaps we should wait for the full post-mortem results before we start scouring across the countryside...maybe we can find out where Roberta ‘Bobby’ Papadopoulos now resides...without her Greek husband, huh?”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

We obtained the ‘next of kin’ details of Stephanie Fields from Barton Fields parents. They were a little unsure whether they were supplying the correct address as it had been ages since they had conversed...during the funeral of Stephanie’s father some years ago. One parent, her mother still alive and living in Lewisham. A younger sister who was married living at Abbotsford.

“Enough time to see the mother...”

“Yeah...hang on! What about our Covid scare?”

“Do you feel better? Worse? I feel okay now we have something to do and the time to do it...”

“Mmm...yeah...okay. We’re spreading Covid far and wide but what the heck, we’re looking at a possible multiple homicide case here...figure in the GPS address so we can get going...and Abbotsford...close to home, eh? You can drop me there, take a SAR’s test and then continue home...”

“There you go...”

The address was a semi-detached house which was one of many that lined the high side of the street. Early Thirties...late Forties. Her house number showed the worse kept house in the street. You had to lift the front gate to open it and the front path was a patchwork of weeds and broken coloured tiles. A brass door knocker that got little work going on its burnishing

but the brass letter opening in the door was used frequently going on its polished appearance. The door opened slowly and a tall woman stood before us cradling a baby on her hip.

“Yes?” Unfriendly and cold. She looked at both of us as though we were Mormon ‘Doorknockers’ wanting to save her soul...if she joined up to the American cult.

I showed her my ID Card as Sophie did the same. She appeared unimpressed.

“Coppers...what do you want with us?” The child began to groan which led to the child being bounced up and down on the woman’s hip...buggered if I could do that and remain standing upright!

“Missus Albright?”

“No...that’s my mother. What do you want with her?” Again, there was no warmth shown as though a past experience coloured her opinion of us coppers.

“Um...Stephanie Fields...nee Albright? Your sister?”

“Younger sister, yes”.

“I...arrh...” I hated these times, not knowing how to approach the subject so it tended to be out there and blunt. “Um...your younger sister has been found dead this morning. Under suspicious circumstances. At a Halfway House...a Women’s Refuge in Burwood”.

“You say dead? That AO of a husband...I told her she needed to keep an eye out for him...I had bad vibes...”

“...he is also dead...” Sophie countered.

“He’s dead too! Killed! I won’t shed tears over his death, but Steph deserved better. Um...you better come inside...” Her tone mellowing, becoming warmer.

The little one leaned towards Sophie as she passed, bringing a smile to Sophie and the mother.

“A bad sign...she going so easily to a copper...I’ll have to watch her as she normally isn’t so forward...or friendly with strangers”.

Like her mother I thought as I glanced at Sophie. She was embarrassed by the baby taking notice of her. I thought that a little strange as Sophs had not paid any attention to the bubs that I could perceive...

We were led into a small Lounge Room which was really an alcove off the hallway. An elderly lady was sitting in a large sofa chair wrapped in a crocheted blanket. The TV was on but turned low.

“Yes...I heard”. The old woman croaked sounding a little impatient. Not the emotion I would have expected of her overhearing our conversation with her daughter. “What happened? You don’t know do you as that silly husband of hers is also dead. He didn’t kill her, did he? He wasn’t that kind of man. A good bloke who deserved better than my Steph. She was a whirlwind. Should never have married as she wasn’t the marrying type. Here...” She lifted a bony finger from under the blanket. “Shiralee here is the mothering type...young Glenda is her fourth”. She looked up at the woman stilling balancing the baby on her hip. “You’ll have to leave soon to pick up the other kids from Playschool...”

I looked around wondering where I could sit. There was no invites to do so. I was amazed at both women, having received the bad news of the death, not showing an ounce of sorrow or grief...the world kept revolving.

“How’d she die?” The old girl eventually asked. “I hope she didn’t suffer is all”.

“We’re not sure as yet to the instrument but it seems she may have died from a single stab wound...”

“Mmm...a concentrated effort...some-one wanted her dead”. A cynicism in the words of the old lady. She harrumphed as she defended her daughter...eventually.

“Mother!”

“No use skirting around it girl. Her father always said she’d end up being dead early in life...young Jason? Where’s he?”

“With her in-Laws at present...Mister and Missus Fields”.

“Good. They’re good people and I have no qualms of them taking over his life...best for him...as long as I can see him on occasions...yes?”

“We have no say in that side of arrangements but we can pass your wishes on to the right people”.

“Good! Nothing else?”. She turned to her daughter who was still standing, bouncing the bubs on her hip. “Can we rely on your hubby to organise her body...” She asked, no...it was more of a demand to her daughter. “I’d like her buried beside her father. He’d have wanted that...he was blinded by her youthful exuberance and beauty giving her most of his attention. Shiralee

here even though the older of the two missed out on so much...she hardly knew her father. He was a stranger to her. I used to scold him at times but it made no difference to how he treated the two...chalk and cheese”.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Mister Hegarty? That you? You’ve been missing in action for a while. Yer got yerself a dog I see. How are you?” He scolded himself for sounding too enthusiastic in seeing the old man again. To tell the truth he had only realised the other bloke had gone missing when he laid eyes on him just then...

The two elderly gentlemen were standing close to a streetlight that added a surreal element to their night-time image. A cold wind with the aroma of rain coming very soon scooted up the street. Their dogs did the usual ‘hello’ of sniffs in rear-end places before they decided that neither dog was a competitor...or a danger...a social interaction that highlighted how men, especially of an older age cannot display emotions or a want to be involved much the same as their dogs...

“Ohhh...that breeze is playing havoc with me arthritis, let me tell you. No...I’ve been in Hospital...and recuperating at home. A couple of stents that were applied none too soon according to the Heart Specialist. I’m as good as can be at my age, let me tell you. A nasty business so I heard...up the street while I was convalescing. I didn’t know it was a Women’s Refugee...did you?”

The two decided as if by telepathy to turn and begin to walk together down the street. The chilling wind at their backs. The two dogs straining at their leashes but not tying either man in knots as they walked on either side of the footpath. About the farthest from each other without getting cold, wet paws from the dew on the nearby grass.

Jason Hegarty shook his head.

“I don’t know...if the woman had weathered the storm then maybe she’d still be alive. There’s too much of this one strike and yer out mentality these days...*’he was violent...he swore at me...he raised his hand to me’*...maybe she deserved it...but there could be more to save then toss away at the slightest excuse...after the War...and yeah, even the Vietnam War, Diggers came home out of step with society’s accepted norms...wife bashing not uncommon then...but most fought through it to enjoy a peaceful life together...blaming the change to

their husbands on the war they had just survived...seeing terrible things and doing much the same...these wars have more to answer to as time passes”.

“Mmm...broken marriages involving Vietnam Vets is higher than the national average...doesn't that say something. And suicide in ex. Diggers is also higher than the national average...” It was obvious Stan Hunter did not agree with Hegarty's observations on social ills and how to correct them as he ignored the statistics provided.

“It's like this latest humdrum to quell the ever-growing whinging from some First Nations Australians. They want a separate voice in Parliament to represent them! Why!? They've got the same as us now...their local Federal and State Member...why should they get more representation?”

Hegarty completely ignored the logic presented by his fellow nightwalker and went off at a tangent thinking his new line of thought was adding to the reasons why society was on a 'nose-dive'.

“They have the same rights and avenues of complaints as us...now...us as colonisers...colonisers be buggered. We've been here for near on two hundred and fifty years...we are not colonisers...our forefathers were but from what I know, the powers to be in England considered this place not a place to colonise but to send out their criminals...petty and otherwise...as the prisons and prison ships were full to overflowing in Mother England...so these *new* settlers were mostly criminals themselves. Now I hear that several different Aboriginal groups do not want to be included in this one-man representation. They want an individual from *their* tribe to represent them in Parliament...keep going and there'll be a tribe of One Nation people being represented in the Halls of Parliament...sitting in Parliament...and nothing would be achieved as bickering and argument will be the day's experience in the Parliament...worse than it is today. Bugger 'em...they's got the same avenue of representation as us now...our local member and that's good enough...that's democracy. A Referendum be buggered...history has shown they are never successful. A total waste of money! And the whole shim-sham? A racist idea...”

Another tangent to concentrate on Hunter thought. It would be a lot better if I walked alone with me dog. Lost in deep thought that I could control...not this quivering anti-society drivel...

They had turned beginning to stroll at an easy pace as a vehicle slowly drove by. A stationwagon. White in colour. The windows blacked out so they couldn't see the occupants. Before Hegarty could start up again...on why the youths of to-day required blacked out windows on their cars, Hunter turned the conversation to 'safer' subjects.

“All these weather events...drought, fire, mice plagues and floods...Climate Change I reckon...”

“Bullshit!” Hegarty responded angrily. Stan Hunter had thought he would be on safer ground when introducing this topic...he was very wrong and completely opposed Hegarty’s solutions for the world’s ills.

“The problem? Too many people on the earth. We need a decent nuclear war to at least halve the population...or decimate most of the northern hemisphere...no Chinese...no Indians...and the European Continent including Russia!? We should kill off three-quarters of the populations...and the Yanks...get rid of the lot of them and we wouldn’t have this business of Climate Change...or these new viruses popping up every time you turned around! Too many people on this planet...that’s the cause of all these new ills...mark my words”.

This was not what Hunter wanted to hear...or remark on. He felt that if he opposed anything Hegarty said, it would get down to fisty-cuffs. He imagined two old blokes going hammer and tong in the middle of the street in the middle of the night. He could never see that happening as he would run a mile to get away from such lunacy...but once upon a time? He could kill with two swipes of his hand. He knew what route Hegarty normally took on his nightly walks and with fingers crossed, Hunter exclaimed he was getting a bad stitch and was getting a little too cold so would head for home.

“Another night, perhaps”. Hegarty stated, sounding disappointed.

“Yes, surely...” Hunter replied hoping in that instance that the invitation would never be fulfilled.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“I’m sorry sir...if you wish to walk up the street to the Shopping Precinct, can I ask you to cross over the road”.

“Yes...of course...” Stan Hunter yielded. “What’s going on? Someone hurt?”

There was a plethora of official vehicles, all seeming to have their lightbars strobing red and blue hues washing over all nearby surfaces.

“Nothing for you to be worried about sir. Can I ask you to move along?”

A slight bow, a toff of his hat and the old gentleman stepped slowly from the pathway onto the bitumen surface of the road to cross to the other side.

The old-fashion mannerisms made the Uniform Copper smile as he watched the old bloke walk carefully towards the Shopping Precinct further down the street. A dapper old bloke the Constable thought, watching him all the way until the old bloke turned to disappear around the corner to head for his favourite coffee café. Firstly, buying the morning paper that he would read cover to cover...obits included...he had nothing else to do with his time and thoughts on why such a large contingent of coppers and official cars were present on his street didn't concern him. If some-one had met a dreadful end so be it...it was a part of living. He would not let it worry him as if he did, that carefully constructed wall of security and safety would collapse.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Stan Hunter slowly sat with a sigh at his outdoor table and chair. He wondered how long this arrangement would exist if he failed to show for one or two days. There were no signs out signalling this table and chair set were reserved for the old bloke...but it was always left for him. He wondered if he died tomorrow how long it would take another person to claim the position...with nought to show for his many months reservations. He doffed his hat and smiled warmly at two attractive young mothers at an adjacent table to rid himself of those black thoughts...they weren't for him. More a Jason Hegarty line of thought, God Forbid! He wondered not for the first time how these young mothers could enjoy a coffee, a talk while they pushed a pram back and forth without missing a beat while the family dog lay patiently at the woman's feet... the dog sitting beside her ignoring the humdrum of the Café.

His favourite young waitress came out, a smile her opening gambit.

"Good morning Stan". She welcomed the old bloke. "Another fine day and they say we are in for more rain...later this arvo..."

He nodded. Rain meant he stayed at home...his night walks would be curtailed. He didn't enjoy sloshing about huddled under an umbrella not able to see where he was walking...and not knowing if anyone was lurking. Again, he scoffed at those thoughts thinking they were more suitable for Jason Hegarty.

"What's going on down the street? Cops everywhere...I had to cross the street to get here. I thought they may make me walk around the block at one stage...there's police tape all over

the place”. Hunter commented before adding that he wished for his usual. That request had never changed.

“Um...I don’t know for sure but some-one has died...been killed in the Battered Wives’ Refuge so the whisper goes...your usual?” She smiled knowing that the order would never change...she a hive of information overheard at various tables...especially from those where ‘older’ folks sat enjoying their usual morning habit...and whiling away the hours. A little shocked that someone so young had beaten all of them to that final earthly arrangement...

He nodded before speaking again.

“That’s a Female Refuge? For Battered Wives? I didn’t know that. You rarely see anyone about...”

“Yes...and there’s a Refuge of sorts down your street when there is a spill-over effect from this address...that’s where a young woman was killed the other day...at that place in your street”.

She nodded before she scurried away, checking other tables for orders before she disappeared into the dimly lit interior of the Café.

Stan Hunter nodded before turning his attention to the paper. The hoo-ha of police activity forgotten. Not even the knowledge imparted by his favourite Waitress worrying him.

The recent homicides forgotten quickly as he returned to the Newspaper while elderly women around him paid more attention to the recent death...that type of thing was excellent gossip material...and as time went by, they added to the weight of blather!

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Connected?” Sophie asked as she straightened, looking carefully around the room.

“I reckon...” I replied thoughtfully. “One stab straight to the heart...attractive woman don’t you think. So was the other victim in Harris Street the other day. One thrust with a long-bladed implement...straight to the heart from the front through the rib cage. Clinically affected...Shareesh Asan...Indian I reckon...we should put out an APB on her husband but I reckon he’d be halfway to his hometown in India by now...”

“Boss...this woman’s death mirrors that of Stephanie Fields nee Albright of a couple of weeks ago...same MO exactly...the single thrust to the heart”.

I nodded, not really taking in Sophie’s words. I was in a world of my own, completely divorced from this scene. Her words coming to me through a long tunnel filled with cotton wool.

“Boss? Um...you okay?”

I nodded, not knowing why I was nodding.

“Our culprit has a hate of women who have fled from the marital home...usually because of repeated incidents of cruelty...either economic, physical or psychological abuse...” Stated Sophie, pleased with her deductive reasoning.

“Yeah...I’ll agree with you up to a point...but let’s not set that theory in concrete yet. We have a way to go. Is there any connection with our two victims? What is the significance of the old bloke bashed to an inch of his life out in the front yard? Did he see anything? Could he recognise or identify our Perps? What was the old bloke doing there in any case? Was he a peep creep? Looking through bedroom windows for a cheap thrill...” I had landed again in full control of my faculties.

“He looked a bit old for that type of thrill...yer reckon he could get his rocks off at his age? I doubt it”.

“Supposedly there are men who are sexually active up to their seventies, eighties and nineties...”

“Yeah!? What’s the percentage?” Sophie asked, a broad grin to challenge my theory.

I ignored her comment as I looked around the room. Scratched my head before pulling at my right earlobe...a habit that usually showed I was not in step with the conclusions so far reached. The Forensic Trace team had already concluded that the Perp came in through the open and unlocked window. I bent to look out through the window seeing nothing of interest. A long veranda with a low roofline over like the classic Australian farmhouse. The veranda tiled in a mosaic pattern popular in yester-years. The Architect couldn’t see the silliness of designing a rambling farmhouse structure that was far better on acreage...several thousand acres!

I scratched my head as I walked to the Bedroom door that led onto a long Hallway with similar doors either side. I walked down the Hall trying each door as I passed. Some were

locked...others not. I peered into those empty Bedrooms...some occupied by sleeping women who had not woken to the sounds of our examination. Others were empty. Neatly presented. Clean and tidy. I counted twenty such rooms...ten to each side of the corridor. Each with a small Kitchenette with hot and cold water, an electric jug, and a mirror over the sink. A twenty-five percent vacancy rate which I felt went against the current thoughts that these Women Refuges were bursting at the seams. There was a large floor to ceiling window at one end of the corridor, the other end spilling into a large Lounge/Dining/Activities Room.

I walked back up to the window that was two separate frames in a larger frame. Both frames slid easily up and down. A simple window lock that could be jemmied open using a penknife...or a metal blade of a thinness to slide up between both frames. I called for Forensic Trace to closely examine the frames and the lock to see whether they had been tampered with. Again, I requested a Forensic Officer to accompany me outside and around to the side of the house. This time Sophie followed, frowning asking herself what the old bloke was up to.

“Could you check all around this area and right at the window frame...and check for fingerprints please”.

The FO nodded and went away to get her ‘tackle box’ of tricks.

“You reckon our Perp came in through that window?” Sophs asked me as I squatted down, closely examining the meagre grass growth and dirt areas on this side of the building. I nodded, acknowledging her question.

“I don’t think he came through the front window into Victim’s Bedroom. He would have made too much noise forcing the window and...” I spun around as I stood on the extreme end of the veranda. “...it’s too open. There’s a security light up near the front entry door and those wall-mounted lights along the extent of the veranda are on motion sensors...so...the only possible entry is through that floor to ceiling window at the end of the corridor. I’ll bet it wasn’t even latched shut...was half open to let the night air circulate through the building...the sashes closed by our Perp as he left. I’ll bet the Deceased bedroom door was only latched not locked...the women felt secure here...I think they will have to re-evaluate their security arrangements”.

I walked out to the concrete area that was the off-street parking area for the property. Two vehicles parked side by side, the bonnets cold meaning they were parked here for some time...all night I supposed. A chalk outline of the old bloke who was bashed to an inch of his life gave a sad ending to a long life. His blood slowly soaking into the concrete surface of the parking area. I jiggled some loose change in my pocket and walked out onto the Council footpath to look back at the building. There were three security cameras mounted on the building façade. They didn’t record any activity as the recording device in the Office of the

establishment was broken...and there was a lack of funds to repair it...it wasn't the first time I had seen such a similar situation. The only thing that pointed to was that our Perp was aware of the problem...which didn't help much...I carefully picked up a cigarette butt with two biro's dropping it into an evidence bag that Sophie had opened. I sealed and signed and dated the outside of the small envelope thinking that Forensic Trace had not done an extensive search of the building...or surrounds. I'd hand over the 'find' to the Senior FO on-site when I ran into her...

Something clicked...a durr...a 'roll yer own'...when and why was this point important. I took the sample from my pocket hoping it would confirm something...anything to me. It remained inert and silent. Whatever had clicked in my brain had left...

"What's the Responsibility Code on this homicide?" I asked Sophie. She scrolled through her smartphone to supply it. "Give that to the Chief FO will ya?" I handed her the evidence bag after which I walked around the taped outline of where the old bloke had fallen, his face and head a mass of blood so I was told. His prognosis not good because of his age...over seventy when things can be decidedly iffy...

"What do yer reckon?" I quietly asked my young partner as she returned to my side. "Do we have a name for the old bugger?" Looking down at the blood stain that had reached its limit of spread. "They don't think he'll survive..."

"Yes...he had a wallet..."

"One of the silly buggers who carried ID. It's a wonder his house hasn't been ransacked...what was his name?"

"Jason Hegarty...lives by himself two streets over. His wife died early two thousands. He's known to the local coppers as he has a habit of walking about the neighbourhood in the middle of the night. Known to meet up with another insomniac Stan Hunter and Harry Coombs who live in this street or one street over but near the corner with Forest Grove...though there's hardly a forest down that way. Um...Stan Hunter habitually goes to that Café we were looking at last week. That old codger that we saw. Dressed to the nines. Bet that's Stan Hunter".

"Mmm...I bet our Jason Hegarty saw something that our Intruder...our Perp did not like...he left him for dead. He should have checked his status before he took off...it might bring the bastard down if we can get a word with Hegarty. In the meantime, I've seen enough...you?"

"Me!? Yeah...whatever".

“Good. Let’s walk around the block to that Café for a coffee, eh? Then we’ll pay a visit to the Deceased ex. partner if he’s still about and her parents. I’ve got the addresses from the Office as they are listed as next of kin while the ex is listed as a hot head and to be wary of him...he has a temper and because of his native country and Islamic fundamentalism, believes he has been shamed by the missus walking out on him. We see this type of thing more often now that we are accepting more people from that area overseas...”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“Mister Hunter...” I surmised as Sophie and I stood on the opposite side of his table. Just large enough to accommodate his coffee mug, a slice of toast on an oval plate and this morning’s Newspaper folded in half.

He looked up at me, squinting though he had dark sunglasses on.

“Do you mind if we sit to ask you a few questions?” I asked as I sat, not waiting for his approval. Sophie noisily scrapped a chair from a neighbouring table to also sit opposite the old bloke. She smiled as the old bloke looked flustered.

We both showed him our ID Cards, waiting for him to nod before putting them away.

“A few questions if we may...” I repeated.

The attractive Waitress fluttered about, taking our order of a mug of coffee for me, an Iced Tea for Sophie. We waited until she had disappeared into the gloom of the Café behind us before continuing.

“A beautiful day to sit in the sun to enjoy your favourite ground beans...”

The old bloke shifted his gaze from me over to Sophie. He looked at her for ages before uttering a word.

“You’re quite attractive, young lady. Too pretty to be in the Cop Force”. He doffed his hat at her. Smiled at her while nodding. Sophie took the reins as he was enthralled by her presence.

“You take a walk each night...around the block...with your dog...” It wasn’t a question. Sophie ignored the thinly veiled ‘pick-up’ line. I thought he meant little by it...just an innocent ‘try’ line. He again nodded slowly as he stared at her. Taking in her features...exploring every line and beauty point...yes, she was attractive in a soft feminine

manner...a veiled softness that hid a hard interior. She had topped her Class at the Police Academy in self-defence and attack modes. The old bloke guessed this...one combatant to another.

“The local Constabulary have stopped on occasion to make sure you were okay...” Again, not a question. He again nodded. This time he replied in a gentle voice.

“I can’t sleep all night. I seem to sleep in blocks of four...five hours. It’s a waste of time trying to get back to sleep...and I hate taking anything for it. A slow walk around the block a couple of times with me dog settles me down again...not every night...but most. Since me missus died I’ve found it harder to sleep all night. When she was alive, I’d get up to watch a bit of Tele...now...I take me dog for a walk”.

“What type of dog is it?” Sophie asked as though she was really interested in the reply.

“Sydney Silky...had them for years. Me missus loved them. Old Bennie will be the last in a long line...in dog terms, he’s about the same age as me...late seventies”. He chuckled. “He’s growing old faster than me...” Another chuckle. I sensed it was one of those ‘favourites’ he would say to lighten any moment.

“You don’t bring him out when you come here each day...” Again, hardly a question. If he had been a little quicker he would have realised the cops had been watching him. As it was, the comment went over his head.

“No...too many people...he’d get distracted and could snap at some-one’s heels...then I’d be in the poo. They’d not let me sit here anymore...”

A sudden shrill cackle from a group of old women broke the tempo. They were seated together some tables away.

“Bloody old crones!” He complained. “Worse thing ever to permit them to sit out here. I’ve complained to the Management on several occasions but it matters little as they still congregate here on most days when the weather is agreeable...the younger women seem to talk a little softer as you rarely pick up their conversation”.

Sophie nodded. Smiled.

“Your mate Jason Hegarty...”

The old bloke blinked hard as he looked at Sophie then across at me.

“Hardly a mate...more a fellow insomniac who often walks the streets in the middle of the night like me. If we catch up it’s because we’re going in the same direction...but no, I wouldn’t call him a mate of mine...he’s been in hospital having a couple of stents inserted...has only just begun to walk the streets at night again. I ran into him last night...he was in fine form. His old self again. Cynical, obdurate, and still listing conspiracies. The one good thing he got himself a dog to accompany him on his midnight walks”.

“Does that happen often? You know, you walking with him?”

“Too often for my liking...he’s a cantankerous character who can easily rile a person...he’s got some argumentative ways that some people would find uncomfortable”.

“When did you see him last?”

“Umm...arrh...as I said, last night. His caustic tongue didn’t thrill me much so I said I was heading for home. A little too cold for me I said...yeah, about one-thirty this morning...he kept on walking while I headed for home...”

“Would you know of anyone who would want to harm him?”

“What’s happened? Has he been hurt? When?”

“Would there be any reason why someone would want to hurt him?”

“Arrh...you ask the questions, eh Detective? Who would want to hurt him? Gawd...I don’t know. Um...I guess anyone who had opposing views to him...or wasn’t that taken by his opinions...any conservative middle-class idiot who thinks violence is the only way to treat these far-right fascists...that excludes me”.

“Why do you think you would be excluded?”

“Look at me! I hobble around with the aid of a walking stick...find it hard to get out of bed each morning without taking a breather between the bed and the floor...and I am a pacifist...I detest violence in any form...I’ve seen too much of it in my lifetime”.

“Anyone you know? A fellow Insomniac who would baulk at the man’s far-flung theories”.

“Has Hegarty been bashed to an inch of his life? Has he been hurt? Was it him who was hurt last night...sometime after I left him...around one-thirty...no...closer to two. I guess he had it coming. His views seemed to harden after his wife died. I once thought he voiced those opinions merely to start a conversation...now I’m not so sure”.

“Why is that Mister Hunter?”

The old man nodded slowly before picking up his coffee mug. His Paper lay forgotten folded in half on the tiny table. He did not elaborate...

“He was assaulted sometime last night...in front of the Women’s Refuge in your street...severely beaten with a walking stick such as yours so we think...the heavy handle doing most of the damage”.

He missed the fact we knew where he lived.

“Is he alright?”

“An old bloke...it’s an unknown how he will recuperate...or not. If not, we are looking at a murder charge for our felon...”

“Hah! I think your Felon should be given a reward for getting rid of vermin...near the Women’s Refuge you say. He saw something that he shouldn’t...and my street? He usually doesn’t walk that way...although he had voiced the opinion such an establishment should not be in existence. If women are accosted inside their marriage it is because they have done something wrong...or *not* done something right...that should give you a gist of the man...intelligent but insanely stupid!”

His blood pressure had risen going on the ruddiness of his complexion. I was surprised at the emotion shown especially from a self-confessed pacifist...I wasn’t easily accepting that of the man.

“His dog?”

“Hah! I was surprised at his choice. A little pug...all black with a light brown flash on his chest...”

“A male?”

“Um...I don’t rightly know. Has the dog gone missing?”

“What was it named?”

“Arrh...Herman...Helmet...no, Herman. Suited him”.

“Yes...while Hegarty still had the dog leash in his hand, the dog had gone...run a mile scared shitless I reckon”.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“What do you think?” Sophie asked as she inched out into traffic.

“He makes my nose itch...” Is all I said as I belted up.

“It’s almost Spring, Boss. Hay Fever I bet...more than a funny feeling about the man...”

“It ain’t a funny feeling...and I don’t get Hay Fever! I want to do a complete background check on the man when we get back to the Office. We’ve seen him before walking to that Coffee joint without a walking stick...quite an elaborate one, eh? You notice it...from the ‘Olde Country’ I bet, though he didn’t have an accent. He seems super-confident...so cool...no worries...a smirk as though he knows something we don’t...most people we interview show some...emotion...some nervousness...he’s as cool as a cucumber...”

“I didn’t notice it...I fail to see how this is helping with our second Women’s Refuge victim”.

“Mmm...I don’t know either but I’m going on the assumption that the old bloke’s assault on the Women’s Refuge property wasn’t a coincidence...he was there for a reason...if we can line up the dots on that assault, I reckon we’ll find the reason for these two homicides of those women...their estranged husbands?”

“Maybe that half-smoked durry you found will give us something...DNA at least”.

“Mmm...here’s hoping. It might have nothing to do with either crime...we’ll see!”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Detective Lind? Carmen Carmody from Forensic Sciences. Sorry this has taken so long but our numbers have halved what with the latest Covid strain doing the rounds. We are extremely short-staffed...”

I nodded wanting her to get to the point and not ramble on with excuses why their Report was so late...the Victim? Who knows until she mentions it. I knew Forensic Sciences had been hit bad as Tellie, my wife had been in isolation for the past seven days. She was due back on deck to-day but I doubt she will surface she was that bad this morning. It was touch and go for me to ring for an Ambulance. I had felt a little guilty thinking I may have passed the virus onto her...and she then passed it on to her colleagues before she was aware she had Covid. It is more prevalent now than before when it first hit with Governments closing off entire economies...now you rarely hear anything about it except to have the death figures advertised...most fatalities are in old people over sixty-five...seventy!

“Arrh...Barton Grahame Fields. Aged thirty-four. Allegedly committed suicide three weeks ago on the ninth...”

“Sorry to interrupt but that Case is not ours...allegedly the chap committed suicide...you need to speak to the local chaps. They would be handling the case...”

“Yes...sorry Detective but the Case will be turned over to you as soon as the official Forensic Report is added to the Pathology and blood workups...together they will be transferred to the Murder Squad as a suspect homicide matter...as you were the most senior person on site at the time of discovery of the body, we will be coming to you”.

I groaned as I nodded, understanding the protocol. Another Case to add to the expanding number that I just seemed to accumulate.

“Okay...I understand. What makes you think it is homicide?”

“Firstly...fingerprints...unknown origin fingerprints were found on the computer mouse, certain sections of the keyboard, the printer and on the printer paper. These prints overplayed other fingerprints...most were of our victim’s...I am confident our victim did not write that alleged ‘Suicide Note’. Those same fingerprints found on various surfaces in the Kitchen and on an almost empty bottle of Barbiturates...our Victim had a high count of Barbiturates in his system. Enough to make you suspicious of him being capable of undressing himself, carefully folding his clothes and placing them tidily on the closed toilet seat...and then waiting for the bathtub to fill with water...and then cutting his wrists in a manner that is the most effective...that is, laterally down the length of the lower arm. Most persons hack away at their wrists crossways until they find the major vein. His arms were cut by a person with some medical experience...and not by a person who was intent on dying. When that is the case the incision is all over the place...not as a perfect straight incision line down the lower arm...the wrist...the Assailant took care. If it were suicide, that person would not care a damn about the cut being so correct...so straight...and not ragged or being deep or not so deep”.

That comment made me sit up, think, and take note. Some-one else had made a similar comment...when...and what about.

“Sounds like a homicide killing to me Officer. Anything else to make it easier for us?”

“No...but the full Forensic Pathology, blood workups, and Forensic Trace Reports will be available to you next week or the week after. We have sent a Forensic Trace Team back to the premises to treat the crime scene as a homicide investigation...which as you know, is a far greater exhaustive examination of the entire house and surrounds...until then, Detective”.

I had Sophie wheel her chair around to face me as I filled her in on the findings. She nodded energetically as she informed me that she had been suspicious of the suicide findings...easy as in hindsight I muttered to her which cleaved her enthusiasm!

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The rest of the week we were in Court so there was little progress of our Cases...another added to the two estranged women killed in the two Women’s Refuge premises. Connected? I didn’t have a clue but until something came up that stuffed that assumption, we would ride with our supposition.

It was a typical Monday morning where those who could, crammed into the Boss’s Office for our habitual Staff Meeting. It was there that we learnt that the old bugger, Jason Hegarty who had been badly assaulted outside the Women’s Refuge had died over the weekend.

His death adding to the two homicide cases we were already investigating with Barton Fields death still out there in ‘iffy’ land. In the words of the Boss, we had inherited the old bloke’s demise as it could be connected to the two estranged women’s homicide deaths...*it could be* stressed by the Boss to ensure we became the investigating team. That’s all we needed...another homicide death to delve into!

We filed slowly out of the Boss’s Office after spending close to three hours discussing all the Branch’s Cases, their problems and present positions, arrest protocols, Court Times and who was allocated holiday time during the upcoming School holidays.

I slumped into my desk chair and swallowed the cool remains of coffee, slam dumping the empty container into a neighbouring bin.

“Where to from here boss?” The young Sophie asked as she spun her chair around to face me.

I ground my teeth together sure that she was never going to stop calling me ‘Boss’. I’ll have to learn to live with it...

“We stay away from the old bloke’s bashing homicide for a bit and concentrate on the two Women’s Refuge homicides. They are connected in several ways. Both were residents of Halfway Houses so both had come from violent marriages...we should check the records for further background material on their lives. They could have been randomly selected by our perp with the Refuges the common factor...not the women. We can assume our perp also came from a broken marriage thus his anger at Women’s Refuges whom he thinks may have instilled anti-men sentiments into his ex’s mind...”

“Hang on Boss...you want to lay blame on Women’s Refuges for anti-male sentiments...and didn’t someone say the only stab wounds in both Cases were carefully sited and pushed down with a single effort? Hardly crimes of passion with anger mixed in for good measure”.

“Mmm...yeah...well...most definitely...haven’t you listened to women...and yes men too as they vent their spleen on their other half’s fault in the marriage breakdown? It is universal when bad feelings are to the fore...”

I looked up at her waiting for her to challenge my assumptions...she didn’t which in a way I was disappointed about as I wanted her to challenge that theory!

“Okay...how can we word our search to find our perp. He comes from a broken marriage...no good as almost fifty percent of marriages end in divorce...he cannot reconcile with being a divorcee. Is there any category we can search out with those facts as the basis?”

“Hardly facts Joe...” Sophie muttered.

“Multiple arrests...where the perp is a divorced bloke...let’s see”.

I slowly beat a tempo across the keyboard hoping I was including enough ‘key words’ that would give a result.

“Hah! Look at this, will yer! It goes back to early twentieth century times...1924 would you believe. There’s a fair few incidents where the ex...meaning males only...has multiple arrests and...where the woman’s body has never been located. Back then it was extremely difficult to charge a bloke with the homicide murder of his ex-wife if there was no body...just look at that Chris Dawson case. He’s been found guilty of murdering his wife some forty years ago where the body of his ex-wife has never been found...the Prosecution Case was all based on

unsubstantiated evidence...it is surprising how many similar cases there are going back a century...”

“That maybe interesting Joe, but that isn’t what you were looking for...you’re supposed to be looking for life histories on the two deceased women and whether their husbands had done time...or where are they?”

“Hmmm...what? Yeah...nah! I’m looking for a bloke who it is suspected may have killed his missus with no body found that has multiple arrests to his name...this search doesn’t help much...hmm...”

“Don’t over-complicate your search Boss. Just do a search on both Deceased woman’s ex-husbands...their histories, careers, and lives”.

“Hmm...yeah! What? There’s some interesting names on this list...”

While I had to admit this list was of no use to our Cases, names dropped out that I had previous dealings with. Others jiggled my memory of years ago. It was a good feeling to ride the memories down through the years. For no known reason to mankind, I ‘googled’ Stanley Hunter to be surprised by an involved ‘page’ on facts of Hunter’s life. Why people did this I have no idea unless they want to ‘bigmouth’ themselves and show they are above the phlebs of this world. A skite I reckon which didn’t go with the man we thought we knew. That was a little against the fellow we had a talk to the other week...the two did not gel...

My thoughts were snapped into the present by a long burst of expletives from Sophie.

“Drakos Papadopoulos...he’s a nasty piece of meat...bloody hell!”

“What!? Who in blazes is who? Papadopoulos?”

“Our former husband of Roberta or ‘Bobby’ as some wished to call her. Drakos has a fist full of charges against him...mostly for DV offences against his former wife Roberta. Did three and a half for assault occasioning actual grievous bodily harm...out on parole after two. What does our hot-headed Greek guy do? Tries to bash down his estranged wife’s front door which lands him back in prison for the remaining parole period. He was released ten months ago...nothing since...but his history shows a man who has a short fuse and a want to hit out...to strike anyone who annoys him...he has ownership problems...I reckon he is worth a visit”.

“Hang on Sophs. Don’t get ahead of yourself. You say he has priors and has spent time in the clink...but those unidentified fingerprints at Barton Fields’ residential address did not place

a red flag against his name...Drakos Papadopoulos has both his fingerprints and DNA on the Criminal Register because he has done time. There were no red flags against him with those fingerprints. Anyhow, why would he be in the picture in the homicide death of Fields?"

She scratched her scalp with a Biro as she looked absentmindedly at me.

"Maybe...we know that many thought Barton Fields and Roberta Papadopoulos nee Karagianis were made for one another in their teens going back to Primary School days...until Stephanie Albright swept Fields off his feet. Roberta's parents were dead set on their number one daughter marrying a nice Greek lad...enter Drakos Papadopoulos who turned out to be a bad seed..."

I nodded wanting Sophie to step outside that box. To extend her thoughts into a logical sequence of events. I liked it so far...I nodded hoping that would be enough for her to continue...it was.

"Maybe..." Sophie wagged a finger at me...something I despised. "Maybe Roberta and Fields got together...what with Roberta's husband in prison with it less than zero of the two ever getting back together again once the sod is released from custody. When Steph and Fields separated, the two...Fields and Roberta met up. The estranged husband Drakos follows his ex...not above his style regardless of the AVO saying he was not to go anywhere close to his ex-wife. He sees Roberta and Fields together which explodes his brain. He kills Fields thinking with him gone Roberta will be his again...got news for you fellow, the girl is over you..."

She smiled, pleased with her assumption. I nodded saying that it certainly clicked all the boxes.

"What about those unexplained fingerprints at Fields abode?" I asked as though I was a Tutor down Goulburn way in the Police Academy.

Sophie shook her head...to her everything fitted except for those bloody fingerprints! She looked over at me and again shook her head...pissed off at me so I thought.

CHAPTER TWENTY

“Um... Roberta Karagianis. How do we track her down? I mean, she could have re-married...”

“If she has that stuffs up your theory of she and Fields re-connecting...”

“Mmm...yeah...you’re right. No, she hasn’t re-married, instead being turned off by her first exercise into it. First thing, the Register Generals to see one: if she has divorced Papadopoulos and two, if she has remarried. Then a scroll through the NSW Drivers’ License records to try and obtain an address for her either in her maiden name or her old Papa surname and possibly a new married name...then cross-check that with the Electoral Role...a visit to the Tax Office will give us a third collaboration of a home address...”

“Hold on...we go to the Tax Office and we’ll need a Court Order. Let’s go the simpler way as you first suggested...”

I let her go as I wanted to contact Forensic Trace. I rang Dee Dee Symonds’ number quoting the Case Number.

“Hang on Joe while I bring up the Case on our computer...yeah...got it...what do you want to know?”

“Your Report stated that there were unidentified fingerprints on Barton Fields’ computer, keyboard, mouse, and other areas. You didn’t run them through the Criminal Fingerprint Data Base...why not?”

“What for? It was a straight-out simple suicide case...”

“It may have been back then when the body was first reported but it has become a homicide investigation...with Sophs and I the Lead Detectives on the Case”.

“Oh! That makes one hell of a difference...yeah, I remember, we’ll have to re-visit the residence treating our further examination as though it was a homicide case...”

“Your people are already onto it”. I interrupted

“Oh! Okay. We fucked up not following through with SOP on trace that we had...um...sorry...it’s our fault. I’ll run those prints through the system and get back to you...give me an hour, okay?”

We didn't wait for her return ring, instead heading to an address at Granville, a spit away from our Office.

I knocked on the door that had a large '6A' around a spyhole. I wondered why this was necessary as a speakerphone and camera were located beside the entry door into the complex. Paranoia on the part of the tenants now residing at the Apartment I would imagine. After several knocks a tired sounding, scratchy voice sounded out of the speaker as though nothing was going to faze this young woman.

We identified ourselves and held out ID Cards first at the spyhole and then at the camera associated with the speakerphone.

"Yeah...okay...what you want?"

"Can we come in to ask a few questions instead of standing out here where half the other tenants can hear our conversation?" We were on the sixteenth level of the Apartment building.

"Yeah...hold on while I get some clothes on..."

We heard a cluck as the receiver was placed on its dock. There was silence for a good five minutes until we heard various locks being disengaged with the door finally being swung slowly open.

"I'm Celeste O'Hara...how can I help you?" She asked as she led us down a narrow hallway into a large Living/Dining/ Kitchen area. Views looking back at the Parramatta CBD skyline which was constantly changing.

"Roberta Karagianis..."

"About time you cops paid attention to her...he'll kill her eventually if he is not stopped first..."

"We're here investigating Barton Fields homicide..."

"Barty...yeah...we heard...Bobby and he made the best couple...Bobby has been so upset when she heard she was off work for over a week. Her Doctor prescribed Sleeping Tablets and Anxiety blockers...she's back at work this week".

I looked around the Flat. Sparkling clean and everything in its place as though a Vogue Photographer was expected any minute. Bric-a-brac and large wall murals of animals on every spare wall. A faint cat smell and the chirping of a Canary in a cage out on the Balcony.

“So, Roberta lives here?”

“There’s four of us sharing the joint otherwise we couldn’t afford the stupendously high rent...it’s reasonable with the four of us putting in equal shares. Bobby? She’s in Westmead Hospital. That crud of an ex gave her another hiding...that’s what I thought you guys were here for...no?”

“Arrh...when was Roberta injured?”

“Last week. Thursday. She walks to and from home every day to where she works. That Office Tower over the railway line at Granville Station. She’s second-in-charge of a cyber anti-hacking group with one of the big Banks...gets three times as much money as I earn a week as a Ward Sister...speaks volumes, eh? Um...if there is nothing else...I’m on the dog shift...need my sleep...okay?”

She led us back to her front door, opening it for our exit. We thanked her for her time and walked a short distance to the Lift Lobby.

“Mmm...” Sophie muttered. “That reminds me. Did I tell you I was fishing to get a couple of Renters into my house? I think I’ve found two suitable candidates...fingers crossed”.

“Coppers?” I asked as the Lift doors shooshed closed.

“Yeah...the youngest woman has only just come out of the latest Academy lot and is on General Duties at Liverpool. The other is more my age and is on General Duties at the Gladesville Station. Both are renting at exorbitant rates so they’ll be eternally grateful to be selected to take up residence at my joint...”

“A bit of a slog from your joint to Liverpool or Gladesville Cop Stations”.

“That’s what I thought but they both think it’s not a problem. The youngest, Patricia “Patty” Driscoll is transferring to the Parramatta Cop Station in the coming weeks...and the other, Sandrina “Sandy” Chisholm thinks it will be an easy drive going against the traffic over Gladesville Bridge”.

“How much you asking?” I added as we reached our Unmarked.

“One eighty...that’s better than the over five hundred they are paying now. The two front Bedrooms will be for them with the third bedroom converted into a Lounge Room for both...if they want privacy or do not want to share my back Kitchen/Dining/Family Room area that’s their alternative”.

“Mmm...” I offered. “Hope it works out okay for you...”

“She’ll be fine...” Sophie replied confidently.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“Roberta Karagianis?” I asked the Front desk holding my ID Card up in clear view.

“K.A.R.A...how do you spell it? Arrh...no worries. Here she is. General Ward Fifteen A. Second Floor and turn to your left as you vacate the Lift...” A smile and she was answering another question leaving me standing like a Shag on a rock. I nodded and headed for the Lift Lobby. Sophie following along behind.

We lost our way twice before asking for directions from a Male Nursing Sister...or a Doctor. They all carry stethoscopes in a similar way so how are we supposed to differentiate?

“Roberta Karagianis?” We both showed our ID Cards as we addressed the hospital bed. The woman had heavy bandaging over one side of her face and grazed knuckles and bruises up both arms that indicated she fought back.

“Arrh...yes. Please call me Bobby...yer here to ask questions about me being savagely beaten by my ex. When they catch him he’ll be back in prison...I hope. That’s what the copper said who interviewed me the other day. Why you Detectives? I see you’re both from the Murder Squad...what do you want from me?”

“Arrh...we’re the Lead Detectives in the homicide murder of Barton Fields...”

“Yes...” There was silence as her eyes filled with tears. “Oh! Murder! I was told he committed suicide...which I will never believe. We...arrh...we were looking forward to the coming year...he proposed to me. We were getting married early Spring next year...” She sniffled then began to sob quietly.

“We believe your ex... Drakos Papadopoulos may have killed Barton Fields. His history shows he has little time in sharing you with anyone even though you divorced him while he was in prison for bashing the tripe out of you...”

“The first time...”

“Yes. The first time...”

“Mmm...while he had the guts to put me into Hospital...this is the third time...I reckon he doesn't have the guts to try it on with another male...and Barty could look after himself...Drakos was only brave when he was attacking women but if challenged by a boyfriend, husband or the like, he would do the four-minute mile in under two minutes getting away”.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“You were right Boss”.

I looked up from my computer screen, my mouth open ready to chew out my young partner for continuing to call me Boss. I was her colleague, partner or ‘heh you there’. Not her Boss. For some reason I bit my tongue advising her I was always right.

“Right on what Sophs?” I added.

“Stan Hunter...he is ex-Army. Stationed over in Perth. Did two tours of Vietnam...was with the American Seals for several weeks...that's impressive”.

“Perth...that's the home of the SAS...Special Forces Units...his wife died a while back...she came from Perth...he told us that when last we spoke to him. I wonder. I think we should have another talk with the old man. How many kids did he have? Was he married only once? I want you to do a bit of digging on the old man...his history. Any pings on our records...check with the West Australian Cops to see whether he had form”.

“What for? He's not a suspect on any of our Cases, is he?”

“No, he's not...but then we have no suspects since Drakos Papadopoulos slipped way down our list after our little talk with Robert ‘Bobby’ Karagianis the other day...and we've stalled with the Women's Refuge Homicides”. I stood turning in a circle as I pulled at my earlobe. “That old bloke who was punched to death on the front lawn of that Women's Refuge...it was in the same street as Stan Hunter lives, wasn't it?”

Sophie madly caressed the keypad as she scrolled up the sad death of Jason Hegarty.

I turned to stand beside her.

“Did he die on the front lawn of that place or days after the attack...umm...I’ve got Court Time tomorrow and possibly the next two days. While I’m away...there’s no point in you accompanying me as the Case was well before your time. I think your time would be better spent on carrying out background checks on both gentleman...and the husband of the second Women’s Refuge victim. We haven’t done enough on both those Cases. I think I’ve got enough time to show you the ropes on the Pro-forma we use for background checks on persons...”

I wheeled my desk chair around to Sophie’s desk to give her a rundown on the search engines. She picked it up remarkably quickly...go figure. It had taken me weeks to eventually master the pro-forma! My first partner Marjory Hendriks was near pulling her hair out at my inability to pick it up in short time...now? I was a master at it!

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Sophie Grasso was excited. Her Uncle ‘Dad’ had heard of a Barn find of an original nineteen fifty-seven Austin Healey One Hundred-Six on a farm out from Tamworth. She and her Uncle were driving up there with their pockets bulging...

It was a wreck! Written off by an Insurance Company way back and picked up for a song by the son of the Farmer who was going to do miraculous things with it...and never did! There was around a dozen cars in the Barn, rusting away under tonnes of dust. An EH Holden in good nick, a Fifty-two Ford Customline and a fifty-six Ford Zephyr...a Torana in each of the ascending models from sixty-eight up to nineteen eighty. All covered in dust with tyres deflated. Good buys for a Torana fan.

Sophie and her Uncle crawled all over the Healey mindful of venomous snakes and spiders.

“What do you think?” Sophie asked her Uncle softly. Her heart beating fast.

“The chassis has been twisted out of whack...that’s why it was written off. That is now a lot easier to fix but was impossible in the day it was involved in the accident. Every panel down the right side of the wreck has some major or minor damage which may be difficult to repair. I doubt there’d be any new or ‘as new’ panels available to use here in Australia...maybe from the UK but that will involve time and money...let’s offer him six large and see what happens”.

They walked out into the sunlight dusting off their coveralls.

“What do you think it’s worth?” The Farmer asked.

“The chassis has been whacked out of line...panels damaged which I doubt can be replaced with new...the seats are throw-aways...I have no idea what the gear-box and motor are like but I reckon they’d need a major overhaul...”

“The driver and his passenger were killed...”

Sophie spun around whispering expletives.

“Unc? I don’t want it...not under those conditions...”

“Tell you what. There’s a Healey Sprite in good nick in that Barn over there. You can take the two for thirty-five grand...no counteroffers accepted. Go look at the Sprite...it’s a nineteen-sixty ‘Bug-eye’ Sprite...light blue...good nick...another of my son’s projects that never got off the ground...he was going to race with it...that never happened...Gunna...that was my son’s nickname...gunna...he’s still gunna do a lot of things and he be spittin’ chips if’n he knew I was gunna sell everything from under his feet...not interested in the Toranas? I’m sellin’ them as a lot ta get rid of them...there’s a racing engine goes with the Sprite...fully worked so’s my son says...”

The two followed the old farmer across the yard to a smaller Barn. This had farm machinery squeezed into it but in a far corner a lump stood under a several cotton sheets.

“The missus wasn’t thrilled with me nicking some of the bed linen from the house but there yer go. Stand back a bit while I lift the sheets off...watch out for snakes...if’n they’re there they’ll come squirming out in fright...”

Sophie whistled as her Uncle whispered ‘fuck me’ to himself. A decent wash and polish and it’d be like new...except for four Big Eastern Browns that slithered out from under it. Sophie near collapsed. She turned and ran towards the large opening of the Barn.

Her Uncle walked slowly around the vehicle, knelt to take in the spare engine. Standing he nodded slowly.

“Tell you what...I’ll give the twenty for this little beauty plus the spare engine and other parts lying about...less the Healey six. I doubt it can be repaired back to its former glory...”

“No sir. Thirty-five it was with no counteroffers...you take this plus the Healey Six”.

“Arrh...we didn’t come prepared. No...if’n you want to get rid of both it’ll cost twenty large...and we’ll need a Flat-top and trailer for the two...could I pick them up in Tamworth as a hire?”

“I’ll hire you mine for the right price...say two days drive plus fuel...plus the twenty...”

“Done deal”.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The Farmer drove his truck and trailer down to Sydney to Uncle Dad’s place. Uncle Dad and Sophie followed the truck and trailer as it belched smoke, crashed gears and laboured up the slightest incline. A long line of vehicles held up by us and the truck and trailer slow pace. By the metallic screech made whenever the brakes were applied made Uncle dad grit his teeth. Any show of misuse of any automobile gave the man the willies.

The Sprite was wheeled off the trailer while the ‘Six’ had to be craned off the back of the Flattop which creaked and screeched at every little movement as though it was on its last legs and was craning way above its maximum lift load...it probably was!

An extra two changed hands and the Farmer drove off with a crunch of his gears happy as any farmer can be with twenty-two large in his pocket. Uncle Dad gave Sophie a huge hug while Sophie’s mother was less than impressed...

Sophie stayed overnight at her mother’s and her mother’s brother place who was Uncle ‘Dad’ to Sophie. From an early age Sophie had laid under one vehicle or another with both her father and Uncle. Everyone thought she would become a mechanic; surprising everyone by deciding on the Police Force as her career path. She ran rings around most wannabe mechanics and everyone in her family would bring their vehicle to the teenage mechanic to ‘tune’ the engine with it purring like a kitten pleasing everyone including her father and uncle. Neither of whom were mechanics, though they would spend hours on the weekends and most nights preparing ‘hill-climbers’ and ‘circuit’ racers for weekend meets.

“We done well child. Twenty-two for both vehicles. If that engine is okay as a full racing motor we could sell the little beauty for over fifty...without spending too much on it. The Healy Six? Another kettle of fish...but in good nick and maybe with a small V8 under the hood, we’d not get much change out of one hundred...I reckon an excellent deal”.

Sophie's mother groaned then smiled...she could never be disappointed with her favourite girl...

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

"You look like the cat who swallowed the canary...have a good week without me, huh?"

"What happened with the Trial...I heard the Jury were sequestered for the entire weekend..."

"Yeah...well...usually when the jury are locked up for such a long time, you either have a re-trial or hung jury because the jury was locked...or the jury clears the defendant. That didn't happen. They found the defendant guilty of all charges...the Judge will hand down the sentencing period next month. Twenty to twenty-five I reckon...a professional crim. Yeah, I and several others who were on the Case were put up at a local Pub for the weekend. Just as well I was there as the jury called down for clarification on certain points that only I was willing to comment on earlier this week. That's very unusual but as you can see it does happen. So...why are you so happy?"

"Arrh...as you know, I have the MGA that Dad, Uncle Dad, and I restored which I love driving around. Dad never had the privilege as he died before we obtained the registration and insurance on it..."

"What did your father die of?" I asked.

"Emphysema. You'd always see him with a 'rollie' hanging out of his mouth. He'd be lying under a car...with a rollie sticking out of his mouth. A lot of the time it wouldn't be alight! Go figure. Mum warned him but he couldn't stop the habit...a hell of a way to die. I'll never forget it...I've all but finished the other MGA which is a stock standard, off the Show Room floor vehicle. I'm waiting on genuine leather seats from the UK. My other project...the MGB...I'm waiting on an Engineering Certificate for the thick chrome rollbar behind each seat...then she will be roadworthy. Umm...with that I will have finished my bucket list...almost!"

"Good for you...is that the reason for your obvious cheerfulness?"

"Well...yes and no. I'd love to do up an E-type Jag...but they're as scares as rocking horse teeth...I went up to Tamworth with Uncle Dad over the weekend. We scored an Austin Healey 'one hundred' Six in 'write off' condition...but fixable according to Uncle Dad...two people

died in that car some sixty years ago. It's been rotting away in a Farm Barn...along with a Healy 'Bug-eyed' Sprite in good condition...that's our next challenge...getting them up to roadworthiness...we might stick a small V-8 into the Healy Six. We've got to see if one will fit comfortably into the engine bay and whether we must strengthen the front end and suspension for it...it should as I think it's been done before...a trawl through the Internet should tell us..."

"That'll give you what...five Sports Cars to choose from to drive...it's always bothered me why the Poms could produce long lines of Sports Cars over there when they have such lousy weather...where are you going to stick them all?"

"Yeah...that's a worry...I don't know. My garage will house three cars but if I'm fiddling around doing one up, I doubt I could position just two in the garage...and then you have my Lodgers' cars...they will not all fit under the Carport with three of mine there...maybe I should lengthen the carport to accommodate four cars comfortably..."

"Hah...I doubt there'd be many people in the same predicament as yourself..." I chuckled. "How's your Lodgers seeing as you were away for the entire weekend?"

"Yeah...nah! No worries". Sophie turned to boot up her computer as though this was a sign that the new day had begun...enough with the niceties!

"Okay...yeah..." I spun around to sit at my desk, placing my gun and Badge in my lockable draw. "Okay...you've had four full days with me out of your hair...what have you done in those days?"

"He's A Vietnam Vet..."

"Who?" I asked, a little miffed at being interrupted in what I was about to do.

"The old bloke whom you said was an ex-army type by the way he stood and walked..."

"There you go...just remember girl, I'm right...most of the time..."

"Yes Boss. Stationed over in Perth...he enlisted after his birth date didn't drop...one of only a few I betcha".

"Now that *is* interesting. That's where the elite SAS Regiment is stationed...The art of killing taken to the next level if you believe what you read about them".

“Two tours of Vietnam. Billeted in with the Yanks on some questionable missions. Pensioned out on medical grounds...um...almost six months in Hospital though I couldn’t get into his medical history. It was locked but we might get details if we question him again. Going on his record he was very reticent when last we spoke. Did he look as though he had long term injuries to you?”

“He had back injuries just from the slow way he sat...and stood”.

“Mmm...Jason Hegarty was also ex-Army with him winning that marble drop on his twentieth birthday. Did a tour of Vietnam also...with the HQ team...also spent some months in hospital...Concord Repat Hospital...at the same time as our friendly Mister Stan Hunter...”

“Yes...okay...and...”

“Hunter was Special Forces...SAS...was taught how to kill in so many ways...”

“Mmm...” I stood to walk in a tight circle. I didn’t want to suppress Sophie’s good work or the hours she obviously put in on background searches. “Umm...Jason Hegarty was bashed to an inch of his life which is not the style of an SAS killing...they kill more subtly...but another talk with the old bloke could be fruitful. He was negative about Hegarty...and he didn’t let us know they were mates while in hospital...”

“Do you think!?”

“I don’t know but we must extend facts...we have bugger all on the old bloke’s death. Nothing on the two women killed at two different Women’s Refuges only streets away from each other and I want to have a talk with Drakos Papadopoulos on Barton Fields’ death. He must be our number one suspect for Fields’ death. His history shows a man who has anger management problems regardless of the fingerprints not being his...”

“The local guys have two other names of old blokes who walk about after midnight. A Mister Harry Coombs and Grahame Hussey...those two have connections to Hunter and Hegarty even if it is just accompanying each other on their midnight sorties...but...Coombs was a male nurse at Concord Repat Hospital with Hussey a Wardman at the time that Hegarty and Hunter were recuperating after numerous operations there...” She looked up at me with a smile that would melt hearts in the future. Her response diluting my opinion of her finds. Not one fact pointed to a guilty person of any of our four homicides.

“Good work...” I declared as I sat back in my chair, placing a foot on the open bottom drawer for comfort. I rubbed my eyes and took a deep breath. ‘*C’mon*’, I thought. ‘*She still has a lot*

to learn not the least knowing when to stop on a search when it was yielding little towards our four Cases...go gentle Joe... ' I took another deep breath. "You've introduced another two names for us to examine. I'm unsure at this stage whether they will point us in the right direction in assessing our perpetrators...but it gives us something".

"Yes, I reckon it points us in the right direction. These four fellows have known each other since the mid to late seventies...have lived in proximity to one another and most importantly, as they wandered the streets in the middle of the night, they must have seen something..."

I nodded...

"Um...Anbu Asan? Shareesh Asan's husband. Has prior hits for Domestic Violence...twice given suspended sentences. When are Magistrates and Judges going to toughen up on repeat offenders..."

"Well...there's a problem...there is little room in all the State's Prisons to house them..." I responded a little churlishly. The fact of the woman filing for divorce from her husband would not have been a difficult nut to crack. She was in a halfway house for Battered wives. I stood, jangling loose change in my pockets. Taking several deep breaths as Sophie was pleased with her endeavours...Truthfully? I wasn't!

"Shareesh says he had his last chance. She had filed for divorce which would have annoyed the crap out of her ex..."

"Enough to kill her?"

"Boss! We know he did not kill Shareesh as her death and Stephanie Albright's are remarkably similar...we think carried out by the same person with it not being Anbu Asan". She looked up at me, a frown to show me she was concerned for me as the famous Murder Detective wasn't following what had transpired before on all the Cases.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

"Joe? Stay behind after the others have left the Office will you...um...George and Humphreys? Get onto that matter we discussed immediately. Let me know the results and let Forensic Trace know to follow up". A prickly problem that had been discussed this morning in the usual Monday morning staff meeting.

I remained seated as the others slowly filed out tossing advice and stirs at me as they went. I ignored most but there were a few I could not ignore. Giving my tuppence worth for good measure.

“Okay...close the door Joe”.

I was now intrigued not sure why she wanted a natter with me in the privacy of her Office with the door closed.

“You okay Joe?”

“Yes Boss...”

“No, you’re not. You usually are one of the most vocal when we have these Monday Morning staff meetings...you hardly said a word and when it came time for you to talk about your Cases, you again said bugger all...so what’s up? Have you problems with Sophie? Tell me”.

“No Boss...she’s fine...” I took a deep breath and swiped my hands over my eyes. “Tellie...I um...I called an Ambulance for her Saturday night...she’s been slowly getting worse over the past two weeks...covid...I’m sure. We did a Rat test on her before I called the Ambulance”.

“Your wife has had covid for the past two weeks and you’ve still been coming to work! Not a good look Joe. Your two daughters? They okay?”

“Yeah...they’ve been staying with Muscles and Marge Hendricks since we first learnt with a RAT test that Tellie had covid. They’re okay...we’ve been checking them every second morning...and me too”.

“I think you should have some time off...on compassionate grounds”.

“No Boss. I’d just sit around moping. I can’t see Tellie...the hospital has banned all visitors...and besides, I have four homicides. Who’s going to pick them up if I’m not here. We’re down on staff the same as everyone...”

Denny Turner shuffled some papers together as she re-assessed her line to be critical of Joe Lind’s performance of late.

“Look Joe, I can understand why you have not been your best over the past week or two but...regardless...you’ve taken your eye off the ball. Why have you an ‘All Points’ out on Shareesh Asan’s husband Anbu...I’d say he has already returned to India...and he may have

given his wife a bloodied nose, a black eye and severe bruising to her body that led her to escape to the Women's Refuge at Burwood but I don't think he killed her..."

I glared in astonishment at my Boss not believing what she was saying.

"If you read back through the Murder Book on the poor woman's death and keeping in mind the homicide death of Stephanie Albright, you'd see the similarities...the method of killing both women. It's not like you to miss that point...but I guess I can be sympathetic towards you at this time but..."

She left the alternative hanging. I knew I hadn't been firing on all fours for some weeks...well before I inherited these four homicide cases but I should not have allowed my personal woes to colour my performance at work.

"Another thing...you seemed to drift off into Netherland on a few occasions before last weekend. Anything to worry about?"

I knew that Sophie would have reported on the incident...a few really...but I just thought it was me losing the thread...nothing serious.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

"C'mon people! I work the afternoon shift to midnight so's I've just gone to bed. Want do you bastards want?"

I held my ID Card out in front of him. Sophie did the same.

"Coppers! Want the fuck do you bastards want?"

"Where do you work Mister Papadopoulos?" A question aimed at decreasing his blood pressure.

"What's it to you..." He saw the expression on my face figuring cooperation might be a better strategy than his normal response of blowing his top. He let out a stream of air. "Yeah...alright...I'm a Stocker and a Forklift Driver at the large Woollies Distribution Centre out Smithfield way. Bin employed there since I was released on parole. I'm enjoying it though I keep to myself...better that way with no complications".

“How long have you worked there?”

The man looked down his nose at me, tapping his foot in irritation.

“Um...they gave me a job when I landed at the ‘halfway house’ after being released from The Bay...maybe a year ago now...kept my nose clean so there’s no need to contact my Parole Officer”.

“And abiding by your parole conditions by not having anything to do with your ex...we know you have broken those arrangements and put your ex. into Hospital for the third time...the local Uniforms will be calling shortly...you’ll be back in the clink quick smart. Serial offenders are not viewed in good light by the legal hooks. You know that...you gave your competition to your ex. a decent send-off...you know how to slit wrists correctly huh?”

“You arseholes are trying to stitch me up for Barton Fields’ death...not on coppers! Not fucking on!” He slammed the door in our faces.

“Notice he didn’t say Fields’ suicide death”. I mumbled as we turned to head for the narrow staircase out of the small Unit block.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

We still had nothing so I decided we should interview the two old chaps that Sophie had dug up in her valiant search over four days. I was still peeved at her efforts over the four days she was left unattended. I really didn’t know how she felt about the matter but by her expression, she thought she had done good...how was I to address the problem without ruining her enthusiasm?

“Mister Coombs? Harry Coombs?”

He nodded in response, leaning heavily on a walking frame after he had difficulty opening his front door to our knock. Peering myopically at Sophie and me.

“We are investigating the homicide death of Jason Hegarty on the twenty-fifth of last month. Between oh-one hundred and oh-five hundred hours on that morning. He was violently assaulted about the head and died in hospital a week later without waking from his unconscious state. We understand you were a frequent companion of his, walking the local streets usually after midnight”.

“Oh Detective...it’s been a while”.

“You did accompany the man regularly so we are led to believe. You were spotted frequently by the local lads as they patrolled the streets hereabouts. Your presence noted in their daily logs. In the early hours of the morning. Yes?”

The old man harrumphed, wiping his mouth and his eyes with a soiled handkerchief that he pulled one handed from his pants pocket. All the time clinging with the other hand firmly on the walking frame.

“This is all to do with the local Member of Parliament living several streets over...that was one of Hegarty’s favourite talking points...He may have been a right royal pain in the arse but if you kept your humour, he could be quite funny...without knowing it!” He again harrumphed. Again, passing the handkerchief over his face.

I turned away as it made me feel sick.

“You’ve known both for a long time...mid-seventies when he and Hunter were in the Concord Repat Hospital having multiple operations to remove shrapnel and bullet wounds from their bodies thanks to the Vietnam War”.

He half-turned to sit on the small seat of the walker.

“I was the first male nurse in that establishment...thanks to that claim in life, my body is permanently damaged thanks to me being asked to move, transfer and lift patients...the pains only getting worse. That’s why it’s been a while since I last walked the neighbourhood. Both Hunter and Hegarty were mere Patients back then. When I met up with both one warm night, it took a while for me to place their faces...it took them longer than that to place me...” Another harrumph followed by the smearing of whatever with his dirty handkerchief.

I nodded several times keeping a smile on my face as I looked down at the man’s filthy and holed slippers. A sudden thought whizzed by...I was glad he had not invited us into his home.

“In the days that you did walk the neighbourhood, you had three dogs...”

“Still got them...they’re aging faster than I”. A chortle at his own joke.

“During those days, did you ever notice anything out of the ordinary?”

“Like what?”

“Other people who you didn’t know walking about...vehicles in locations they shouldn’t have been...anything that yelled out they didn’t belong...”

“Mmm...” He nodded several times giving us the impression he was deep in thought. “Yes. It was a regular thing...and only occurred when Hegarty was walking with Hunter and me...a car...a Subaru Forrester...off-white in colour...blackened out windows so you couldn’t see anything inside...which means who-ever was inside had troubles looking out...seems stupid to me...”

“Why did this arouse your interest?”

“It would always slow down as it passed us...”

“Every time the three of you were out and about?”

“Just about...yeah...nearly every time. We asked Hegarty to remember the Rego Plate numbers so he could look it up on his computer...”

“He had a computer!?”

“Yeah...that’s how he kept in contact with his far-right Conspirators and hard-heads...”

“Even though you stop walking the neighbourhood, did that curtail your habit of seeing them?”

“No...we keep one night a week where Hunter, Hegarty and Hussey come over here to play cards...a good, fun night...yeah...we’ll have to think of someone to replace old Hegarty...he died you know”.

“Yes...that’s why we are here asking you questions”. I now had doubts on anything the old man offered us. “Have you any idea who may have bashed Hegarty to an inch of his life...who would want him dead...and why they would want him dead?”

He slowly shook his head. Looked up at me almost sorry he couldn’t help us.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Hegarty's family had removed everything from his house leaving us holding nothing. The computer may have been a 'gold mine' if only we had been quicker...no-one to blame except ourselves I guess.

"The house was going on the market by the end of the month and was expected to sell for over a mill!" Sophie spat out.

We contacted the Executor of the old man's will asking where the computer may have been. He wasn't aware of its location, saying it could have been included in the rubbish removed from the house.

"There was little of value in the furniture and furnishings with most of it chucked. The computer may have gone to the local Salvos people...I'm not sure".

I was about to hang up when something hit me.

"Sir, the computer...it may give us an indication of who murdered him...did it have password control?"

"No, Detective. The garbage he had on the thing bespoke heaps about the man. He was so deep into conspiracy things and right-wing politics...it was disgusting. We...um...my wife and I deleted everything on the hard drive. Everything. Sorry Detective".

I replace my phone back on its dock angry at myself for being so lax. I turned to Sophie...

"Sophs? Computers? Everything is now 'cloud' bound isn't it? Is it possible to trace out that information even if you don't have the relevant computer?"

"Depends on whether it is password controlled. If it's not it may be possible if you have the name the account is in...like mine...'*Soph25convertibles*'. That would be a hard one to guess".

"He's an old bloke...he'd have something simple I reckon..."

I stood, kicking 'Big Red' as hard as I could out of frustration. We should not have to do this exploring. All that happened was the punching bag rocked slightly with a pang of pain going up my leg. I stumbled around for some minutes sure I had broken my foot...or ankle...or toes! The pain quickly subsided as I pushed my chair around to Sophie's desk.

“Sophs? Get onto Digital Analysis Section to see whether they can scrounge information from the ‘cloud memory’ with only a name...no...before you do that, check to see if he has a Driver’s License. It will detail his birth date...the more info you can provide to the computer geeks the more they’ll love you...”

“And what are you going to do?”

“Go up to the nurse’s station to see whether I’ve broken my foot! Be back shortly”. I added. I turned back to face her. “Remind me will you when I get back to ring the Doctor-in-charge of the Anger Management Courses that Drakos Papadopoulos may have attended while he was inside the clink”.

As I hobbled off the Murder Squad Floor the Boss looked up, waving her hand as though I was a lost cause!

CHAPTER THIRTY

I missed Lunch. It was a good three hours before I hobbled back to my desk. My lower leg in a Moon Boot with instructions if it deteriorated and the pain increased I should see my doctor and get off my feet!

Sophie was excited and it wasn’t because I could be AWOL for a week or two!

“Boss? Digital Analysis says they may be able to trace out the Account through Microsoft Cloud. Hegarty had his License suspended last year on medical grounds but his date of birth was fifteen October nineteen forty-nine...he is seventy-three. They’ll need a couple of weeks as they are short-staffed because of Covid...Um...that’s not the good news. A Subaru 2015 Forrester wagon, pearl white finish is up for sale on the Used Cars Web site. Castle Hill...I’ve rang the chap who sounds middle-aged to say I was interested. He said I’d have to be quick as he has a buyer coming to look at the vehicle this afternoon...around four”.

I glanced at my watch. Just gone three.

“Castle Hill...let’s go”.

We made quick time with siren and lights flashing. Zooming in and out of traffic at breakneck speed. I was impressed with Sophie’s driving. I guess with a CAMS License she would be better than most. I looked up the name of the Seller on our Criminal Register.

“If it’s the same person, our man has done time...several times. Aggravated Assault...twice. Resisting Arrest three times. Belonging to an illegal Motorcycle Club...the Witnesses of Death...jeez, who things up the names? Displaying Club ‘colours’ when it is an offence...lah la lah and so forth...a nice bloke by all accounts”.

I felt a shiver, convinced we were on the right track...for Hegarty’s homicide death in any case.

“Pull up over the driveway so they can’t take the vehicle away”. As I said this, a Tilt-tray Truck pulled up beside us. I nodded as I alighted awkwardly from our Unmarked.

An overweight, middle-aged guy began to throw his weight around as he rushed down the length of his driveway. The rapid walk causing him to wheeze and go a beetroot colour. *‘This the guy who we suspect clobbered old Hegarty to death?’* I thought, now unsure of our suspicions.

“What in blazes...move yer fucking car and truck will yers. These people want to take me car for a drive before they buy it...move, will youze!”

“No can do Mister...?”

“What the hell...youze are coppers. You think you can do anything you like whenever you like. Are you stopping me from selling me car!? You can’t! This a Police State or something...coppers stopping honest people from doing business...youze can’t do that! Can youze?”

“We believe this vehicle may have been used in a vicious crime some weeks back. We need to conduct a search of the interior for any signs of such an act...if you excuse us, we will transport this vehicle back to our Forensic Vehicle Compound at Glebe. You can expect the vehicle to be returned to you within ten weeks in the condition it is at the moment...”

“Ten fucking weeks!! No fucking way!! I need the dosh! What crime!?” Again, his normal pasty colour turned beetroot red.

I walked up to the man getting in his face as Sophie reversed our Unmarked and the truck turned a tight turn to back onto the driveway, the tilt-tray beginning to descend level with the fancy front wheels of the Subaru. The prospective buyers nodded to the owner of the vehicle to quickly walk away. Not wanting to be involved in any of this.

“Mister Garry Henson is it? Formerly known as Ivan Ivanov...a proud Russian name. Why did you change it?”

“None of your fucking business...maybe I learnt the truth of my father and mother back in Mother Russia...maybe not...”

“A former 2IC of the ‘Witnesses of Death’ MC Gang which has numerous Chapters in Russia...I understand you may have been ordered to Australia to tighten control of the Club here and to expand the network of drug supply and selling in this State...right? You have not yet begun to infiltrate other States...a bit slow according to your ‘Handlers’ in Russia so I’m told”.

All this from a conversation I had with Police IQ and another to the obtain a photo of the man’s Driver’s License as I hung on tightly to the panic handle as Sophie navigated her way through the beginning of the afternoon swell of traffic.

There was silence. The former Ivan Ivanov wanting to remain non-verbal.

“Your car was video-ed on several CCTV cameras around the area where our victim was bashed to death. What were you doing in a suburb far away from your home ‘patch’. On several occasions but mostly in the time zone around 0100 hours to 0200 hours...an odd hour to be out and about...”.

“Not me copper so it couldn’t have been my wheels...”

“It’s a bit difficult to hide your presence from so many domestic CCTV cameras about these days...”

Not one of the cameras could pick out the Plates on the vehicle. I wasn’t about to let him know that piece of information.

“Not me driving copper!” He glanced at my moon boot. “I was wearing something like that around that time...”

“Did you have a walking cane or a crutch? I don’t know what is best for me...”

“Crutches always get in the way. A walking cane suited me best...”

“Oh...yer still got it?”

“Sure, I’ll show you how to use it best...hah! I’m helping a bloody copper...who’d have thought”.

He stood to walk inside his joint, Sophie following close behind.

“Yer can have a loan of it if you like...no strings...” He offered as he returned to his front veranda. We watched in silence as the truck drove away. I had my fingers crossed.

“Yer not trying to bribe an Officer are you?” I asked, a smile on my dial as I took delivery of the cane. A beautiful specimen that I clutched further down its length.

“Hardly...”

“A decent handle”. I observed as I twirled the cane around. “Like...it’s like a burl at the point of the handle. Yer could get a decent swing like a golf club...”

He fell silent wondering what this was all about. He knew it wasn’t about doing a favour for a cop. His mind not connecting the cane to the bashing death of Jason Hegarty.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

We went back over the video streams we had of the Subaru not learning anything of substance.

“Wait!” Sophie exploded. “Reverse that back a bit...there...that car turning the corner to go in the opposite direction as Henson heading up the street...it illuminates two persons in the vehicle as it swings around the corner. Henson always said it wasn’t him driving his vehicle because he had a badly sprained ankle at that time. He had a moon boot on which he found uncomfortable to drive with...so he gets one of his cohorts to drive...I’ll get onto Police Intelligence and Gang Related Crime Unit for a list of Henson’s associates”.

“Sophs, you’re a gem. All we must do now is wait for forensic results on that cane. I betcha there are traces of blood and hair that matches our victim...and traces of the same in the passenger and driver’s seats on that Subaru wagon. The bastard is going down!”

“Why have they picked Hegarty out to pummel? I can’t see Henson or his cohort being involved in any of the two Women’s Refuge homicide killings...”

“Yeah...the sixty-four-dollar question...what’s in Hegarty’s past that would warrant such a violent reaction? In your research with that Pro-forma, was there anything...anything to indicate a sordid past on Hegarty’s part? Links with an illegal MC Gang...or drug distribution...he was a Patient at the Concord Repat Hospital...could he have gotten any drugs illegally during that time...that would have heightened interest from the ‘Witnesses of Death’ boys if they had been around at that time”.

“Not that I could see Boss...” She was silent for some moments before starting up again. “Was Henson married? Did it go to pot with his wife running to one of those Refuges. Hegarty was in the wrong spot at the wrong time. Henson was trying to force his wife to return to the marital home. They hit him as he could identify both men...possible Boss?”

“Mmm...” I spun around and begin hitting my keyboard. “Hegarty...he was a Nacho...not a combat soldier but attached to the HQ posting in Vietnam during that war...what did he do after his two-year stint in the army? While I’m digging that out Sophs, could you delve into past assaults that had a white Subaru Forrester thereabouts...go back say twenty years...um...’hit’ words...white Subaru Forrester...white wagon...blackened out windows...assault involving head injuries...” She spun around to begin her search. She enjoyed these chases, I thought to myself.

Speaking quietly to myself I read out what little came up of the Hegarty search.

“A Delivery Driver of Medical supplies...he may have come across Hunter and Coombs in his travels...but Henson? Not likely unless he could lift certain drugs from the consignments in the back of the truck he was driving...”

I looked over at Sophie.

“Arrh Sophs? Ask the Police Intelligence Section and the Drug Squad people have they anything on their books going back to the late eighties of illegal drug distribution involving Jason Hegarty by name”.

It never occurred to me that I was loading my young partner up with continuous requests one after the other...she wasn’t complaining or giving me dirty looks. As I said, she enjoyed this aspect of being a Murder Dee.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

“Retirement came up in conversation the other day...” I didn’t think it relevant that the conversation with Sophie was around two months ago!

Shelley was home but still weak, sore, and lethargic.

“With Sophie? She’s a little young to start worrying about retirement, isn’t she?” Tellie asked as she lifted a glass of water to her lips.

We were seated on the outdoor terrace with a cool breeze making it comfortable after a hot, sticky day. Me on one side of the table, Tellie the other. A minor precaution although she had tested negative before she was released from Hospital.

Typical Sydney weather in late Spring and earlier summer in December.

“That’s what she thought...and she got a little uppity about it. As she said, she was in her early twenties and didn’t have a clue what she wanted to do in retirement some fifty years away...she may be dead so she said, which was a little stupid having 12% taken out of her salary now if that happened. She doesn’t need the extra cash at that moment but she knew a lot of young women in that age bracket who could do a lot with that cash right now instead of having the Government possum it away! I knew what she meant...”

“Mmm...has she selected her lodgers yet?”

“Yeah...two young female coppers which appears to be operating okay...”

“At the moment...”

“Yeah...and she now has another two sportscars to work on...she’ll never stop!”

“Two more! What is she going to do with them all...Rego and Insurance for what? Five Sportscars! That will be prohibitive don’t you reckon?”

I nodded. I hadn’t thought of that...trust Tellie to think of that!

“I haven’t heard from Malisa for a while...have you?”

“She’s in Manila. She sent me an e-mail the other week...sorry...I should have sent it on to you but you were exhausted with covid laying you low. She stays in regular contact with Shelley...they were always good friends...going back well before Bill had his accident”.

“More than you do. Shells and Marge were your partners but you seldom ring them. Once upon a time you were shoulder to shoulder for more hours than you and I are as a married couple. I speak to Shelley, Benny, and Marge at least once a week. Why is it you men never encourage that regular contact?”

I shrugged. I didn’t know...I topped up my wine glass which left but dregs in the bottle of excellent Cab. Merlot.

“Look, can we get back to this retirement problem?”

“It may be a problem for you but I’m fine about it...”

I looked across at the woman whom I loved more than life itself, surprised at her response.

“Yeah...um...I have what? Fifteen years to go if I retire at the retirement age of people who were born between nineteen sixty-five and nineteen-eighty. What am I going to do?”

“Firstly, you can empty out your Man’s Shed and do some of the things you’ve been letting slip...and by then we would have sold the van...”

“For a smaller one...no...we’re getting away from the gist of things I want to elaborate on. You are almost twelve years my junior...I’ll be close to eighty-one when you retire. Too old to do what we want to do...do the big one...”

“We can put that on the back burner...I’d like to do a couple of cruises before I waste shoe leather getting around Oz...”

“When in hell did cruises come into the picture...no...hang on, we keep drifting off the fact that I’ll be over eighty when you retire. If you leave work when I retire you’ll be what...late fifties. You’ll lose too much of your retirement egg if you retire then...”

“If not most of it...I’ve never thought about that age difference ever being a problem...it is, isn’t it?”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

“Sweetie? What are you doing?”

“Mmm...what?” I looked around as though I had been shaken from a dream. I had opened the roller shutter that gave my Man’s Cave more room out under the Carport. I had extended the carport roof years ago without Council approval to the side fence line. It was double the width and double the length to allow the Van and both our vehicles to comfortably park under...and the extra space if I needed it when making something...that hadn’t happened for a long time.

“You’re sitting on the Van step with your sketch pad in your hands...you going to start up or is this something you will do when you retire. Did our conversation the other day scare you...”

“What? No...well...it made me think. I haven’t got that many years to go before I retire...”

“If you think seventeen years is not a long time. What’s all that stuff in your shed?”

“Most of it is Malisa’s. When she got the bit between her teeth she used to scout the second-hand stores for stuff she could restore or change its use...some of it good ideas, most I should chuck”.

“Not without talking to Mal first. By the way, I can retire when you turn seventy without taking any of my superannuation. Leaving it there to roll over until my official retirement age of seventy...if we can afford it...living on your contributions...or the superannuation amount”

“And the rental on both sides of the house...or selling it...”

“No...I do not want you to sell the place. It has too many memories...for both of us...no, we will not sell it no matter what”.

“Don’t be so committed to one avenue when you don’t know what the future holds for us. The way you are talking, would you agree to do what Abbey and Banjo are doing...travelling around Australia towing a caravan? Or a medium sized Motorhome?”

“Yes, so long as the girls are settled into their own lives...yes, for sure...after we enjoy a couple of cruises”.

“Tar...”

I stood to wrap my arms around the dearest thing in my heart.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

“Why are we re-interviewing Papadopoulos? I thought we had dismissed his role in the death of Barton Fields...we are letting the two Women’s Refuge Homicides slide...I get the impression you think to hell with them as they deserved what they got!”

“Mmm...no...hang on a bit...that’s not the case Sophs...well...Drakos...I don’t think he has been honest with us. He is holding back on something I reckon”.

“The fingerprints...”

“They’re either relevant or they aren’t. If we assume the suicide note was not written by Fields...or not written on Fields’ computer and the fingerprints of an unknown person were placed on the various surfaces sometime *before* the death of Barton, that opens a completely different scenario”.

“But...”

“Leave your mind clear of any points that don’t make sense. Forget the fingerprints...who would then be our Number One-person in the homicide death of Barton Fields?”

“Yeah...I guess Papadopoulos would climb up that totem pole of suspects...but...”

“Don’t query it until you have something concrete to change your opinion”.

We hopped out of the Unmarked, my moon boot still causing me grief. We were shadowed by one of the guards as we stepped through the various security protocols to gain entry into Silverwater Prison. Thankfully, this would be the last day of having to wear the bloody thing. A visit later to the nurse would have it reefed off.

I don’t know whether it is just me, but I always felt a weight close in around my shoulders as I walked the wide corridors of any prison...they were all the same...they all gave me that feeling. That weight...that depressive atmosphere...yells and screams...the banging of prison doors and gates...whistles as though the inmates had a secret telegraphic sense that a female was close by...and she wasn’t a female screw!

We were shuffled into a small Interview Room, the ubiquitous Guard inside and one outside the room. Drakos Papadopoulos I would have thought, not classified as a dangerous git who could lose it at the drop of a hat.

“Hello Drakos. Enjoying your new digs? They’d be familiar to you, wouldn’t they? This is your fourth reservation, isn’t it?”

He looked at me...a thousand knives stare that would have attached me to the back wall if it were effective. Instead, I smiled.

“What you want with me, copper...I ain’t kilt nobody...yet. But you’re coming up fast as my first victim on me bucket list...keep talkin’ and you’ll get to number one, you fuckhead!”

“Save your shit for some-one else as you are not making me shiver in my boots. This is your fourth time inside for the same reason. Belting your ex around. Putting her into hospital. When

are yer going to learn? I guess when you kill her in which case you'll see more of us...I'll hunt you down like a craven cur that you are!"

"Hah!" He shook his head, a sneer telling us he wasn't impressed...or he was and that was his natural smile.

"How long did you shadow Fields? You knew he and your ex were getting together. Not an arrangement you felt comfortable with, eh?"

"What is this copper? Haven't we been through this before? You still want to stitch me up...you reckon it would be an easy thing and keep me out of the way for what? Ten years?"

"Mate, because of your recorded bashings of your ex I reckon you could be looking at close on twenty...do you deny being in Barton Fields home?"

"I..." He looked up at me unsure what card I had up my sleeve.

I nodded slowly, looking at him intently. A tight smile telling him I had an ace up that sleeve. He broke the gaze...one up for me!

"So...what was that again? You have been inside the victim's home? Is that right? When?"

He clamped down, looking at the tabletop separating us. Nothing more no matter how hard I tried to trip him up! To get him to elaborate past a yes/no response...he was an experienced crim with so many trips to the clink. He knew the consequences if he opened his mouth too wide...things could spill out that he did not want broadcast.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Sophie sat heavily into the driver's seat of our Unmarked. Turning to me as I struggled to lift my leg into the floor-well of the vehicle. I was glad the moonboot will be coming off in the next couple of days. This afternoon if we make it back to the Office...if not, within the week...you bloody beauty! She turned to me lost for words...speechless! She sat there with her head resting on the top of the steering wheel slowly shaking her head.

"Phew!! Joe! Boss! You can't do that!"

"Can't do what?"

“Lie...straight out bullshit...we have nothing that would suggest we have trace evidence that places Papadopoulos in Fields’ home”.

“He doesn’t know that...and if he was in Fields’ home at the time of the homicide and we had trace of that fact, he knows he’s fucked...”

“But you can’t do that...if it comes out in Court that you employed false-hoods to nail him, it could cause a mistrial and him being set free!”

“But even if we could prove he has been lying to *us*...nothing fucking happens!”

My mobile buzzed then began its dreary ring. My blood pressure rapidly decreased which I was thankful for as I was about to say something no partner should tell a colleague...to fuck off so early in the relationship! I put the Mobile to my ear.

“Detective Lind here...yes...oh! Can I just place my phone on its dock and have you repeat that information for the benefit of my young partner...yes”.

“Sophie? How’s that old bloke treating you...sorry...Tellie here. Senior Forensic Officer...I’m his constant complaining wife as he does not listen to me...”

“Me neither Missus Lind. How are you? Over the dreaded virus?”

“I think so...all the tests have come back negative so here I am, back at work trying to catch up on a four-week absence...um, business. We did a return visit to the Barton Fields address once we were advised it was now a homicide investigation. Again, on the outside side gate, smudged prints but distinct enough to draw comparisons. They matched the unknown fingerprints found on various surfaces inside the house. On the computer keyboards, printer and various surfaces and utensils in the Kitchen. From this, you could surmise our unknown person had prepared a drink that contained sufficient barbiturates to knock our victim into kingdom come!”

“That’s an assessment you cannot back up with facts, my love”.

“My love, you should pay more attention instead of trying to railroad me. The fingerprints were on a bottle of barbiturates found in a Bathroom cabinet, on an instant coffee container and an adjacent sugar container and on a mug that did contain a mixture of coffee and drugs. On those facts I can ascertain that our unknown perp not only prepared the concoction that allowed them to undress our victim, fill a bath with warm water, place our victim into the bath and slit his wrists laterally causing lack of blood and effectual death of our poor victim. The way our victim died would suggest our unknown perp has some medical knowledge...”

“Papa...Papadopoulos...”

“If you continue to listen my love, I was about to supply information that indicated the man was in the premises...however, we cannot ascertain his presence at the time of the offence or whether he was there days beforehand...before the time of death of our Deceased...um...that is all. You will receive a Final Report on the examination of the Death House next week or the week after...we are awaiting results on forensic trace found and its origin. Phew! That is all...no...um...the Walking Cane that you delivered to us last week...it has yet to be examined fully, but I will say a set of prints overlay prints of a known felon. Because a section of that print was smudged...”

“A lovely technical term, don’t you think? Smudged?” I interrupted.

“Shut up Detective. You keep elbowing your weight around could cause me to lose my line of thought...um...the overlaid prints belong to a careless Murder Detective who should have known better how to manage articles connected to a murder investigation...um...we have enough to gain an alike comparison. It may not be sufficient to allow its introduction into Trial matters though. The underlying print belongs to Elwin W Mihajlović, a former Witnesses of Death 2IC to Garry Henson formerly known as Ivan Ivanov. Again, it will be another week or two before we examine and formulate any forensic trace on that Cane. I think I have exhausted all matters pertaining to two separate Murder Investigations. My, my, Detective, how can you keep all your Cases in order and not confuse one Case with another. I tell you man; you are one smart bastard!”

She hung up. I could hear her laughter long after the line went dead.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Garry Henson was arrested as he exited a local Gym known to have various ‘heavies’ and suspect Lebanese family members as proud clientele.

His off-sider Elwin Mihajlović was arrested at his place of employment, a well-known and well-respected motorcycle shop and attached mechanical repair shop. From all accounts and examination, the business was going extremely well. One wonders why the Manager of such an establishment would also step to the other side of the street when the returns from the business were more than acceptable.

A Court Order to obtain Taxation receipts for the past five years showed a successful business. Questions to both Police Intelligence and the Gang Related Crime Team indicated minimal

attendance by both men to the ‘Witnesses of Death’ illegal Motorcycle Club. Some years ago there was a members’ revolt kicking both Henson and Mihajlović out of the Club. Various enquiries failed to indicate the basis for this revolt. Neither man showed any loss of sleep over this mishap and reports indicated that they continued with their lives unaffected by this little misadventure.

Mihajlović showed a greater business sense while Henson floundered being kept afloat by charity from his close mate so it would seem. The man had adopted the anglophile version of his name Mikhail...Ted Mikhail. Because he showed smarts more than Ivanov, we decided to drill Mikhail first.

We kept the two apart hoping neither one knew of their mate’s arrest.

I sat noisily at the table...our suspect opposite me. His Solicitor sat beside him with Sophie opposite him. I informed all that the meeting was to be video-taped and audio-taped. There were no objections. I went through the identities in the room and why we were interviewing our suspect.

“Um...Ted...is that what you prefer over Elwin?”

The man nodded.

“I’d appreciate you speaking in a strong tone for the taping of these proceedings...” I indicated the camera lens and large microphone. These were blue-tooth connected to up-to-the-date equipment in the neighbouring Electronics Room.

Ted nodded...then stated in a strong voice that he understood.

“You immigrated to Australia in nineteen ninety...at the commencement of the Bosnian/Croatia War that went from nineteen ninety-one to ninety-five”.

“Yes...the...how should I say this...the organisation I belonged to disappeared at the start of the war in my country. You could see it coming...the war...so I got out...”

“It took you less than six months to join the ‘Witnesses to Death’ Motorcycle Club. You became firm friends with Ivan Ivanov now to be known as Garry Henson”.

“Yes...”

“You and Henson took control of the MC Club in ninety-four...yes?”

The man nodded then realising his mistake he replied in a loud voice that yes, he became 2IC under Henson's control.

"A 'heavy' for the 'Fallen Angels' MC gang was beaten to death in March ninety-six. The 2IC of the 'White Skulls' beaten to death in September of the following year. In February two thousand the 'Captain' of the Rebels illegal MC Gang beaten to death. The three deaths were all similar. Each of the victims were severely pummelled about the head. All dying before they could be transported to hospital...do you know anything about those homicides?"

"No..."

"You and your mate were turfed from the 'Witnesses of Death' MC Gang in two thousand and eight. Why?"

"We were voted out by the membership...a democratic vote". He smiled at the absurdity of the situation. This turned to a laugh as he thought his comment was hilarious...beats me what was funny in the comment!

"For what reason?"

"Leadership is fickle...what can I say...once your fellow members don't like you, you're out". He shrugged. Held his hands apart gesturing he really didn't know the reasons for the downfall of the pair.

"For the membership to turn against you so suddenly, you must have suggested...or done something that they totally disagreed with, yes?"

"I don't know...you seem to know more than I".

My Mobile buzzed in my shirt pocket then began to ring. I took it out swearing under my breath and looked at the ID caller's name. It was the Boss, Denny Turner. She knew our agenda this morning so something of importance must have arisen. I was instructed to meet with her in her Office immediately. As I left the room, a Uniformed slipped in to sit with Sophie.

"Sorry Joe. I knew you'd be in the middle of something...um...Forensic Trace rang me. Your wife knew of your agenda to-day and rang me instead of you. She knew you would ignore her call but you would not ignore my call". A smile to try and stem my anger...it only worked partially. "Um...Henson's Subaru Forrester...blood and skin trace found on the floor mats of both floor wells. Driver's and passenger's side. Trace also found on the driver's seat...all matching our victim, Jason Hegarty..."

I jumped and clapped my hands together. The boss indicated there was more by a wave of her hand.

“The Walking Cane belonging to Henson. Blood and skin trace on the handle. The fingerprints of Elwin Mihajlović partly obscured by the fingerprints of a clumsy Murder Detective. That might cause problems if that fact gets out at the time of the Case going to Court...here’s hoping. Those prints of our Mister Mihajlović were positioned so that the Cane was used like a gold club...the trace found on the handle matches our Deceased Mister Jason Hegarty...”

“That puts the rope around both their necks...bloody good work!”

“Why did the men attack the old bloke...he had to be in his seventies!”

“I have no idea and a complete examination of Hegarty’s life did not turn up any clues as to the reason for his violent death...Sophie did more than a complete narration of the man’s life having certain incidents explained/ confirmed by telephone calls to persons close to the old bloke who would know of his life and secrets...he had none except he became a conspiracy advocate and right-wing alarmist later in his life...but there was nothing suspicious of that time in his life except that he was a clod with his beliefs as they matured”. I shook my head. “On evidence we unearthed, Hegarty was not their first victim...I’d hazard a guess and say the two assault old blokes and homeless types for pleasure...they got their rocks off viciously assaulting these types of men especially around the head. Enough for a few of their victims to die from those inflicted injuries...not enough evidence to nail the two...a confession would be nice”.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

I almost skipped out of the Boss’s Office heading towards the Interview Room. Both Sophie and Mikhail’s Solicitor could tell of the change in me. Even as I sat and began to apologise for the interruption, it was hard to keep the smile off my face.

“Good news?” The Solicitor offered. His face crinkled with frown lines that spoke heaps of his concern for his client. He could tell I had just found that missing million under my bed.

I signed back on for the sake of continuance and shuffled the sheaf of papers that held shorthand notes and questions of importance.

“Mister Mikhail...Ted? You like to go for drives of an evening with Henson...in his car. Yes?”

“Yes...we both suffer from insomnia...a lot like those old codgers you see about”.

“In your suburb?”

“Nah...um...nah...yeah”.

“Is that a yes or no concerning old blokes walking around the streets of your neighbourhood?” I looked at the man over the top of my reading glasses. “Again, is that in Burwood or closer to your suburb?”

The Solicitor placed a hand on Mikhail’s upper arm. A signal to not answer that question.

“You drove around in Hanson’s Subaru Forrester...it is described that all the windows except the windshield were blacked out so you couldn’t see who was inside...” I let the statement float for some time. “The vehicle? Hanson had it on the market to sell...it was in good nick...any idea why he was selling it at that time?”

Again, there was silence.

“The Walking Cane that Henson used while he had a moon boot on...”

“It was mine...I lent it to him until he could take off the moon boot. It was my grandfather’s and I wouldn’t be surprised it was even older than that...handed down generation to generation. I’ve had offers for it...I would never let it go...”

“I had to wear a moon boot for several weeks. It was removed recently. Your friend gave me that walking cane while I had the boot on. Interestingly, your fingerprints were on the cane...”

“To be expected as my client has already stated that cane has been in his family for generations...” His Solicitor spoke for Mikhail as he held his hand on his clients upper arm.

“Your prints were on the cane as though you were using it as a golf club...holding it so that the knobbly head was the ‘driver’...the ‘club head’ so to speak”.

Again, I let the moment float.

“Why did you attack Jason Hegarty? What was he to you?” My speech getting louder. “What reason did you have for bashing the old bloke about the head...similar injuries to those three persons I mentioned before” I was now shouting. “...what did Mister Jason Hegarty ever do to you?” Slapping the table causing my palm to sting.

“I don’t know what you are talking about. I don’t know a Jason Hegarty...” I simmered down as I sat heavily back into my chair.

“Then how is his blood and skin deposits on the handle of your cane...and on the floormats of the Subaru and on the driver’s seat of the vehicle matching the DNA of the elderly Jason Hegarty?” I asked calmly...this was the sixty-four-dollar question.

The Solicitor again placed his hand on the upper arm of Mikhail.

“Detective? I would like a word with my client...in private if you don’t mind...”

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

“Is it Garry Hanson or Ivan Ivanov?”

“Whatever...”

“If we need to lay charges against you, we need your correct name. The name that you not only use in everyday living, but the name that is registered as your legal name. Did you change your name from Ivan Ivanov to Garry Hanson on your eighteenth birthday. According to your Passport Details you were born on the second May nineteen eighty in Semisk in eastern Ukraine. You have kept your Russian citizenship...”

“What was the question?”

“Have you changed your name to Garry Hanson by deed poll on September one, Two thousand here in Sydney?”

“Whatever...”

“Mister Hanson...”

“Yeah, yeah. My legal name is now Garry Hanson...I saw it on a gravestone...I liked the name...”

“Are you the legal owner of a 2016 Subaru Forrester Wagon, Pearl White in colour with illegal blacked out windows. Its registration number is TX 32 GX. Is that correct?”

“You know I own it...yer stole it from me when I was about to sell it...yer pack ol’bastards!”

“Your vehicle was spotted on Macquarie Drive at 0300 hours in Bathurst on June six two thousand and eighteen. What were you doing in Bathurst at that hour on that date?”

“Couldn’t sleep. Went for a drive...bloody hell, that was years ago...”

“Some drive. A Mister Samuel Castigon, a homeless man of sixty-six was assaulted on that night at that time. Severely assaulted around the head which did cause some brain injury...he did describe the attack and he was able to give a description of the vehicle...”

“Know nothing about that...I couldn’t sleep so’s I went for a drive...”

“With your mate Teddy Mikhail?”

“Yeah...I goes, he goes”.

“November twelve two thousand and eighteen. In Gosford. A Mister Pogus Milta aged seventy-one. A harmless homeless chap who everyone knew. Severely beaten about the head and shoulders. Died from his wounds three months later...”

“Sorry to hear that...” A sneer.

“Your vehicle was recorded on traffic cameras at Mount White at 0130 hours heading south towards Sydney...”

“Again, I couldn’t sleep...went for a drive”.

“Again, your vehicle was noted on the automatic Toll Register heading north on the North Connect Tunnel at 0136 hours. You turned off the MI to head for Hornsby. At some time on that night a sixty-year-old alcoholic homeless bloke Brian Housos, almost died from severe head injuries inflicted...”

“What can I say...I suffer from insomnia...”

“Your vehicle was identified on several consecutive nights on several streets running at right angles to Burwood Road, Burwood. Behind the strip shopping precinct. A Mister Jason Hegarty aged seventy-six also suffered from insomnia. Known to walk the back streets around his home on early mornings weather permitting. He was assaulted, dying of his injuries several days later. Do you know Mister Jason Hegarty?”

“Wouldn’t know him if’n I fell over him...”

“Mmm...I think you may have. You were using your mate’s walking cane at that time. You had a moon boot on which you found hard to walk with so the cane helped you to get around. You couldn’t drive at that time so your mate Ted Mikhail gave you his walking stick and drove your vehicle on that night...the cane that you found useful handed down from generation to generation. It was a family heirloom...”

“Yeah...that helped a bit...bloody painful...” He was still cocky. Still answered with a smile. A nod.

“Because of the injury to your ankle and foot, you could do little to help your mate bash the life out of Hegarty...he was not a homeless man but one who walked the streets early morning because he couldn’t sleep...trying to lay into the prone old man proved difficult. In fact, it hurt. Your mate Mikhail did most of the damage using the walking stick like a golf club to inflict terrible head injuries...you tried to help but found that without the cane as support, you did fall over the man. Only stopped from doing so by your mate as he was taking a breather”. These snippets not known as facts but used to fill out the accusations.

“A good story but totally wrong...” He replied, a shake of the head, a smile.

“Then why is blood and skin traces on the handle of the walking stick?” I let the comment float for some time. “That match the DNA of the dying man...” The demeanour of the man slowly changed...from a confident air to one who was hiding something.

“Mister Henson? How can you explain the trace elements on the cane’s knobbly handle?” He flipped his hand nervously. His head slowly lowering to rest on his chest. Eye contact was not possible...

“Mister Hanson? How do explain blood and flesh particles on the front floor mats of your vehicle? On the passenger and driver’s floor pans. Also, on the driver’s seat and on the gear shift lever? Mister Hanson...those remnants match the DNA of Mister Jason Hegarty”. I slapped the table hard and half stood from my chair, leaning towards the man. “You are a brutal, sick man who gets his rocks off by bashing the tripe out of old men...you are going down for the homicide death of Jason Hegarty...you may get released before you die...either way, you’ll be an old man yourself when you get paroled”. I sat, breathing deeply. “Hopefully, there’ll be no sick bastards about who get their jollies off by assaulting old men...though perhaps I wish there will be, giving you a beating you’ll not forget. Yeah, a thumping that will leave you lying in some gutter close to death...as you were killing time walking the streets...here’s hoping, eh?”

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

After charging both men with the beating homicide of Jason Hegarty I asked Sophie to dig out all the details on the bashings and/or deaths of homeless men where the Subaru Forrester could be noted nearby or coming or going from the area.

If we could glean enough evidence to suggest their involvement, they may confess to some of the bashings and/or killings...here's hoping in any case. I was not about to hold my breath.

The Prosecution at the Trial may not use these additional cases...the Judge may suggest that the additional information could be prejudicial to the case before him. If we could tie them in, it would clear up one or two homicide deaths and bashings, taking them off our books. I wasn't about to hold my breath!

It always surprised me how some of these homicides come to a successful completion...by a ring into Crimestoppers by a person unknown or by the smallest amount of forensic trace busting the Case wide open.

My phone rang in its dock as I finished instructing Sophie on her latest task.

"Joe? Muscles...arrh...I'm a little embarrassed...a little circumspect...um...Doctor Ian Hirsi? In hospital in a bad way...he very well could become a statistic of this new covid variant. His wife? She was the Doctor's Assistant...she died last night. I'm sorry but I have only just begun going through the Doctor's cases...a little behind...as we all are. I have almost a third of my staff off at the moment which means we are being yelled at by both the Prosecution and Defence tables on current cases... all Criminal Cases have been pushed back which does not please certain Judges who never look for excuses...this is a roundabout way of telling you why your autopsy and forensic pathology reports have not left this Office. Me and my assist will be working long hours trying to catch up".

"The Reports on whom?"

"The Stephanie Albright and Shareesh Asan homicide stabbings. Hirsi had not completed the final cutting on the Asan woman but his notes indicate that he thinks both women were killed with the same weapon...he was only guessing but he thinks it could have been a large screwdriver with a long stem with the end...the part that goes into a screw-head being sharpened to a fine point...it would need tempering of the steel so not to break. A precise position of the point and with body weight, pushed between the ribs into the heart. Going straight through. When it hits the rear of the spatula, the screwdriver head is hit with a

hammer. Enough force would be exerted to have the point splinter bone causing the point to burst through to the bedding material on which both women were sleeping on...yucky, huh?"

"What would be the point in forcing the point further after it has pierced the heart...there's no point is there?"

"I guess it may represent anger...but carrying a large screwdriver and hammer about? A bit old fashion...cumbersome...I'd rather carry a battery-powered drill and a long drill bit..."

"Yeah...but you're a modern-type guy...and you couldn't hit a screwdriver handle with a hammer no matter how many times you tried!"

"Yeah...you could be right on that one...um...the preliminary reports on both women...sometime this month..."

"Nothing else? Anything in the blood workups?"

"Arrh...no...nothing on either woman..."

"Okay...thanks for looking after the girls while Tellie was in hospital".

"No worries...they're a delight and they get on so well with my three...speak to you later".

CHAPTER FORTY

Tellie 'dog-eared' her place in the book she was reading, closing it to gently place the book on the bedside chest of drawers that I had made years ago. She turned off her reading lamp and slid down under the covers to snuggle into me. I was lying on my back, my left arm over my eyes.

"You on a downer huh?"

"Yeah. Why, I have no idea".

"You've wrapped up another Case so I heard...you always go on a downer when you successfully complete a murder investigation..."

“It’s got a long way to go yet before we can say we’ve wrapped it up...and then the Court Case which can be a bastard within itself...but yeah...I don’t know why I have these downers at the completion of a case as many of my fellow Detectives? They celebrate with a drink or three...or at least a few rounds with ‘Big Red’...I can’t seem to get into the spirit of completion like they do”.

“Yeah...you take on a Case as though the western world is dependent on you solving it and if you don’t, we sink into anarchy! The Case becomes a part of you...every waking hour you are thinking of it. I can tell when you’re not paying attention to either me or the girls by the look in your eyes...we right for next weekend?”

“Yeah...I booked the return tickets three weeks ago...we got a discount. I’m looking forward to seeing Danni without all the covid bullshit. It would have been harder for her as she was confined to barracks so to speak...it will be good to see her...I am missing her more and more”.

“Yeah...me too...and the girls too. Al and Sam have their bags packed already...you’ve still got an open Case haven’t you?”

“Mmm? Yeah. The Barton Fields homicide and the two women stabbing homicides. Here they thought they were safe moving into DV Women’s Refuges...I think they’re all connected somehow. How? I have no idea...it’s just a gut feeling. We’re right with the Barton Fields homicide with Drakos Papadopoulos being our Number One suspect but we can’t tie the guy in knots...and he had an accomplice...or someone with him on that homicide but we have no idea who. We have his fingerprints and DNA but he’s not on any records...that’s a bugger!”

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

“Detective Lind...Senior Sergeant Bill Waters Burwood Local Area Command. I met you on that nasty business where Stephanie Albright was killed. There was an attempt made last night to gain access into the same house again. It was unsuccessful though he left a mess where he was trying to break in”.

“He?...You on site?”

“Yes sir. I can stay here if you want to take a gander. We called in the Forensic Trace people hoping to get a ‘tag’ on our intruder. I don’t know how that went...they’re still here”.

“My partner and me...um...no, we’ll come straight out. Give us about thirty minutes, okay?”

I was silent as Sophie drove at a leisurely speed going with the traffic.

“Sophs?” I suddenly asked which made her jump in surprise. “When you were doing that research on Drakos Papadopoulos, did you search out known associates?”

“Yeah, I did. He had none. He gathered enemies more than friends so it seemed...”

“No known associates...no cell mates...no pen pals, huh. Not unknown with a certain type of crim...he stays away from friendships because they can get him into trouble...how about work mates. He’s been employed...right? ...um...where?”

“At the large Woollies Distribution Centre out Smithfield way...no...I didn’t check out that avenue...should I?”

“Later...when you get a chance...almost there according to our GPS thingamajig...”

“Down the next street...”

We pulled up behind a stream of official vehicles, some still firing a blue and red strobe over the nearest houses.

“Doesn’t look like a Female Refuge Centre...” Sophie mumbled as she alighted. Repeating what she had said the first time we were here...to investigate Stephanie Albright’s homicide stabbing.

“They seldom do, wanting to sink into the suburban street scape so annoyed ex-husbands and boyfriends find it harder to find their errant women...to have another go. I’d like to know the incident of exes forcing their way into establishments like this”.

“Looks and sounds like a Pre-School Kindergarten by all the screeches of young ones...”.

“Yeah...they’re the losers in all this hoo-ha...makes you wonder what society is gunna end up like, huh?”

“Yeah...I wonder how the little ones process their mother and father falling apart. Whether there is long term consequences or to them, it is just a part of living?”

“Don’t know. Don’t want to know...”

Senior Sergeant Bill Waters extricated himself from his official unmarked vehicle. Nodded in my direction. Gave Sophie a tight smile as he walked briskly towards us.

“We have to nail this bastard before he takes anymore lives...he’s a local bloke who is not comfortable in getting outside his familiar comfort zone...he keeps on trying he’s gunna succeed eventually”.

“Good morning Senior Sergeant”. I shook his hand. Sophie almost curtsied. There was energy between the two...go figure...the Sergeant was old enough to be her father. Then again, she could be attracted to older men more than the young ones roaming about to-day.

“Partial fingerprints on the windowsill and the upright section of the window...they’re a match as far as possible with only partials to compare. The same as those here at Stephanie Albright’s death and those found at Shareesh Asan’s death house...he couldn’t jemmy the window sashes apart as there was too many coats of paint. He then turned his attention to the back door but his struggles must have woken up the old girl who lives in the back...in the Grannie Flat...she turned the outside light on as she opened her door...she caught a fleeting sight of a bloke high tailing it up the side of the house...dark clothes...white gym boots...grey hair...that’s all she could offer. The place is over-flowing with six women and seven kids. She’s got her arms full right now...it could all disappear within a fortnight or two...hard to tell”.

I walked around the back to see the old girl supervising a tribe of kids. I remembered her by her crone’s speech pattern and her ‘woe is me’ attitude. I was surprised to see a smile on her face. She was a completely different woman who loved the little ones.

“Precious, aren’t they?” She offered the Sergeant a seat. Sophs and I had to stand. “Nothing riles them...not even seeing their mothers crying...or nursing bruises...black eyes. Oh, if only I could look at life through young eyes like theirs”.

“Good morning Missus Canto. I see you have a full house...”

“Good morning to you Detective. Yeah...overflowing but it could be empty in another fortnight...depends...depends on a lot of things. The least whether there is a reconciliation between any of these women and their husbands...”

“You saw our culprit...do you reckon he was the same one who got inside to murder Stephanie Albright some weeks back?”

“Detective? I’d like to help ya but I didn’t see that bloke either. I wouldn’t know if theys were the same bloke...” The crone’s whine began to creep back into her tone. I thanked her to have

a closer look at the back door. Two double dead bolts and a normal night-latch. I was bent down looking closer at the area where there was obvious damage. I was surprised when the door opened quickly in front of me. I stood up, surprised by the action.

“Joe? What are you doing here? There are no dead bodies lying about...” Dee Dee muttered. Laughter in her voice.

“Yeah...nah. The same fingerprints drew us to the scene...how are you, my love. No signs of covid?”

“Luckily no...Tellie was pretty sick there for a while. I hear the Forensic Pathology Department is flat out getting staff to turn up. That new bloke...the Indian chap...”

“Hirsi...Imran Hirsi...wanted to be known as Ian on-site. His missus died in hospital last weekend. I hear he’s not doing well...touch and go”.

“It’s a bugger...he died last night...there appears to be no boundaries who suffers from this bloody virus...um...our intruder? He doesn’t know that to attack this back door is a total waste of time and effort. He’d have better luck on the front door. He came through that door last time...they’ve put an extra lock on that door as well. It’s hard being a midnight intruder...everything is going against them!”

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

“Where to now Boss?” Sophie asked as we sat in the unmarked. Most of the official vehicles had left. A Police Wagon was parked in the driveway and would remain for however long...or until a body turned up!

“We can walk from here...up to that Coffee Café...remember...the Chicken and Avocado Wrap...where that old bloke sits on a fine morning...”

“Stan Hunter...yeah...okay. Let me park the car properly first...”

“Then you may as well drive up to the corner...less distance to walk”.

Sophie shook her head but obeyed my suggestion! Driving up to park just off the corner to Burwood Road.

“Mister Hunter! May we sit at your table. There’s few spare tables and chairs about. It’s a busy place on warm days like today...”

“They’re forecasting a storm for late this evening...”

I shook my head. Why do people, especially old people always have to put that ‘rider’ into a cheerful conversation?

“A woman almost got killed last night...that why you around here again?”

“No...no woman was in danger last night. A lowly burglar tried to break into the Refuge place...we have no idea if there was a connection...”

“The Women’s Refuge where Jason Hegarty was killed?”

“Arrh...yes. The same address...”

We ordered. The Waitress looked a little frazzled. Offering Hunter a top up, she walked off before she could comply and before Hunter could nod his assent. I wondered how long our order would take.

“Have the bastards who bashed Jason to death been arrested?” He asked as he swallowed the dregs of his coffee mug. A thin tall chap suddenly appeared with the coffee pot and re-filled Hunter’s mug. Hunter nodded, thanking the young bloke for the prompt service.

“He’s a new bloke...” Hunter offered. “Young Serena has been handling all the table service by herself for too long. Now that Summer is in full swing, they have a full Café to attend to...she was starting to grumble...good for her. So...has Hegarty’s attackers been arrested yet?”

“Arrested and charged...”

“Why did they do it? It wouldn’t be for money as he rarely walked about at night with coin in his pockets”.

I looked up the road. A long line of traffic slowly drove down the hill from under the Railway Bridge towards the end of the Shopping strip and Park. I shook my head as I didn’t know.

“For fun!” Hunter exclaimed as he shook his head. “Why didn’t they pick on me. I would have given them what for...”

“Two of them...we now know”.

“Yeah...even three of them. I maybe old but I reckon I could give them a right royal licking!” He exploded, loud enough for others nearby to hear. He lowered his head. “So...the women who were killed. Any suspects?”

“No sir. Not at this stage”.

“Mmm...someone who doesn’t like an establishment for DV victims...someone who had their missus flee to such an establishment because of a rotten marriage...like Martin Taylor who had his missus and kids killed...a T-bone...killed them instantly. The driver of the other car? She was living in one of those Refuges for battered wives...drunk as a skunk. Been booked several times for drink driving. She was an alcoholic who kept on driving...it was bound to happen”.

All this as our orders were placed on our table. A game of chess to ensure they plus my coffee mug and Sophie’s iced tea fitted on the table. A delicate operation. Hunter’s newspaper had disappeared. He was sitting on it so we found out later...it kept his bum warm! His conversation filtered from both our memories as we tucked into the best Chicken and Avocado Wrap in Sydney...as it was, both our memories were full of opposing thoughts on the deaths of the two young mothers...being mixed up with Barton Fields death where we were thinking the three homicides were connected...when there was little to nothing connecting them!

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

“Where to now Boss?”

“A nice, quiet, secluded park where we can sit under the shade of large trees to have a snooze...”

“Against the rules Boss”.

“Yeah, I know but that’s how I feel after eating that lunch...and I betcha we would not be the first or the last to catch a bit of shut eye during the day. Stan Hunter? I nice bloke who is just sitting around waiting to die...um...that’s not going to happen to me...how about we pay that firm...the one that Drakos Papadopoulos works at...we’ve been saying for a while we should visit it”. I looked up the White Pages on the in-car laptop to get the address after which I programmed the information into the GPS. Miss Direction would navigate us to the front door.

The large Distribution Centre dwarfed its neighbouring enterprises. The roof area was huge. I've often wondered why these establishments with huge roof areas haven't filled them with solar panels...it would be worth their while, so I thought...perhaps the roof structure could not support the extra load...

After making initial contact with the front receptionist desk where the pert young thing was not that inviting, the Chief Security Officer came towards us with a broad smile. Barry Holsworthy used to be one of us but to save his marriage and have more free time for his kids, he quit. Just like that! Five...six years ago. It surprised all of us including our boss at the time, CB. Clive Butler.

"Barry? You're looking good. You reckon you made the right choice eh?"

"For me it was the right choice...my wife still divorced me and my kids don't speak to me...but I'm living with a wonderful woman and her two grown kids...rarely see them. I've often thought without the constant nagging of the ex, I may still be a Murder Dee...but I don't miss it...I got regular hours...more money than being a cop...you arrh...you getting my Receptionist in quite a tizz. Huh? What is it that I can help you with?"

"We are investigating two possibly three connected homicide cases. Your Drakos Papadopoulos keeps bobbing up as our main suspect...we would like to ask his Shift Supervisor some pertinent questions about the man. How reliable he is...his mates here at work and how he gets along with other colleagues...background stuff...you know how it goes?"

Holsworthy nodded, pinched his upper lip while looking at the floor in front of him.

"You should have a Court Order to gain that information..."

"No personal stuff just background shit that we can get from you or one of Papa's colleagues".

I had to smile to myself on the shortening of the man's surname...Papadopoulos is quite a mouthful!

"You're not likely to get anything positive from his colleagues. He wouldn't win a Mister Popularity Contest by a long shot...okay...keep it general...come up to my Office".

We followed him up to the first-floor office area. His Office overlooked the staff parking area. A vast area dotted with tall gums that looked as though it could hold several hundred vehicles. At the moment, it was less than a third full. The afternoon and night shifts were the largest

with around one hundred workers on both shifts which were not due to start for another two hours...the first at four o'clock..

“Umm...Drake Papa...yes! Sorry...he’s not at work. He’s been told to stay at home for a week because he was in contact with a covid positive person...sorry. What can I tell you about the man? We have sent him to two Anger Management Courses...the next confrontation he has with fellow workers or Shift Supervisors and he is out...off the premises. He is a hot head...”

“Any known mates here on these premises?”

“Yeah...I guess...um...Martin Taylor. I thought he was on the Autistic Spectrum until I learnt of his past. The guy is one of our best workers we have. Trustworthy, diligent, and reliable. It has me bugged why he and Drake became friends...” He shook his head. “Martin...you could give him a verbal list of fifty things he had to do over a shift...and he’d have them all done within that timeframe...and done good. His only problem, give him a coffee break or the lunch period and he’d be out with other smokers...he is a terrible smoker...rolled his own...there would be a smoke cloud hanging over his head he was that bad. When we took him on we had trouble trying to stop him from stopping work every quarter hour to light up...he eventually got the hang of it and as I said, he would now be one of our best workers...”

“You mentioned something about his past? What was it?” Sophie asked taking the words out of my mouth.

Holsworthy leaned back in his chair frowning at both of us.

“Um...that steps over the line without a Court Order, I’m afraid...sorry...anything else? No? Then I’ll escort you downstairs”.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

“What now?” Sophie asked as she turned the motor over, snapping on her seatbelt. I was still hanging out for a snooze in some large park nearby.

“I think we should share a coffee with Stan Hunter tomorrow morning. Let’s get back to the Office so we can get in a couple of laps in the pool”.

“Why the coffee with Hunter...he’ll accuse us of harassing him shortly...”

“I don’t think so...he is not a man who will ever be confrontational...never...it’s in his training as a Special Forces man...it never leaves you”.

My Mobile buzzed in my pocket before it began its boring ring.

“Joe...Tellie talking as your friendly Forensic Trace Officer. This little bit of news slipped through the cracks...sorry...as you know, we are way down on staff numbers. Arrh...fingerprints...um...the prints...a particularly good set of the left hand were made when our suspect leaned against the back wall above the bathtub to turn on...or off...the taps of the bathtub...that Barton Fields died in...at his home address. I have no idea how this was deleted from the Final Report into the Barton Fields suspected homicide murder...made to look like a self-inflicted death. Suicide...but a suspicious Murder Dee would not take that as gospel”.

“Telly...tell me...” I was excited. So was she, you could tell by her tone.

“Yes...a beautiful full set on the tiles above the tub...made by Drakos Papadopoulos...no mistakes...his left hand. He is right-handed isn’t he?”

“Don’t muddy the water, Tells. You my love, deserve better than just a kiss...tonight. I’ll buy the wine, you supply the food...better still, why don’t we take the two girls to our favourite Pizza Joint? And leave enough time after we put the girls down to...”

“Be careful Joe, others maybe listening!”

I turned to Sophie as I instructed Tellie to repeat the news as I placed the Mobile into its dock.

“This proves his presence at the scene of the crime...that magic bullet!” Sophie voiced excitedly.

“Yep...let’s visit Stan Hunter tomorrow morning to gather more background stuff on Martin Taylor before we start harassing either man...we have both...”

“Just for Barton Fields homicide murder...not Stephanie Albright or Shareesh Asan’s deaths...they’re still giving us head-aches”.

“Patience my girl...we’re almost there. I can feel it in my water”.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

“It must be the coffee as it can’t be my personality or after-shave...”

“Yer right, Stan. It’s the coffee...” We again sat opposite him, re-arranging what was already on the table to allow my mug of coffee and Sophie’s Iced Tea. “We would like to talk to you about your lodger...Martin Taylor...”

The old man shuffled about finding it hard to speak. There was something in his mien that showed he may have known about our suspicions that Martin Taylor and Drakos Papadopoulos were in cohorts in killing Barton Fields...and maybe, just maybe both were guilty of killing both the women in the Refuges.

“The...um...the Pension People...they gunna take me pension away because you know...I have a lodger”.

“Don’t know anything about that and I think you’d be below the threshold in any case...he don’t pay you much rent does he? All those chores he does for you lowers what he should pay. I think you’re okay...but we’ve got nothing to do with that so don’t worry yourself”.

The old man visibly relaxed. He still had a shaking hand as he lifted his coffee to his lips.

“No...we want your views on the man. What makes him tick...his life...” I was coming at it sideways. I doubted the old man twigged to us wanting a full history of the life of the man.

“Sad...a really sad story. Martin Taylor and a friend of his from Medical School. They joined up and started a veterinary business at Croydon first up. My wife and Martin’s wife Angelika...Angie...became incredibly good friends. The business was doing great, enough for them to purchase a large plot at Burwood Heights...taking all their clients and more with them. About eight...nine years ago Angie picked up the kids from School. Angelina was six or thereabouts, Bryce was a little older I think...from memory. The car was T-boned killing Angie instantly. The car was pushed across the road by the collision straight into the path of a semi-trailer...that pushed the steering wheel post...or whatever its called into Angie’s chest, impaling her against the rear of the seat. It took them three hours to free her. The kids hung on for five days I think...before they both died”.

He again went to pick up his coffee mug but relented as his hand was shaking so much. Our order was placed on the table. We nodded our thanks.

I wondered on the impaling being the reason for the killing implement being hammered through the scapula in each of the two women...and here we had medical knowledge which was evident at the Barton Fields death scene. Sophie glanced at me as she leant forward slightly asking Hunter how the accident had affected Taylor...his entire family wiped out in a single blow.

“Yes...I’ve often thought about that. The driver of the other car...she was a resident at one of those Battered Wives Refuges...not the one in my street but the one over in Regent Street. She didn’t have a Driver’s License, losing it because of ‘driving under the influence’ on several occasions. She was three times over the limit at the time of the accident on that afternoon. She was a drunk...an alcoholic...”

Sophie leant back and blew out a stream of air. She had connected the dots. I wasn’t that far in front of her.

“So...that would have devastated Martin...for that matter any person I’m sure”. Sophie countered wanting to keep the old bloke talking.

“Yes...he fell apart...completely. He couldn’t work. Tried suicide twice. The last time he almost succeeded...he has scar tissue down both arms...lateral cuts...it changed him...totally...”

Again, Sophie noticeably reacted. This time there were tears.

Hunter coughed to clear his throat, this time succeeding in getting the mug of coffee to his lips.

“My late wife? She was adamant that Martin should take up residence in our Grannie Flat where we could keep an eye on the man...he was a different person...more like...no, that’s unfair...I was going to say like someone on the Autism Spectrum...he couldn’t think for himself. You had to remind him to have a shower. To eat. To go to sleep. He’s a lot better now but still...he needs that reminder still...sometimes. You could give him a verbal list of one hundred things to do over the following week...and every one of those things would be completed...perfectly...unbelievable! I got him the job at the Woollies Centre after I put him through a Forklift license course...he’s loved over there...the Shift Manager can’t speak highly enough of him...I don’t know what will happen after I’m gone...who will look after him...that worries me...but he is a gentle, kind man who doesn’t investigate the meaning of life...he...he is just killing time. What for, he has no idea”.

There was silence for some time, each of us thinking how we might react to such a series of events.

“Do you think he knows right and wrong? The Law of the land?” Sophie asked softly.

“What is this?” The old bloke countered angrily.

“Do you think it is possible that someone...say Drake Papadopoulos could suggest a course of action with Martin following through?”

The old man sat back in his chair, looking from me to Sophs and back again. He coughed several times and for one moment I thought he was going to stand to walk away from us.

“I never was impressed with that Greek guy. He could manipulate the Devil to read the Bible...true. I think if he had enough time, and was consistent in his speech, he could make Martin do something...anything...it would need to be connected to Martin’s life experiences since the accident. I see where you are going with this. Speaking bluntly, he could coerce Martin into killing someone...like those women in those two Refuges...yes, I think it would be possible...and the tragedy...I don’t think Martin would be aware of doing anything wrong...”

I cleared my throat and nodded for a re-fill.

“Um...we have enough evidence to arrest and charge both Martin Taylor and Drakos Papadopoulos with the murder of Barton Fields and Martin...with the homicide deaths of Stephanie Albright and Shareesh Asan at the two Refuges...but the difficulty will be proving Martin knew he was doing something wrong...and charging Papa with coercing Martin into committing those three homicides...I am sure any Judge will request a Psychological Assessment on Martin Taylor. The result would be that Martin cannot to be held accountable for any of those homicides. He may be ordered to be placed in an institution...Papa will stand trial as an onlooker only...we know he did not murder Fields...but he was there and he did turn on and off the bath taps more than likely...that unfortunately, is the way of the world...”

I finished off my coffee to stand knowing we would be arresting and charging two men for the three crimes, unsure as to the success of our actions...

Pcb 21/01/2023

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