

MURDER SQUAD DETECTIVES  
JOSEPH LIND, SHELLEY ANNE SHIELDS,  
RUTH KINDLE and DOUGLAS CHALMERS'S



**ONCE  
IS ONE  
TIME  
TOO  
MANY**

A Crime Novella by  
**PETER C BYRNES**

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JOSEPH LIND,

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# ONCE IS ONE TIME TOO MANY

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## CHAPTER ONE

He had sat on his haunches carefully inspecting her body as one would a specimen under a microscope. He ran his hands across her breasts and down to separate his hands at her spread legs. He deliberately skipped over the stab wounds up and down her body. He felt her boobs, kneading them; almost laughing at their pliability. Their firmness showing her youth. He zeroed in on her maidenhead, the soft down pleasing him. He ran his hand over it which excited him again, preparing him to penetrate her once more, his body smearing her blood onto his torso as he again brutally pummelled into her. Something that excited him also...that slapping sound of skin on skin...but he must remember to go for a swim before heading back to his campsite, so that there was no trace of her blood anywhere on his body.

He had lifted her T-shirt over her head as he hated that stare...that stare locked on him, making him nervous. In doing that, it exposed her boobs now unfettered from the bra that he had ripped off her during one of his frenzied moments. One of many tiring moments that seemed to roll over him...wave after wave. It was almost impossible for him to stop. As he probed deeper and deeper with his penis, he did not want those accusing, unblinking eyes locked on him, so he hooded her T-shirt over her head to hide that accusatory stare.

He withdrew, kneeling over her inert body, feeling a modicum of satisfaction though he was too exhausted to think straight.

*'A good night's sleep to-night'*, he thought. A smile to show his consent and the reason for his tiredness. It would be a first for such a long time.

To ensure she was dead, he again stabbed her several times. No blood seemed to erupt from these fresh wounds, he unsure why that should be the case. He played with the knife wound, digging his finger into the warmth of her flesh at the knife entry point as a warped experiment.

He went to wipe his knife on his jeans at the side of his knee as he always did when gutting and de-scaling fish. Thinking better of it, he wiped the blade on her T-shirt, the action exposing her head and face again...and that glare of hatred, of pure anger assaulting him once more. She followed him with those accusing eyes though he knew that was impossible as she had been dead for a while now though time meant nothing to him during these incidents. That was the only thing that made him pause...that time stood still...it made him take in what he had done and was doing...it made him feel ill...to the very bottom of his being.

He seemed to cower from the stare, promising himself that once was one time too many. Now that it was over and the pressure released, he somehow felt guilty and dirty. Not at all like his imagination had promised so many times in his daydreams. Those voices inside his head promising so much more...but they didn't deliver...ever! Those hidden images that had fuelled him hours ago as he waited for her to finish her jog along the beach and with a lovely smile accepting his offer of a lift back to the camping area. Watching her every step and the way her hips swung, the way the breeze picked up her hair to flutter like silken material caressed by the onshore zephyr of a breeze made him smile and tried once again to awaken the 'deadly serpent' as he called his penis.

When he stood after ejaculating little this time, it was with painful knees creaking their presence. He groaned at the pain as he straightened to stand, thinking he was too young to have arthritis or some such. It dawned on him then, that he had been on his haunches or knees for hours, so it seemed. The reality was he had worked on her body for around thirty minutes...half an hour out of a lifetime where he had slowly killed her...slowly...hurtfully, and in a debauched manner.

He hiked up his underdaks then his jeans and buckled up the belt. He wiped his body down with his T-shirt that he would fling into the surf later. All the process seemed to do was to further smear her blood over his torso. He looked down at the blood smears thinking he will need to take a swim before he did anything else. He looked around at the dense bush surrounding him, confident once he had covered her body, she would never be found! Doing his flies up before standing motionless, his mind was devoid of a single thought as though the last hour or so had not occurred. Butchering and subjecting the young girl to the most obscene and depraved actions had now escaped his memory, though he felt confident he could beckon the images into his mind whenever he wanted...if he wanted.

It was then that such a thought almost made him vomit...he doubted he wanted to relive the experience...it was too intense and depraved.

He kicked at her angrily convincing himself she was dead.

"Never again..." He promised himself aloud. Crossing himself to be sure of his conviction.

He briefly wondered if he could keep that pledge. He was only young, a lifetime left to live...he nervously fiddled with the knife hoping this was the last of it. He couldn't keep doing this knowing he would do it once too many times, leaving clues that the Police would collect...enough to place him in prison for the rest of his life. He doubted he could survive locked into a six by four cell with some crud he wouldn't know...or want to know! Forced by the Institution to share a cell with a guy he would probably kill...or vice-versa as he slowly went stir-crazy!

His life was the great outdoors, surfing, fishing, camping in the bush with not a soul around...concrete walls, ceiling and floor surrounding him would kill him.

He again wandered around the body, looking intently at her.

The condition of her made him puke, emptying what little he had in his stomach. She looked as those a demented man had wielded a knife, stabbing her flesh in a frenzied attack. *'Did I do this?'* He wondered, appalled at the bloody outcome.

He leant against a nearby tree, his stomach churning until there was nothing left. The taste of bile and the pain of a twisted gut assaulted him...another thing he didn't like. The euphoria that had built inside long gone, so it seemed. That initial contentment at the point of many ejaculations now forgotten with a moodiness enveloping him. A feeling of melancholia, of why, of wondering whether he would ever do this again...once he now thought, was one time too many.

Then he remembered the others...he sat on his haunches again, this time crying not for her, but for himself and what he was becoming...he shifted his mind back to the two short months in Vietnam where he had honed this compulsion...this insanity. He cried for the boy; the youth he once was knowing he could never step backwards to those days of innocence...

He tightened control of himself and once again lifted her T-shirt up over her head to be rid of that accusing look, something he felt sure would haunt him forever.

Someone else may interpret the look on the attractive young girl's face as one of sheer panic...of terror! He wondered if this difference was there to make it easier for him to get over that look...the young face now set in stone with blood smears colouring her pale features.

He jumped away from her knowing full well she was dead, but still...that look...he had made sure she was dead before he penetrated her once, twice, three times before he felt sated. He lifted her T-shirt back over her head, again kicking her hip a few times.

He looked around to find a rock that he had trouble lifting. Staggering back to the body, he lifted the rock above his head to drop it onto her skull with force. The sound of cracking skull surprised him, but the thought of squelched bone and brain matter made him smile...even exciting him. She would never assault him again with that look. Her face now so severely damaged, no-one would be able to recognise her...

Her face, her eyes, and her young body, however, would haunt his every sleeping moment. He would toss and turn, trying to escape those penetrating eyes, her skin now grey with blotches falling away...her hair dotted with leaves and other dead matter.

He hurriedly shifted dirt, leaf matter, and branches over her body, finishing with several large, blackened limbs and rocks to 'tie' it all down. Their blackened state showing the effect of a brutal summer of bushfires around this area around five seasons before.

He walked around her body in a state of nervousness making sure nothing was showing or hinting at a body buried there. He was hoping she would never be found...her body rotting away to nothing...he had that feeling!

He slapped his hands down the sides of his jeans and headed back through the bush towards his vehicle parked up above the high tide line. After he had stripped off his jeans, he raced into the whitewash of the surf, rubbing sand over his body to remove any stubborn stains. He washed and rinsed his T-shirt giving it a wash comparable with the actions of the best washing machine on the market. He slowly walked from the surf, closely looking at his body for blood stains as he put on his jeans.

Every step away from the act and the soiled body did not improve his mood. He needed to distance himself from the death scene...this area... his feeling of dread and guilt again triggering him to vomit again though there was scant left in his stomach. This time he spent time bent over, the bile even getting up his nose as he hung onto the tailboard of his vehicle.

He sat on the sand wanting the taste and pain of his stomach to subside. He wanted to leave the area as quickly as possible. Then good judgement set in as he reviewed the next couple of days. If he left the area now, he would be the Number One suspect.

He returned to the campsite. A cup of coffee and then a nap. He slipped out of his jeans to hang them over a rope line he had tied to two trees. He carefully did the same thing to his T-shirt, examining it carefully for any stubborn stains. They would dry quickly now that the nor-easterly had picked up. He viewed his upper body and face to ensure there was none of her blood present. He felt confident the surf had ensured there was not any blood trace on his body.

He sat against a tree trunk to enjoy that cuppa allowing the sun to dry his skin. He fell asleep leaning against that tree until the north-easterly chilled his body, waking him. He wondered what he would have for tea as he had given the last night's catch to other fellow campers in the area. The young girl was the farthest thing in his mind...

## CHAPTER TWO

It must have been only a few hours when he was snapped from sleep by someone slapping the side of the van, wondering aloud if he was at 'home'. He felt as though he had only got off to sleep a little while ago after a night standing at the edge of the water hoping that 'big one' would come across the bait! He stood unsteadily from his bunk to open the door; his eyes blurry as he had trouble focusing in the fierce glare of the bright sunlight. There were uniformed coppers and other SES people milling about, all with an accusatory glare, so it seemed. He stepped down to stand in front of the van, not having to pretend to be still half asleep, showing fair dinkum confusion at the questions flung at him from several directions. With the constant accusatory tones, the weight of the words pushed him backwards, forcing him to sit uncomfortably on the Van's steps.

"Sorry Officers...I was up past midnight until this morning fishing off the beach...about halfway along where there was a sizable gutter that I had not fished before...yeah, I caught a few and tossed a few back. Not because they were undersized, but because I had enough as it was. Have gutted and scaled them. Given a couple away...was thinking of giving the flathead fillets to two of me fellow campers, saving one for meself having the two fillets of Bream for Tea tonight. What's going on?"

The speech sounded confusing to him, so he needed to watch what he said as it could be construed as the ravings of a guilty person, not someone starved of sleep. He didn't want anyone interfering with his life...or digging into it.

The Lead Copper took his particulars and asked again his wanderings over the past couple of hours...had he seen a young teenage girl walking alone along the beach...jogging on the firm sand between high and low tide marks...long hair...wearing dark shorts, a singlet top...what had he been doing during the last twenty-four hours.

"I've already told yers. Was beach fishing most of the night...been asleep since early morning, I guess...as soon as I came back to camp at first light". He rubbed his eyes and ruffled his hair trying to display he was still half asleep. He really didn't need to worry as his appearance sure looked as though he had been rudely awakened.

He noticed his large knife stabbed into a log beside the fire pit like the Excalibur sword. He staggered in bare feet across the ground to extract it but the Head Copper pulled the knife from its position before he was anywhere near...he blamed his slowness on his bare feet and sleepy condition. The copper balanced it in his hand, checked to see how sharp it was.

“Nice knife...worth a bit...yer gotta be careful around here. You leave it out like yer have and it is sure to be nicked...it’s got blood on it, mate...”

The young bloke scratched the back of his neck, trying to think carefully. When you are in this state of sleepiness, yer gotta be careful how yer reply to questions asked.

“Yeah...didn’t think about something like that...yeah, I told yers, I hooked a couple of fish, a good-sized Bream and two decent size Dusty Lizards...caught a few others I suppose, but I can’t keep them for too long so’s I tossed them back or gave them away. The blood is fish blood...that’s me favourite fishing knife for filleting fish. A scaler on the other side of the blade...had it for years. A good feel...the same on me jeans if you’re wondering...”

He looked across at his jeans flung haphazardly over a temporary clothesline. He hobbled over without shoes on to straighten out the jeans.

“The blood’s from gutting the fish. I wipe my blade on the legs of my jeans...a bad habit I know but...”. He gave a shrug, a cock of his head as though this explained his habit. The copper nodded as he weighed the knife, looking closely at the blade and then the jeans which had dried blood down both legs.

“A lot of blood on those jeans...and a warning...” He turned to the young bloke as he still played with the knife. “The Rangers don’t like yer tying a clothesline between trees...it can damage the tree bark”.

“Yeah...” The guy bent over to view his pants. “Me fishing pants. I guess they need a wash...I’ll wash them in the surf after you guys are finished with me”.

The boss copper nodded. “It’s easy to see you don’t have a wife, eh?” He chuckled at his own joke. “Been here long?”

“Yeah, close to a week”. He looked around at the campsites, most occupied. “Yers can check with the Ranger. I’m paid up until the day after to-morrow...was thinking about extending it by a day or two...I don’t know...I guess it’ll depend on the weather. I can smell a change coming”.

The young bloke scanned the southern sky, nodded as though his opinion was the gospel truth.

Again, the boss copper nodded. The man’s general appearance and manner did not itch his nose or twitch his antennae.

A bloke crawled from his swag on the opposite side of the fire pit, surprised at the gathered throng.

“What’s going on?” He asked groggily as he stood, rubbing the sleep from his face, and tousling his unkept hair.

“Seen anything peculiar?” The Lead Cop asked as he walked over to the guy’s two-man tent, still holding the knife in his hands.

“Like what?”

“A loner...someone who could be roughing it in the bush? Looking suspicious...out of place”. The copper realised as he was saying this, he was describing both young men standing in front of him. But his antennae still had not twitched.

“I ain’t seen anything like that but I’s keep to myself...I gotta head back to Bathurst as I’m starting back at work next Monday...do you want me to hang around for a bit longer? If you do, I’ll need to contact me Boss...”

The tall copper looked intently at the man. Unshaven, messy hair but then again, he didn’t wake up that well himself. He flipped the knife over in his hands, commenting on its balance before handing it by its hilt back to the bloke who still looked half-asleep. The youth nodded his thanks.

“Fishing to-night?” The copper asked.

“Don’t know. An outgoing tide, and I think a new moon to-night...and as I said, a change in the air. I’ll see, but I’ll still need to catch up on sleep...why all you blokes milling about?” He jutted his jaw in the direction of about a dozen cops and SES personnel gathered around the head police officer.

“What’s happened?”

“A twelve-year-old girl...missing since lunch time to-day...a local girl from Grafton, camping here with her family. She went for a walk up the beach and said she’d be back to their camp spot by lunchtime...missing now for close on six hours...and you saw nothing suspicious? Or heard anything out of the usual?”

“No, Officer...”

There was no reaction by the young bloke to the news. He scratched and tousled his hair again. He grabbed the side of the caravan and gave a yawn. "Um...I came back along the beach just on sun-up...best time of the day to my way of thinking. No-one else on the beach that I saw, and I was a fair way along the beach...almost at its northern end. Maybe she went for a swim and got caught in a rip...there's been a couple of beauties these past couple of days...at regular intervals along the length of the beach... a shark coulda took her...it's known to happen up around here so a local told me the other night. We were fishing the same gutter and saw several sharks about twelve hundred long swimming the gutter...this morning after I got back, I kind of conked out after making meself a coffee".

He nodded at the half-empty mug perched on the Caravan's A-frame.

The copper twisted to look at the mug still half full which would now be cold. He nodded a couple of times looking the man up and down before peering into the fire pit where embers still glowed.

*'This guy knows his business around pit fires'*, he thought.

He nodded more to himself as though he had made up his mind on something.

"You need me to stay past the day after to-morrow?"

"No...but maybe you could help in the search...maybe tomorrow at least...and I'll take down your particulars".

"Yeah...sure...no worries".

He walked across to his two-man tent to grab his wallet from a pouch in his sleeping bag. He gave the cop what he wanted before stepping away to allow the young guy with the bike room to stand before the tall copper.

"Let me catch up on a bit of sleep and I'll join yers". He murmured as he bent to crawl back into the small tent.

## CHAPTER THREE

“Mate, do you mind sharing your fire-pit?”

The man stood to look around as though he expected a fire-pit to suddenly appear at every camp site.

“No...yeah, no worries as long as you bring a couple of armfuls of scrap timber to keep the fire going...it’s a bad point of this campground that does not have a pit or some type of BBQ set-up...less than fifty percent of the campsites have a fire-pit”.

“Fine...yeah...makes for sharing and a ‘getting to know you’ exercise, eh?”.

He came back with his second load of timber off-cuts, rushing away to get his dinner to cook on the swing-out flat steel plate.

“Fish...”

“Yeah, pulled it in just a while ago...well, early this morning. Off the rocks over there spinning back towards the beach...this morning...early. Best time of the day”.

The owner of the fire-pit looked at him sideways, gave a faint smile before concentrating on his beer and his fish wrapped in alfoil.

“Fair dinks...a decent size by the looks of it...you’ve filleted it, looks like...still...you can still appreciate the size of it...enjoy”.

“Yeah...it’s the biggest fish I’ve ever caught. I gave the other fillet to a family down further...what’s all the fuss going on. Cops, SES blokes, and I noticed a few RFS guys wandering around this afternoon...all afternoon”.

“A girl went for a jog up the beach this morning...and disappeared. Her parents put out the alarm when she failed to return for Lunch...I reckon she jogged up the beach and decided to cool down by going for a swim...she’s now out past the wave-line heading for New Zealand...” He harrumphed at his lame sense of humour. “She was young...” A statement not a question.

The ‘Interloper’ of the fire-pit gave a double take. He couldn’t remember anyone describing the lass as young.

“Yeah, seen her a couple of times around her parent’s tent...she sure looked older than twelve, let me tell you...” A smirk to finish off the description. “She was my height...and you know...well developed”.

The interloper looked at the bloke as he wasn’t that appreciative of the guy’s sense of humour. In fact, he wished his fish would cook quicker. The guy didn’t seem that concerned over the girl’s disappearance causing the Interloper to continually prod at his meal in a nervous gesture.

“Yer got anything to go with yer fish?”

“Yeah. The people I gave the other fillet to, they gave me some of their salad...looks a beauty”.

The young bloke nodded as he hadn’t thought of anything to go with his fillet.

‘Bugger!’ He thought to himself.

The ‘Interloper’ felt the guy’s discomfort, thinking it was something to do with sharing the cooking plate. He moved his piece of fish over to one side.

“No...no. Push it over near mine otherwise you’ll be waiting until Hell freezes over for it to cook...not a brilliant design and I’ve seen better. The ones up northern Queensland and the Northern Territory are miles better. The only thing going for this one is the concrete walls and the over-sized plate...and I like the individual swivel arm that you can boil a kettle while yer waiting for your food to cook”.

“Yeah, sure. Okay. Thanks”. He murmured as he pushed his fish into the centre of the plate. Not really interested in fire-pit cooking facilities!

Still, the guy seemed a little uptight and wasn’t interested in small talk or sharing any anecdotal stories which was the Law amongst all campers...well...the usual banter. Maybe Law was a little stiff. Where yer from, where yer heading, had a successful day fishing and of course...the weather!

Maybe he lightens up after a couple of cold stubbies, the interloper wondered. He wasn’t about to see if he did as he wasn’t offering any of his ‘throwdowns’. They were in short supply. He was relieved when his fish cooked allowing that aroma to waft across the fire-pit and he was able to move back to his camp. He suddenly remembered they hadn’t shaken hands or introduced themselves...another Law amongst like-minded campers. As he walked past the small tent with a beautiful Triumph Bonneville in top nick up on its stand close by,

he noticed a large knife near the entry flap into the tent. He felt a chill travel down his spine, thankful he was leaving the following morning...he didn't trust the owner of the fire-pit one iota or for that matter, a bloke who rode a bike...they were generally bad people who belonged to bikie gangs who were not scared of a fight! He hated generalisations but the guy had a constant frown that did not display a friendliness or camaraderie that most campers had towards one another.

## CHAPTER FOUR

The following morning, another group of searchers crowded around the tall copper who was giving directions. This morning they had moved the mass of volunteers, SES personnel, RFS and coppers up to the entrance track onto the beach.

“We don't want to go over ground that has already been searched so to-day, we'll concentrate on the western side of the track that follows the beach...the Life-savers will concentrate on the water and up around the southern and northern rocky headlands. Remember to keep hydrated, keep your hats on and good luck...stay in touch with your fellow searchers and keep them in sight. Look for fresh tracks that may go off the main track at right-angles heading away from the beach. Okay, let's see if we can locate her to-day...arrh...keep a lookout for tyre tracks that shouldn't be there...we're still hoping to find her alive, so we are not looking for a cadaver...understand people?”

‘A bit bloody vague’. The head of the local SES group thought though he kept his thoughts to himself, shaking his head as he looked at his mate. The lead copper from Grafton did not have a good reputation when the chips were down.

“Arrm...Doc. There were fresh tyre tracks of a ...maybe a Ute.... saw them yesterday”.

The tall copper glanced at the two Toyota Utes parked uptight in this section of the camping area. One positioned up against the A-frame of a caravan, the other positioned further away on the opposite side of the fire pit. A tarp tied to its side with a swag under the tarp. Further down was a two-man tent, a Triumph motorbike on its stand beside the tent.

“Yeah, I saw them too. Young blokes on their bikes hoon along the beach here. One day there's gonna be a terrible accident what with the speeds they hit...they use a couple of Utes to transport their bikes up here...they're from town”. He turned to his Number One. “When we get back into town, check with the young sand-grubbers crowd. See if they saw anything...” Turning back to the gathered throng of searchers. “Keep a look-out, eh? And

yeah...those tyre-tracks you saw yesterday could have belonged to one of those..." Pointing to the two Toyota Utes parked side by side. "They admit being along the beach fishing although both were a bit iffy about what time it was when they returned..."

Several members looked at one another thinking the Head Cop was not at his best this morning. Maybe lack of sleep, more than likely, most surmised.

Two days later, the young beach-fisherman slowly and carefully extracted his rig from the marked site position and headed slowly towards town.

There he filled up with fuel to head out of town to join the main highway heading south. Placing his favourite Cassette into the slot and turning it up loud, he picked up speed towards the next destination somewhere down the road.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

It was a sweltering hot day, with a high humidity count dragging the strength out of you, testing the authenticity and strength of your underarm deodorant. A typical Sydney early summer day. The December humidity with thunderstorms either coming up the coast or from the sou'west. A wall of stifling air greeted us as we left the Central Court building in the CBD.

"Shit! A café with air-con, huh? I need a coffee and something to eat, quick smart! How about you girls?"

We had attended the first day of the Preliminary Hearing of the Patricia Vance Murder Investigation. Her brother charged with the hit and run homicide of his younger sister. A cut and dry Case which meant there was no opposition to the man going to Trial for the heartless homicide. If his Defence Counsellor could persuade him to plead 'guilty', the proceedings made even easier.

We walked in and out of three Cafés before we settled around a table at the fourth café we entered, almost cold with the air-con working overtime. We ordered before we settled at the table.

"This is that Café that was at the centre of that siege...back in..."

“Two thousand and fourteen...December that year...and yeah, you’re right”. Ruth countered as she looked around half expecting a Muslim-type guy to jump to his feet with a shotgun.

“Do you want to go somewhere else?”

“What for? That Mad Monus guy ate a couple of bullets...no...this is fine, and they serve beaut coffee so I have been told...”

“Okay”. I responded, still a little apprehensive.

“How do you think he went?” Shelley asked, shifting nervously in her chair. She knew that Bill’s performance would be high on my mind. “It was his first court appearance, wasn’t it? You know... since his accident?”

I shuffled my feet and scratched my nose before replying, eventually pulling on my earlobe to complete the nervous habits I was unconsciously developing. Our coffees placed on the table before us. The eats would take a little longer, so the pleasant young waitress offered.

“Both Ben his best mate who now works for one of the biggest and most successful Defence Counsellors as his Second Assist...both he and Bill have always said there was nothing like it. Like the Lead Actor in a Stage Show on Opening night, there is a certain buzz that cannot be captured in any other field...except for that Actor suffering first night jitters...”

Shelley looked at me over the rim of the coffee mug while Ruth Kindle sat there patiently waiting for more.

“Yeah...and...” Shelley asked placing the mug carefully back on the table.

“It wasn’t there...” I stated quietly, sadness in my voice. I looked at both women, my arms spread wide in a questioning manner. “He could have been reciting verses from the Bible...which he thinks is dribble. There was no feeling...” I looked around the small Café. “No emotion in any of his words. They were giving him a Case he cannot lose, but you had this feeling in the pit of your stomach that he was losing it. He stood there, rooted to the spot. Where eloquence and stage manner were a requirement, all he managed was a boring monotone...there were three top DPP guys there with others watching the performance. I can’t...you know...I can’t see him being promoted...unfortunately, I can only see him being demoted...on that performance this morning...and it was only the Preliminary Hearing where he had the full attention of the Court and the Defence people not able to respond”.

“C’mon Joe! You can be so unforgiving...so...so negative and lacking any form of encouragement...I don’t know, you’re being a little harsh even though I agree with you about his delivery. He was as nervous as all hell as he knew this was going to be the make-or-break time for him”.

I shook my head as our eats...a plate of ‘toasties’, was placed on our table. There was no further talk on the subject, but I had voiced my concerns...like a sledgehammer where subtle was not involved! My typical style so I often thought. Funny how people would think differently of your style. Most who know me would never accuse me of being blunt...direct...and having no finesse...I had a chuckle at that thought.

“So...if he can’t cut it, where would they put him?” Ruth asked, having demolished her second toasty. “They have a responsibility to him as he was heading for home after pulling extra hours on that dreadful night. They owe him”.

“Yeah...nah...arrh, unfortunately they don’t. The upside of this is if they toss him, they as the largest Law Firm around, will ensure he has continuing medical bills covered and any compensation or Disability Pension paid to him for the rest of his life”. I replied, shaking my head, knowing that this scenario would eventually appear. “Ruth, they don’t owe him anything as it now is a fight between Bill and the Insurance Company. The DPP’s Office will always be on his side...thank heavens...but it will become a contest between Bill and that Insurance Company. He will be sick and tired of visiting Doctor after Doctor. Some with him, others not”.

“You make him sound like a basket case...and any similar case crashing and burning”. Ruth exclaimed.

“No Ruth...he is not a basket case, but his brain has taken one hell of a battering. The reality is he’ll never be that strong, confident, brainy person again...and I cannot tell you at this stage what he could do adequately and satisfactorily to fill in his every day. I repeat, that is the reality of the situation. I’m not going to sit here and tell you anything different...I’d be just wasting my breath and your time”.

I fidgeted around so I could extract my handkerchief from my pants pocket, blowing my nose with a bit more gusto than needed. I looked over at Shelley who placed a hand on my lower arm. Asking whether I was okay.

I nodded looking at her through misty eyes.

“Yeah...now and then”.

It was a pity that it had to be this Case with me the Lead Detective given to him as his test Case.

He was finding it hard to find his feet, even with the Magistrate making allowances for him. I had no idea, not knowing all the workings of the DPP Office what and where they may place him. A gopher maybe...a Research Assistant...a Solicitor's Second from the office...no, that would mean he was occupying a position that could be better suited for an up-and-coming Solicitor's Assist with a nimble mind. I was jumping at different setups that I knew little of...but my mind would not stop thinking of Bill standing there dumb struck out of water. Everyone in Court knew of his predicament but that doesn't mean the sentiment would excuse his display...at the completion of proceedings he turned to find me sitting at the rear of the Public Gallery. He nodded...then gave me an embarrassed smile. He knew he had not cut it. He had failed the test, watched by those who would discuss his future back at the DPP's Office...with no correspondence accepted on the subject!

“What do you think may happen?”

I shrugged my shoulders, not comfortable in talking about it. Ruth nodded, finishing off the dregs of her coffee.

“Um...I have my Interview next week for a Grade Three...here in the Murder Squad...”  
Kindle informed us, swinging the conversation back to better things.

“Do you know how many are going for it?” Shelley asked as she glanced at me giving me a smile.

“Um...quite a few so the whispers and rumours indicate...and...um...I've also put an application into the AFP as a Three in the Digital Analysis Section...I'm afraid some of those gory Cases we have had lately have rocked me...I'm not sure I could handle too many more...once is one time too many and when I looked into the future as a Grade Three, only dead bodies were a certainty for me if I remained in the Murder Squad...know what I mean?”

“Once is one time too many for you, eh? It happens...but truly, there will come a time when you accept the death and gore. True...give yourself a chance...all of us have had to go through what you are going through now, truly. It doesn't get easier or harder...but you concentrate on the family...of those left behind who are wondering how and why...they are the ones that get us through the blood and gore”. Shelley placed her hand over Ruth's hand. She gave it a squeeze finishing with a smile that usually put a positive spin on things. Kindle didn't look convinced and frankly, I don't blame her. I have often thought what made a Murder Dee with that constant connection to the seedier side of town...and the

‘upper-suburbs’ where similar bloody crimes are committed...I guess a certain degree of cynicism and an ability to compartmentalise work and the Cases from normal life may help. It has with me.

“I don’t think you ever get cold...you know...detached or disconnected towards the Victims we see daily. Yes, I know people must think we become inured against those grizzly sights. But it is completely the opposite...we care about our Victims. Wanting to catch the bloody animal who did the deed...I can tell you of my first bloody body and everyone since...you just must...I don’t know...finding the culprit has a huge effect on you. You have found justice for the Victim when others shy away. What has a greater effect is those Cases that we do not solve...a Perp roams free of our clutches...they’re the ones that hurt the most”.

Shelley nodded forcefully, as though she had just delivered the Ten Commandments for all to hear!

“I understand what you’re both saying, but I’m having sleepless nights already...and I’ve been in the job what? A couple of months as a Two...things were a lot better in Robbery where you rarely saw a bloody body...”.

“We all do lass...don’t let Joe’s or my attitude fool you...we all have those moments of having enough, not wanting to stay in the Squad for another day...I think those stupid moments that Joe and I often partake in, stirring the shit out of each other and talking gibberish is our way of softening an already gruelling day. I’ve partnered other Dees and I can tell you, that stupid repartee between two Dees like Joe and me for example, keeps us sane...don’t let on to that numbskull sitting beside me...he may get a swollen head”.

I wondered not for the first time, why she left Robbery...purely as a promotion to obtain that Detective Two...she didn’t know what she was jumping into in leaving Robbery to accept that Grade Two position in the Murder Squad.

“Huh...she thinks she has the answer to everything...don’t be fooled by her tongue...”

“Shut up Joseph! Does the Boss know about the AFP application?” Shelley turning the conversation back to safer subjects.

“That’s Malisa’s Section, isn’t it?” I asked, suddenly realising the reality of losing a young, exceptionally good Detective to an area where her attributes would not be used to the fullest. I was sure that she wouldn’t last long in that position, preferring embarrassingly to be in a section where dealing with the public was paramount...say in Border Force or Customs. I was sure of my predictions, nodding my head to emphasise the point.

“Yeah...and Dallas Courtney’s baby is how Mal describes it...so we could be losing you, huh?”

Shelley glanced at me with a look that could kill. My uncertainty of Ruth succeeding was not an encouraging sign according to the Laws of Shelley!

“Yeah...maybe...yeah”.

“Just remember, those people conducting the Interview for your Grade Three Detective level here will do all in their power to trip you up, confuse you and get you angry...whatever you do, don’t let them get under your skin...they’ll have won, and you will have lost the job...”

“To tell you the truth...I’m not that keen to stay on but the AFP Position came up after I put my application in for the Three here...and...here...you are almost obliged to put in an application to step up a level...whether you really want to or not...there’s a certain pressure applied to do the right thing as though you have to show enthusiasm to better yourself...and others on grades below you are blocked by that Officer not wanting to scale that promotion ladder...you hear it all the time”.

“The Peter Principle”. I muttered.

“Sorry?” Ruth commented. I waved the question away thinking I’d explain later.

“Yeah...okay...I was worried that I could be wasting people’s time...but the Boss said to let it lie as two irons in the fire can be to my advantage. The Cop Force Interviewing Panel would know of my application to the AFP. They’re not that keen to lose personnel to the AFP so they could put me up to that three to keep me here...so the Boss explained yesterday”.

I nodded, giving her a smile wishing her the best, whatever way the cards fell.

“One thing...as a Dee Three you will be expected to mentor Dees One and Two as we are mentoring you...you will be the Leader having no weight on what Cases you will be lumbered with...gory or not. I get the impression your preference is with the AFP...tell the Interview Committee straight away...it could make a difference to how they treat you, okay?”

“Whatever way it falls, it will be to your advantage by the sounds of it”. Shelley smiled, both women leaning over to hug each other, which caused the two to tear up...bloody hell! Women!

## CHAPTER SIX

It was cooler in Grafton than in Sydney, which was unusual, especially for this time of year. Ruth not allowed to partner us for the expected two to three-day trip north just to view bones discovered in the recently burnt out, blackened bush. She needed to attend a couple of Interviews which she was terribly nervous about. Shelley was a little put out as she had wanted to be with Ruth as she attended those interviews...it was a hell of a nervous time which needed someone close to help...Ruth would have no-one to bolster her flagging confidence without Shelley.

The way it falls, I had mumbled as the reply to Shelley's dilemma of not being there for her friend. That had afforded me a quiet flight with Shelley's cold shoulder all the way north!

We were met as we alighted from the plane at the Airport by a bloke who must have picked his teeth on that silly TV show about wrestling or more to the point, '*How to fool any audience with acrobatic performances*'. He was huge with a barrel chest that I couldn't put my arms around!

"Union or League?" I asked, my head cocked up to look him in the eye...and I was just over six in the old scale.

He smiled a crooked smile. A gentle chuckle before he answered. A slight bend of the body to look at his shoes...and to break eye contact...that had me thinking straight away!

"Neither...weights helped and so did Orienteering during my High School days, but most of it is just good genes...both me mum and dad were six footers".

"Bloody oath they'd be good genes to inherit..." I replied. "Bloody good!"

"Senior Constable Dan Pearce at your disposal. I've booked you into a little Motel away from the railway line, the flight path of the Aerodrome and most importantly, away from the Highway and the continuous roar of Road trains". He smiled, nodded, and requested we follow him. Shelley had problems not to fall over her tongue. I chuckled at her attempts at charades! She also got the fits of giggles which didn't help with the game of charades. All through her little display, Constable Pearce remained aloof and unaffected. There would be fellow air travellers who wondered of her sanity, not realising she was just taking the mickey out of herself. We loaded our luggage into the back of the 4WD and as we first headed towards that Motel of note, the Constable spoke of the 'Black Summer' just ended as it was now called right through the State and around Australia.

“Yeah, all forested areas around Grafton...north, south, east and west have been burnt out. Pretty bad...” He noted in that typical Australian habit of understatement. “Every State took a pretty big hit with uncontrolled fires all over the place...yeah...a Black Summer says it all...and now we are hit by this coronavirus thing...not good”.

The real damage caused by the atrocious bushfires that in total had burnt out fourteen million hectares up and down the east coast of NSW, mostly virgin bush, was the loss of animals and birds. There were those who were predicting the extinction of certain animal and bird species. The population of Koala Bears on the east coast reduced to levels that was close to extinction. Border to Border, north, south, and beyond, the area completely razed was beyond comprehension. Both Queensland and Victoria had experienced similar conditions. Over three thousand homes lost; thirty-three people dead which was a miracle when the areas of the mammoth fires were realised...and the speed of the fire fronts appreciated. There were fires that were burning on hundred-kilometre fronts, impossible to contain or to put out and that burnt from late Spring right through the Summer months...four straight months of choking smoke, daylight turned to dusk or black as night. Flames and embers skipping ahead of the main fire fronts by hundreds of metres...even kilometres if the wind was right.

“I doubt we would ever have found her remains if the bush had not been reduced to ash”. He added quietly.

“Who found the body?” Shelley asked...she knew firsthand the ‘Summer from Hell’ with flames licking at her property out Londonderry way. If not for the concerted efforts of the volunteer RFS guys, her home would have burnt to the ground...and they had just completed major extensions to it...it would have been heart-breaking for them if they had lost their home. They were now making alterations to the house to bring it up to the new standards of domiciles built in known fire zones with external sprinklers on the roof and walls for a start. They were looking at replacing external wall coverings with a more fire-retardant material as Phase Two of their efforts.

“Um...a party of ‘Save the Animals’ people who are now walking through the areas of burnt-out bush looking for injured animals...Koalas and Wombats. Removing as many animals as they can, otherwise they will die from hunger and thirst...there’s no food out there for them...or water...” He shook his head sadly. “They stumbled across the remains. It is obvious wild dogs have attacked the body...or whatever, as the left leg and arm are missing. The sad part was with these fires which attacked with higher temperatures than ever seen before, the temperature has severely reduced any forensic trace to zero that could have been collected from around the area. It has well and truly been destroyed”.

Both Shells and I nodded in unison, realising this may be a hard Case to crack.

“Any indication of time of death...and what sex are the remains?”

The Constable ‘Adonis’ Pearce turned into the common parking area of the Motel, slowing to a crawl as he headed towards the rear of the complex.

“Picked up the key before heading to the Airport this morning...had a quick squiz...very nice”. He handed Shells the key. “A proper Apartment that is a lot larger than the standard Motel Unit. You each have your own bedroom both connected to a common Lounge area, kitchenette, and Bathroom. A family Apartment according to the Receptionist”.

We placed our overnight bags on the beds that we had selected without a word said. It was all dependant on resilience and bounce in the mattresses as we dumped our overnight bags onto them! We’d been doing this for ages on every overnight stay in some country town. We settled that dilemma without a cross word. I sniffed the almost full coffee tin that smelled okay, before heading back out to the police vehicle.

We headed out, going across the vehicle bridge that must be one hundred years old. Out through South Grafton until we hit the tree line...nothing you could say gave credit to the absolute carnage that was visible for mile after mile on both sides of the road.

“There was a moment when the Firies were a little worried they could not defend Grafton from the solid wall of flame. The town surrounded with leaping flames and acrid heavy smoke that turned day into night...the wind changed and was from the north-east. A cooling wind unlike the ferocious north-westerlies coming from the Red Centre...then we got substantial rain for a couple of days. While it did not douse all the flames, it reduced the advance of the fire fronts to tolerable levels so that we could control and contain the spread of it...Grafton was lucky but several small towns in the hinterland weren’t as lucky with entire small communities burnt to a crisp with every one of those villages knowing people who didn’t make it”.

We left the highway, again on a narrow bitumen road. There were spots showing burn marks that had melted the bitumen. I asked him what had caused these ‘bruises’ to the macadam.

“Either trees falling across the road burning to ash, thus the marking on the bitumen...or vehicles getting caught with nowhere to go. This road is the only road out for Minnie Waters and Woolli...a few people left it a little too late to try and make it out...” The visual image had me shaking. To be sitting in your car blocked from going forward or reverse by falling flaming trees. Knowing this could be it because running was not going to hack it...neither was sitting in a vehicle whose very duco was now smoking and licking with flames...what a terrible way to go!

We crested a ridge which gave us an uninterrupted view to the coast and for miles up and down the length of the National Park. Nothing but charred and withered tree stumps. A fine dust ash picked up by the breeze created a series of grey willy-willies that danced leisurely across the landscape. The scene had an eeriness about it as there was not one bird call...the area was devoid of sound with not even a reasonable nor-easterly humming through the crowns of the trees...as there was not a single crown, just a single twisted black trunk that gave me the impression that large match-sticks had been planted into the ground after they had burnt their length with this...this charred trunk all that remained. It made you sad...there was no getting around it. The bush will revive...but the animals...the birds...anyone's guess and no-one was taking bets on the outcome.

The young Adonis put the police truck into gear and headed down towards the coast. We were silent as there wasn't a single word that could describe our emotions. I knew Shelley was crying as she blew her nose several times.

He veered off onto a dirt side-track.

"This'll lead us to the Illaroo Camping Grounds. A popular spot for those wanting to bush camp right at the beach. Me and the missus come here regular-like...yeah...um, the skeletal remains...she identified as a young pre-pubescent female in the ten to thirteen age group. She could be Beverley Priest whose family still has their farm out of Copmanhurst northwest of Grafton. The daughter went missing from their camp site here on the Thirtieth of November Nineteen Seventy-five. Forty-five years ago. There was a huge search for her...her body was never found... old man Priest...he died not long ago...he would come out here every week-end to carry out a search..." He shook his head. "Tragic, really...but he never gave up. Beverley's father wouldn't go with the old man...his father...he would always say if they found her body, that last sight of her would be the image indelibly marked into his mind's eye. He preferred to remember her as a bright, sparkling lovely girl who had true grit forcing herself past her impediments to become a champion hereabouts. She always had a smile, even for strangers...maybe that is what got her into trouble..."

"Is there any Cases where a young lass in that age group has gone missing around this area apart from...?"

"Beverley Priest, Joe".

"Yeah..."

"Arrh...we haven't got that far yet, but that would be something in your sphere of responsibility, wouldn't it?"

I laughed, partly at the audacity of the young bloke. He could be right with his assumption, but I don't think either Shells or I needed reminding of our duties.

He pulled up beside a clutch of vehicles parked in complete disorder.

A tall Uniformed guy extracted himself from the throng of Uniforms and Scientific personnel decked out in blue bio-suits smudged with black and grey smears. He opened the door for Shelley and aided her ascent to firm ground. I have never had any trouble either alighting or boarding these large 4WDs but that should not have caused him to ignore me entirely...neither had Shelley for that matter!

He came around to shake my hand.

“Detective Lind? Sergeant Colin Tander...I am the Lead On-site. Um...about to give orders to pack up and head out. We won't find anything more out there though the Scientific people want to spend a couple more hours on the job...at least until last light”.

As he was telling me this, he was leading me to a tight bunch of Bio-suited personnel.

“Detective Joe Lind...and his partner, Detective Shelley Shields from the city. The Murder Squad. This is Mannie Winters, a Forensic Pathologist on loan from New Zealand. She is stationed on the Gold Coast, lucky her and they could get here faster than a team from Sydney...besides, the Sydney lot were flat out, so they said...and Mannie's team. Charlotte Perkins, Saraki Pudensharmi and Mannie's First Assist Cody Tung. There is another Forensic four-man Team still up there...Mannie and her team here have been working since sun-up. They've had enough...they're pooped for the day”.

I nodded my understanding before turning to walk with Tander, walking at a brisk pace to keep up with the man. Shelley had given up on the chase and to prevent embarrassment, she dawdled along behind at her own pace accompanied by one of the female Trace Technicians.

“As you can see, we are naming, cataloguing and placing every bone as they should be positioned. This poor child has a bad break of the right femur with a metal plate to splice the break...she may have walked with a limp...maybe not but it may be the only thing that we can place our hats on in identifying the poor girl”.

“Those types of metal splices have a Registered Number on them. We will be able to confirm the identity of the remains by that...if there are any relatives still living in the area, they can inform us where the operation took place which will make our enquiries easier...the temperatures reached in the fire? Would that fact diminish the taking of any

DNA from the bones so they can be compared with the father's...um...Mister Priest". I half mumbled to the Forensic Pathologist.

I pointed to her skull which had been smashed to smithereens, slivers of her skull laying on the table. "Um...animal activity wouldn't do that, would they? That's an external hit by a rock...or a sledge-hammer or something similar". I mused as I bent over the table looking closely at the remains.

She shook her head.

I walked around the large table, stopping to lean in closer on several occasions.

"Would animals have done that damage?" I repeated, pointing to the complete destruction of the skull.

"No...I'd say the perp either kicked her continuously, stomping on her head or...he used a rock or something heavy to squash her skull in...I can only guess whether our Vic was deceased at the time...hopefully she was well past the point of pain...a lot better if she was already dead when that terrible destruction was carried out".

She solemnly shook her head. She was close to tears.

"Why?" Shelley asked as she looked closely at the surgical plate on the right femur.

"Possibly to make identification harder...or to get further kicks...who knows with sickos like that. He may like the sound of a watermelon exploding...that's the closest I can get to explain to you that sound...with one or two cracks as the skull gives way...as I said, I can only hope she was beyond pain when that took place".

"So, he didn't know of the plate...or realise the person can be identified by the plate".

"Yeah...a fair assumption".

"Would the break to her leg cause her to limp which may have given our Perp a sense of vulnerability emanating from the Vic?"

"My partner likes to throw out these questions to allow him to look at different scenarios at once..." Shelley looked up at the Head Forensic Pathologist, sharing a smile together...women's secret business is how I saw the gesture.

"The break...and the plate? Was the operation done here in Grafton Base Hospital?"

“Pre-nineteen eighties? I doubt it. A major Hospital only. Either Sydney or Brisbane, I would imagine...I’ll take a bet on Brisbane as it is closer”.

I again walked around the table covered in a blue tarp, with all the bones so far uncovered placed in the correct anatomical order, pleased that such a readily examined imperfection was there to make our job a little easier...or to solve.

“The location of the body? Can we get to it?”

“Um...yes. Sure, but there is little to see...” The Forensic Pathologist looked about scratching her head as she did. “Um...but if you insist, I’ll get my Second Assist to drive the two of you to the dump site...I think I can hear her coming towards us on the beach. The Police here have been most helpful in lending us two Quad Bikes which has made the collecting of all the bones so much easier. The location of the body is a fair drive up the beach and then into the bush...about two kilometres...yes, here she comes now”.

The ATV turned noisily into the central meeting area with three adults all in filthy, sooty Bio-scrubs hanging on for dear life. The driver grinning like an insane Stockcar driver. There was a genuine air of conviviality between all the persons standing around.

“There’s nothing really to see, Detective”. The Number Two Assist said calmly as she wriggled out of her scrubs and gloves, tossing them into a nearby bio-bin.

“I’d still like to look at the death scene, if you don’t mind driving us back up the beach?”

The woman, FO Casandra Wilcox gave her Boss a quick look. Her Boss nodded giving her a tacit order regardless of how stupid the idea may seem.

I should have insisted on sitting in the front seat as the legroom in the back was almost non-existent! I figured this was my payback as Cassie as she prefers to be called, insisted Shelley sit up front with her. Still, at a fair clip along the hard sand between high and low tide lines, it didn’t take us long to veer up the beach into what would have been dense bush some months ago. I watched the ash powder drift out from the wide tyres of the ATV, almost mesmerised by the ash clouds. She crossed over a sandy track.

“That’s a formed road, isn’t it?” I yelled at her over the sound of the engine.

“Yes...well, a sandy track that’s pretty rough...it parallels the beach from near the Campgrounds up to the group of houses on the southern bank of the river...mostly fishermen and people who prefer the quiet life live up there...I couldn’t live there. The track bulldozed through years ago to give all the people who live at Sandon Point an alternate

way out of the area...they needed it this summer for sure. On a king tide event with the fires chasing them south, there was nothing left of the beach sand because of the king tide, so the track saved a few lives, that's for sure...but when the work was undertaken, half the Greenies in the Southern Hemisphere turned up to lie in front of the single Bulldozer. Took them twice as long to complete the work and caused the Court System up here to go into meltdown so the Lead Copper informed me yesterday”.

She savagely turned left to head up away from the beach and into what would have been dense bush before the fires devastated the area. She eventually slowed to a halt where Crime-tape formed a perimeter over a large area. That would be the search area. There was still around six Pathology Assists crawling around in inches deep powder ash. It was a useless task on all fours looking like some type of animal that had escaped from a fire with blackened blotches and grey ash powder all over them. They all had commercial grade respirators on so they wouldn't suck up any of the powder-fine ash.

We followed our driver through a pathway of red flags to the dump site.

“As you can see, the body had been cramped into the fork of a large tree...see the blackness of the ash showing the large branches of the tree with an outline of fine almost white powder ash where the tree burnt out to completely nothing. There were decent temperatures experienced in the fire...the body? Partially hidden...partially buried. Whether that was the work of the Perp...or just the natural cycle of nature I'm not too sure but with a guess, I'd say the body been partially buried with litter, leaves...whatever, tossed over her to help with discovery being a pure lucky chance. These terrible fires exposed the remains otherwise I doubt the body would ever have been discovered”.

I nodded and began to wander around the site, glancing at the surrounding scene at every step. I stopped and at every turn, looked towards the beach and the rolling crash of the surf. Going on what had survived the flames, it had been very dense bush. I walked down the flagged path to repeat the process on the outside of the area, several times almost losing my balance and causing clouds of ash powder to erupt into the air. Thankful that I had remembered this time to bring a change of clothes.

“What do you reckon, Shells?” I asked as I came to stand beside her. She had refrained from walking with me...which was a first, so I thought. This habit of mine of wandering through a death-scene house...or even around the body dump here, was a habit of mine which I inherited from the best Boss I have ever had. D S Church aka Abbey. He suggested such a habit in the belief that certain triggers in your mind could often picture an anomaly that accelerated the Case forward. It was surprising what the mind picked up while walking softly through a death-scene house.

“That you can throw those trousers out, Joe...and this spot?” She shook her head slowly as she took in the area. “It’s a fair way from the camping area where the girl was camping with her family...and presumably, so was our Perp tenting there as well. He may have been driving a 4WD which was rare in Nineteen Seventy-five...I reckon with that type of vehicle, he was towing a caravan...and caravans at that time were pretty basic with nothing back then being classified as an ‘off-road’ Van or having the home comforts that all modern caravans now have...luxury homes on wheels as they are now described”.

“Mmm...you sure have jumped a few hurdles with your assumptions”.

“You asked for it, partner. You don’t think my assessment is worthy?”

“No...no! Buggered if I know, but your guesses are as good as any I might think up...but why so far up the beach away from the camping area? What, we’re talking close to a mile north of the campgrounds, aren’t we? Close to the northern extremity of the beach...it would have been a beautiful place before the fire destroyed it...full of bird calls...a beautiful place to camp. In all my trips with the van and Bill in tow, we’ve never surfed this beach...more’s the pity”.

“Closer to two kilometres I reckon”. Shelley corrected. “And then one...maybe two hundred metres up off the beach...he would have had to force her to walk away from the beach, I suspect...man-handle her”. She shook her head. “She would have been absolutely terrified”.

I nodded, turning in a circle making me giddy.

“Yeah, maybe...though I don’t like the 4WD scenario. I’m more inclined to think it an off-road bike, a dirt bike, or a sand-grubber bike...an ATV perhaps...if they had been on the market around that time. When did ATVs come onto the market, Shells? I can see the Perp racing across the sand for the full length of the beach with a handful of mates...on bikes...or ATV’s...it’d be a bloody hoot”.

Shelley turned to the young Pathology Assist to wink at her. She danced her fingers across the small keyboard of her iPad.

“Joe? ATVs in various forms appeared in Australia in the late Sixties, early Seventies”. She smiled as I had not thought they were that age...when you compare their development with Dirt Bikes which didn’t appear for another twenty years! She turned to the PA. “Even at his age, he’s still a Bike lover”. She said happily. “Um...it’s a long beach. The guy is a well-heeled Camper who would drive along the beach sand until he had what he was looking for. A gutter, a large rip...he may have been packing up as it was getting late and three good sized fish was two too many...the girl has walked...no...didn’t someone mention she was a

District Champion runner? Could have been jogging the length of the beach and was on her way back to Illaroo Campground...he offered her a lift which she accepted as she knew she was going to be late for Lunch if she continued to walk...and besides, she had seen the guy several times at the campground...and the rest is history..." She gave a tight smile. "If that was the case, she was used to long runs...I couldn't do it..."

"Now that is plausible, young lady...completely plausible. You'd make a fine Dee..." I stated, pointing my finger at her...which she hated.

"You're not attuned with my theory, huh?"

"You could tell, huh? No...I still like the idea of a young bloke and his bike...she would be thrilled sitting behind him as he powers along the sand. He veers off...she gets a bit worried, but he says all he wanted to do was take her along the track. He drops the bike and then forces her further into the bush...here...the rest is history"

We all fell silent, slowly nodding as we digested both scenarios.

"The bike...the dirt bike wins out, to my way of thinking...and yes, I ride a bike up on the Gold Coast...so yeah..." The young Forensic Officer countered, a beaming toothy smile making it a happy scene...it was contagious.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

I flipped my ID Card at the elderly woman. She bent in close to read the information on the card as though she needed to update her glasses!

"You're the Police from the City...it's a sorrowful situation, isn't it? She's been out there alone in the bush for close on fifty years...such a shame...all alone...yes...although we're hoping that at last Bev's remains have been found. Here's hoping this discovery doesn't cause a new wave of suspicion to again go right through the town. The same as when she disappeared all those years ago, neighbours accusing neighbours, friendships stretched...families disintegrating...it was a worrying time. Do you think it is young Bev Priest?"

"Once a Reporter, always a Reporter".

I smiled.

She nodded. A look that I thought was challenging me.

“I only work here twice a week or whenever they need me...I retired from the full time work some time ago now. Getting harder to get out of bed on a wintry morning”. She smiled. “Got to be careful I don’t earn too much otherwise it has ramifications on my Old Aged Pension...but I like being here smelling the smells of the print ink, the sounds of the presses, hearing the anger of the Editor when something goes wrong...he really impresses me with his wide knowledge of swear words...he can string them together to make some sense”. She chuckled, nodded, and asked what she could do to help us.

“Do you have digitised ‘back issues’ here instead of the hard copies? Back issues around the date of the young girl’s disappearance? A couple of weeks before that date? We can isolate each story on the girl’s disappearance instead of plodding through an entire edition...possible?”

“Yes...that’s what I’ve been doing here since I retired. From my point of view, all these years of history for this town are reflected in the pages of this newspaper and they deserve to be digitised and placed in a secure, fire-proof enclosure or cupboard...and a second copy sent down to the Mitchell Library in Sydney...that’s what I’ve been doing since I officially retired...I’m up to date which makes me feel good. You want to see all we have on the disappearance of the poor girl, yes? That is what you want, Officer?”

I nodded, giving her my best smile.

“It will enable us to learn the intricacies of the Case as it wound...umm...as the investigation came to a grinding halt. Sorry, but that is what we have been told”.

“Were you signed on the day that Beverly Priest went missing?” Shelley asked in an almost secretive way as the old girl tottered towards a desk groaning under the weight of piles of paper.

“Oh yes...the town was buzzing”. She sat slowly at the desk and as she addressed us, she opened a Laptop and booted it up. “Back then, Grafton wasn’t as big as it is now. Everyone knew everyone...there were no secrets...we all pitched in together with every man spending days looking for her all the way along the beach. There were those who thought she may have gotten into trouble going for a swim. Yes, she loved walking...running and it was a hot day, so she could have gone for a quick dip and gotten pulled out by a rip...the beaches along the coastal strip of the National Park are never patrolled...you enter the surf at your own risk...and if you did, it shows you up as a bloody idiot...even a shark which is not a rare sight with them swimming surprisingly close to the water’s edge along that beach. I

don't know, she was a strong and capable swimmer, so I think she died at the hands of some pervert...they had them back then, you know”.

She smiled before once again concentrating on her Laptop.

“Were you the chief reporter back then?”

“You make it sound so important...yes, me and two others at that time...all on the same level. There were no show-ponies back then...yes, writing up a story on Missus West going into Hospital. The Hadley's having their fourth child...it has a levelling effect on all of us country-bumpkin Reporters. Then Beverley went missing...I did heaps of background digging but yes, everything about it in the Paper at that time had my By-line...the Police of the time continually wanted me to back off...I was getting in their way, so they said, but I was supplying them with stuff they didn't know about”. She shook her head and wiped at her eyes with a small lace trimmed hanky. “Married the Station Sergeant on the Case so I had to be...you know...civil...very calm leaving the finger pointing to others when reporting on the Police investigation...but to me there were holes in the examination. Things that I thought were obvious mistakes. That caused worrying moments with my marriage. No-one likes to be criticised at every step of such an important Case. He knew he was out of his depth at that time, as he did not need his new wife to tell him so. What am I supposed to do, publicly shame my husband not long after we married?” She chortled “We had five kids...just as many miscarriages, yet I kept on working here right through...” She smiled at the memories. “He died several years ago. A well-liked man so like a lot of small-town cops having everyone's respect...”

“Can you recall those glaring mistakes and omissions?”

“Oh dear! After so many years...the contentious points that I found alarming should be noted in my dossier on her disappearance...um...sorry, but you'll have to read through it...the whole thing...sorry” She grinned as she looked up at us. A challenge in her mien was my interpretation.

“Could we have a look at all the Daily Editions involving the disappearance of the girl...”

“Arrh...and a few Editions before the incident, if you could?” Shelley interrupted. I thought about her request, finally nodding to her after I had figured out why she requested such a thing.

“I'll do better than that...I have always wanted to write a book about the Case, so I have gathered every piece of fact on the disappearance...and yes, a few pieces of fiction that people sprouted to start silly rumours”. She shook her head, a smile coming and going

quickly. “Yes, a sad time. I even have ‘she said/he said’ information, which is no good in a Court of Law, but it rattles the can, on occasion. Sometimes things fall from that can when you least expect it. I have a Dossier on every known fact about the girl, her family and friends and school mates...her Little Athletic mates...and every camper who was at Illaroo Camping Area at the time...”

“Now that is impressive. Could we get a copy?”

“As long as you do not write a book about it...” She chuckled as she keyed in commands into her Laptop, placing a Flash drive into a side port to download her endeavours...then another to startle me on the volumes of entries...it had to be quite exhaustive to fill two Flash Drives!

“The local police...”

“Yes...I cannot say too much about their investigative skills as I married the Lead Officer on the disappearance as I mentioned before...to be truthful, I think they lacked some...oh...out of the box thinking if you get my gist...oh...the hubbie, bless his soul would be swearing at me right now...we did have a few cross words over that...Bless his soul”.

She gave a ninny that even surprised me!

“Those Back Issues prior to the disappearance? We have them digitised. That is what I have been doing on the days I come into the Office since...since I officially retired from forty to sixty hours a week”. She again had a giggle. She shook her head before continuing. “We occasionally got a young Uni Student who is majoring in Journalism come in and help during the Uni holidays...mostly from Sydney but we got an occasional student from Queensland...hah...they usually boarded with us...not that we had a big house...” She laughed at the memories. “It got a little tight to say the least and if more than one Student came up, it was very cosy”. She again hid a laugh behind a raised hand. “Let me set up one of the computers there in the corner for you...won’t be a moment”.

I was impressed with the old girl on so many levels.

“Around that time, were there any incidences of child molestation or blokes exposing themselves...rape cases...things like that? That’s what we will be looking for in those back issues in our search prior to the crime occurring”.

She stopped what she was doing, resting her head on her hand. Looking into the middle distance trying to conjure up those days.

“Yesss...yes. All communities have at least one. Let me sleep on it...may be the best person to talk to about that would be Bill Waites. He was the Senior Constable here during that time. He was my late husband’s second in command...” She stopped, again looking inwards. “Maybe not such a clever idea as there were rumours about his behaviour with young girls...all discounted but accusations were still flying about...rumours that had no basis in fact”. She shook her head. “It made it tough on the one bloke who was doing something for the kids of the town. Country towns can be boring for kids if there are no sports organised and run by a group of parents. That’s where he made a dramatic difference”.

“Arrh...nothing conclusive, eh? That would reinforce or reject those hurtful rumours...was there any bulk to the rumours?”

“No...Bill was fantastic with the kids. He single-handedly formed up kids’ teams for Cricket, Soccer, League and Tennis. He had that aspect of the town humming along nicely. I always thought it was someone with their nose out of joint. Jealousy about the way Waites organised things...he could be a bit hard on any kid not showing the right stuff...he was the Pied Piper of the local kids in the District. Regarding any...you know...any perverts or dirty old men, I’ll have to think about it. Leave it with me”.

We spent the entire afternoon going through Back Editions and skimming through the old lady’s dossier on the disappearance. From what she had collected, there had to be someone of note to itch our noses with ancient facts that pointed towards a perpetrator.

“No...” She uttered slowly, looking back to those days. “There was no-one of note who rattled the cage, itched the nose of the Police of that time or who caused locals and neighbours to commence rumours of nothing but hot air...sad, isn’t it...and then to discover her remains almost fifty years later...still without a suspect...”

“We’ll try our best, missus...that’s all we can do”.

We thanked her for her cooperation and turned to open the front door of the premises. I turned back as I held the door open for Shelley, who would be a little miffed at me displaying a courtesy that spat on every form of belittling the role of women in society according to her principles.

“One final thing, if I could. Back then in Seventy-five, were there any clubs formed for dirt-bike riders? You know, locally in Grafton”.

She looked at me, one hand on her hip. A frown as she concentrated.

“No...I don't think so and, in those days, there was little interest in such things. I'm not saying there were no bike riders but if there were, it would have been an ad hoc arrangement between mates who had that same interest...”

We had 'Take-away' that night, skimming through the mountain of information that Glenda Staples had accumulated. In skimming, we were hoping that a name, a phrase may jump out at us. We both knew we would have to do a more calculated perusal when back in the Office. Right now, all we wanted was to be up to speed with the investigation as we were coming at it forty-five years too late...and from a bastard of a direction...that is, we knew little of the town back then. It's people, its underbelly! Every town has something of an underbelly, no matter how big or small the town was.

We both went to sleep with tired eyes and numb heads at a crazy hour of the night!

## CHAPTER EIGHT

The next morning thanks to the local guys, we had a vehicle and driver at our disposal.

We arrived at the centre house in a row of early Australiana cottages that looked neat, trim, and regularly maintained. There was a good half-dozen of these early Australiana cottages facing onto the street. The Council more than likely responsible for the cottages, with front lawns and gardens well kept. Huge Jacaranda Trees over-shadowed the dwellings with the trees lining the full length of both sides of the street...emitting a subtle sweet smell.

“Council looks after them...the lot are registered on the National Trust...even the bloody trees that make a real mess when they drop their leaves in Autumn...like now! We often see TV or Movie people using the houses in some costume drama or early Australiana story”.

I nodded my head as I slid from the rear seat onto the ground. The young Constable waited on the Council footpath for us to join him. The concrete footpath was a series of dips and crests caused by the incessant search of the trees' root systems ruining the pathways. I noticed people walking on the roadway because of it.

“Um...Bill Waites was a Senior Constable at the time of Bev's disappearance. He may give you some personal insight into the event...or maybe not as he is getting on...you know, a little forgetful now”. This whispered to us as we stood at the gutter-line which was deeper and wider than I was used to seeing. Bill Waites was lounging on his front veranda, a favourite past-time to while away the day. That, or a walk up to the Bowling Club where he

would have three middies and a meal put on the running tab. No-one expected Bill to pay it off.

“City coppers!” Said with venom, as though that told a zillion stories on the ineptitude of those from the Big Smoke! We walked up onto the veranda to introduce ourselves. All we got in reply was a pronounced harrumph that seemed to emanate from his nose like a complaining horse!

“Yer’ll take all the kudos as though us country cops are nothing but keystone actors bumbling around getting in our own way...I seen it happen time and time again!”

“No sir...not at all. We appreciate the effort you put in back in seventy-five. The days of searching through thick bush looking for her body...and the hours spent on interviewing every Camper from here to hell and back. Since the mid-eighties when the Murder Squad came out of the Homicide Squad, it became Law that every unexplained or sudden death should have our input. A state-wide edict. That is why we are here as skeletal remains *were discovered* in what was once dense bush. We can only guess at this time who they belong to, but an educated guess would be the young Beverly Priest...unless you have had several young girls disappear around that same date-line”. I gave him my best smile that was a waste of effort. His cynical attitude didn’t change. “We are not here to usurp the valuable work your colleagues and you have done, but we can institute far greater resources on the Case than you could ever muster back in those days. So...” I spread my arms to silently say *‘here we are!’*

The old man squinted up at me having finished constructing a rollie as I had rambled on. I for one thought he had tuned out as he constructed the rollie! He curled his tongue around the tip and base of the beautifully built cigarette, stabbing it into the corner of his mouth where it stayed, drooping and unlit! I thought the mental capability of the man could only concentrate on one problem at a time and he had completely missed my oratory!

“I understand you were the Lead Senior Constable at the time?”

He rested his entire body weight on his arms that were placed on the armrests of the chair as though he had to relax his back, transferring the weight of his body through his shoulders. He nodded a couple of times as though re-running the memories of the event through his mind. Doing the same thing with my initial comments. Satisfied, he again looked up at me, the squint returning. He seemed to arrive at a decision that he thought had weight.

“I was the Senior Constable...yes...the second in charge under the Station Sergeant at the time. Sergeant Colin Staples...a good man...though personally...I think he was the wrong man to lead the investigation...” He again squinted up at me. What got to me was this was

the second person questioning the ability of the man to conduct the investigation. What made it worse was both persons were close to the team leader, Sergeant Staples...not a good look but it was obvious that nothing changed because of this!

Waites continued.

“Knew the girl and her entire family. Grafton wasn’t that big back in those days. Her family took it bad...I...and my family were good friends of the Priests. Still are but the numbers are thinning fast. Me especially good friends with old man Priest. He was a figure of some bearing around these parts for a long time...I retired about a year after she went missing...it just got too hard for me...out on a Disability Pension...been a while...I find it hard to accept any form of responsibility now...or pressure of any kind...can’t take the weight...the heat”. He shook his head displaying an air of sadness. He was once the hero, now a has-been with little interaction between the townsfolk and himself. His life now consisting of him watching life pass him by from his narrow veranda with nary a wave or ‘howyagoin’...sad, huh?

He looked over the veranda rail and followed a vehicle going a little over the forty-kay speed limit. Shook his head as though the world was going to hell on a pack horse, and he could do nothing about it.

There wasn’t a wheeze or a shortness of breath and as he bent to light up his rollie, a cloud of cigarette smoke enveloped him.

“We didn’t even come close to figuring who the Perp might be...and it sat like a knife over the entire population of Grafton and surrounds for a long time. People suspected the next-door neighbour, the bloke down the street...you know how it can get...it poisoned us for a long time...a troubling time for the town...and now, I have visions that same attitude will appear again now you city Dees are here to kick over stones...a pity”.

“You had no suspects?” Shelley asked quietly.

“No...not a one, so all we could say repeatedly, was it was some Itinerate or Out-of-towner to try and tamp down this suspicious aura overwhelming the town. We’ve had two Coronal Enquiries with neither ending on a promising note...like...the young girl was taken and murdered, her body buried by a person or persons unknown in a location unknown...nothing else...bloody frustrating, it was”.

His rollie had gone out, now stuck in the corner of his mouth as he spoke. Stuck with Superglue or something else as it remained even when he opened his mouth wide in a yawn.

“How far north and south did you go in identifying and interviewing people...campers and such?”

“There’s no place north except miles of beachfront and National Park...up to and past Sandon Point all the way up to Yamba...and south you have Minnie Waters and Wooli which are always extremely popular spots...then a couple of beachfront camping areas until you hit Corinda...and then Woolgoolga further south. No road or even track linking the almost continuous beachfront. Around four hundred Interviews, some conducted on people who had left to return to their homes up and down the coast...or into the hinterlands behind Grafton on farms...like the Priest family who have been around these parts since Adam wondered what that thing was between his legs with Eve having only one go at it...to no avail...we had a description of a Toyota 4WD Ute that we could not locate...to tell you the truth, I doubted the veracity of that information...”

“Why?”

“4WDs around that time were mainly used in mines and such. A Forestry camp, perhaps...”

“Or a farm”. I suddenly added. The thought jumping into my brain without any help from me.

“Yeah...a farm”. Waites agreed, a smile showing yellowed teeth. “You rarely saw one. They were not as popular as they are to-day...two bob a dozen, nowadays...rare as hen’s teeth back then...mines around here? Not that many and we covered every one that was within a hundred mile radius of town...no good, but that had been our best lead...it just fizzled out...and my nerves went...I was pensioned out to sit here as me wife died well before that day...so’s I sit out here rain, hail or shine just watching the passing parade and wondering...still wondering who the bastard was...so good luck on yer quest...hope you get the blighter...that is, if he is still alive...I can tell you now it was no-one from this town...”. He again smiled, the rollie still comfortably sitting in the corner of his mouth. “To tell you the truth, it was always easier to put the guilt onto an ‘out-of-towner’ but that’s where it stopped...all the leads going cold”.

A crucial point that had me wondering whether we would ever get satisfaction in rolling up the Case. The age of the perp would be anywhere between mid-sixties to well into the seventies. Was it worth the sweat? You bet! We owed the young girl our full attention. We weren’t about to disappoint or abandon her.

“Um...back in those days, was there any youths riding around on dirt bikes?”

He scratched his head before taking the rollie from his mouth to inspect it. He again ran his tongue down its length on the join line of the paper before once again placing it in the corner of his mouth.

“Not that I can remember...no...but sure, there would have been lads on bikes racing about with loud exhaust pipes, but I think it could have been a little early for such machines...they would have appeared around the turn of the century...or maybe a little earlier...you know, dirt bikes”.

“Was there any thought given to...arrh...blokes who showed a propensity for little girls...or little boys...or anyone who spied into bedroom windows?”

He again squinted up at me, a shake of his head as though we were the dumb bastards who had completely underestimated the coppers’ investigations back then.

“You think we didn’t run that avenue out? We had a handful of such people...huh...I was left off that side of things. It would seem coppers no matter what, looked after their own regardless of the rumour-mongering going on around them”.

“Gays?”

That earned Shelley a quick look from the old bloke whose cigarette still clung to his bottom lip. He turned away to look out at the street as though a major roadworks gang had just arrived, giving him something different to look at.

“Huh...I would imagine you have heard all the rumours about me back then. I took nought notice of them...and yes, I am gay...but so what? It has taken me a lifetime for me to confess and accept my lot...it has been a hard road...extremely lonely. The missus and the kids never had a clue...funny hah! But now...I haven’t a clue where they all are now...it can be a lonely life for an old fart like meself...and I’m too old and cranky to look for a mate”.

I let that lie for a bit before I continued.

“Did you have any suspects however tenuous...”

He took the cigarette from his mouth to reshape the thing before once again placing it carefully back into the side of his mouth.

“A bloke back at the turn of the century was imprisoned for seven years for Two Counts of Attempted Rape of a minor. He had priors such as peeping tom offences and several

attempted rapes here in town and up the coast...he was at the Illaroo Camping grounds at the time Beverley Priest went missing...though he would have been an early teenager at that time...he and his extended family...he now lives up Yamba way without his family...or that's where he settled after finishing his term of imprisonment...he should be questioned...he became the number one suspect after he was arrested for attempted rape charges. He was questioned for hours on the Beverley Priest disappearance...nothing tangible was gained. I went up there when he first came out...I was out of the Force by then, but I felt compelled...for the young girl's sake to have a go at him...maybe you can do better in having a go at him”.

“He was questioned about the young girl's disappearance? At that time?”

“Yeah...savagely...the coppers on the original Task Force in Seventy-five were long gone by Two Thousand and Two...and most wouldn't have known where in hell Yamba was!”

“Why are you aware of this person?”

He lowered his head and shook it slowly. That annoying cigarette still hanging grimly to the old bloke's lips.

“The Internet had been going for a number of years...in Two Thousand and Two...” He harrumphed at the ineptitude of his fellow coppers of the time. “Most coppers except for those in Sydney, wouldn't know how to do an internal probe of a computer. If you're wondering, gay blokes were using the Internet back then as though it had been a thing older than Methuselah himself! Alf Thomas...look him up...and yes...he is gay. To be truthful, we swam in the same pool for a while even though back then, there was very few of us if you get my drift...but speaking personally, he is not your man...the savagery he experienced during those interviews in seventy-five...they were looking to extract his guilt by any method you could think of...what made the whole thing smack of police brutality was the fact that Alf Thomas was a fifteen year old kid at the time...there was no proof that he was treated as a minor or that his parents were present during the...arrh...the grillings...several episodes spaced over days!” He again looked out at the road as he took the rollie from his mouth to smooth it out again. “Plenty of evidence back at that time that the cops really got to work on a couple of the known...arrh...you know...those dirty bastards who poison innocent boys into their way of life...left one young bloke close to death and in Hospital. Nothing happened...nothing. A broken back that gives him hell...for all his life...not one copper...not even Staples paid a price for their heavy handedness...”

“Fifteen-year-old boys can be guilty of an act like that...”

“I don’t doubt it, Detective but Alf was a puny, undersized kid with a bad case of zits...I doubt he could have wrestled Beverley Priest to the ground, let alone hold her in such a position while he raped her...and really...having sex...even forced with a young girl would have made him puke...just thinking about it...he was gay for fuck’s sake. But the attitude...the belief back in those days...had gays as Satan’s Disciples!”

“If you say he was gay, it is unlikely that he would have done the deed in any case...unless he did something like that to prove to himself...and others that he was not gay...he would have been caught in the twix and twain...poor kid”.

“Tell that to the coppers back then who gave him a rough time...being gay back then...” He shook his head.

I nodded, glanced at Shelley before I stood, thanking the old man for his time and insights. He nodded, still squinting at me whenever he looked up at me. We said our good-byes, wishing him well as he once again buried his head in a cloud of cigarette smoke. That venom that was noticeable first up had disappeared as though he didn’t have the strength or the will to keep it going on all cylinders for too long.

“Did he itch your antennae? Did he seem like a child killer to you, Tonto?”

I shook my head wondering what a child killer looked like...like any person in a crowd, they didn’t stick out in any way! And Bill Waites would never be identified as a gay guy in a small club in Grafton. Yes, there would be the whispers, but people saw the good the young man at the time showed in organising youth sports for all the town’s juveniles and younger kids.

As we walked towards our ride, I googled up dirt bikes asking the question when did dirt bikes first appear?

Nineteen Eighty-Seven...a Japanese Kawasaki ...the first of its type on the market.

That put my whole theory down the drain unless I brought ATVs into the scenario.

“Maybe a 4WD Ute, Shells...or an ATV?”

She raised her eyebrows and gave me a smile knowing full well she had won the point!

## CHAPTER NINE

We had enough daylight hours for a short trip up to Yamba. Constable Pearce liked to travel fast. He suggested we ring the Yamba Cop Station to get the address of our POI.

“Thanks for that Constable...you say the man has moved to Maclean...Number six, Little Yamba Street, Maclean”. I signed off and programmed the address into the large GPS machine that was a part of the internals of the Laptop securely anchored to the spot between the driver’s position and that of the front Passenger. I spun it around so that I could see where we were going...and where we had been. I hadn’t seen these things in Sydney cop vehicles! The trip up to Maclean was fast which gave me the scary jitters several times.

We eventually arrived at the address without a scratch...which surprised me.

Pearce looked passed me at the small fibro cottage.

“Needs tearing down, I reckon...” He concluded as he slipped from the driver’s position to the ground in one smooth action. Both Shelley and I had to almost jump to the ground.

“This your personal mode of transport?” I asked as I walked with him up the front path onto a small Porch area that did not accommodate the three of us.

“Yeah...it is the only large 4WD on the market that I can comfortable sit in and drive...it’s the only one of its type in the whole of New South Wales...a lot of string pulling let me tell you. Tander impressed me in getting the vehicle...” He added as he knocked on the door.

We could hear activity and the yap of a small dog coming from within the cottage. It took ages for the front door to open slowly. We were on the verge of turning to return to our vehicle or walk carefully to the back of the house.

“Mister Alfred Thomas? Is he in?” Shelley asked as she leaned towards the old lady.

“Round the back...yer got me out of me chair to ask after him...a good day to yers!” The old girl went to slam the door in our faces...failing badly at the attempt, almost falling over.

We walked around the back to find three old caravans up on bricks in a semi-circle around a huge Jacaranda tree. There was an outside Bush Loo closer to the back of the house. An old concrete double laundry tub sat up on blocks under a cold-water tap at the back of the house. Their method of washing in all weather...I doubt it would receive much attention during the winter months. The old girl would be making a motzer in rent. I bet the Tax

Office was not aware of this arrangement, I thought. Pearce again knocked on the door of the first Caravan.

“Alfred Thomas?”

“Yeah! Who’s asking? Arrh...bloody cops, eh? What da yers want with me?”

“You were at Illaroo Campgrounds in Seventy-five...”

“Yers gotta be joking...”

“Beverley Priest”.

A burst of comprehension and fear changed his facial expression to one of a wily old fox.

“Arrh, yeah...yer asking me now about something that happened when I was around fifteen...sixteen! That’s what? Forty-five years ago? Come on, coppers, yer a bit slow on the investigation the way I’s alooking at it”.

As he was saying this, the old bloke stepped down out of the Van, both he and the van a little bent. He directed us to sit at an outdoor setting that surrounded a fire-pit that was mostly in shade from the Jacaranda tree. He sat with a sigh apologising for the lack of comfortable chairs. We all said that we were fine before we became serious.

The bloke would have to be in his early sixties, no more, but the lines and crags on his face had me guessing at someone in his mid-seventies at least. He hobbled about with the use of an old bent cane, his legs bandy as though he had ridden horses in his younger days.

“You okay, Al?” A croaky voice asked, coming from one of the other Vans. “Do ya want me ta call the coppers ta get rid of your visitors?” A coughing fit his question mark.

“They *are* the cops, ya fuckwit!” Alfred Thomas angrily replied. He also joined in on the coughing choir.

“Yeah...okay then. You just yell out if’n you need help, old mate. Okay?”

Alf Thomas nodded, cocked his head, grinned showing raw gums where either teeth were absent, or he had forgotten to put in his false teeth this afternoon. He mumbled that the neighbour who offered his help couldn’t fight his way out of a wet paper bag, let alone take on us three! He chuckled as he looked at Constable Pearce...

“You did time...”

“Yeah...a little hard to say a positive word about it...”

“Two Thousand and Two...for six years...”

“Only did four and a bit...for being a good bloke. Getting out was...” He waved an arm about as though that said it all.

“Attempted Rape...and there are signs that you may have committed more than the one you were sentenced for...true?”

“I ain’t saying a thing that could put me back in...so...if there is nothing else?” He finished up in a coughing fit, bending over with his arms wrapped tightly about his chest.

“Cancer...” He informed us as he wiped tears from his eyes.

“Isn’t there anything you want to come clean on...like two attempted rapes in Grafton some ten years before you got nabbed for the one that put you into the clink!”

If looks could kill, Pearce would have been breathing his last.

“The girl who disappeared from Minnie Waters Beach...I...I had plans for her, but someone beat me to the ‘catch’.” He gave a short laugh that developed into a coughing fit. He bent forward with his arms tightly held across his chest. Large globules of phlegm spat into the fire pit. He wiped his mouth with a swipe of his lower arm, spat another ‘bomb’ into the fire-pit before sitting upright.

“Yer okay, Alf?” Drifted from that middle van again.

“Yeah mate...no worries”. He shook his head as though there was little hope for the invisible mate. “On my part it was a crush of a young teenage boy for a pert young girl. Me and the family back then...we was at the campgrounds at the same time she disappeared. I’d say the bloke who had a tent, but he preferred to sleep out in the open in a swag under a tarp he had tied to the side of his Ute...even when I tried to get friendly like, he told yer to back off...I can remember he gave me the chills...”

“No name?”

He shook his head.

“Anything that sticks out about him?”

The old bloke thought about the question for some time, eventually shaking his head.

“Nah...sorry...it was too long ago...maybe if you find the young fellow who was also camping nearby...he had a Triumph motorbike...could fit all his stuff onto the bike...including a ‘knock-down’ fishing rod. He shared a fire-pit with the guy...don’t know if’n that’ll help but...and then there’s the bloke with a Ute and a caravan...he was anti-social as well...didn’t mix with any of the other campers except when he gave away good-sized fish that he had caught earlier during the night...I mean, that’s why a lot of people like camping, to mix with like-minded souls...”

He let the unfinished sentence swing in the air, we deciphering his words however we wanted.

## CHAPTER TEN

The following day we’d returned to the Cop Station as there was little profit to be had standing around watching the surf roll in on a couple of miles length of pristine beach.

“What’s north of the Illaroo Campgrounds?” I asked Sergeant Tander as he placed a full coffee mug in front of Shelley and me, cursing his clumsiness as he spilt coffee onto the table from both mugs. He sat with a sigh taking a sip of his coffee before answering.

“Sandon Heads. Isolated and often cut off. You need a bloody good sand-tracker to get in and out of the place. A sand track runs parallel for the entire length of the beach north from Illaroo and then out along Minnie Waters Drive. We’ve had a couple of medical emergencies that required Helicopter evac from up there...why people want to live in such isolation, I’ll never know...especially when you get older. No running water, no power, no sewerage connection for a long time...most of the dozen or so houses on both sides of the river mouth of Sandon River now have solar power, good water tanks, satellite connection for the TV and phone but still, it’s one hell of a place to get to...especially for those living on the southern bank of the river mouth”. He leant back hard against his chair. “Most of them have their vehicles parked on the northern side of the river mouth as the road out heading north through Broomes Head then onto Yamba or Maclean is a far better track than the one heading south to Illaroo. Those living on the southern side at the mouth of the river have a small tinnie so’s they can get across the river mouth...and they share what 4WDs are on the south side to drive along the beachfront to fish. We interviewed some people in the Sandon River mouth village, sticking mainly to those who did have 4WD Utes...but you open a can of worms going that way as there is countless camping areas and small villages

all the way up to Yamba...and half the population are holidaymakers who come and go..." He shook his head as though re-living the Case that the local coppers had resurrected many times...mostly just to fill in time. "Without any forensic trace on or around the remains, you have one hell of a Case. Frankly, we gladly hand the Incident over to you. I hope especially for the Priest family involved; you can bring closure for their sake...um...a copy of the entire Dossier that was generated on the Case will be sent off to you down Sydney in the next week or two. All the information on two Flash drives as the total size of the file is too large to risk having it sent to you in the written form. I understand you also have a similar Dossier from the local Paper...huh...you'll be doing nothing but read for weeks to come".

"One thing we asked Glenda Staples yesterday was what was the number of perverts and similar types in and around Grafton at the time of the disappearance. Did the original Police Investigation look into that sector?"

"Yes...all suspects and known perverts were questioned on their whereabouts and movement on that morning. Back then, Grafton was not as big as it is now. We had two known Peeping Toms, a youth of twenty-two who was a snowdropper...that's what they were called back then. A young bloke would steal women's underwear off the clothesline at night. A serial Rapist who was out on Bail...they went through his story minute by minute. He was a Teacher at the local boys' High School. He's done his sentence and lives just out of town in a Retirement Home...and then there is Alf Thomas whom you know about. In my estimation, he has climbed the ladder of 'Persons of Interest' let me tell you...though that is based purely on gut feeling without a shred of evidence".

"He may be worthwhile a re-visit after we have familiarised ourselves on his complete background. That type usually rubbed shoulders with like-minded people...so our sphere of interest just expanded somewhat".

"That's assuming our Perp is a Grafton boy".

"Yes..." I glanced up at the tall Sergeant who seemed uncomfortable accepting the fact that our man may be a local!

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Mister Toby Jacobs?”

“Who’s asking?”

We flashed him our ID cards.

“Hah...coppers. I’m impressed. Murder Squad Detectives from Sydney. What do you want with me?”

“You may have read in the ‘local’ that Beverley Priest’s remains were found out along Minnie Waters Beach the other day...”

“And you’re reacquainting yourselves with every person who was questioned about the disappearance back then...or had some history in kidnapping and killing young girls back then. Right?”

I nodded my head as I looked around for a spare chair. Shelley trailed two chairs from somewhere for us to sit on. We were in a large room that served as a meal-time room, a Recreation Room and much more. I could see Bingo nights in this room. There may have been half-a-dozen other patients all asleep with their heads at strange angles. Most were drooling. All the required fifteen hundred millimetres apart...except Shells, me, and Toby Jacobs. No one seemed to mind.

“I’ll tell you what I told the local cops back then, even though they belted the shit outa me putting me inta hospital...and I am reminded every fucking day of their handiwork...and what happened to them? Sweet Fanny Adams! I know nothing about it. Sure, I knew Beverley Priest as I was a Coach for the Little Athletes and promising kids who could reach State Titles if they trained well. Bev? On top of that I was a Teacher at the local High School, so I knew most of the kids”. A smile as he thought back to those days. “She was young but full of spunk and enthusiasm when her father bought her to the Field one Saturday morning. She would have been around six...seven, I guess. A little young to include in the Squad but...” He slowly shook his head. “She was an absolute natural. She outshone every member I had in my squads...her style, her balance, and her speed. She was invested for greater things...but then she broke her leg...badly”.

Again, he shook his head, leaning to one side to look me in the eye. His back was in a type of brace that allowed only minimal movement of his head.

“As far as killing someone...like a twelve-year-old girl who I knew!!! No...no, not on. And if you want to mention my rape case, go ahead. I still claim I did not rape that girl. We were having an affair which I readily admit...and which she denied in Court...showing photographs of bruises and cuts when she went to the cops...what made it worse was I was a married man with kids and she was a nineteen year old beauty who was in one of my squads...I know every man...and I’ve met a lot who claim their innocence...but I was stitched up by a domineering father who was livid that his beautiful daughter lost her virginity to a much older man in such a manner...so he creates these bruises and cuts...on his own daughter would you believe...what an arsehole...so is there anything else I can say? I hardly knew Bev Priest...but she sure could run. Nothing else? No, so I bid you a farewell. I’m tired so I will wheel myself to my room for a lay down...glad to be helpful”.

He paused, looking back through the years. Shelley went to stand, but I grabbed her arm as I was sure the guy hadn’t finished.

“Hah...back then they weren’t looking for the truth, just some innocent clod who they could fit up for the crime. Me being suspected of having lascivious thoughts as I am slim, small. Some would suggest I had a feminine shape more than that masculine Rugby Forward build...and I didn’t do myself any favours when I responded to their continued prods about being gay...queer. If I was gay, then I would have naught feelings for a young girl. They took that as a sort of a confession instead of me extending the logic of their accusations...”

He again paused to drink coffee from a large mug. It had to be cool I thought. We weren’t in the loop to even be asked if we wanted refreshments.

“I truly don’t know how I ended up with this life-long affliction. According to the police officers present, I did the damage while trying to hang myself...receiving bad bruising as I fell onto the upturned chair, I was using...but no-one has explained how I received terrible bruising to my chest...and across my shoulder-blades and upper back at the same time...”

He chuckled, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

“They had an internal investigation into my plight while I was in Hospital. No-one came to interview me, but the Findings agreed with what I have just said...but they realised one thing. They couldn’t stitch me up for the crime, so they moved on...when I was released from Hospital, I was instructed to move to Inverell, then Tamworth until funny enough, they rotated me back to Grafton...then I had that attempted rape case...they were all over it wanting me to be imprisoned for the crime whether or not I did it”. He half laughed, again wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “The continuous pains started to get to me forcing me to retire well before I should have...ending up here as I found it hard to care for

myself...so, coppers forgive me for being a little rude, but I've had enough of youze...you wouldn't know the truth of yer nose being on yer bloody face..."

He raised his arm awkwardly. A burly woman scurried across the room and wheeled the man away up a nearby corridor. I raised my eyebrows and cocked my head at Shelley before heading for the wide corridor that led to the front doors of the establishment.

I looked across at Shelley as we went to board the 4WD police vehicle.

"What do you think?"

"If I had a quid for every Crim who chorused his innocence, I'd be a wealthy woman..."

"Can you see yourself in one of those establishments when you get that old you cannot fend for yourself?"

"The only worse scenario would be living in such a home with you as a fellow inmate!"

"You know, they have done two investigations into the manner the cops of the Fifties and Sixties conducted their Cases. They reckon there was a twenty percent factor of innocent guys being arrested, charged and sentenced for crimes they didn't commit..."

"They were stitched up..."

"Yep...and an internal investigation by Major Crimes was conducted in the Nineties with a greater degree of false imprisonments...around one in three persons, so that thought about the constant chant of prisoners being innocent has some credence".

## **CHAPTER TWELVE**

We drove out of Grafton heading for Copmanhurst, a small village hunkered down between State Forest, rich farming land and the Clarence River that meandered about as though lost. As I spied the houses clustered together to form the small hamlet, I wondered why the houses were there at all! Admittedly, it was a beautiful part of the world but...

The Priest farm was miles out of the village towards the headwaters of the river and once we turned off the secondary road, we were on dirt. Recent rains gave the surrounding

countryside a richness of green but Pearce who was again our driver and tour guide, told us the area had been hard hit by the drought that nearly wiped out several farms.

The Priest farmhouse was a typical design, a large rectangle building surrounded by a deep veranda. Several dogs stood at the edge of the veranda welcoming our approach with a bark and a wag of their tails. A Machine Shed close by with another Lean-to that was the Hay Shed. Water tanks seemed to grow off the side of all the buildings that were all crowned with solar panels. Pearce alighted first, again helping Shelley to the ground. I looked around for the ladder before sliding off the back seat onto firm ground. An elderly woman and three young kids came to stand at the edge of the porch area, holding a hand to shade their eyes. The old girl gave an order which made all four dogs sit and shut up!

“Come through. We’s been expecting youze. Let me make you a coffee...you are the city folks looking into my sister’s disappearance and murder...it’s been a while...forty-five-odd years about”.

I nodded my head following instructions to sit at the largest Kitchen farm table I had ever seen.

“Yes, four of my kids are at Boarding School, two out on the farm and these three just getting in the road. Their School has closed because of this Coronavirus thing but there have been no cases up around these parts. Dad’s still alive and determined to make ninety...”

Just then an elderly man wheeled himself into the room. The three kids welcomed him in unison...a grand gesture.

“Youze gunna find him? He’d be close to Tabatha’s age, wouldn’t he? Around sixty...sixty-five?”

“Sir, we’ll do everything in our power to bring the guilty person to Trial. We have the advantage of more resources, better forensic services...”

“That’s all bullshit!” The old bloke spat out. “I knows that there is no forensic evidence present because of the recent fires...yer about at the same point that the local blokes were forty-five years ago”. The words spat out. “Yers are forty-five years behind the eight ball, hear me!?”

“Now Dad...these people will try their best...that’s all we can ask...and don’t be so rude to our visitors...you always insisted that, when I was a kid”.

We stayed to talk to Beverley's sister. The old bloke used the opportunity to blame everyone for his daughter's demise.

"Even if we found her body back then, it wouldn't have done any good as the forensic stuff and evidence was pretty basic back then...if it was present at all!" He exclaimed righteously.

He may have been approaching ninety, but his lungs were good and his mind sharp, if a little cynical. I guess I couldn't blame him for that...he had badgered the cops...he and his father...until they were sick and tired of the two.

We stayed way past our intended time to leave, heading back to Grafton in the dark. I wasn't too sure if anything was achieved, but we now had faces that were central to our investigation. An essential element as far as I was concerned.

## **CHAPTER THIRTEEN**

As the plane levelled out at cruising altitude, both Shelley and I booted up our Laptops. I wondered not for the first time what we would do without them. To me it clearly displayed the skill that Detectives of another time...not that long ago...showed as they chased out a Case without such an important part of the arsenal. Laptops, smartphones, and iPads with various large records such as the Criminal Register digitised...what and how would we work without them. Like the adoption of Fingerprints and now DNA trace and Photo Recognition Techniques, the nabbing of culprits should be so much easier...but in most cases it still takes shoe-leather and hours of scanning through digital paper trails and interviewing dozens of people to come to a successful conclusion.

I wriggled and squirmed as I read a Report we had been expecting.

"What!?" Shelley asked angrily. "Joe!? Will you stop squirming about. You're upsetting the trim of the plane with your constant jiggling about! The Captain will come down the aisle in a minute threatening to throw you overboard!"

"Mmm..." I didn't have a clue what she was going on about. "We have the full Autopsy and Blood Tox on Patricia Vance...mmm...bloody stupid..."

"Bloody hell, what's bloody stupid!?" She replied in a loud whisper, her blood pressure increasing.

“Patricia Vance? Our Hit and Run victim who turned out to be a targeted hit. She had undetected Breast Cancer that had secondary growths in her Lymph Nodes...she had between six months to a year to live according to Waller who did the autopsy on her...bloody stupid...such a bloody waste of two lives...Patricia Vance and her brother. If the bloody brother waited patiently, he could have had his share in the Vance fortune without breaking a sweat! Now, he’ll get bugger all except at least a dozen years locked up! So bloody stupid...ironic, is that the right word?”

“It goes with your ying and yang with the Universe in equilibrium, huh?”

“Mmm...we also have confirmation on the identity of those remains found at Minnie Waters Beach...”

“That was quick!”

“Maybe all it took was a telephone call by the Forensic Pathologist up to Royal Brisbane Hospital. The girl came in...in arrh...March Seventy-two with a serious compound fracture of the right femur. Beverley Victoria Priest was nine at the time...flown up from Grafton...thrown off a horse landing badly at her parent’s farm near Copmanhurst...as you know, Copmanhurst was almost burnt off the map during this summer’s hell fires”.

“That maybe the closest we get with that Case. Having confirmation of her name...she was twelve...what a horrible way for a twelve-year-old to die. You can betcha she was subjected to some horrendous actions which I bet included rape multiple times...we’ll never know, will we? Which is worse in a way as it plays with our imaginations, huh?”

“Unless we are lucky enough to nab the Offender and he tells us of his cruelty. Not that I really want to hear all the details...you?”

“Mmm...makes you wonder, doesn’t it? Why he stopped at just the one. Here he is, all wound up having the little girl of his dreams in his power to do anything and everything he wanted to do to eventually kill her after doing whatever he wanted to do with her. What stops such a man from continuing with his insane and sick acts? Why does he stop? Why just once with such depravity and no more?”

I looked over at her, glancing down at her opened Laptop which she balanced on her knees, not using the small drop-down table in front of her. I thought how silly that was!

“Once maybe one too many times for the man...jeez...I asked the same question the other day, remember?”

“Nah...you reckon!?”

“And truly, we do not have a clue what was done to the poor girl. For all we know she was killed quickly with no shenanigans going on before or after”.

“True, but we do have an insight into the Perp...he must have a sick mind to completely shatter Bev’s skull...now that is not the normal habit of a mere rapist”.

“Maybe it sated his twisted mentality and at the same time it scared the hell out of him...what he was capable of...I don’t know. Maybe he looked down at her body once he had exhausted all those secret desires...and hated himself for doing such a thing...maybe the death of young Beverley by his hands was enough to last into his old age”.

“Yeah...maybe. Perhaps he met the love of his life and settled down in glorious marital bliss...having kinky sex once a week satisfying all his innermost secret cravings”.

I looked across at my partner, nodding to show I agreed with her, but wondering how she could engender such a vision.

“Yeah, maybe you are right with the beast held tightly within his chest...”

“Which would suggest an explosion may or could happen...by the reading of a simple Newspaper Article detailing the finding of the remains of Bev Priest just off the Minnie Waters Beach with Police confirming she had gone missing in November Nineteen Seventy-five...perhaps that would scare the shit out of him...he thinking it was only a matter of time before we caught up with him...his paranoia driving him crazy”.

“Yeah...scary, eh? But yes, I’ll go along with that”.

## **CHAPTER FOURTEEN**

It was another warm day. Wispy clouds floated slowly across the clear blue. A lovely day if you could just ignore the smell of rotting flesh.

“The smell had to have clung around the place for some time...” I commented as I went to walk through the long grass up beside the house that sure looked derelict. “Who called it in, do we know?”

“A call into Crime Stoppers...could be any close neighbour around here, I suppose”. Shelley replied. “Sick and tired of the smell, I suppose...”

“You’re making a lot of suppositions this morning, Oh Masked One”.

“That’s as far as you can go, Joe. We are still examining everything from where you are standing up to the site of the body...around behind the Garage...and the inside of the house. I betcha these drug dens would never do if they had stayed off the Ice. The inside of the place is putrid...they should burn the joint down. Sorry guys, but you should go interview all the close neighbours as we’ll be here for a couple of hours, I reckon. To-morrow as well. We have warned the Station Sergeant as he will need to provide a couple of Constables to guard the area”.

“What a life! We’re now being bossed around by the Forensic Team...what is the world coming to? Especially when the ‘Bossy Big Boots’ happens to be my wife”.

“God, he’s a complainer of major proportions. He must be hard to partner”.

“You have no idea...” Replied Shelley.

“Well, I don’t know...but I think you see him more in any twenty-four period than I or his daughters do”.

“That makes me really depressed and wondering how the hell I cope!”

Both burst into gales of laughter. Shook my head as I wondered what I had done to deserve this major put down by two delta ladies.

“Can we get back on track, ladies. Who or what is the deceased?”

“Caucasian female around late teens to mid-twenties. Slim. Quite attractive, around one seven five tall. Taller than the average female. Um...by her skin tone and lack of the usual bad skin and rotting teeth, I’d say she had only just become familiar with drug use. I betcha if she had known her fate, she would have refused that first tab...Um...cause of death unknown at this stage but poisoned is my educated guess. ODeD. Why dumped her behind the Garage is anyone’s guess? The house has been vacant for a while now with various squatters and druggies using it as their home. The local Police called on many occasions with complaints about drunken fights, foul language...the usual druggies’ squat pattern...arrh...we sent off her fingerprints as there is no wallet or purse to help name the girl. Nothing back so she hasn’t a history. We have also sent off several photographs of body tattoos to see whether that will help...maybe a Missing Persons form was filled out

detailing those tattoos...if not, we may have to wait for DNA comparisons if they were taken from her father...but if she isn't in the system, bad luck, I'm afraid".

"The locals? Have they ever nabbed anybody on these premises that have form that you know of?"

"No, but that was something I didn't think of...as luck will have it, the local Station Sarge has just arrived. Ask her..."

I nodded, turning to look at the Station Sarge and her male offsider. Gillian Mulligan had climbed the ladder to become the Station Sergeant...good on her...I hadn't seen her in ages. She and I had been Classmates in the intake of '85 down in Goulburn. An item off and on between many...arrh...many dalliances at that time. While the days were filled with either classes or physical training, the 'off' days, nights and weekends were our time. Like all red-blooded young people, male and female, we found it extremely easy to party on at every opportunity.

"I'd recognise that face on a dark night anywhere! Still getting yourself into trouble, I see Joe?" She tippy toed to kiss me on the cheek.

"Hello Grubber, bin a while". A wide smile on my dial. I happened to glance at both Tellie and Shellie. Both had that *'I know what you did back then'* look that had me arrested, charged, found guilty and brought to stand with head bowed at the gallows. "The last I heard you were getting out...arrh...before we go too far, this is the Chief Forensic Officer on site...and is lucky to have attracted my attention. My wife, Estelle Sanchez..." Turning to Shelley. "My partner, Shelley Shields..."

I don't know what I had said so provocatively, but the three women, Shelley included, gave each other knowing looks.

Mulligan gave Tellie and Shells the once over.

"Still the same, hey Joe? Surrounding yourself with attractive delta ladies...the spots never change, do they Joe?" She shook both Shells and Tellie's hand. "To answer your question, yes, I did get out but came back in when my kids had finished High School...three...two boys and a girl. Married to an ex-Army bloke...still happily married to him. Your name often bandied about within the Rank and File...you have quite a reputation. Did you know that? And I will tell you now...remember you got yourself entwined with the Rank and File over their lack of following certain procedures back a couple of years ago? A deceased Vietnam Vet hero mixed up in the shemozzle, wasn't he? You strung up by the fingertips for quite some time from memory. I and other Station Commanders who would have known

you from those wild Goulburn days stood up for you, most going against their own people. You sure did rattle the hive though, Joe...things never really change, huh? If memory serves me well, you had the hierarchy in an impossible situation. To give you a Bravery Award or a kick up the arse, a demotion, or that proverbial fucking door...you got the Award, huh?" She smiled, looking at Tellie and Shells. All sharing that smarty-arse look and grin.

I've often wondered why my affinity for delta women was so engrained into my psyche. Those days at the Academy whizzed through my brain and I had to admit, it was the delta women whom I chased and bedded. Those memories my fondest recollections of those days. Now there was my first wife Helene, Marge Hendricks, Shelley, and Tellie...and other women like Penny Catts and Penelope Pennicello who held my interest for more than a moment...my mother...or more correctly, my grandmother on my mother's side was the one point of attachment throughout my early years. My grandmother was a delta woman I suppose, casting my affection to similar women was a consequence of her rearing and influence.

Strange how things work out...

I felt as though my face was on fire and to lessen the effect, I did what I normally did in such a situation, I tried to joke my way out of it.

"So much for the niceties...we have a homicide case waiting to be solved". By the looks on all three women's faces, I think I may not have fooled them.

"Okay, then..." Mulligan replied, a smile on her face.

*'They're taking over the fucking world and belittling us poor men in the process'. I thought. 'Oh, woe is me!'*

"This house has been vacant for almost five years. A Housing Commission joint if you hadn't noticed. The last legal residents would have paid their price and are walking the streets unhindered about now. There are a select number of houses that reek drugs and AOs who think they can always mistreat the system. We pay this house a visit at irregular intervals, always catching druggies selling, shooting up or sleeping away their dollars. Last lot ten days ago. Four guys and two females going down for possession...the dead girl? She could've Oded is my best guess. They just moved her out of the joint and up behind the garage, their befuddled minds thinking that was enough to be eternally rid of her...you can't have a dead body soiling up a drug den now, can you?"

"The latest crowd? You keeping tabs on them?"

“Yeah...they spend most of the daylight hours at the Railway Station. Their delivery boy jumps off, completes the transaction and is back on the train before it pulls away...quick and clean”. She turned to her Number Two who opened a clipboard and handed me a sheet of paper that listed six names and addresses.

“Three on that list are deceased...a sad state of the Nation, eh? Yeh, overdoses”.

“Thanks for that Grubber. You reckon a drug OD?”

“Yeah...since all this Coronavirus thing, the supply chains have been reduced to a trickle with the purity all over the place too...well...you’d be shooting mainly Washing Powder or powdered bleach into your veins...bet that is how our little girl saw her Maker...with snow white veins!”

She always had that off-gallows sense of humour. I remember party-time in Goulburn was always the better with Grubber’s presence. She never really thought she was that funny...she was also the Ace on cross-country races, winning every time. We always said she had a Mountain Bike, or something hidden halfway through the race circuit. She also could belt the bejeezus out of most of us, including me, but it was always nice to get into a clutch with her. She had the sweetest smelling sweat...let’s not go any further, eh?

## **CHAPTER FIFTEEN**

Shelley didn’t come with me for the afternoon exercise half hour. She had something more important to do, though she shied away from telling me what it was. A little embarrassed, a little pissed by my continued demand of wanting to know. As far as I was concerned, there were no secrets between partners...unless it was me wanting to keep a secret from her.

I came back onto the Murder Squad floor feeling a little drained as I had over-extended myself much to chagrin of the Squad Coach who thought at my age, I was being a little foolish pushing myself so far. Exercise yes but pushing yourself beyond the normal boundaries was not a clever idea at my age...but my times weren’t going down, more up at a rate that wasn’t acceptable to me. Us men can be our own worst enemies at times!

“Joe...when you gather up your things...”

“C’mon Boss. If it’s a call-out, give it to the night guys...”

She looked around; her arms spread wide in a questioning manner. Turning back and forth, gazing at the empty Squad Room.

“You’re it, Joe...with Doug Chalmers...”

I looked across at my occasional partner who filled in satisfactorily when Shells was off...or not available like now...not as good as Shells, but then again, my expectations may be a little too high. He cocked his head and lifted his eyebrows as though telling me that he too, was not that keen on doing extra hours on a Case...especially not now as he had geared himself up to head for home. Well...for him, it was always one or two at the Local where other Dees and Uniforms always drank at before heading home, knocking the missus over with a stale beer breath. She was not at all impressed which I think, only made him order another Schooner!

Both he and I rang our better halves as we descended to the parking levels under the building. Neither mine or his were impressed with the late call-out...not as much as Doug or me, but we let them vent their spleens over the incident. I felt like saying to Tellie to take it up with my boss! I held my tongue as she would then have the shits with both of us.

I threw Doug the keys to the Unmarked, asking where in hell we were heading. As he computed the address into the GPS, he answered slowly...more than one duty at a time was asking slightly too much, so it seemed.

“Cranebrook. Water Gum Crescent...bet it’s a Domestic Violence Homicide...”

“Yeah, I won’t take your money...but this time of day!?! Highly unusual, though since all this self-isolation, staying at home and social distancing laws, the fact that the population are crammed into the marital home twenty-four seven can have dire consequences, don’t yer reckon?”

We sat in silence travelling through suburbs I didn’t think existed. To me, I had thought all this area was productive small farms and Chinese market gardens. The breadbasket of Sydney. No, I was thinking in a different direction. This area had originally been Orchards and Hobby Farms. Now it appeared to be houses one too many sizes too big to fit on the block of ground. It looked to me as though they were overweight persons trying their hardest to get into clothes one size too small. I think this area was known as the Macca suburbs...for an extra dollar, you can have the larger chips...in this case, a first-floor extension to provide a Games Room or Movie Room. The Rumpus and Family Rooms weren’t enough!

“It’s frightening, isn’t it? The degree of violence in the average Australian home...” I didn’t like silence for too long and would open on a subject...any subject to get the voice box going. “Though I understand it is not just a blight of Australian society but all western democracies...and with this Covid-19 thing...” I let the comment slide.

“Mmm...” He replied. Enthusiasm lacking so it seemed.

I thought I’d lost him...again showing he could do only one thing at a time...in this case, driving!

“Mmm...” He begun, taking one hand off the steering wheel to scratch his nose. “It’s a phenomenon not just in Australia but in just about every country on Earth. Some places worse, others not. Look at India for example, the degree of wife killing over there is an enormous problem...the murder...the raping of women seen as a man’s right! And if strangers rape her, it is the woman’s fault with her being bashed or murdered to exact some revenge for her transgression...there has to be logic in there somewhere”. He harrumphed, the closest I’d ever heard him laugh.

“You wonder what and why it is a problem?”

“I have a theory...” He began suddenly. “In Western Countries you can blame it on the First and Second World Wars and Religion. In Eastern Countries, you can blame it on Religion and Caste in the case of India”.

“Okay, but how?”

“Australia’s population in that period before WW1 commenced, was around the three maybe four million mark. The actual death total is still being debated, but recent studies have put that figure higher than the 62,000 fatalities recorded back then, with 155,000 wounded that was previously accepted. The number of fatalities due to war wounds *after* the end of the war has never been correlated or added to the total number of war dead including the number of suicides”. He moaned under his breath as someone tried to get in his way. He gave a toot to show his disgust. He received a finger salute from the guilty driver. “I’ll stick my fucking Glock up your bloody nose!” He voiced loudly. “Arm...where was I?” He added, back to his soft voice. “Yeah...the point is, allowing for deaths during and after, the figure relating to total injuries after including PTSD which was included under the broad heading of shellshock and lastly, the number who turned to the bottle was something like two-thirds of the total number who served which was around 300,000 men. An entire generation of young men wiped out or critically injured having chronic problems until they died...or took their own life”. He tapped on the steering wheel while waiting for the green arrow to turn right. Again, I thought he had exhausted the speech. He suddenly started up

again as he slowly turned right with the lights. “Initially taught how to fight, how to kill, how to hate the enemy and how to be angry...” He took one hand off the steering wheel to scratch his nose again...then his ear. “...but at the time, those who came home after the war, there was no de-programming of those men. No thought of wiping those habits from their minds. The vast majority came back home broken, disenchanting, or depressed. With the bottle they tried to live on, kicking the cat and belting the wife. This problem never dealt with by the sitting Government of the time after the War; instead, society’s opinion was that *‘he saw dreadful things during the war so give him space as it was not his fault’*. The next generation learnt from their parents, and it was what? Twenty years...two generations before WW2 begun, duplicating the same errors in educating men for war and when the servicemen returned home...the same conduct was ignored for the same reasons...kick the cat and belt the missus was a society catch-call...and again repeated throughout society to this day...and then you have those avid religious types who live by the Bible or the Qu’ran. Both preaching patriarchal beliefs where the wife is the servant at the disposal of the husband. A second-rate person who was there to serve the ‘master’. Punishment was swift and at times brutal if she disobeyed...”

I nodded as we obeyed that all-knowing woman who lives in the GPS thing-a-ma-jig, turning into the street where the hotchpotch of official vehicles positioned the house about half-way down the block.

“You’ve obviously given this a lot of thought...me? I’m not too sure. Around a third of all DV Cases Australia wide is where the woman is the instigator...”

“Yeah...but the same thing still applies...the woman snaps at the constant badgering of the husband and loses it...just the reversal of the accepted norm...but it is still the male who presents that over-bearing, dominating manner expecting the little woman to do better...to do as he commands...but she can never satisfy his demands...she snaps because of it...it is still the male taking the high road”.

“I don’t think a lot of women will even listen to that statistic...”

“They’re the facts, Joe”.

We parked half-a-block distance from the crime house, walking down the middle of the street with the sun starting to dip towards the horizon.

“A late night, huh?”

“Yeah, Senior Constable. It certainly looks like it”. I replied as I signed into the Crime Scene Register. “Not my cup of tea to tell you the truth...we were both heading for the door when we took the call...the Night Shift boys were still doing exercises down in the Gym”.

He nodded knowingly, as though he had joined the night-shift boys in their daily exercise regime. To them as important as breathing...us standing in the middle of this suburban street at dusk the consequence!

We walked up the front path, nodding several times to Uniforms standing around, asking if it were okay to enter wondering whether the Forensic guys would let us inside the house. Getting the okay sign, we entered and walked straight into the Lounge Room.

Housing Commission house flashed across my mind.

Andrew Waller stood as we came up behind him.

“Joe...Doug...you guys joined the Night Brigade, huh?”

“Nothing as romantic, Drew. We were too slow to walk off the floor...”

“Ha! That’ll teach yers...a bit of a mess, eh? The husband is in the kitchen with two Uniforms either side of him and he handcuffed to a chair. Mister André Lesaj...the ‘saj’ pronounced ‘s.a.r.g.e.’ with a soft ‘G’. He’s well known to the local guys, and he has form according to the Lead Uniform on-site who is minding our perp in the Kitchen. Several charges against him dealing with assault...of the missus here...over an extended period”.

“Why do woman constantly allow such brutes back into their lives?” Doug commented angrily.

Waller raised his eyebrows. I half expected a shrug, but it never came.

“Three bullets...the first with an entry wound just below the right eye. The other two, one in the torso, the other in the right calf. The first bullet killed her instantly. The other two just for spite...and anger, I guess”.

I walked deliberately around the body, blood slowly soaking into the worn carpet. Obviously, the Housing Commission thought another five or six years of life could be squeezed out of the floor covering before it would need replacing. They’d have to bring that date forward as there was no getting the blood stain out of the threadbare floor covering!

Silly thoughts I know, but what else are you going to think of as you eye the bloody corpse?

I sat down on my haunches to take a closer look at the head shot. Attractive woman I thought, who has tried repeatedly to keep the weight off and make-up on to please the man.

“Through and through?” I asked Waller. He shook his head. “That means that it was from a distance which would put it at a lucky shot, or it was a twenty-two calibre...”

“Nah...I’ll need to confirm it, but my guess at this stage is a nine-millimetre automatic revolver...a Glock only because at the moment they are easier to get on the Black Market”.

“So, a lucky shot then. There’s a chance he was still standing close to where Doug is standing at the moment...I’d say the cheek shot was his first shot with the other two occurring as she went down, the torso shot then the last to the calf region...we’ll get him to run through what happened but I still say it was a lucky shot or he is the next Olympic Gold Medallist in precision handgun target shooting”.

Waller didn’t respond so I thought he agreed with me.

As I stood, I scratched at my ear not convinced of my first theory. I again sat on my haunches looking closely at the body.

“No...the right calf was the first shot and as she reacted by trying to lean away from her husband, she was shot in the torso. She began to fall as the third shot got her in the eye...he was holding the pistol low...” That was better with Doug agreeing with a nod

“Doug? Will you pull up his Crime Sheet, please?” I asked my partner as I half turned to get his attention. Me still on my haunches.

“Yeah...got it already...Nineteen Ninety-two...twenty-eight years ago and not long married. He received a Suspended Sentence with one hundred hours of community service and a fine of two thousand dollars. In Twenty-oh-nine a similar sentence...even though it was his second charge of a similar type...um...lucky number three a similar charge but this time he was ordered to stay away from the missus and the family home, or he would find himself back in jail...seems like he has at last succeeded”.

“A gun used?”

“No...fists and the last time several kicks to the stomach. She was pregnant at the time. She lost the baby...oh! He was also ordered to attend an Anger Management Course, was ordered to stay away from his missus with an AVO issued, pay a fine of three thousand two hundred dollars and two hundred hours of community services...the Magistrate said at the time that he was lucky not to receive a prison sentence”.

“Fourth time lucky, eh? Three times too many times. Is there any note advising when he started residence again with the missus going against the judgement of a Court? How many kids?” I asked.

“Two...according to Records, both are spending time at the Governor’s Pleasure. Like Dad, like son and daughter, so it seems...and no, there is no mention of the gap between his Court appearance and when he returned to the family home. The daughter, Angelica. Belted the tripe out of her husband of less than one year. He couldn’t take the chatter of him being bashed up by the missus. Committed suicide before a sentence was handed down. Three years two months with a non-parole period of two years ten months. Arrh...this extended to a penalty of Life as she bashed to death two fellow inmates and caused a female guard to pack it in. The son killed his wife and a two-year old daughter in twenty-seventeen. Received a twelve-year sentence with a non-parole period of ten years six months...still enjoying himself at taxpayers’ expense...it’s amazing how children will follow the example of a parent who has anger management problems. You’d think it would be the opposite with the kids learning from their parent’s aggression”.

“Yeah...you’d think so. A nice family, huh? Both take after Dad, eh?” Waller murmured. “Just what society needs...a treadmill of family violence that will ensure it never stops”. He shrugged his shoulders and looked around. “I guess I shouldn’t complain as it keeps me in a job...the same for you two, huh?”

I had a go at his gallows humour, both of us chuckling which would seem surreal to an ‘outsider’.

I circled the body another two times. Looked at what little bric-a-brac there was in each room...lean with no wedding photos or shots of the two kids as they grew. In fact, the entire set-up eked of coldness with no warmth anywhere. I continued my ‘walk-through’ of each room with the feeling reinforced...the chill and lack of love displayed anywhere within the house...it certainly wasn’t a home!

“Does the man have a Parole Officer...how about who may have conducted the Anger Management Course he was instructed to attend...can you dig that out for me, Doug?”

Chalmers had followed me as I did the rounds of the house. He now sat on the edge of the single bed in the third bedroom and began to play with his iPad.

“Arrh...yesss...Gloria Sheridan...she was the Co-ordinator for the Anger Management Course...try her”.

He gave me the phone number which I punched in as he said it. A pleasant voice answered on the third ring. I identified myself and the reason for the call. The name was familiar and when she began to talk, so was her voice.

“André Lesaj? Now there is a bloke living on borrowed time...”

“Why do you say that?”

“Um...Detective? Why are you enquiring about Lesaj?”

“We believe he has just shot his wife to death...” I replied as I walked out of the house onto the front Council footpath. Leaning back against a Patrol Car as I spoke, looking back at the house. “I’m at the residence now with the wife lying on the Lounge Room floor with three bullets in her body...”

“Arrh...jeez...let me get a grip on myself”. I heard her place the phone down, silence before she blew her nose as though there was a persistent gooby that would not let go. She picked up the phone. “Sorry Detective...Joe Lind, isn’t it?”

“Yes ma’am...um, you know the guy?”

“I knew the entire bloody family. I no longer conduct those Anger Management Courses. Someone with thicker skin is doing the heavy lifting...it was always on the cards that this would happen...I could lay a bet on it unfortunately. What little I can remember of the wife, she was a lovely person, thrust into the marriage by Mama and Papa the way they do things in the ‘Old Country’ except they were living in Australia. I guess it takes some generations to filter through that is not how we do it and her marriage was a notable example of the wife being belted about by not only her husband but by both kids. I guess André thought it was one time too many in his twisted sense of how the world should work. She obviously did something that was not up to the expectations he had...*bang*, you pay for it with your life. He stuck out like a sore thumb during those Courses. He didn’t believe anything he did was his fault...it was the missus every time. He was just a bully in the extreme. Funny though, according to his Boss of the time, he was a gentle, obedient, and popular employee...you figure it out. I knew this day would come...hang on...”

Again, I heard the sniffles and another mighty blow of the nose.

“Sorry...as you can see, I bleed too easily...is there anything else? Um...just to ease your suspicions, I use to help Ellen Phelps occasionally. On several occasions you came in for a chat...I sat on the side saying little, which was difficult as you always demanded...no, that’s

too strong...you were eager for cross conversation with all who may have been present. Ellen always talks warmly of you”.

“I thought I recognised your voice...and name”.

“Yes. You doing okay?”

“Life tends to throw you a curve ball occasionally...I’m doing okay now. I guess that could change at the drop of a hat...”

“Yeah...let’s not wish it, huh? I know what you mean. We must share a coffee someday, huh? Gotta go, nice talking to you...one thing. Lesaj? He all right?”

“Yeah, fine. I haven’t pistol-whipped him yet...still some time left...”

I heard her laugh as she hung up. I was walking back up the front path to the veranda of the house when I heard someone in the house shout out ‘Gun...Gun!’

Bam, bam...bam, bam, bam resonated through the thin walls of the house.

As I slowly stepped over the threshold of the front door into the Lounge Room of the residence bent over and noiselessly taking my Glock from its holster, Lesaj must have opened the double doors of the Lounge Room and stepped onto the veranda. I turned to see a figure vault over the veranda railing with an immediate response from Uniforms outside. I realised quickly that I was in the firing line if one of the Constables began to shoot.

“Drop the gun, arse-hole. Drop it. Do it now, shithead! Drop it. Don’t force us to shoot...your life is in your hands so drop the gun and you will live...” Around half-a-dozen voices demanding the gun be dropped and that Lesaj drop to his knees and eat grass himself. The difference between the male and female shouted voices was truly comical. The demands from the male Constables was loud, filled with venom and promises of a mile of hurt if the shooter did not obey the orders. The female on the other hand was octaves above her normal speaking voice...reedy, nervous, and almost comical...so beat me for being sexist!

“Taser...taser...” That voice shrill and obviously from the female Constable.

“Don’t even think about it, man...just drop it, hear me?” A much cooler voice with no theatrics involved. This guy was in control of himself and the situation, unlike others who were on the edge.

“Man...do as you are told. Place the weapon on the ground...kick it towards me and drop to the ground yourself...”

Eat grass was a repeated command as though the guy thought it clever.

“DON’T!!” A certain belligerence in the tone of voice. “DON’T...JUST DROP IT, WILL YA!?”

Silence, then a roar of at least three to four revolvers going off simultaneously in one loud volley. Then a heavy silence punctured by the sobbing of the female Constable. Several shouts to check colleagues were okay...then an expletive with words indicating they were in deep shit because they fired their guns...even taking them from the holster was investigated by the S and E guys. Regardless, when a felon is shot, everything stops, and the S and E guys take over the crime scene. It would be hours before the S and E guys had conducted their investigation on the shooting. Me and Doug would be sitting around twirling our fingers for bloody hours! This debacle occurred every time a police officer fired his gun, regardless of the why and wherefore.

Each of those Constables stood down on full pay, making them feel as though they were the crims in the incident.

All I could see was a bloody late night for me and Doug...which would make the following day a time that would become just foggy memories.

I poked my head outside to see André Lesaj spread-eagled on the ground with one or two Constables still with their guns pointed at his body. I half turned to peer around the corner of the Lounge and the Hallway that led towards the Bedrooms, Bathroom and Toilet. The Station Sergeant was kneeling on the floor beside a young Constable who was groaning in real pain. The Sergeant trying her best to patch the man up with things she had found in a cupboard. A Medical Kit that I doubted I would use on an open wound.

“You need a hand?” I asked in a whispered tone. Why? I have no idea.

“I can hear an Ambulance getting closer so I reckon my young Constable will be okay. You need to check your partner...I have my doubts he will survive. He copped two to the chest and his breathing is ragged, full of rattles, know what I mean?”

Doug was lying beside him. I lifted my Mobile and speed-dialled the emergency number.

“Shots fired. Shots fired. Two Officers down. Need a couple of Ambulances and back-up. I repeat, shots fired, two Officers down. Cranebrook. Water Gum Crescent. I repeat, Cranebrook. Water Gum Crescent”.

The Sergeant turned to me, saying that she and a couple of her men outside had done the honours also. I nodded my head, realising I was panicking, shaking and fearful for my spare-time partner. He had not that long ago married for the second time. To a woman who made him smile every time he spoke of her. She had a son and daughter from her earlier marriage and the boy got on well with his two from his former marriage. He was looking forward to the future having lost a certain cynicism once he met her. The divorce had been messy with the Ex wanting it all. Doug had lived in a Hotel room with the shower and toots down the end of a communal corridor...he couldn't afford anything else having been fleeced of everything through the Family Law Court system. His two kids...adults really, had tried to stay neutral but had at regular intervals, apologised to their father for the way their mother was going on...still, after five years after the split, she was still carrying on. She violently spat the dummy when Doug walked down the aisle for the second time. Jealousy? Don't know but it reeked of a woman who thought she still had some control over her Ex. There are many incidents that show up the bad side of even a woman who thinks God and the Law are on her side...never accepting but ignoring the facts of the matter.

It's a nasty world out there and I reckon finding your 'soul-mate' is partially luck...you had better odds at winning Lotto over hooking up with that wonderful woman...I had been lucky twice. I wondered why I deserved such a break as I looked down at Doug...he was dying...

His life was looking up is how he would describe his future...now? I thought it was all in my hands...shaky as they were!

I crawled up beside him to take his hand. The other I tried to apply a pressure hold with a towel over his chest. I didn't have a clue whether this would help or not...but I had to try something.

“Stay with me partner, stay with me”.

He didn't look good, his face covered in a light sheen and his colour a pale grey. His eyes having that stillness, that stare that wasn't really looking at anything...that thousand-yard stare. There were two holes bubbling blood in his chest. On each breath there was also a gurgling sound with blood-stained bubbles popping out of the side of his mouth. He had trouble breathing, fighting for each precious breath.

I knelt in closer to him, my mouth beside his ear, tears coursing down my cheeks.

“Come on mate, stay with me”. I ordered in a croaky voice. I heard sirens coming from different directions. “Come on mate, the Ambos are near here, just hang in there, will ya?”

His left eye welled with tears that cascaded down the side of his face into his earlobe. There was a faint inhalation then a gurgling exhale. I waited for the next breath, but it didn't come. I didn't know enough about the damage of the bullets and didn't know whether CPR would be of any use. I crawled backwards to lean back against the wall, drawing my knees up, resting my arms on my knees with my head bent forward to rest on my arms. They covered in Doug's blood, now smearing my forehead and face.

I let the tears come silently.

I heard the activity of other people in the Hallway, the sound of one, two, three then click as a gurney went passed me. Another one took its place.

“C'mon Detective...your turn...help us get you on the gurney...”

“I'm okay...”

“No, you're not, so don't give me any cheek, sunshine. We'll get you into Hospital as quickly as possible”.

They connected various wires and things to my chest as though I was generating electricity and they needed to connect me to the grid!

I really couldn't give a shit how quickly they could transport me into Hospital and to be fair dinkum, I couldn't give a flying fuck if the world exploded at this precise moment and propel nine billion beings into orbit as mere space junk!

Know what I mean?

Another partner of mine going out the wrong way...what is the matter with me? Do I generate disasters?

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I leant back and placed my face up to the rays of the warm sun, with my eyes closed and my mind in neutral. I could have stayed that way for the rest of the day. The ‘Green Area’ where I was seated, protected from the early Autumn winds by the Hospital Building that edged around the area on three sides. I was due to be released to-morrow morning and after spending three days in my version of PJs, I’d had enough. I wanted out and to-morrow morning couldn’t come fast enough.

A shadow moved over me.

I opened one eye and squinted up at the interloper.

“Good morning, Joe. You look relaxed and in love with life...” I sat up and nodded, agreeing with the assertion that I was indeed relaxed...a step too far about being in love with life though! I could still see the bloody bubbles popping out of Doug’s chest and mouth, something that will take a while to fade.

“Mmm...I had a bet with myself about your appearance. I lost the bet as I predicted you would have turned up a day ago...I was disappointed...and I cannot afford the ‘Book’ I had going...good to see you in any case”. I said, my face cracking a wide grin.

“I did, Joe...I turned up yesterday. You were asleep. I didn’t want to wake you...you looked so peaceful. How are you feeling?”

“How thoughtful of you. I can assure you; the S and E guys weren’t as thoughtful. It must be in their DNA to think that all innocent people are guilty...I would imagine those Constables who shot Lesaj are feeling terrible but with the S and E team cutting through them, they would be feeling more guilty than ever as though they are the Crims”.

I gave a half-hearted harrumph thinking I should swing around and sit up to give Phelps somewhere to sit down.

I didn’t.

“They even had me second guessing the scenario, asking why I hadn’t taken a shot at the bastard. To explain to them I had three...maybe four Constables in my line of fire...that wasn’t good enough for them...the silly bastards asked me how I felt about my partner being shot to death...what a bloody hide...I yelled at them to leave my room. Loud enough

for a Doctor to come running in, asking them politely to leave”. I shook my head, harrumphed again. “Is this an official visit?”

“With you, every call is an official visit. Ready for home?”

“You betta bloody well believe it, Doc...I was ready yesterday”.

Apart from obtaining the Doctor-in-Charge approval to leave, I also required Doc Phelps approval to re-commence working.

“They always keep their favourite Patients in for that extra day. How do you feel about what happened the other day?”

I looked down at my hands then raised my head to look around at my surroundings.

This area was the Common Area in the middle of the Hospital building which encompassed the ‘green’ area on three sides. Staff, patients, and visitors alike used it. There were seating arrangements with tables and chairs, or timber bench seats dotted around the area, most almost hidden by low bushes neatly trimmed to provide that privacy. The lawn looked as though it had begun its life as a Bowling Green it was that flat. Maybe Bocca. A level path meandered its way across the lawn to disappear into a grove of trees. Patients in wheelchairs wheeled out to take advantage of the level paths. I preferred the groves of Spotted Gum and Turpentine Gums, both with straight trunks with the first branches well above my head. The only trouble was they’ll have trouble with these trees as they reach maturity. It will be hard to extract them before they threaten to fall. I think that will be well after my time...

Regardless, you could hear the breeze rustle through the canopies and the sounds of various bird calls made me smile.

Doctor Phelps looked at me a little skew-if. Looked around shaking her head in amazement.

“Joe, only you would think there will be a problem in years to come to be rid of these trees...or if there was a problem at all with them”. She hid a giggle behind her hand held up to her mouth. “You’ve deliberately ignored my question to go off at some tangent completely unattached to my question...which was how you felt about the day your partner was shot dead? You so do this at every turn if the question is a little too hard for you to answer. Bringing up ghosts is not your way of having fun, huh?”

“I feel...no, I now know that I could not have saved him even if he was on an Operating Table with a flurry of gowned Surgeons standing over him...but...he was getting his life

together. His second marriage made in heaven, so he often said. His kids getting along fine with his new wife's two. A real Brady Bunch, by all accounts".

I fell silence as I thought of the day that Doug died. I shook my head slowly, fighting to keep the melancholia at bay.

"The bastard knew he had no-where to go but down, so he shoots two coppers and has a brief stand-off with a couple more before he raises his handgun knowing he would be shot multiple times. Suicide by cop fire they call it..."

Ellen Phelps nodded. She looked around before concentrating on my dial.

"Doc? Relax. I'm okay..." I sat up straighter and swung my feet to the ground allowing her to sit beside me.

"I'm sure they checked out the toilet before they let him sit on the throne, closing the door to give him privacy. I'd say they didn't look hard enough...that's not like Doug. He'd be suspicious of the man just asking to use the toot...for number twos, so they gave in to his objections of not being capable of wiping his arse with his wrists manacled...I'd have done the same thing...who'd have thought the guy would have two Glocks...one to shoot the missus, the other hidden somewhere in the toot. They're still not sure of its hiding place...but in the toot!? If nothing else, the guy thought outside the square".

I shook my head still amazed that the guy had two handguns...and hiding one somewhere in the toilet! Come on! Who'da believed it!?!?

"You know, the incident of cops being caught in a pub brawl is minimal, cops firing their guns absolutely minimal with there being cases where a cop does not remove his gun from its holster in anger or attack for his entire length of employment...and the incident of cops shooting to kill a crim...next to nothing. You are one of the few cops in the Service that has done all those things multiple times..." She looked over at me, a deep frown showing she was gobsmacked by that revelation. "Do you feel different? Proud? Boastful? No! I know for sure you do not feel any of those emotions...in fact you rarely...if ever, rewind those incidents in your mind...that's where I come in thinking your attitude of ignorance, complete disregard and total deletion of those events wiped from your mind..." She shook her head. "That worries me, Joe. It worries me a lot...you would in terms of hours be up there with a few others who I have listened to...four young Constables shot André Lesaj...all of them hit parts of his body. Three of them couldn't stop firing, being forced to by their mates...they all are having nightmares over the incident. All on some form of Stress Leave. All of them seeing me every second day. One is still in Hospital. I thought you would have smelled him out Joe...I'm a little disappointed...with you? Even the Station

Sergeant who knelt over her shot Constable more than likely saving his life has visions worrying the hell out of her...and she has trouble sleeping. With you? It's like water running off a duck's back...and that is worrisome".

A smile to go with the stir. Well, it maybe the truth but I still took it as a stir...that is how I get by...

"I don't know how I can help you, Doc. Maybe if I show restraint in future dealings with felons. Maybe smile as I drill a felon with one bullet through the centre of his forehead...another through the heart".

"There you go again! You are making jokes about it when others in my care have trouble not crying..."

"I cry, Doc. You know that, but I hate really crying as I wail like a Banshee with my whole being hurting...and it tires me like nothing else does...I will always stifle that urge...understand?"

She looked over at me, a frown saying she more than understood...which still meant she was more than worried for me...

"Doug's funeral to-morrow morning. Are you going?"

"Yes, but I'll be wearing civvies. Tellie brought my formal dress uniform in this morning. It doesn't fit me anywhere. At least Tells and I can sit away from the block of Uniforms. I understand it will be quite large as Doug is the first police officer for a number of years to be shot to death while on duty...and Tellie tells me she will be proud sitting beside me as I will need to wear all my medals...including the two Bravery Awards. That may get a couple of noses out of joint especially me wearing civvies while displaying all the brassware. To tell you the truth, I think that is against all the written laws that we must abide by...who cares".

"There you go again...not missing the opportunity to snub your nose at those above you. It's in your DNA make-up, I reckon".

"Yeah, maybe...but truthfully, when I have had the chance to check out my Dress Uniform or to get another made to fit?"

To be truthful, I wasn't looking forward to it. Doc Phelps nodded her head as she also hated these formal funerals.

“You enjoy it, don’t you Joe? Every opportunity taken to twist some-one’s balls”. She again frowned at me before continuing. “How do you think you would react if it had been Shelley and not Doug?” She asked softly. A slight breeze wafted her perfume across my nose...nice!

I shook my head.

“That’s an unfair question...I don’t know...” Scratching my head and then pulling on my earlobe. “That’s a question I cannot answer as it was Doug and not Shelley. I cannot imagine such a scenario. It’s like asking me how I’d feel if Tellie suddenly died. I can’t get my head around that...but I guess I would be shattered...”

Phelps nodded before looking around at our surroundings.

“It’s beautiful here, isn’t it? And the birds...there would be some who would be driven near insane...but me? I love their various calls...and colours...you? One or two of the old biddies complain, but...look at the beautiful colours...why is it that the most colourful here in Australia have the most raucous and grating calls while the most beautiful melodies belong to the plain black and white of Magpies and Butcherbirds?”

I nodded, thinking she really didn’t want an answer from me. Instead, I returned her smile as it was a favourite past-time of mine as it helped me to relax...sitting on the back deck watching the girls play on the lawn, the dogs finding me easy to sit on instead of the deck and the garbled voices of several bird species!

“Yes...far better than a Ward bed...listen to the breeze through the crowns of the trees. It always soothes me along with the various birdcalls...I’d hate to live somewhere where you couldn’t hear a single birdcall...that was one thing that struck me driving and walking through the remains of those fires up north...not a birdcall and the smell? It is quite distinct, not a pleasant smell at all”.

## **CHAPTER SEVENTEEN**

I hadn’t realised I had met Doug’s second wife before. Several times, in fact. She was a Senior Sergeant out of the second hardest Cop Station in the Sydney Metropolitan Area. Mount Druitt which was just under the Kings Cross Station for the total number of callouts and charges laid against anti-social people.

“You were with him, weren’t you?” She asked as Tellie and I stood before her to offer our condolences. I nodded, feeling decidedly awkward. “He didn’t suffer for long?” She asked wanting an honest answer.

“Yes...um...I’m sorry I could not do more for him...” A sad smile to go with my words.

“Yes...I was told he was dying the second after the second slug entered his chest. He would never have survived even if he were in an operating theatre...he was dying and there was nothing that could be done for him, so don’t beat yourself up, Joe. You were there for him in his last moments...um...did he...um...did he say anything?”

“Um...yes. He said Bobby twice...I wasn’t too sure if that was it until your son told me that is what Doug called you...it was his nick-name for you...”

She looked down, then away, shaking her head to rid her eyes from tears.

“Yes...silly in a way...there is no connection to anything...” She half laughed and sobbed. “He just always called me that...so he had thoughts for me as he died...that’s so comforting”.

You wouldn’t have known it as she burst into tears. Leaning heavily on me, we walked down the Church aisle to the front pew.

“You and Tellie? Please stay here with me...this is my mother, Glennis. My father died a while ago now. Glen, my mother...Mum? This was Doug’s partner in the Murder Squad, Joe Lind and his wife Tellie”. The old girl turned her head to nod at both of us, a tight smile our welcome.

Senior Sergeant Mishel Chalmers in full dress uniform turned to look through the large crowd that jammed into the Church. She nodded and tried to smile to persons in the congregation. She then did something that I would forever remember. She caught the eye of Doug’s first wife and requested she join them with her two young adults and Doug’s two. She stood and hugged her and as she sat, she went arm and arm with the woman.

“We loved him both...and he loved us both...we are lucky women”.

The two women sobbed, their tears falling together.

It was the most humbling incident I had ever experienced. Something that I would remember for my entire life. As long as there were women like that, the world was in a good place. Tellie jolted me back to reality by wiping away my tears...

I kissed hers away.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

He was his father's son. The same belligerent and cruel expression, the flashing eyes roaming and moving, wanting to settle onto something but never quite making it, like the erratic flight of a Dragonfly skimming over the surface of the water. Stopping and starting, jerking one way then the other.

“You the bastard who killed me old man?” Venom in his voice as his eyes locked onto me.

He would be enjoying his stay ‘inside’ I thought, wondering if he was king of the heap yet. If he wasn't, then it would be so in time. He was that sort of person...he was ‘Top Dog’. That brought a smile to my dial that he didn't like. He thought he was being left out of the joke...or was being jerked about...he never liked being the butt of someone's joke. Yep, he'd be liking his stay here. Told when to eat, sleep and take exercises. I gave him my best evil grin, like Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*. Shelley gave me a worried look, not impressed with my acting...it was usually better than what I had displayed...I'll blame the Author for the erroneous words and lines.

“Nah...” I stated confidently. “Your fucking old man killed my partner and then didn't have the balls to eat his own bullet...he suicided by cop fire, the fucking gutless bastard...raising his handgun in front of a flock of cops...why? Because he realised too late that in a moment of rage, he had killed the only person who may have loved him...his wife...your mother...for no sane reason...”

The crud tried to stare me down. No-one has achieved that though many have tried...such a childish thing but us men can be that at times.

He looked down at the table-top, his gaze now suffering from some type of sedative as the erratic course had died down.

“Yeah, well...” He couldn't help himself. He had to fill the silent vacuum with something. “Maybe mama did sometink to rile him...it sure didn't take much...” A bad-teeth grin. “He'd let go at the drop of a hat, he would. The bastards wouldn't let me attend his funeral...betcha there were a lot of people there...”

“From what I heard, very few with those few being cops making sure he didn’t escape the flames...his ashes were spread in the flower garden outside...” Okay, I couldn’t help myself, I just had to get that stir in!

“He hated flowers...no-one went? Not even his brother? He’s dead when I get out. He owed me old man he did and couldn’t be bothered to repay some by attending his funeral...the gutless bastard”.

“I’d be careful what you say threatening someone in front of a Detective. It could turn on you and bite. What did he owe your father?”

“He...”

He caught himself in time, clamming up, knowing he had said way too much, especially in front of a couple of police officers.

## **CHAPTER NINETEEN**

The Boss beckoned me with a hooked finger, curling and uncurling it for me to enter her Office. I strolled down not wanting to give the impression I was walking quick-step at her beckoning gesture. There is protocol within the Office, one of which is never let the Boss get the better of you!

I think she must have flipped over that page...or not taken it in!

She closed the door behind me and leant against the edge of her desk as I slouched into a visitor’s chair, not liking her show of power by standing over me. I thought about standing but realised it was way too late for that. She must have read my mind as she shook her head before she took a chair beside me...not her Executive Chair behind her desk.

She rubbed her hands together, then lent towards me.

“You know what the chatter is in the corridors of power at this moment? No? I expect you don’t...it’s all about a senior officer ignoring the accepted rules around decency at a partner’s funeral...and about flouting the dress code at such a solemn occasion...and not showing decency in pinning his many service medals on a cheap, off the rack suit of Lowes quality...”

“Hang on a minute Boss! That suit was a ‘fit the man’ three-piece from Peter Jackson...and at close to four hundred dollars, was most certainly not a Lowes ‘cheapie’! For the record Boss, which I think most of those complaining buffoons were privy to, I was in Hospital for the three days prior to the funeral. My wife had brought in my Dress Tunic, but it didn’t fit in any area of my body. It was a little late to arrange another at such short notice...so I wore my best suit...I have four such suits”.

She fluttered away my utterances with a wave of her hand.

“It has been whispered that he also showed a complete lack of etiquette by sitting with the Deceased’s new wife...who was in full Dress Uniform...and so was *his* ex-wife! The Commissioner of Police and several Deputy Commissioners were halted from sitting with the grieving widow as per protocol, by your insistence of sitting with her...and summoning the *ex-wife* to join the little party on the first pew...” She stood and walked slowly to the floor to ceiling narrow window that gave views over the Ferry Terminus at the navigable extremity of Parramatta River.

She turned and asked had I anything to say in my defence.

“I have no intention of repeating why I did not have my Dress Uniform on...and the misconception of my ‘day’ suit being a cheap off-the-rack Lowes special...four hundred bucks which was fifty dollars off because I purchased four suits and half a dozen business shirts at the same time...to me it was not a cheap buy but necessary as the hoi-polloi did not think much of my previous ‘uniform’! Jeans, a white T-shirt, ankle high toppers and a worn leather bomber jacket”. I scratched my ear and took several deep breaths to calm me down. My ‘tunic’ was good enough for them when I was an undercover cop, but now? I had to join the ranks of suitably dressed Officers. This actually came about when certain Senior Officers in the AFP ordered I wear something better when I was sequestered to their ranks...at that time it *was* several Lowes ‘cheapies’ which wore out and lost shape very quickly. “In regard to my wife and I sitting with Mishel Chalmers...we were invited. She wanted me close which meant both I and my wife were with her. Regarding Doug’s Ex sitting with us, I will never forget that moment. Doug’s first wife has shown nothing but aggro and jealousy, even making a scene when Mishel and Doug married...they had been divorced for five years, for God’s sake...she took Doug to the Cleaners, leaving him little to live on which meant he was forced to live in a ramshackle Hotel room as that was all he could afford after child maintenance fees for his two kids was debited automatically from his fortnightly wage...he never complained or put the woman down, instead he made excuses for her vile actions...but Mishel stood above all that shit and invited her to also sit with us...both women sitting together arm in arm...crying together...and as Mishel said, they had both loved Doug and Doug had loved them both...because of that, they were special people who shared a bond that could never be broken...”

I stood and grabbed my handkerchief to blow my nose. Stuffing it back in my pocket, I slumped back into the chair...

“It would have been so wrong to have all those Honchos taking up the front pew. Mishel didn’t know any of them from a discarded cigarette pack. She wanted people she knew and who knew Doug sitting with her...it was her decision to make not those who think because of their standing, they should be centre-stage on every occasion...good on her for sticking up for her husband and his memory...”.

I went to stand but was quickly ordered to remain seated.

She came and sat back in the Visitor’s chair beside me, again leaning towards me.

“Joe...you are my most trusted Officer...the one I can always rely on to give one hundred and ten percent on every case. You push the boundaries and continually shun the Policy and Procedures Manual whenever it suits you...and you can get yourself into a whole lot of shit. I must admit, you do have allies amongst all those Honchos in College Street...you’ve got a month to organise the Dress Uniform...and I think you were fully aware of how the protocol works in such situations. Good on you for giving those ‘starched collars’ a wake-up moment. The service more beautiful by you giving a eulogy and staying up there giving Mishel moral support...and I too was affected by the humbleness and love Mishel displayed to Yvonne Pratt, Doug’s ex...and I too will never forget it. I’ll definitely ask for you to give a eulogy at my funeral...if I go before you. All I’ll say is you have rattled that cage again as you often do and shaken their little world...good on you! Go and get fitted for that Dress Tunic, huh. I’ll say nothing more on the subject”.

“It’ll have to wait Boss. From what I know, the Tailor who does our stuff has closed his doors because of Covid-19 and it is impossible to say when they will open to trade again...if they do”.

“Shit! Let’s just hope you are not required to go to someone else’s funeral...someone close”.

She patted my shoulder. Standing, she opened the door pleading for me to stay out of trouble as she was running out of excuses trying to explain my excesses.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

The daughter was the perfect likeness of her father and just as sour. A permanent sneer gave her a slightly insane look to my way of thinking. I guess to some it was something to stay away from...like a warning saying, 'Do not Trespass'.

"I got nuttin' ta say and even if I did, I wouldn't tell a copper!"

This insane chip against Police Officers was completely unfounded as a quick look through her criminal record sheet showed little history that would put her crossing paths with local coppers. A couple of 'Drunken and Disorderly' charges mixed with an Assault or two was her lot...until she bludgeoned her husband to death. It was a gory scene with blood everywhere, so went the story. It would seem once she started, she couldn't stop until exhaustion took over. But that really doesn't explain the behaviour. Sure, a chip off the old bloke but this almost insane anger? Unable to control the urge to explode? It was never explained and a recent chat with the Prison Psychiatrist didn't help much. Either way, it would appear she was 'in' for her natural life as her behaviour did not stop when she was first incarcerated. Two fellow women inmates can tell you she was extremely difficult to control once she smelled blood...once was not too many times for her...

"You're the arse-hole killed me old man..." A statement not seeking verification. A look that flittered up to me and just as quickly, she lowered her eyes to examine a minor blemish on her arm.

"Nah, sorry love. He was too scared to eat his gun as he stepped out in front of around half-a-dozen coppers and began to raise his weapon...suicide by cop fire I think they call it".

"Bullshit...he'd never be too scared to do anytink".

"Sorry missus...I'm just reporting the facts to you...thought you'd be interested. He pumped three slugs into your mother...the first to her right calf, the second to her torso and as she went down, the last to the eye socket...he was firing low. What, the pistol a little heavy for him?". I couldn't help it, I just had to get that stir in.

"That's bullshit...he would never touch her..."

"Three times he faced Court on DV Charges. The second to last time he put her into Hospital..."

“Nah, copper...that’s not how it went down. He took the fall for me...I punched her lights out...the last time, yeah, it was Dad...but he’d never kill her. No way”.

I was amazed at this reasoning which jumped several steps that would make the whole thing logical. I went to continue the discussion, but Shelley’s hand on my shoulder stayed any further words.

How can you reason with ignorance?

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE**

It had been one of those days...three days drifting into four where we voluntarily chained ourselves to our desks looking through the files sent to us from Grafton. The Grafton police officer’ files and the Glenda Staples stories from the Newspaper...pile upon pile of files on five Flash drives. I think the memories on each Flash drive taken up with photographs. If nothing else, you could accuse the old girl Glenda Staples of having an OCD streak. Files catalogued alphabetically, date lined, and/or numerically connected. Photographs were either copies from a decent medium format camera or early shots taken through an SLR camera...their quality slightly fuzzy and poorly defined, but you could see how they improved through the years using better and better digital equipment. The earlier shots of the mid Seventies taken with 135 colour film on a decent quality SLR camera. I had volunteered to first peruse the Staples Volumes while Shelley and Ruth Kindle perused the copy of the Police Operating Files on the disappearance of Beverley Priest. After they had finished that, they could follow me and peruse all the local News snippets kindly given to us. I had taken the opportunity to download the Flash drives onto our current working folder as a separate file dealing with the disappearance of Beverley Priest. Looking back through the now enlarge folder, I found that Shelley had done the same with the Police Operating Files on the disappearance of the poor girl. This would make it easy for us to each transfer across to the other file. The data we were reading causing both of us to make notes on assorted items, mistakes, and questions. We filled several yellow legal pads with more questions than answers.

After each of us had gone through the entire formality, we would sit in one of the small Interview Rooms and bombard each other with these questions. Sometimes it worked; sometimes it didn’t, but one thing was for sure, it made us question the entire investigation and our recent role in it.

Cumbersome, time consuming and frustratingly boring, but we had completed several difficult and cantankerous investigations in this manner, so we were not about to abandon the format, habit, or protocol.

It was Thursday, mid-afternoon before Shelley stuck her head out from behind her computer screen.

“It’s different, you know...without Doug being here. I know he was no office clown or joker but there is a gap in the air of the Office...know what I mean? He was one of Nature’s gentlemen as you said at the funeral. I never have thanked you for that...I couldn’t do what you did...you did good, Tonto”.

I leant back in my chair happy for the interlude. Nodded even though I thought Shelley was talking dribble! We both sat there looking at one another, Shells with a slight smile slowly rocking back and forth in her chair. She was looking inwards at times that had included Doug Chalmers.

Me? My mind was blank, thankful for this brief interruption as my eyes were starting to hurt and my head got heavier. A headache was coming. I subconsciously ran a finger over the furrow in my scalp that was the route of a wayward bullet years ago now. I sat and wondered whether the incidents of headaches was connected to that close shave. I decided against such a connection and endeavoured to strike it from my mind. Unfortunately, that didn’t stop that feeling that a headache was imminent.

“You hate it don’t you, when a crim gets the cheap way out instead of suffering sitting in a cold cell wondering repeatedly what he could have done better...” Shelley cut across my musing.

“They’re air-conditioned...”

“Sorry!?”

“The cells...they’re air-conditioned. The temperature at the best temperature for comfort...twenty-one to twenty-three degrees Celsius...I’m unsure about the humidity count but it couldn’t be that high...maybe in the thirty to forty percent grade”.

“Us people are paying taxes so those bastards in prison are feeling quite comfortable on a stinking hot day because their cells are air-conditioned...give me strength!” She shifted slightly so I knew she had a bee in her bonnet. “Sometimes I worry about you, Joe. Not enough to give *me* a headache, but just a bit off that, in fact. Once you roll up a Case, that’s it...even when the Case involves one of our colleagues being shot dead”.

She looked at me, challenging me to say something.

“They’re dead Shells...both the good guy and the Crim...they’re joined at the hip almost throughout eternity...their names forever linked...if you believe that guff”.

“Yeah...but you don’t think of them once they’re gone”.

“What’s the point once they’re gone? If they weren’t worth a moment of reflection or concern while they were alive, there’s no point in carrying on about it when they are dead!”

“You think about your Grandmother much?”

I had been open and honest about how I had always thought the woman was my mother until she died, and I got to read her Will and look through her papers to discover she was my grandmother on my mother’s side. My mother had done a runner when I was no more than three months old. Heading for pastures unknown until I chased her down...feeling a little guilty that I had!

“Yeah, I think about her a bit. But there would be days that I didn’t...besides, she is family not a work colleague or a crim...”

I could hear the growl come menacingly across from her desk. Then there was silence until Shells managed to rope in her annoyance.

“Mmm...this Bev Priest Disappearance Case? They certainly interviewed just about half the bloody State...” She re-joined, an aloof expression as though she was dealing with a bloody grub...or something well below that in intelligence.

“Except one...” I was in the mood to stir a bit. “You know, the chap in question...the guilty guy...I’d say they missed the opportunity to question him”.

“Jeezuz!” She looked up at me shaking her head as though I was a lost cause. “I haven’t a clue where we go from here. I guess the local guys also had that feeling being at a loss of which way to turn. Looks to me it will become an Unsolve annoying us sitting on the corner of your desk. The Grafton lads had certainly put it in that category...unsolvable...so it seems to me. They’ve resurrected it several times but all they did was kick over old sods of dirt, not thinking of going in a completely different direction...they just turned over old shit”.

“Hmm...yeah, I got that impression also...by the way, it is something I always forget to ask...why is it that ‘Unsolved’ Working Volumes are placed on the corner of *my* desk? It’s been the habit since I was partnered with Marge Hendricks...and now you”.

“Easy Sherlock...you’re the lead in this partnership”. A smile to add to her words of knowledge. A caustic reply wasn’t worth the effort.

I placed my hands behind my head, intertwined my fingers and bending my head back as far as it would go, I closed my eyes. “What directions are there left for us to go down?” I raised my arms in an exalting manner. “What do we know?” I asked the great man in the sky or was it the guy suspended in the ceiling paint. Watching mere humans walk around below him...I still didn’t know what he was supposed to do! Perhaps morph out at some time to scare the bejeezus out of us...”

Shelley shook her head, her expression displaying her thoughts of me being a lost cause. She had waved to Kindle to join us...three heads are better than two! I rolled my chair down to Shell’s desk to join the group of two, not wanting to shout out any thoughts I may have on the Case.

“We are pretty certain he had a 4WD...more than likely a Ute. 4WDs weren’t a common sight on the roads back in seventy-five...seen more at Mine sites...”

“And farms”. Kindle commented.

“Yes...farms!” I had not thought of that...or had I? There was something familiar in the words. Both women turned to me looking as though they were wondering about my sanity because of my loud and quick reply.

“He either had a caravan which again weren’t that popular back then...or common...so either an early model caravan or some type of tent. The guy used to living it rough in the bush...that’s what he prefers over a crowded caravan park or an area like Illaroo. Late twenties to early thirties...that would put him as late sixties early seventies now...an old bloke. Maybe he is now impotent, huh? The acts no longer exciting him that way. Likes his own company...has long hair, which was the go back then although again, it was the hairstyle of the alternate brigade and those who shunned societal norms of the time! The Rolling Stones considered the baddies of society against that reputation the Beatles had with their shorter, styled haircuts. Maybe he still has a mullet of grey hair that shows him as a bloody twit. Fancy having a mullet at his age! A Drifter...maybe a bloke who drifts from mining town to mining town...”

“Not a caravan...if he were a bushie or a wanderer who preferred to set up camp in the bush away from other people, he’d have a small tent...or a swag...were swags a thing back in the seventies? He more than likely tied a canvas sheet to one side of his vehicle and lived under that most of the time...” Ruth offered. Her assumptions having a ring of truth about them. “Definitely a swag...no...a sleeping bag on a waterproof ground sheet”. She concluded, nodding her head to emphasise the point. “They weren’t as fancy as what they are today...no...I think that or a small lightweight two-man tent with a sleeping bag...they roll up to virtually nothing which enabled him to pack it up on his bike...a Triumph or Norton back in those days...saddle-bags with a carrier fitted behind over the rear wheel...I’ve seen guys even placing stuff on the fuel tank which would allow them to still lean over as they rode along the highway”.

How she jumped from a Ute and Caravan across to an early model Triumph or Norton motorbike so fluently was one of her assets. Shelley glanced at her, patting her on the shoulder to show we both respected her input.

I nodded, telling her I liked her assumptions. “But let’s not get bogged down when we are talking like this. Let the perimeters of our assumptions be flexible, okay?”

Ruth looked at me thinking I had given her the run of the mill. Up she began again.

“He liked beach fishing...he’d cook the fish. If he didn’t hook a decent fish, he’d live out of cans...he liked his own company too...maybe he was gay...that would have been tough back in the seventies...alone with no true mates...and the Law hunting them down at every turn”.

“Not gay, no. A gay guy wouldn’t kidnap and rape a twelve-year girl...even back then when what made a gay guy exist wasn’t that well known or understood...”

“Unless he was trying to prove to himself that he was straight...to be accepted by his peers...”

“Mmm...it’s a thought, though I am not convinced...I go back to the point that a gay guy would never do such a crime”.

I couldn’t let the two women bully me out of the way with their assumptions. Crowding me out of the brain-storming session where offerings could hit on the reality more times than not.

“Once was one time too many for him...he didn’t like what he had done...I mean, in the end it was pure evil which he recognised...he had let the devil free...that is why he has

never repeated the act..." Shelley commented. "So, looking for similar acts with the Perp having been arrested, charged and sentenced would be wasting our time..."

"I don't think so. Yes and no. We must start somewhere, so 'priors' are worth chasing out. The local guys would have driven the 'History List' of known felons who acted in an equivalent manner quite mad! But our digitised records are so much easier to sift through so we should carry out that search before we go too much further...Ruth?"

I was a little disappointed at Shelley's negative approach. Then again, I wasn't top of the world with this case either.

"That makes it almost impossible to crack without him having priors or repeating the act again and again..." Ruth ended our little chat in saying that. "What you said the other day, Joe. What stops a guy like that from re-offending? Self-hate...which can lead to other things...he must have been bursting with a plethora of sexual fantasies, drive, or uncontrollable urges to make him kill the young Beverley...then he feels repugnant at what he has just done...standing there doing up his flies as he looks down at her. Young, so young, and defenceless...now a lifeless, bloodied mass!"

I nodded as I swung my feet onto the floor, rolling my chair back to my desk to address my keyboard. Googling up former and operating mines around the Grafton area.

"Yep...copper, coal and alluvial gold...a fossicker's dream apparently...Lapidary Clubs...not necessarily in the area as they organise week-ends and weeks away for members...it's a start...next week perhaps".

I didn't have the energy to start the search to-day...tomorrow may be different. The two women looked at me as though I had grown a horn in the middle of my brow. There had not been any mention of Lapidary Clubs during our brain-storming session so where in blazes had he come up with it, they were both thinking. You could tell as much by their expressions. Both looked at one another and shook their heads in unison. The man was too far gone to help resuscitate him...leave him be and ignore him...he may get over it!

I glanced at the clock, too early to knock off to do my exercise regime down in the Sub-basement.

I scrolled up the Lapidary Society of NSW to ring them. Unfortunately, advised by a croaky old man, members details weren't kept back in the early to late seventies...or if they were, he hadn't a clue where they now were.

“We do have several members who would have been members back in those days. They may be able to help you. I’ll contact them first to see whether they will be co-operative. Why are you wanting to go back that far?”

I explained the situation of the remains of the young Beverley Priest recently being found and my supposition that the chap may have been a fossicker...used to his own company, living a bit rough in the bush, tenting it.

“Mmm...yes. Doubt they could help in that manner...not one of our members, I can assure you, Detective. None of our members are killers of young girls, let me tell you...” A little affronted was the old bloke. “But we’ll see, yes? I’ll ring you to-morrow morning, yes?”

I hung up feeling even less confident than I had ten minutes ago.

“Shells? You had enough? I have...how about ten laps of the pool?”

“Sorry Joe. Have other plans”.

“Okay...yeah”. This was the second time in two consecutive weeks she opted out of our daily routine. Even Ruth Kindle had something better to do. No matter, a dozen laps of the pool is a lonely affair in any case, so I won’t feel out of it!

I returned to my desk half an hour past the accepted knock off time to find Ruth still there.

“What are you still doing here?” I asked as I stopped by her desk.

“Meeting my love not long to go, so I thought I’d fill in time going through the files on similar Cases of kidnapping and death...a lot but very few unsolved. I have about fifteen names of an age in our parameter age group...”

“Yeah, good...we can look at them tomorrow”. I unlocked my gun drawer to grab my Glock and ID Card. I was heading for home and not a moment too soon.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO**

My Mobile buzzed as I picked it up to use. I answered softly concentrating on other things than what I should be focussing on...the damn phone!

“I’m looking to speak with a Detective Lind...I think that is his name...”

“I am he...” I answered pleasantly. The voice came from an elderly person short of breath, forcing out every word.

“Yes...you are Detective Lind?”

Christ, we could have this bloody waltz together for a couple of hours before I got the shits and hung up on the old bloke.

“Yes sir, I am he, how can I help you?” Losing interest in him by the second.

“Yes. I understand you are looking for a chap that in the mid-seventies, was in his late twenties, early thirties, preferred his own company and often would spend days and weeks in the bush...I was the Secretary of the Australian Lapidary Association which was incorporated in NSW in the Nineteen Twenties. As the governing body, we had Chapters across Australia, the most popular Clubs were here in New South Wales and Western Australia. We had many enthusiastic pickers, scabblers and washers amongst our many Clubs. Yes?”

I nodded as though replying to him. My lack of response threw him. The silence grew until I thought he was waiting for an answer...what to I'll never be sure about!

“I do not have that knowledge. That is why I approached your Association for help”. I replied.

“Arrh...yes...that period? The end of the Vietnam War with many having an enormous problem with fitting back into society...living in the bush. Cut off from loved ones and people in general. We had a few like that. Are they the types you are looking for?”

“Yes sir...though I must admit I didn't make the connection of the mid-seventies to the end of the Vietnam War. Many good men were scarred by that War. I know of chaps who just disappeared off the radar never to be found...regardless of they wanted or not to disappear...”

“Yes, a sad situation. We arbitrarily select youths, teach them to kill and when they come back home, there is little help for those who need it to ease themselves back into society. A national disgrace. I served in Korea and the Governmental attitude back then hasn't changed even now. It is still the same which is a major problem for the Government. Hopefully, those returning from the Middle East Troubles will be better treated by the Government, eh?”

“Armm...yes, one can hope, eh? Do you have any names that could be within that description...that grouping?”

I realised I could be here for hours with the old man drifting around in circles unless I continually pulled him back into that scope of interest for me.

“Vietnam Vets? No...I don’t think I ever came across one of those. They’d be in your sphere of interest with so many of them going off the rails...”

I was sorry that the Vietnam War was even mentioned, as it cut into his train of thought and brought out his racist views. That is, Viet Vets and non-Viet Vets.

“One bloke...although he was around mid-eighties and would have been far too young to be a Vietnam soldier. Maurice Ridge...Morrie Ridge. A superb Bushman who knew a lot of Aboriginal cuisine...and bush tricks...” He giggled at his joke. “Yes, he could go bush and survive...reckoned all he needed was running water nearby as he could trap and kill whatever with what he called a Salad Bar for a side serve. A quiet sort of bloke...I haven’t heard of him recently, but he used to roam the bush out around Lismore...up in the mountains around there...he had some nice gems that he found in his wanderings...worth quite a bit of money, especially if they were cut by a Professional...he wasn’t interested saying that would kill the natural feel...the natural beauty of them. There are people like that, wanting to retain the natural beauty of the stone”.

“Do you know if he had a vehicle? A 4WD Ute perhaps?”

“Ooh! I don’t know...but I guess he could have as the sightings of him were widespread, not possible if he was on foot...umm...I suppose he could always thumb a lift. He had three dogs...one as big as a small horse that he called Souze...no-one else I’m afraid, Detective. I hope that may help you. Good afternoon to you”.

I sat there thinking back through the conversation. Eventually, I looked up the internal phone numbers, rang Lismore and asked whether they were aware of a middle-aged bushman who lived in the bush up around there.

“Ridgey-didge...Morrie...Morrie Ridge. A harmless loner but a friendly bloke. Doesn’t seem to have a chip but something happened to him for him to shy away from society. He comes and goes up and down the coast and into the hinterland. He should write a book on his bush skills. Yeah, he’s roamed around this district for years...I came here in Two Thousand and he was known about long before me being stationed here. Yeah! What do you want to know?”

“Do you know where he is at present?”

“Not exactly, no. He comes in usually once a month to withdraw money from his Account. To buy powdered milk, coffee, flour...stuff like that...he’s due here next Friday. Do you want me to hold him until you can get up here? If he goes bush, there’s no hope of finding him until the following month...and I reckon if you tried to nab him, you’d be fighting with three bloody dogs”.

“Wouldn’t he have been in danger with all those bushfires this last summer gone?”

“Yeah, we were worried about him and quizzed the RFS guys to keep an eye out for him. They found his truck...a burnt out 4WD Ute skeleton that should have been scrapped ten years ago...it wasn’t even roadworthy back then...I guess we could have forced it off the road...no-one seemed to worry about it...there was no sign of Morrie after the fires went through. We can only hope he turns up for his monthly shopping trip. It’d be a bloody shame if he got caught in the flames”.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE**

“Let’s fill in the time positively before Shells and I have to get to the Airport. They’ve really cut the number of Intrastate flights to the bone. They don’t want us giving the local guys up there a sniff of Covid-19 as the Health system up there wouldn’t be able to cope with many townfolk coming down with the virus which may see them hospitalised. Um...your suggestion last night Ruth, had merit...but thinking about it, it doesn’t give us much. Why? There is no knowledge of how she died, what was done to her before she died and after she died. Because of this, we’ll be pissing into the wind. What attributes of Beverley’s death do we know for sure? To put it bluntly...none! So, we have no comparative listings to call up. Excellent work, but I’m afraid it was useless...”

“What’s this about Joe?” Shelley asked, a little miffed at being left out.

“Ruth had some time to spare last night waiting for her secret lover...” Ruth turned a funny colour of crimson. Shelley gave me a look to kill which I chose to ignore. “So, she was going to look back through the records to see whether she could obtain crimes of a similar nature thus hopefully given us a name...hoping our Perp has committed a similar act before or after Beverley’s death...but unfortunately, we have no detail to compare to similar cases”.

“Ooh...I’m sorry. I should have kept both of you in the loop. I gave that a go yesterday but gave up before I started for the reasons you brought up just now Joe...sorry. Come on Joe, time to head for the Airport. Ruth? A good try, unfortunately, it doesn’t fly...give it a go placing different criteria into the Pro-forma while we are heading north. We’ll be back tomorrow all going well...see ya”?

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“Thanks for taking the time to see us...” I wanted to start off friendly-like. I’m afraid I fell at the first hurdle.

“Yeah, right! I had no say in the matter. I was bundle into the back of a Divvy Van the minute I came out of the bush into town...kept in a cell overnight. Not good...and me dog, he’d be getting worried by now so keep your platitudes and thanks for some-one more worthy...say a serial killer!”

“Why would you say that?”

“Say what?”

“About keeping our thanks for a serial killer...”

He sat up and looked around the small room, thinking perhaps that a serial killer may morph out of one of the walls. He blinked rapidly as he shrugged his shoulders. There was nothing said that may have cleared the comment up for us, so we continued the interview.

“Your dog, Souze? She’s been here at the Station overnight. Spoilt. She’s been bathed, fed, and watered. She looks a million bucks!”

I gave him my conciliatory smile. He nodded his thanks. At least his dog should have enjoyed the stay.

“Morrie Ridge...it’s not registered anywhere...there isn’t even a Birth Certificate under that name...so...what is your birth name and why have you changed it to Morrie Ridge? Who are you hiding from?” Shelley began on the front foot, boring straight into the bloke. I wasn’t sure he deserved it, but what the heck, start off strong and see what happens before reverting to a more conciliatory line of questioning.

It wasn't a glare or even a stare. It was a look of total boredom and distrust mixed with that faint smile that seemed painted on his dial. He the only one included in the joke. Somehow, he made me look away, the first person ever to do that. I gave a quiet harrumph accompanied by a slight smile of my own. He looked down at the Biro he was fiddling with. I wanted to swipe it off the table, knowing full well that he was constructing the scene...he had control at the moment, getting me hot under the collar for his endeavours. To me, that attribute smacked of an ex-copper.

“You ex-Army?” Shelley asked to fill in the silence.

He glanced at her, another crooked smile. It was then that I could see the scar that went from the corner of the mouth up to his eye socket.

“You on a pension, eh? Possibly TPI?”

“Yeah, kind off...if you were a good copper, all you have to do is go to the Bank to obtain my proper name...that I am ashamed of...truly. Family can do that to you, can't they? Any time, huh?”

“Does your wanderings take you out to the coast...say around Wooli, Minnie Waters and Sandon Point which is about due east of Grafton?”

“I know where Minnie Waters is...a lovely little layback village...once was I guess, until it became a place where you had to book three years in advance to get a site that only a small ten-foot caravan could squeeze into! It's no longer that quiet little village. Sandon River which is to the north of Illaroo campgrounds going the same way if it hasn't already been spoilt. It's getting hard to mind yer own business...and small spots north of Sandon Point towards Yamba also have lost their seclusion and privacy”. He looked away, interested in a spot on the wall behind me, I assumed. “Getting a little hard to get around now me truck got burnt out in the fires early summer just gone...seems I will need to buy another truck. Nothing fancy, just good enough to get me, me digs and me dogs around the area between the New England to this coastal strip. I've hitch-hiked a couple of times, but I don't like it...most people won't pick up a stranger with three dogs. It's usually local blokes...farmers in their Utes. The dogs will stay in the back, no worries...but the conversation always gets around to personal stuff that I ain't gunna tell anyone about...but all in all, I don't go much on hitching a ride...there's some weird people out there...” He smiled then chuckled, realising the humour of his last few words.

“The fires this summer...I'd say you were lucky to live through them...”

He nodded, looking up at the ceiling as he did...thanking the Lord Above for his survival.

“Never seen anything like it. Fire fronts hundreds of kilometres long going faster than you could run...a frightening time...people might thank their God for safely making it through. To me it was a bit of luck and knowing the bush around me. Lost two of me dogs but I’ve still got Souze who will be waiting for me downstairs, huh? He’ll be getting a little impatient by now...so much bullshit...I just figured it out, you’re casting yer net trying to catch the sod who killed that young girl...Nineteen Seventy-Five wasn’t it? Her remains unearthed because of the fire that ravaged the entire Yuraygir National Park that includes a large strip of coastal land up to Yamba...I wasn’t born in Seventy-Five...”

“When were you born?”

He quietly harrumphed glancing at me with that crooked smile again.

“People...they are bastards to one another...to each other. There’s no telling what one will do to you even when you thought he was a mate”. He nodded as he once again began to spin the Biro. “If you must know, I was a cop...got mixed up...caught in the middle of a DV Incident...my own parents, would you believe. Suffered severe stab wounds inflicted by both me parents who seemed to be in a trance-like state with hate boiling over to such an extent, logic and knowing what they were doing going out the door. Lashing out at anything that moved”. He fell silent as though running the memories through his mind. Just as quickly, he picked up the thread of where he had stopped. “They ended up dying from stab wounds inflicted on each other”. He shook his head as though imagining the scene. “They were drunks, to put it mildly”. He traced the fine scar line up to the side of his eye. “My partner shot both...I couldn’t take the reality even though I knew they fought...physically hoeing into each other when both got on the turps...I couldn’t hack it. Fell apart...Senior Constable Morris left society behind...drawing a pension for my troubles and a lump sum for my years of service. The crud who killed that young girl back in...um...a while ago now? Around the Seventies, wasn’t it? I haven’t a clue though I’ve dug about meself...a loner like meself but I am sure he was a Viet Vet. I stumbled over his digs one time...it would all be burnt now after the summer fires...” He shook his head. “I was scared for me life. Told Souze to run, but she wouldn’t leave me. As it turned out, she made the right decision because we both survived...just...”

“How?”

“If you look in the right spots and study the lie of the land, there’s some deep caves, a few with clear water...deep river or creek gorges where the flames wouldn’t trespass...even overhangs that will always give you protection...that was what kept us alive. It is one of me ‘spots’...I got about a dozen between the coast here and up to Armidale...no-one knows of their existence...but that fire-front? It sucked the very air out of your lungs. You think you

are dying slowly with no oxygen to breath. Both me and Souze laid down and tried to breathe shallow-like. Must have helped as we're still both here".

"You were noted as being a lapidary member. Is that correct?"

"Hah...no...well...yes and no! I was surprised having a swim by a mob who thought they were reasonable bushman. All they did was plod about chipping, ripping, and making a bloody mess...and those so-and-so's who practise washing for alluvial gold? They muddy the water downstream so much they force all the stream critters to find new homes...getting savaged by dogs and cats for their trouble...for what? A little bit of colour that wouldn't keep them in bloody soap. They know they aren't supposed to do such things in National Parks, but they flaunt the Law where-ever they go...so...to recap? I do not know who that bastard was as it occurred some fifteen years before I settled here...but I'd like to squeeze the life out of his balls. Nothing else?" He stood. "I'll wish you a good day and leave you in peace. Please offer me the same sentiment...and I need a lift back to where you dogs picked me up...after I've been to the Bank, got some supplies and picked up Souze...hear me?"

He nodded before quietly leaving the room as we finished off our notes.

"Don't you hate that type of person...holier than thou? He was upset about people doing damage in a National Park where such activities are not allowed...but neither is living in the bush...camping rough...yer permitted to camp in organised areas set aside for such activity...but not permitted to live out in the bush anywhere in a National Park..."

"You sure of that?"

"Yeah...well, I think so".

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE**

"Senior Constable Morris...at least we got his name. Shells? Run the name through the NSW Police Records. See what you can come up with".

"And what is my partner gunna do while I'm slaving away over my iPad?"

"Arrh...leaning back, closing my eyes, and recounting what little we know of our 'loner' back in Seventy-Five..."

“Our Senior Constable Morris is bound to have run into him while he was in this area...you know, as they both stumbled about in the bush...”

“Only if he stayed in the area after he committed the deed...which I doubt. I’d say he pissed off out of the area not long after the deed but stayed long enough not to cause any suspicion to fall his way by his departure. Morris? Has he left the Station yet?”

I stood hurriedly to chase after the man. I thought his first destination would be the Bank and then to the local Supermarket where he would stock up on his monthly supplies. I ran down the street, crossing the main drag and jogging down one block to catch him as he left the ATM.

“Morrie...just a moment. One word if you don’t mind?”

“I do, but I doubt that will trouble you”. He stuffed a wad of money into a canvas bag along with his ‘Plastic’. “How about we sit at that Café down the street and chinwag, huh? Your shout of course...” A thin smile to go with his suggestion as though he thought he had put one over me. He had all morning, was how I looked at it!

We walked to the corner Café and selected a table a little away from the rest. A pert woman took our order as we gazed about at the streetscape.

“Okay...it must be something important to have you out of breath chasing after me”. A grin that showed up the facial scar. It seemed to hurt when he smiled as he went for it every time he smiled. That expression was not something the man practised much.

“Mmm...not that hard. We are all creatures of habit...you...once a month you come in for supplies. I would imagine if you were up around the Armidale district, you’d come out of the bush on the same day...”

I glanced his way as the Waitress placed our coffees and a sausage roll for me and a meat pie for Morris.

“Yeah...that’s right...the end of the first week of the month the eagle shits and I have a top-up of funds placed in my account. These ATMs are handy machines...doesn’t matter where you are, yer can still have access to your money...if you have enough, that is”.

“How do you keep so clean? I mean, living in the bush? You’d have to get a little dirty, unshaven, dishevelled, wouldn’t you?”

“I remember someone saying if you let yourself go, you’re on the downward slide...I shave maybe once a week...go for a swim summer or winter once a week and usually the day before I come into town. About every three months I shout myself a haircut and a close shave at a Hairdressers...one here in Grafton and one at Armidale or Tamworth that I use regularly...and most of the Caravan Parks...and even in areas like Illaroo Campgrounds, they now have showers installed. The hot water obtained from solar panels. So, if you know the lie of the land, you can get by if you have your wits about you”.

I looked at him as he took a bite of his meat pie. For a bloke who has shunned society and lived rough in some bush camp, he didn’t appear to be as ‘lost’ as he hinted at previously. He must have read my mind as he tried to make excuses and give reasons for his appearance...one would look at him and not have a clue he was one of society’s dropouts.

I waited until we had both finished eating.

“You said back at the Police Station that you had stumbled across ‘*his*’ camp...how did you know it was ‘*his*’ camp?”

He looked up the street over my shoulder. I thought he looked in that direction so he could also spy my expressions out of the corner of his eye.

“I don’t know...” He shrugged. “It just seems to fit; you were asking about the AO who killed that young girl...probably raped her several times...I just assumed as there can’t be that many of us living rough out in the bush...less than the number living it rough up around Daintree”.

I nodded.

“And again, you are assuming he raped the Deceased several times...why would you surmise that action on a twelve-year-old girl?”

He turned his bottom lip down and shrugged again.

“Then why take her? His thrill isn’t in the taking, but what he can do with her while she is completely powerless and under his control...Psychiatry 101 in the Police Training lectures...funny how I have remembered them”. He again smiled, that reflex action with his hand touching the scar-line.

“What was the bush camp like?”

“Up tight in an undercut section of cliff...not a big cliff like further inland but still...an undercut section. Near to the point where a creek cuts under the Wooli Road and begins its ascent towards the coast down there. Wooli Creek. It would have given decent shelter against the wind and rain from the south through to the northwest sector. His swag rolled up hanging by a short rope swinging about in the breeze from a nearby tree limb...and a fire had only recently been doused...it had its own pit dug out in part from the rocky ground. There was another fire pit at the back of the overhang, lit on a winter’s night to keep him warm...there were timber boxes that held supplies also hanging by ropes from the nearby tree to make it hard for any animal foraging about...enough there to keep him fed for at least a couple of months if he was careful. Rice, potatoes, tinned vegetables, a large jar of coffee, sugar, milk powder...um...some other stuff...you know? A creek about fifty easy metres away for fresh water...as long as you boiled the shit out of it, or you got those special pills that purify the water. Sold at most decent camping and surplus stores. A change of clothes hanging over a rope line...several waterproof coats including a ‘Dry-as-a-bone’ coat that looked new...I reckon he may have lifted that...I was gunna take it meself but you don’t do stuff like that on a fellow loner...besides, I had an inkling he wasn’t far away and was hiding in the bush watching...you know, you get the hairs on the back of yer neck rise up...yer never too sure what his reaction might be if’n you go to swipe any of his stuff...he could attack you with an axe, a tomahawk...or even a rifle but I didn’t see any ammunition or magazines so’s I could have been wrong...yer never too sure...and Souze and me other two at the time were a little nervous...skittish...I haven’t checked the camp since the fires went through...he may have been lucky”.

I leaned forward, looking fiercely at the man as I nodded.

“When were you given a medical discharge from the Force?”

“Um...I can’t remember...I don’t want to remember...” The beginnings of a smile. He was playing games with me, and I was an eager competitor. His reply generating so many more questions. I drained my cup of coffee and stood, shaking his hand as I did. Asked him which way was the Cop Shop, smiling as I offered up my excuse of not knowing Grafton that well...it was not a town that I visited much during investigations...this was my first.

“Yer dog Souze? He’d be pretty old, no?”

“Hah...he’s the third dog I’ve had that I have called Souze...the first one was a Greyhound...got him as a rescue dog. Souze Two...a bull massif...one hell of a dog...don’t rightly know what happened to him...Souze I got now...she was left...I found her on the side of the road. She’d been run over...she possibly fell out of a Ute and went under a wheel...the bloke didn’t know his dog was gone...he’s halfway to Broken Hill before he knows his dog has gone...she is one hell of a dog. Look at me sideways and you have a dog

growling showing nothing but teeth...Detective...always be aware of direction...always know where north is regardless of how many times you are turned around”.

He nodded, stood, and began to walk away, a wave over his shoulder his farewell. No thank you for the free coffee or meat pie...what was I expecting? Him paying for a three-course meal? Not in a bloody blue moon!

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX**

I went in and paid the bill, coming out I wandered over the road to the Bank, asking to speak to the Manager.

A middle-aged man with a salt and pepper beard and moustache came to the counter.

“Yes sir, what can I do for you?”

I showed him my ID card and offered the advice that I was the Detective heading a team investigating the disappearance and death of Beverley Priest since her remains were found some weeks ago.

“I have just been speaking to a chap who is on the list of possible suspects, though we suspect he maybe a little young to have been in this area when Beverley was taken”.

The Manager, a Mister Royce Barton nodded his head.

“His name, Detective?”

“Um...he has given us a name which we are suspicious about. Morris...we don't know his birth name. He withdrew a wad of money some thirty minutes ago from one of your ATM's out front. Can you help us? And no...I do not have a Court Order to obtain the information I've requested which is the proper course of action in situations like this. Um...I'm hoping you can just supply his name, sir”.

He stood, stepping away from the counter. He again peered at my ID Card, taking down the switchboard number down at Parramatta. He relayed that he wouldn't be one moment, taking my badge as he walked towards a back Office. Several minutes later, he came back out, nodding at a Security Officer standing in the public area. He again leaned towards me, giving back my ID Card. He seemed a little more relaxed, smiling as he addressed me.

“Detective...” He looked away then back at me. “I know the Priest family. They are customers here...I know the torture they have gone through over the years. My father was a schoolmate of old man Priest. Good mates. Um...sir, I’ll open the door for you...” He waved to a door at the far end of the counter run.

The door opened at my approach, and I was escorted into the Manager’s Office by a bright young Teller. I settled into a straight-backed chair as instructed by the Bank Manager. A desk-top sign gave his name as Charles Dean. I remembered seeing the name on various shopfronts albeit all were closed. In fact, Grafton looked like a deserted town with little pedestrian traffic and even less vehicular movement because of the Covid-19 scare. It was said that these regional towns were really concerned about any virus outbreak as they didn’t have the resources or the staff at the local hospital to keep it in check.

Every regional town right across Australia would have been in the same boat.

“About half an hour ago. He swivelled the screen around so I could view it. He scrolled through people addressing the ATM area.

“That’s him...” I poked my finger at the image. “Yeah...that’s him”.

“Okay...let’s see. He withdraws on the first or second of each month. Usually around the one-hundred-dollar mark. This morning he withdrew five hundred, the most he can withdrew at any one time...he has done that for the last...oh...the last twelve months...no...eighteen months about”.

“Nine thousand dollars about...a new Ute, I suspect. A very patient man. What is the name on the account and what is his birth date?”

“Morris Richard Galligan...birthday given as twenty-two February Nineteen Fifty-four making him sixty-six years of age...that your man?”

“I guess so, though I would never have put him at that age. I would have said he was in his forties...late forties. Living rough must have some benefits so it seems. A little old to my reckoning to be roaming around in the bush...it’d be a hard life, but he appears to be all the better for it. He would have been twenty years old at the time of the young Priest disappearing...” My mind clicked through information recently obtained. “He would have still been in the Force at that time and not anywhere around here. Thank you for your cooperation...oh...one last thing, how long has the account been active?”

“Yes...the account was opened in Ipswich in Ninety-one...and there is over two hundred thousand in the account”.

I gave a soft whistle at that piece of information. I doubted whether I could become a ‘drop out’ with that type of money and a regular deposit every month. Maybe I was never meant to be such a person...I liked the warmth and comfort of my own bed every night and someone to tell my dreams to.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“Senior Constable Morris...no such animal, Joe...in the list of all NSW Cop Force bods...bloody hell! This Case is nothing but blind alleys! We’re getting kicked from arsehole to breakfast with nothing to show for our hard grind!”

We were now in the air, catching the early afternoon flight back to Sydney.

“Try Senior Constable Morris Richard Galligan of the Queensland Police Force, stationed in Ipswich”. I smiled as Shelley turned to me wondering who in hell was this Galligan bloke and did he own a dozen Sheep Stations somewhere up north!

I sat there half asleep, just vaguely hearing Shelley speed over the keyboard, something I wished I could do.

“A Queensland copper!” I suddenly suggested. Opening my eyes wide as though something had bitten my balls. “Not Victorian as that is too far away...but a Queenslander? Pretty much the same climate for most of the year...maybe a little colder in Ipswich in the middle of the winter...he’d still feel comfortable I reckon”.

I again fell silent thinking what it was about the guy that got my hackles raised. I suddenly spoke up breaking the silence.

“I couldn’t do it. You’d have to be a country lad who more than likely would feel more comfortable in that lifestyle. Even if you found somewhere...like a deep cave or something, where you were right out of the weather...you starting up a fire would have a tell-tale of smoke rising lazily into the sky...that surely would be spotted...and cause the local RFS guys to come and investigate...”

“Only if you started a fire during the day. If I were the guy camping rough, the only time I would start up a fire would be after dark”. She turned to me. That patronising smile meant to belittle me...it worked!

“That means a late Dinner...having it as you trample about in the bush in the dark...”

“C’mon Joe. A good fire sends out light a fair distance...but if I were that loner, I’d make sure a had a good quality lamp as well...arrh...tell me again why we are paying so much attention to this guy. He’s too young to be our Perp in the Beverley Priest murder...he admitted that himself. He wasn’t even born in seventy-five...”

“According to him he’s too young. Born after seventy-five...I reckon he is one of those persons who it is difficult to judge his age...”

“Mmm...yeah...maybe. What aren’t you telling me, Joe? To me he is in voluntary confinement of his own choosing because of some dramatic event in his life...which is years away from the young lass’s brutal murder...so tell me again, why are we putting so much sweat into this guy?”

“Something doesn’t sit right with the guy...”

“Yeah, like?”

“He goes by an alias...why? Galligan is the surname on his Bank Account...”

I really didn’t know but he sure got my nose a-twitching. I looked over at Shells not knowing what to say. *‘She will drive me mad with this’* I thought to myself.

“Just as I thought, you haven’t the foggiest, do you?”

“To be honest...no...but something doesn’t sit right”.

“Good! Tell the local guys that you have an itchy arse over this bloke and let them deal with it while we use up energy trying to solve the death of poor Bev Priest”.

“Yeah...okay...but have you checked the Queensland Cop Register?”

“Give me strength! You haven’t taken in a word I have said, have you? As I said earlier, you know something that I am unaware of...come on partner, cough up”.

“Yeah...nah...a little...maybe”.

If she had her Glock, I imagined she would have whisked it out and stuck it up my nose. Her gun thankfully, safely stored with mine, in a special locker for such things down near the rear Hostess station, so I felt safe.

“Yep, here we go...how dumb are we not figuring he spent his younger years in the Queensland Cop Force? Dah!!” Sarcasm laced her every word and as she glanced over at me, her words laced with sarcasm.

I smiled to myself because even though she thought it a total waste of time, she had continued with the search. I knew she would!

“Yep, Gold Coast Central. Senior Constable James Morris Galligan. Grew up in Ipswich. Paid out on a Disability Pension in...Ninety-one aged thirty-seven. Fell off the earth some fifteen months later assumed to have entered the surf and kept on swimming...his body never found...there is a Service Photo of him on file...a lot younger man but it is our boy for sure”.

“Try the Grafton coppers, they know where he is...or at least each month they can make contact...and he was born before seventy-five. In Nineteen Fifty-four if my maths is up to it...which makes him over twenty when Bev Priest went missing. Maybe your itchy arse was right indicating we should look at this guy a little closer...” The closest she would ever come with an apology. I really didn't want one from her as if she did, I would be paying the fee for its appearance for the rest of my life!

“Both parents killed...that's all it says. It does not elaborate...end of story except he was an exceptional Police Officer bound for plainclothes...mmm...I hope my records are a little more forthcoming and offer more insight into my character and service than what Morris's eulogy offers. I'd feel slighted by the short-hand history of spending so long in the Force”.

“So...what would you like? She served with honour, honesty, and sacrifice...especially when you consider she partnered that brilliant Dee, Joseph Lind who safely guided her through many obstacles for a lot of years”.

“Shit...give me strength...notice how the Man of Steel turns it around to concentrate on him...a really humble asshole, huh? Okay, what are we going to do about our Mister James Morris...or do we say Morris 'Morrie' Galligan?”

“As they told us at the Lismore Station, you'd never find him in the bush...but he emerges like clockwork once a month for supplies. Let's put an alert out for him when next he comes in out of the cold...and yeah, he's going to buy another Ute with a price around six to nine thou. That'd buy a decent vehicle with wide tyres for sand travelling”.

She again glanced at me, a frown to show she was not following the banter.

“Okay...I'll ask...where have you got all this information from on the bloke?”

“Good deductive reasoning...and the cost of a meat pie and a coffee”.

“Yep, okay. Total bullshit. He’s not about to tell me...sounds like a plan. We’ll need to get the Boss’s approval before we can get an ‘All Points’ just concentrating on the New England and Northern Rivers Areas. One thing we can do is to put a ‘hold’ on his Bank Account. The minute he tries at any ATM to obtain funds from Grafton to the New England area, the local guys can nab him”.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“Joe? Before we land, can I run through the facts revolving around our sixty-odd year old ‘bushie’ because it doesn’t add up to me?”

I nodded.

“Okay...he was born in Ipswich, Queensland in Nineteen-Fifty-Four which puts his age in the mid-sixties which I would never have guessed at. He had jobs for brief periods after he left school with a Higher School Diploma in the top ten percent of the State. He tried a Bank, State Public Service and even as a Builder’s Labourer before joining the Queensland Police Service on his twentieth birthday in Nineteen Seventy-Five. There is no indications of him being in the Grafton area at the Christmas School Holiday period in Nineteen Seventy-Five. He was involved in his parents’ drunken arguments which led to him being dismissed on a Disability Pension in Nineteen Ninety-One. He had a mental melt-down from which he would never recover according to the Force’s doctors and psychiatrists. In the sixteen years he served mostly stationed in the Gold Coast area and served with distinction. He was in line for Plainclothes Detective grades at that time. He disappeared for several years before emerging out of the bush to use his bank account at Armidale. He was given an insurance payout plus his combine superannuation and holiday payout which meant he had a balance of over a six-figure amount...at no time does he even get close to being a suspect in Beverley Priest’s disappearance and murder...you are barking up the wrong tree, Joe”.

“Mmm...yeah...it appears that way. Does the fact he was known to the local Ipswich coppers change your opinion? There is no official history of his run-ins with the local coppers except at ages twelve, fourteen, fifteen, and seventeen he was interviewed by the local coppers for being a suspect in numerous peeping tom incidents around the area. The local boys took pity on him as his parents’ behaviour was well known...local coppers were

often called to the marital home on reports of violence, bad language and screaming...alcohol was a problem..."

"Yeah, okay...that makes the possibility more plausible, but I am still not convinced...your nose is giving out false sensations, oh masked one...blow it a couple of times to clear it, huh!?"

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

"Detective Lind? This is Senior Constable Deidre Tomkins from Missing Persons. You placed a photograph of a Jane Doe up on the Missing Persons Register whom you assumed died from a drug overdose ...um...her manner of death is yet to be confirmed..."

"Yes...an educated guess based on the fact she died at a known drug den in the burbs. I am sure her autopsy will be first up to-morrow morning. All the outward signs are there that she died from an OD. Have you carried out a PRT of her?"

"Yes...and it hits more than the required number of logarithmic points on her facial make-up. Can I arrange a DNA sequence to compared with her father's DNA? As you know, all Missing Persons Reports obtain such DNA references when the MPR is first reported by a family member. That makes it easier for our identification processes".

"Sure...no worries. You can ask yourself for such a procedure by contacting Brian 'Muscles' Sarvich at the Forensic Building in Lidcombe. As I said earlier, we got her booked in for tomorrow morning for a post-mortem. I am confident she has died from an OD but that could be a week or two away for blood tox results to confirm that supposition. Perhaps we'll see you at the Lidcombe Pathologists Quarters in the morning..."

"I hate being a spectator at such events. I feel I am spying...viewing a specimen that I have not been cleared to spy on...at their lowest point, so to speak...when they are completely defenceless..."

"Yes, I know what you mean. If I could, I would rather be doing something else than watching a body dissected and pulled apart. Maybe me and my partner will see you there then".

"Yeah, maybe..."

I wasn't about to hold my breath.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

“It's her, isn't it?”

“Yeah, I reckon, but wait until you have confirmation with a DNA match, just to formalise the identity...such a bloody waste of an attractive, young lass”. I stated forcefully, really pissed off at the stupidity of the young thinking they will never be hooked on Ice when the evidence says otherwise...every bloody time! It really got under my skin as I could not relate to the activity. Kids will continue experimenting with drugs knowing that the activity will either cause brain injury or death...so why do they continue to be ignorant when they've been told of the dangers by their peers, their teachers, travelling Drug Squad Officers and others...it's got me beat!

I walked out onto the rear Dock area of the Coroners' new building at Lidcombe. Muscles followed me out, Shelley in step with him followed closely by Constable Diedre Tomkins and her partner Constable Three Jeremy Mothers. Shelley handed me a coffee. Every one of us except Muscles had that look of shock after seeing the autopsy of the young girl...

“Bugger of a business, eh?” Muscles uttered softly. He took a drag on a long panatela.

“Since when have you taken up the weed again, mate. It took you heaps of self-discipline to stop last time...it's been what? Five years?”

“Longer than that, mate. Marge told me if I continue to smoke, I was not having any time with my triplets. They're now ten going on fifteen...so it's been ten years...I know, I know...I cannot offer you a reasonable excuse...sorry...yeah, I know. Marge won't even let me in the house smelling of cigar smoke...she has a change of clothes in the garage for me every day and demands I have a shower in the outside shower near the garage before coming into the house or playing with the kids. It's kinda got both of us on tenterhooks, especially around the girls...” He nodded to himself before taking a sip of his coffee.

“Um...” He pulled me aside from the others standing around, chatting amiably in a tight circle. Totally against the safe distancing laws of the moment. “I'm thinking of tossing in the towel. The place runs like clockwork now and Brenda Wzerlic practically runs the show, in any case...”

I was surprised by the stale odour that wafted from every pore of his skin and his clothes. I wondered if I had such a stale smell when I was smoking. I guess I did!

“Won’t that bugger up your pension?” I asked.

Constable Tomkins finished off her coffee tossing the container into a nearby rubbish bin, saying her farewells and thanks for helping in her Case. I nodded, saying until next time which was a little brutal under the circumstances. She did a double take wondering what I meant.

“Yeah...um...” I stammered. “We’re bound to cross paths again, huh?” A weak smile trying to soften the words.

She nodded before stepping down off the dock to make a beeline for her vehicle, followed closely by her partner. She suddenly turned to address Muscles, retracing her steps to stand at the bottom of the dock area, shielding her eyes from the bright sun with her right hand. Jiggling the car-keys with her left.

“How long will the DNA comparison test take?”

“About the same time as her blood work-up, organ tests and tox details. Usually around seven to ten working days. When I get them, I’ll ring them through...we won’t release the body until we have definite results on those tests as confirmation of her identity”.

She nodded, waved saying something about visiting the parents to let them know how long it will be before they can have the body of their daughter. Her words seemed to drift away as she said them.

“She should wait until everything is figured; don’t you reckon?”

“Depends on her relationship with the parents. I would be hard pressed to do that job. Interviewing those who have reported a missing child, then having to occasionally touch base with them...and then bring them the sad news the parents were dreading, that the apple of their eye has Oded. On illegal drugs. Then resurrecting all the emotions when the Coronal Enquiry begins...and ends. Buggered if I could do that”.

Shelley looked at me as though I’d grown two horns in the middle of my brow.

“Joe!? What do you think we do? We get involved with close family members. We usually interview them, tell them how their loved one died...anesthetising the gory details to soften the effect. The family follows us as we advance through the Case...we’d meet them through

the various Court proceedings that could be more than two years after the Vic died. I'd say we are more involved with close family and friends of the deceased person more so than any copper working Missing Persons...we are involved for several years waiting for the Case to go to Court...and sometimes longer if the guilty party appeals the conviction..."

"I'm with you on that one, Shells". Muscles commented. To take the spotlight off me I asked whether he was serious...about calling it quits soon.

"I'm coming up to my sixty-first soon, mate. Don't forget, I'm a couple of years ahead of you..."

"A couple be buggered...has to be closer than a dozen".

"A dozen be buggered...yer gotta be kiddin' me...my back is buggered, I'm finding it harder and harder to get up of a morning, harder still to look at all the dead bodies but...don't get me wrong, I still am pleased at doing the cutting and the report writing. I'm pretty sure I can get out on a Disability Pension and with my Superannuation coming to a tidy sum we should be able to send my three onto University...if that is what they want to do...they're a bit iffy on that at the moment...we still haven't exhausted Mar's Super so we have cash to burn in a sense ...in fact her Superannuation has been growing at an alarming rate...the running of the place will be in good hands, with Bree taking control with Waller her second...we'll see...but that is how I have planned for my retirement...it's been in the works for several years now Joe...you've known that for as long as I've known it".

"If that happens, there'll be a few noses out of joint thinking they had first place in looking after the Office".

"Yeah, I know. It doesn't matter which way it goes, there'll still be a couple with the shits. Them's the breaks I'm afraid..."

"Can't you hand over the running of the Morgue Section while you hang on to overall control. Cut out the stab and thrust of the autopsies and just retain over-all command?"

"I have thought of that but...your words of 'cut and thrust' is the part I enjoy. Even the report writing of each subject, having to sign off on each autopsy is still a joy...it's the staff control that is getting up my nose..."

"Anyone in particular?" I asked, a worried look on my face. It was so unlike Muscles to be so down. "When was your last holiday, mate?"

"Um...remember. When we all took over that house up in Townsville..."

“Shit mate, the triplets were about five and just ready for school...that’s five...seven years ago now. You need a break...in any case, you need to hand the reins over to Bree to see how she can manage the job”.

“She’d do fine...”

“The proof is in the pudding, mate...I mean...jeezuz mate...this is a surprise...” I truly couldn’t see the Morgue Precinct without Muscles. He had been a close mate to me even before he went off to do the sabbatical in Belgium. Digging up the remains of dozens of Diggers buried in a mass grave during World War One. When he returned, the romance between he and my partner back then Marge Hendricks, blossomed in secret until it became too hard to keep the affair to themselves.

“Don’t worry Joe, I’ll still buy that decent red each fortnight. There’s no chance of me missing your...no...Tellie and the three girls’ company every two weeks. You? I guess I can add your presence into the mix, though that will be difficult”.

“Thanks mate. That’s right royal kind of you. I know where I stand on the totem pole of popularity, huh?” I joked as I always did when Muscles was around.

However, his confession really threw me, making me wonder whether his marriage was as solid as both admitted. I had seen cracks...admittedly Tellie said I was boxing with shadows in a darkened room again, a habit of mine too easily disturbed!

## **CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE**

We had barely left the Morgue Precinct when Shelley asked about Muscles.

“He’s been saying he has been thinking of retiring for the last umpteen years. No...he’ll stay on as he is one of those blokes who’ll be taken from his Office feet first...he loves the work too much, but it’s a bit worrying about his back. He’s had troubles with it after coming back from those digging fields in Belgium...a long time to nurse a bad back”.

We were heading back to the Parramatta Police Building when I suddenly sat up and blurted out the order as though I had been partially de-nuttled!

“Shells? Go back to the drug house”.

“What for?”

“We’re missing something...”

“What? She died from an OD...possibly caused by the ‘filler’ of the drug being powdered bleach or washing powder...possibly mixed to dilute the cocaine...or heroin”.

“Mmm...that’s the thing that doesn’t line up. To-day’s choice of drug is Methamphetamine commonly known as Ice. The ‘filler’ scenario in a drug would intimate Ecstasy or ‘E’, Heroin or cocaine which has gone off the boil with those wanting a high. I’d say because of the very nature of manufacturing being so questionable, the addicted ones still have a sense of survival. Her Rap Sheet never had her dabbling in heroin or cocaine and there were no arm tracks because if there were, Muscles would have noted it. I’ll hold onto my opinion until we get the blood tox back...in the meantime, I just want a squiz at the joint”.

Shelley shrugged, glancing at me as though I was a stranger with four arms.

“Tonto thinks he’s sure it’s on the way back to the Ranch, Kemosabe. No need to detour by much, trust me”. I quipped.

Shelley gave me a quick glance, a quicker smile.

“Um...One Feather? We don’t have a Ranch. I know that One Feather failed his orienteering course last summer. He couldn’t find his way out of the tepee, so I’m not about to rely on his sense of direction...I’ll program it into Miss Direction before we take off”.

“Now that is downright cruel, oh masked one. You needed a white cane to find the saddle on your white horse. It took you all day to realise your mask had slipped over your eyes and you weren’t going blind! You’re quick, oh masked one...you are supposed to be the brains of this partnership, but I am starting to have my doubts as you cannot tell the difference between a Bull Bison or a stag with eleven points!”

“Eleven points of what?”

“There you go...showing so easily what a drongo you really are!”

“What’s a drongo?”

“And you call yourself a bloody Australian!”

“What are you talking about!?!? I’m the Masked Ranger, the hero to millions of kids...I have no nationality, little one feather who rides a smaller horse than my all-white steed”.

“Hah, hah! I know what drongo means and I’m a Plains Red Indian who is proud of his one feather. Loved and admired even though I only have one feather”.

“Shows how easily people can be confused...” She wittingly responded.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

“Christ! The smell...that’s a dead body, don’t you reckon? The Forensic people were here for two days. Another two days after they finished, and it is back to business as usual...dead bodies!”

“Yeah...the common side effects of doing drugs. Your death while you sleep...what a trip, huh? I have no understanding or comprehension of the pull...the absolute necessity of taking a drug even if it means you die...I would have always thought the act of dying was sufficient to curb the taking of a particular drug...evidently not true, huh?”

“How long did you smoke after you became aware of the risks involved?”

“Okay...point taken”.

We wriggled in past the ajar door that did not open or close properly, to step slowly towards the location where bodies were positioned, lined up like marionettes on a ‘lunch break’. Two bodies lay side by side, bile and whatever solidifying as it dribbled from the corner of the mouth down the side of the face of both youths. Their heads were lolling against their chests as they both half-sat, slouching against the far wall of the room.

“Such a bloody waste, eh?” I murmured as I backed out of the room, speed-dialling into the Office to notify our find and to organise the people who would have to process the death scene.

“Christ they’re young. I’d say mid-teens...maybe seventeen at the most”. Shelley offered as she too back-pedalled out of the room. She headed for the ajar front door. She practically ran down the front path to our Unmarked to grab a bottle of water which she tossed to me, taking another for herself.

“You okay?”

A stupid question.

We both felt the same...abhorrence, absolute sorrow, and yes, anger at the crud who had taken what little finances the kids had knowing or yes, even ignorant that their product would kill. We had confronted this problem before. No person in their right mind would kill off their customers as that was bad practise! Unless we could prove ‘intent’ there was no touching the bastards on a murder charge. Not for the first time I wondered how those cruds slept at night...hopefully very badly! However, I doubted that as they were plain ignorant bastards who thought purely of the dosh they were making. They never saw the truck load of pain they were leaving in their tracks...as if they cared...not likely!

It took close to an hour for all participants to arrive at the address.

The last lot were the Forensic trace mob with Dee Dee Symonds the Lead Officer whispering apologies at her tardiness. She had been to another crime scene...not a death scene, thank God!

Nothing could be done until they arrived to take control of the Death Scene, by which time both Shelley and I were climbing the walls. To off-set our impatience and frustration, we stood with a group of Constables from the local Station who it seemed were glad to be out in the sun.

We all watched like a mob of meercats as two vehicles came to a halt on the other side of the street. Government 4WD vehicles with heavily tinted windows. The occupants in a pantomime as they all opened their doors at the same time and alighted to stand tall and look about. Two pairs of ‘suits’...AFP for sure. I was waiting for the fanfare as they came to attention.

“What is a gathering of AFP twerps doing in a non-descript part of town attending in force at a double OD Case? Young teen-agers dying because the product they crave for was being ‘cut’ and bulked up with a dangerous ‘filler’”. I murmured. “Betcha we’re in the middle of something that those bods don’t want us anywhere near”.

“Good afternoon...arrh...lady and arrh...gentlemen”. I acknowledged their presence as they came towards us. I flashed my badge, expecting someone from the little group to reciprocate. Nothing, nought, nada. I wasn’t that disappointed at having no effect on them. It was the usual thing with Officers from the AFP. They stood aloof from us lowly State employees!

“What is a group of AFP personnel swarming like a cloud of bloody flies over two...I’d say two OD cases. Youngsters still in their teens. Either shit product...”

“No...” One of the AFP gents interjected. “Too pure heroin mixed possibly with Methamphetamine...we know who, where, what family and where they’re getting their precursors from to make shit Ice...”

“But you still allow these creeps to continue as though they are immune from arrest and charge...they have the blood of five young addicts on their hands...three of them that I know of meeting their fate recently in this here abandoned Housing Commission house”.

The apparent Head Honcho nodded, giving me at least the time of day.

“Yeah...a faulty product from a family who has only just begun producing and selling...they haven’t yet learnt of the correct cutting of heroin and what ‘filler’ was safe to use...they’re still in the experimental stage”.

“You have the five deaths, and you haven’t acted on that information! Un-bloody-believable!”

“The El Basri family. Three brothers, two sisters with their husbands wanting to make a packet to retire on. Heading back to Lebanon to enjoy their retirement nest egg so go the whispers on the street. They live a couple of streets over...” He waved his arm about. “Their manufacturing place in the Industrial area in Dural. They have expanded very quickly relying on the reputation of having exceptional shit...”

“What!?” I was starting to steam up. Shelley dug me in the ribs to calm me down. It worked as I found it hard to breathe. Her jab had hurt!

“They have expanded their territory into two separate Bikie gang areas. We have been waiting for the usual ‘fly-by’ shootings and if that failed, which we think it will, there will be a couple of tit-for-tat killings. Hopefully, we are positioned so we can catch the whole drama on video in which case we can roll up three distinct drug cartels...and even their suppliers of the necessary ingredients”.

“Are you serious!? Dead kids don’t seem to be a factor in your operation...like a spider’s victim in its web, they are just rotting residue. You haven’t mentioned once the two kids sitting inside there with death stares...not once!” I roared, finding it difficult to tamp down my anger.

My mobile rang at the same time as Shelley's. We both raised our eyebrows as we turned away from the four 'suits' to answer. The head guy had a smile on his face as he too, turned away.

"Joe? You there with Shelley? Get the hell out of there..."

"Boss..."

"Now Joe. Get the hell out of there and give the two deaths over to who-ever appears to be in control..."

"Fucking no one from where I am standing..."

"Joe? Move...follow Shelley".

That gave me the creeps and I looked about looking for Camera guys. I couldn't spot the hidden camera and as Shelley had started to walk towards our Unmarked, I did the same.

"Keep going Joe. Just keep going...and not a word from you. Get the fuck out of there".

I spun around several times hoping to see the Boss's hidden camera. 'Maybe it's one of those new-fangled Drones which have a camera attached' I thought. I again spun around, this time looking skywards which made me dizzy. I reached out for the door of the Unmarked as Shelley looked on.

"You okay, Joe?" A frown her thought I was approaching insanity!

"Yeah..." I replied uncertainly.

"What do you reckon?" She asked.

"Me!? I reckon this Corona Virus is going to kill a lot of people world-wide before it is contained, and a vaccine developed...even then I think we will be living with it forever...like the common cold and flu viruses which surface every year in a new mutation...the same with this Delta strain I reckon...and it makes you wonder why at this precise moment the virus was unleashed onto the world's population. I mean those 'Wet Markets' in Wuhan Province in China have existed for a bloody long time. They've been killing animals there on demand by customers wanting the recently slaughtered animals for food. Bats, civet cats, monkeys, even skunks! What type of people find them appetising? Why did the virus suddenly jump over to humans at this time? Hundreds of those animals have been killed for human consumption over a lot of years in that 'wet market'. They are

saying the original virus either came from Bats or Pangolins...they're a real strange beast that I have never heard of before. It's a Chinese strategy to bring the western world to their knees, primarily America...but every economy will suffer because of it...it's a Chinese disease...but more importantly, a Chinese conspiracy...yeah...and I'll lay money it was Dee Dee who rang the Boss when she thought I might get a little punchy”.

“You reckon, huh?” She looked across at me as she belted up. “Nah, I'd say the house is under static surveillance...we were there waiting for the Forensic Pathologist and Trace teams to turn up for about an hour. Plenty of time for the head guy in that position to ring his boss...who then rang our boss with more than enough authority to order us away...and I'll bet he supplied real-time video of us walking down the front path. Denny Turner knew every move we made...ain't modern telecommunications fantastic!?”

“Yeah...you may be right. Just think about it and think Asian Flu, SARS, MERS, Chicken flu, pig virus...all originated from China at those types of markets. They all originated from that one 'wet' market in Wuhan. They were practising and looking for a virulent disease that could encompass the Earth. The earlier versions of coronaviruses not as contagious or as deadly. At last, they have constructed a virus that has no cure, and which could be used to kill millions of lives worldwide...just their style”.

“Yeah? Joe, your conspiracy theories will send you mad”.

She started up the car and gingerly headed up the street. I was slumped low in the passenger front seat.

“Yeah, either that or I reckon it's our own Government trying to be rid of old people above the sixty-age group to save on Old Age Pensions...” She said with a broad grin.

“Yeah? Seems as though you have given this a lot of thought. Arrm...how did they get hold of the virus? The Australian Government I mean, so they could infect all people over sixty-five? Which brings up another problem...most Politicians are over sixty-sixty-five...how were they made immune. If they had a vaccine to protect themselves, they have the blood of perhaps a million deaths on their hands”.

“Haven't figured that aspect out yet...but yer always want to shoot me down in flames...I'll become a nervous little sunflower not able to voice an opinion at all you keep that up!”

“What? Who, you? Not bloody likely!”

She continued up the street to turn right at its end...not that there was a lot of traffic on this suburban street. I noticed that the four AFP Officers were watching from the small Porch

area of the drug den. I was tempted to give a cheerio wave of departure...or a one finger salute, but then thought I shouldn't as my career as such that it couldn't take another hit!

"Yeah, I get what you mean, but thinking about, I reckon it's the Greenies...the international plane flights have tumbled in the extreme...and people aren't driving their cars around...there is practically nil traffic worldwide...the Greenies are in heaven knowing that the CO2 levels in the atmosphere have diminished significantly...and the smog levels are at the same level as experienced in the Nineteen Fifties...turn right here, Shells".

"What for?"

"To do a drive-by of the El Basri family home. I got their address from the White Pages while you were gushing on about a Chinese Conspiracy of major proportions".

"You serious, Joe?"

"Yeah!"

"Maybe it is God planning all this as he knows the world was getting past the point of no return with the greenhouse gases and climate change...He wants to save us..."

"God!!! You serious!? What, he is willing to see millions die in order to save the majority...a really humane and loving God!"

"Doesn't it make sense?"

"Only to those who believe in Him...not to this aging atheist and cynic!"

"Maybe us atheists should make that weighty decision, otherwise we'll be left at the spaceship docking point...you know, when he comes to raise all the Believers up away from this God-awful place..."

That brought us into giggling fits with Shelley having trouble driving. She had to pull over as her eyes were watering so much. It just so happened it was a couple of properties down from the El Basri home.

"Woah! How the other half live...makes you want to start up as Drug Dealers, doesn't it?"

"Nah...I have a conscience and am not impressed with easy money..."

"Mmm...a Merc. Two Audis and a large Beamer 4WD...money's tight huh".

My mobile buzzed then began its boring ring tone.

“Joe? Get the fuck outa there, now! I have this feeling mounting to place you on home arrest without pay for disregarding the orders I gave you less than fifteen minutes ago...I’m still tossing it up”.

I mean, we were parked for a genuine reason...and how on earth does she know where we were. The AFP must have the El Basri family home also covered with static surveillance teams...and they knew at once who we were...how else would the Boss know of our position not that far from the El Basri family home.

“Shells? That Dashcam? Could it be wired so ...say the Boss, could cut across it to display on her Laptop where we are?”

“I never thought of that...shit, that’s scary. How about voice recording? That’s a little worse. I’m going to investigate that because if it is true, it’s a huge invasion into our privacy...especially if we have never been informed of its ability to send back vision and sound to the Boss! It’s just not on, Tonto!! No way!!”

“Shells? Back to the Office...don’t even think of a slight detour to use some-one’s toot!”

“I heard Joe. I heard. Bit of a worry with Big Brother watching over us...”

“I hope he is there the next time we get into a ticklish situation...but somehow I doubt it”.

“Conspiracy theories can turn you into a dribbling old idiot who constantly shits in her pants...what a future to look forward to, huh!?”

## **CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE**

“WTF!!” I loudly exclaimed, standing at the threshold into the Boss’s office.

“C’mon Joe. Don’t carry on about it...you got snookered and you don’t like it. Chill will you and stop yelling! I am less than three metres away from you and I have perfect hearing...so stop shouting”.

“Boss, there was no thought of the two victims...just kids around seventeen...eighteen years of age. To them they were just a by-product of whatever those guys were doing”.

“Let’s get it straight Joe. Those two were always going to be victims. Understand that and believe it! You could never have saved them, Joe. It wasn’t our case to call. The AFP has longer tentacles than we will ever have. Your late AFP mate would have shown you that repeatedly. They will hopefully roll up three networks, distribution channels, manufacturing laboratories and yes, overseas set-ups who will always try new methods to get the drugs and the precursors smuggled into the country. If they are successful, they’ll possibly save thousands of young lives here and around the world...”

“Bullshit, Boss. That’s just flowery words to quieten any opposition to their methods...”

“Yer right, Joe. But drop it anyway. Go for a walk and chill out”.

I looked at her, giving her my most cantankerous and angry stare that didn’t even dint! She kept the smile on her face as she once again ordered me out of her Office, to stop shouting and going on like some prima donna, telling me a couple more times to take a walk.

I’d reached the Lift with the doors closing when Shelley jammed into the gap forcing the doors to re-open.

“Have somewhere to go, eh?” I muttered, the steam still escaping.

“I thought you may need help to cross the road...I can hold up traffic with my Glock”.

“That’s an offence, young lady”.

“Don’t you young lady me, little guy with one feather...you sure it’s an offence?”

“Don’t push your luck by trying it...you have been officially informed and unless you don’t mind me being a witness for the prosecution, I suggest you drop the idea...besides, they taught me well in Kindergarten how to cross the road”.

At least this repartee caused me to smile. She can do it every time...

## **CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR**

“Fuck!” I murmured as I flung my pen onto my desk. “You want a coffee as I’ve got to get out of here for a break. I am sick and tired of reading all the recorded notes that the disappearance of Beverley Priest has generated. There must be a mountain of paper. Thank

God they digitally copied those notes as I don't think I could go through so many reams of paper now at my age".

"Yeah...yer gotta feel for Detectives of old having to flick through copious numbers of A4 folios...it would be interesting to know if they also sanitised this lot to protect someone...you know, country cops will always look after their own".

I looked at her, surprised she would even suggest such a thing.

"That's an offence just suggesting such a thing. I don't think those boys up in Grafton would do such a thing..."

"You never know...and we wouldn't have a clue unless we compared the digital copy with the reams of paper that they have in their official files...hell! I'd go slowly mad, I reckon. I need a coffee and a minute away from this bloody screen!"

"What? You want to have a coffee downstairs...playing truancy, eh?"

"I don't care what you call it, masked avenger. I want a break is all..."

"I'm with you, little one with one feather". Shells said, humour in her tone of voice. I wondered what a person would think if they overheard our repartee.

I clicked my fingers at Ruth whose desk was several rows down from Shells and mine. I mimed drinking. She shook her head.

"I'm waiting for a call from the Head of the Panel who interviewed me...I don't want to miss it".

"Transfer your phone across to your mobile..."

She shook her head to that suggestion, so I let it be and walked out behind Shelley, letting Hendo know of our plans.

We ordered and settled, sitting at the back of the Café which was two blocks from the Office. We had foregone the usual coffee at the 'Java Pot on the Plaza' as it was now called. The place a favourite spot for all who worked in our building. An edict had made the rounds of every Office that if Officers continued to ignore business hours...they were just that...work hours and not meant to while away work hours spent sitting in a Coffee Jar joint, each Officer would be deducted a reasonable assessment of their wages each fortnight. Our little spot was now in a sub-base area not frequented by our colleagues...hopefully.

“Grrr...who was it who requested we be given a copy of every slip of paper used on that Case. I cannot believe the dribble coppers write on a Case they’re working on. We’re not as bad as that, are we?”

“That’s for someone else to determined, my dear...but yes, I have to agree, I had trouble not tossing the whole fucking file against the back wall of the Office...”

“Your computer, you mean?”

“Yeah...have you finished going through the Newspaper woman’s collection?”

“Yeah, there’s enough material there to write that bloody book...” She went silent looking into the middle distance. “You know, what is wrong with that? We’ve got just about every piece of evidence and rumour recorded...enough to write a book”.

“You’d get that Grafton woman’s nose right royally out of joint...and to tell you the truth, I prefer we use all this information we have in arresting the crud if we can figure out who did this to Beverley Priest instead of becoming aspiring young authors. Wait until you retire before you jump into Authorship...isn’t that what they all do? Disclose information after they have left the Force? Something to do in their retirement daze...”

Shelley nodded as she took several sips of coffee.

“Is there anything in our Work Edicts that would prevent us from doing so?”

“Yeah...a whole Chapter with several sub-sections to prevent us from doing so...and signed pro-forma when we enlisted declaring that we agree in not disclosing any material to do with our place of work...with one hell of a fine and years in jail to think about what we had done...if we in fact did it!”

“Mmm...fuck...we’re always behind the eight ball...maybe a fictional account...like the Lead Detective is a smart, worldly woman of exceptional good looks and fashion sense who has a slovenly old partner who is just warming a seat waiting until retirement day”. She gave me a sideways look before laughing. “Poetic justice, eh? Um...I’ve got about a dozen pages of notes for us to discuss and sort through...”

“Yeah, me too. There was only one name that caught my attention...well...one of several. That young bloke...the young fisherman...who seemed to appear and then just as quickly, disappear without a detailed study done on him as though whatever he had said to the coppers at the time seemed to ring true to them. How else can you interpret the lack of ‘follow-up’ done at the time”.

“Yeah, me too...I have him down for further investigation. Can you believe they never checked the License Plate of his 4WD or that of the caravan noted on the file to notify whomever they had chased it through the right channels? It was an omission...or someone just forgot to follow the rules. I ran both through the records, coming up zilch for my troubles. He was trying to hide his identity by replacing the plates on the caravan *and* his vehicle...but he forgot about his Driver’s License”.

“Yeah, I reckon. I thought that too. I ran the Victorian Driver’s License...the number through the system. Peter Furnese. He is now seventy-two and living in a Retirement Village at Kiama on the South Coast”.

“I didn’t get that far...you used the Driver’s License Number that was written down by the local cops at that time? A Victorian address”.

“Yeah...but he’s lost his License three times over a twenty-year period...all for drink driving. Seems to me he is hanging on to a mighty guilty secret...”

“Mmm...I didn’t come to that conclusion...and now he’s a bloody Psychologist...give me strength!” She shook her head in mock derision. “Some-one else who caught my eye...that bloke who rode down from Grafton to Illaroo on a Triumph. Could fit all his camping gear on the bike...a little two-man tent, a fishing rod and a couple of cooking things. Intended to stay for a long weekend, both the Friday and the Monday. He had something to say about a bloke who drove a Ute and didn’t like to share his fire-pit with anyone else...we got anything else on him like a name, an address or where he possibly is now?”

“Yeah...hang on...yeah. A local youth from Grafton...um...no, his name is gone but I will check it out when we get back to the Office”.

“That gives us three names to work on...at least that’s a start”.

We drank our coffees and discussed the Case before walking back into the Office

I fell silent as I tried to narrow down the name of the guy who rode an old Triumph motorbike back in seventy-five.

“Would you believe they have digitised the RMS data base back to the fifties. All I had to do was enter *Triumph, Grafton* and an age of our suspect being in the twenty to thirty age group to get a couple of hits. Four in fact”.

“That easy!?”

“Yep...all thanks to Dallas Courtney and his wonderful Pro-forma. Name One is too old. Four and three ditto. Number two is our man. Paul Wycombe aged twenty-two in Seventy-five with a birth date of August Nineteen Fifty-Five. Now lives in a back Paddington street aged sixty-seven...let’s pay the man a visit, huh?”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

“Paul Wycombe?”

“Nah...he’s inside. Who wants him?”

I flashed my badge at the elderly guy who obviously walked on the wild side of the street. He had yet to clean his face of make-up from a late night the eve before. Either that or he’s made a mess during its application.

“Coppers! Murder Squad Detectives! That’s worse!” He scampered inside yelling out for Paul. Eventually a bloke appeared at the door to the three storey Victorian Terrace house renovated recently by all accounts. I did a double take as it was only a street away from Brenda Wzerlic and her Surgeon husband’s Terrace at the back of Paddington when the two had been a couple.

I showed the man my ID card and shuffled about to allow Shelley to do the same.

“Are you Paul Wycombe? Yes? You grew up in Grafton, yes?”

“What’s this all about, Detectives?” A slightly effeminate voice though educated and strong. He had to be in his late sixties, yet his skin was taunt, missing any lines around the mouth or eyes...Botox I thought to myself.

“You were at the Illaroo Campgrounds in November Nineteen Seventy-five...” More a statement than a question.

“If you say I was, then yeah I could have been...so?”

“You were at the campgrounds the day young Beverley Priest went missing...”

“Arrh...I’m with you now. I read something about a month ago that her body had been discovered...” He shook his head slowly. When he looked up at me, his eyes were misty.

“The poor girl, lying out there for what? Close on forty-five years. Yes, I was there that weekend. Spent the entire weekend helping in the search for her...with every man and his dog from the Grafton area...didn't do a scrap of fishing...yes, wait a moment, I did do a bit and caught the biggest fish ever...yes, I can still bring that image up...hah”.

“You shared a fire-pit with another camper...”

“Yes...Peter Furnese...where in hell did that come from? He was a sour sort of bloke...didn't like company and I can assure you, very much hated sharing his fire-pit...Peter Furnese...when one of the local Cops was questioning me, they asked about sharing a fire-pit with a bloke called Peter Furnese...why in hell has that name stuck? He had a Ute...filthy thing. Don't know how he ever got it registered...I had my Trumpy then. A beautiful machine...” He shook his head, a smile at the memories. “The coppers questioned me for hours, so it seemed...I was nervous...not because I did anything you know...but because of what I am...you know”.

“Did you often go camping by yourself?”

“Yes...back then, you know...it was illegal back then to be a gay guy...and there was precious few in Grafton at the time. An occasional young bloke who came up whenever the Uni in Sydney was on recess...far and few between...and the known gays were mostly old and bitter, trying desperately to hide their sexuality...like...Bill...Bill whatshisname...Bill Waites. He was a police officer in town around that time. A Number Two if my memory serves me correctly...yeah, he was Number Two. Tried to hide it by going the other way...he became the King of the kids. That's unfair as he did enormous things for all the kids in the district...I hid mine by buying a blokey Triumph Motorbike...but I felt free riding the thing up and down the highway coast whenever I had the time...those were the days...”

“Did you have a run-in with the bloke?”

“Um...what? What do you mean? Hell, it's a long time ago now...no...but I only shared the fire-pit with him once. You know, the fire-pit was the 'honey pot' that drew all the campers together. You'd have most of the campers sitting around the fire talking about their travels...good vibes by everyone present. Plenty of laughter. That particular weekend, it seemed that all the campers would congregate down further at another fire-pit because...his name has gone again...”

“Peter Furnese...”

“Yes...he thought the fire-pit was for his exclusive self...not a guy to chew the fat with...he...um...no, it’s been too long”.

“What was it that flitted across your mind? Sometime those thoughts from nowhere can help us a lot...understand?”

He nodded and pursed his lips as he scratched his bald head.

“Um...I’d been fishing the day before...on the bike there was nowhere where I could put a Beach Rod...I had a smaller rod that broke down to three lengths. A decent size to pack on my Trumpy and a comfortable size for rock fishing...did a bit of beach fishing with it...and I went fishing the following day. That was when I caught the biggest fish I have ever caught in my life...she was a beauty...it was when I mentioned where I had caught it...from the rocks...he gave me a queer look. One that, you know, had him thinking he may have been caught out is the way I interpreted it...the look...you know? I came back off the rocks early morning after catching that big one...that’s enough for me”.

“Can you give any reason for these thoughts?”

“Um...hah...hindsight can be a devil of a thing. I think he may have felt I had seen him driving back along the beach that morning...yes?”

“Did you?”

“Arrh...no...no, I don’t think so...no. But if I had, he would have been travelling down along the hard sand in his Ute later in the morning then what he told the coppers at the time. Look...I’m not sure. But when I went back to camp to fillet and scale the thing, plenty of people gathered round...it was a bloody big fish...he was asleep...or just dozing, and his hair and skin were wet...I remember that now...leaning back against a tree, a coffee mug hanging from his hand. It looked as though he had been for a swim, as he had taken off his jeans and T-shirt and hung them over a line tied to two trees...that was a no-no...”

“Anything else?”

He shook his head apologising for not being able to supply any further information. I gave him my Business Card, asking if he remembered anything else, to ring me. How-ever small or irrelevant, it didn’t matter.

“One thing, Officers...” We turned to face him. “I cannot remember whether...um...Peter Furnese was the owner of the caravan and Ute...or whether he owned the other Ute...which

was in a terrible state...he had a tarp tied to the side of the Ute and he used to sleep in a swag under it...no, sorry...I cannot remember...um...nothing else, I'm afraid".

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

"It's now Furness...Peter Furness. What do you coppers want with me?"

We sat out on the small paving area in front of the old bloke's little piece of paradise. Two rooms. One the Toilet, shower and loo and the other room for everything else with a medium size flat-screen TV hanging from the ceiling. He could lie in bed or sit in one of two 'ezi-boy' couches...he had choices! A motel room no two ways about it, except this had a small Kitchenette opposite the 'wet' area. A Frig, Microwave, a sink, a cook top, and a washing machine all shoe-horned into the small area which was really the corridor from the front door into the enlarged Bedroom area.

It was better out here with trees and the constant shrill chatter of Rainbow Lorikeets and the beautiful tones of Butcherbirds competing with one another on the musicianship of their calls.

It looked as though he spent his waking hours sitting out here reading the latest Novel doing the rounds of the establishment. Rain, hail, or shine as his little 'outdoor area' protected by the overhang of the patio floor above.

"I love to sit out here...with an on-shore breeze yer can smell the salt air and hear the surf...I use to love fishing...did it all the time...now I don't trust me balance or eye-sight to get away from that rogue wave...useta love fishing, I did".

The very tone of his voice relayed the sadness of him missing that past time, never again visiting that form of nirvana. The curse of growing old for some, I guess.

"You were in Vietnam..." Not a question, more a statement. I'd seen several photographs taking pride of place on various shelves, crowding them out. Various shots of young blokes wearing their 'giggle' hats, draped in bullet belts, standing on Tanks or them religiously cleaning their Armalites AR-15s. All with a cheerful smile for the camera...that's not how many returned home...

He nodded his head slowly.

“You never married”. Another statement, this one answered by a shake of his head.

“Nah...I couldn't settle down...you know...when I came home...”

“You been here what? Ten years about...”

“Yeah...well, there comes a time when you are forced into...” He spent moments looking for the word, waving his arms about. “Submission...or is it incarceration?” He looked up at the crowns of the trees, a tear forming in his eye. I wasn't too sure. “I spent almost ten years out in the rear paddock of me sister's and brother-in-law's place. Out amongst the trees...camouflaged so's no-one would bother me or know I was there. Went into town with me sister once a month to get supplies...couldn't go by meself...too many people”.

That comment drew a comparison between he and Morrie Ridge who had said he wasn't a Vietnam vet...but he was in the age group. The figure of both men walked across my mind's eye...there was something there that had my nose itching, but I could not pull it into view.

“Is that how you feel? Being incarcerated...” I asked as I looked around. I doubted I could see out my days in an excuse for a Motel Room. You couldn't describe it in any other way.

“Having my wings clipped, yeah. I'm now seventy-seven...there are two or three Viet Vets here...all of us winning the lottery with the ball dropping the wrong way for all of us. That sounds as though I hated the time over there...I hated it so much I applied for a second tour. One of the few forward scouts to survive two tours of duty. A rare animal, let me tell you...amongst us Nashos in any case...they teach you to shoot, to hate the Gook, to get angry and to trust yer mate beside you...with yer very life. Never did bond with any of my fellow diggers. Both tours I was a forward scout...relying on me own wits. Third RAR up in Townsville...” He chuckled. “Yet I was a Victorian born boy. Marysville. Trust the Army to send you somewhere close”.

He jiggled his tea bag before taking several cautious sips, complaining it wasn't strong enough. Tea drinkers always want their tea scalding hot then complain about the temperature. Me as a coffee drinker? I always waited for the heat to subside a bit before partaking. I cannot see the logic in scalding the inside of your mouth to prove it was a bloody good cuppa!

“You know the Army's all for mateship...I can remember one time out in Indian Country we came across a fair number of NVA...I couldn't get back to the boys, so I was stuck out in the middle of no-man's land just trying to stay alive. Shells fizzing and pinging over my head going in both directions. I heard our Number One call in artillery which didn't take

long to start falling. I could hear him telling the Artillery guys to walk it out away from their position. Trouble was, I was between the platoon and the NVA so's I was gunna cop it any tick...somehow, they jumped over me and that was the first time I may have thanked God for his intervention...that was also the last time I begged for his intervention. I guess if someone else was me, they may have become a religious soul. Not me, I'm afraid...don't yer think it is laughable? An Atheist calling on Him when it got hot in the Kitchen. Yer never really forget what yer were taught when yer was a youngster in Kindy Church. A Catholic Church I reckon. The others don't seem to last from a lad to a grown man...The NVA? They copped a hammering...we withdrew and joined the rest of the guys thinking we were bloody heroes...I lived through Operation Balgowlah and Coral. They were the longest battles between us and the NVA, but you don't hear of those operations...they overshadowed by Long Tan. Why? Bugged if I know. We lost more Sappers and the NVA lost more men than any other battle in Vietnam...and it continued longer than any other battle between Ozzie sappers and NVA and Cong, but hardly anyone knows of those two battles”.

He looked up at me with eyes that were red and glossy with tears.

“It wasn't so bad...it could have been a darn sight worse if you know what I mean. Yer make your own bed in yer life. Yep, it wasn't that bad”.

“Illaroo campgrounds in nineteen seventy-five...almost due east of Grafton...” I had to get him on track as he could ramble on about his War experiences for-ever. Like so many other Vets, they were constantly reliving the nightmares. By the sounds of it, he may have had a few good days...

He tented his fingers as though deep in thought, nodding to himself before commenting.

“Used to be one of my favourite fishing spots...a lovely area”.

“You had a caravan and a 4WD Ute...a single cab Ute?”

“Yeah...for a while...I purchased both from a bloke who worked the coalfields out of Singleton. They were as rare as hen's teeth and every camp I made, I had blokes coming around to stare at the rig...I'd made some very clever alterations to both the van and the Ute...most ideas born from my Army days...all were good enough to draw accolades from the those gathered about eyeing the rig”. He shook his head and chuckled. “Those sticky-beaks had to have a look as it was a rarity. Shoulda guessed before I paid hard cash for the rig...they may have seemed interested, but I didn't want a lot of people sniffing about...yer can't have it both ways, but I sure did try!”

“You changed the License Plates of both the Van and the Ute...”

“What! Who me!?! Don’t know nothing about that...no...” He scratched his head. “Nah, don’t know nothing about that...nah!”

“You didn’t pay the annual Rego or Insurance on both the Van *or* the Ute...”

“Suited me...I was never pulled over...” A huge smile as he knew he had got away with it, scot free...for a lot of years!

“What happened to the Ute and van?”

“Black Saturday when Marysville and half of Victoria was razed to the ground. Had me rig in the back paddock of me sister’s place...nothing survived that fire in two thousand and nine. That was when I came here. In two thousand and ten...kinda had nowhere else to go...and me sister had enough of me...yeah...her family home was also razed to the ground...just a chimney stack was left. Took them a long time to re-build. I thought they were mad re-building in the area...yer chasing yer tail t’ my way of thinking”.

“Illaroo nineteen seventy-five? You were there?”

“Could be I guess...you seem to think I was...so’s I musta been”. Cool, nothing fazed him. There was this hint of a smile as if he knew a bloody good joke and wasn’t going to share it with us. He sat there, this half-smile as though he knew a few things we didn’t. His elbows on the arms of the chair with his hands clasped easily together as though he didn’t have a care in the world.

“A twelve-year-old girl went missing. Her remains were discovered this year after those terrible bushfires that practically wiped out all forested parts of the State...”

“Yeah...I watched that on TV. Funny thing is, that area...that entire National Park burnt out in seventy-one...seventy-two...arrh...now I know why you are here. You think I could be somehow involved. Yeah, I was there at that time if my memory serves me well. I had beach-fished all that night prior to her going missing. There was a lot of cops and SES guys forming up search parties right up along the beach...too many people sniffing about from memory...I don’t like crowds and when they formed up each morning it was too close...I wanted out of there, but I knew if I had pissed off straight away I’d become their Number One suspect...woulda had the cops hanging off me arse all the way down the highway...or whichever way I was heading...can’t remember which way I headed after leaving Illaroo”.

“You still are...”

“What?”

“The Number One suspect...did you kill the girl?”

He harrumphed, shaking his head, looking over at me as though he had not noticed me taking a chair opposite him.

“I’d lay a bet and say I’ve killed more people than you...NVA, Cong and maybe a few Sappers and Yank bastards who would push through jungle areas like bloody bulldozers, wondering why they never engaged with the enemy. Me? With little girls? Never!” A tonne of disgust. With a challenging stare he glared at me. “I knew I would be a suspect. A bloke by himself was a strange beast...I did what I always did when out bush in Indian country. I hunkered down waiting for the shit...whatever...to pass over me”.

“So, when did you leave the area?”

“Arrh...ooh...two or four days after that...I joined in the search for the little girl...she’s been found, huh? After all this time. How’d she die, do you know?”

I shook my head.

“Copper, I’ll give you a complete rundown of my meanderings if you like...I kept a pretty good log...a Journal of my meandering ways...from then in seventy-five and a couple of years before that right up until I settled at me sister’s place...and I can state that at no time of me going through NSW, Victoria and Queensland was there a report of any young girl missing whenever I was in those areas. Guaranteed Detective...it’s not my thing. In fact, I feel sick thinking of what might have happened to her...the poor little thing”.

We let him reminisce as we took notes on his various and leaderless travels, turning left at an intersection for no other reason but to turn left. I knew this wasn’t our man even from the start. He may have hidden from society and preferred the loner’s life, seen terrible things and done terrible things himself but...to kill and bury a young girl...it was not in him. Maybe the original coppers from Grafton also saw that in him...that and the closeness to the end of the War and believing that all Diggers were heroes and not persons to be derided, ridiculed, and called ‘child-killers’.

It was a pleasant drive back up to Sydney and I detoured slightly to drop Shelley at her place. I stopped to have a coffee and to look at the work they had been carrying out on the house to bring it up to ‘Fire Zone’ regulations.

“What did you think of our Viet digger?”

“Like so many, not able to settle down and acclimatise back into society...”

“Maybe...that doesn't tell me much...just maybe he carried out the deed. It being once too many times and the act had shocked him into stopping...or corralling those inner urges...maybe he did it a couple of times over in Vietnam...it would have gone unnoticed and ignored...there was too much of it to care for a young girl living on the street”.

“Mmm...nah...even though I like your once is one too many times philosophy, he is not our boy”.

“Yer think! That's fine but that leaves us with one hell of a headache with not even a suspicious character to hook onto. I reckon we must feel like those original coppers investigating the girl's disappearance...completely stuffed when we reached that brick wall that has stood in the way for close on fifty years”. I slapped the side of my leg as I walked around an Edwardian bedhead, base, and end board that they were rubbing back to bare timber, the mug of coffee in my left hand. “I mean...I don't want to write off the Viet Vet...not yet, but...it's a pity this bed is not Queen or King size...is that Red Cedar?”

Shelley looked up at me shaking her head.

“Mahogany...more than likely from the West Indies...it's a denser, harder timber than Australian Red Cedar but can have a similar decorative grain work and colour”.

I nodded my head, impressed with her knowledge.

I spent an hour at her place looking at the old pieces of furniture both Shells and her Brin were doing up. A lot of hard work, but every piece they had tackled looked a million bucks.

“I see you have completed that French Polishing Course...”

“Yeah...loved it and love the finished product. The guy who agreed to taking me on...to teach me to French Polish? Takes patience, let me tell you. He visits every now and then. He is in second heaven, so he says when he sees all these pieces. We still have no idea where they came from...we'll have to work on that very soon. Mum still goes on about how she was in heaven when we took all the pieces from her place...I haven't told you, have I. Dad had a Garage...you know, one of those storage Garages. The rent on it has been paid for years ahead...I'll let you know when we have a look what is inside...”

“Who has been paying the rental?”

“Some Law Firm in Melbourne...for what...since I was seven when Dad just dropped these pieces off...thirty years. Can you believe it?”

I followed her out of the triple garage which at the moment was their combined workshop back into the house. I was rinsing the coffee mug out when I stopped. Shelley took the mug from my hand and placed it in the dishwasher.

“What?” She asked as she straightened up.

“The guy who had Ute...and a swag which he seemed to place under a tarp tied to his truck...we haven’t chased him down, yer know. He is the unpleasant bastard who Paul Wycombe said thought the fire-pit was his and his alone. Not wanting to share it with anyone. We have been getting his ID mixed up with the Furness bloke...all because of the Ute being the same. A Toyota Landcruiser Ute...what have we got that will enable us to pry him out?”

“Um...he was questioned by the local lads back then. In reading between the lines, he was one hell of a caustic bloke...I’ll drag it out tomorrow”.

I drove away heading for home wondering why I had not stuck to my attempts at making or doing up pieces of furniture that at present, were stacked willy-nilly in my man’s cave. A kind of guilt enveloped me. I promised myself I would start...soon.

## **CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN**

“Have I been arrested?”

“No...but you were held overnight so we could fly up here this morning to talk to you”.

“All you had to do was to ask me nicely to stay in town. I would have hunkered down in the back of me Ute. I was under arrest which pisses me off! Remember, I was an ex-cop. Admittedly in Queensland, but the Laws of that State are not that different to NSW”. He gave me a savage look that made me lean back away from him. “Me dog, Souze? He’ll be fretting for me about now. He’d still be in the back of me new Ute...can some-one take some food and water out to him?”

“Taken care of Mister Morris...um, sorry...Morrie Galligan. You paid out cash for a new second-hand Ute. That was the thing that put out a red flag. You transferred over ownership

and Registration to Morris James Sean Galligan...and I like this bit, your address happens to be the Police Station up here...”

“It was either that or the Bank. Haven’t spoken to the Bank Manager...jeezuz...I don’t recall ever speaking to him...”

“You cannot do that...using the Cop Station as your mailbox...change it. Check with Australia Post to come to an amiable solution”. I looked at him until he broke the stare, nodding his head. “You stated last time we spoke that you hadn’t been born in Seventy-five. Your birthdate happens to be Nineteen Fifty-Four. March five. You were twenty-one back then...in Seventy-five. Old enough and big enough to overwhelm a twelve-year old girl”.

He looked down at his hands, shaking his head repeatedly.

“Yeah, yer right I guess...I was just trying to draw attention away from me...I don’t like people getting into my face...it may sound stupid, but I enjoy this social distancing advice...one hundred and fifty centimetres is still a little too close for me, but it is better than a social scrum”.

I nodded, understanding his problem.

“Um...I was paid out on a Disability Pension in April of Ninety-One. Began to camp rough about mid-nineties...up until that point, I wouldn’t know where Illaroo Campgrounds were...I’d never been in that area even for holidays. You can believe it or not...no skin off my nose...” He looked over at me, challenging me to disagree. “It’s just as hard for me to prove my innocence as you to prove my guilt. Sure I could have, I suppose, camped down at Illaroo...check the Ranger’s receipt book as that will tell you I was never close to that area ever, until I began to go inwards, wanting to be away from people...all they do is hurt...all you have is my word and as one ex-cop to another, that is the honest truth.”

“You were in Vietnam...” Not a question, more of a statement.

He looked down at the table, thrummed his fingers at a fast tempo before looking up at me.

“Only just...did a three-month tour before we were all pulled out in Seventy-four...I have always felt sorry for all those people we left behind. They backed the wrong horse and from what I’ve been told, have suffered plenty for that...while the Yanks especially, continue going around the world doing the same thing...repeatedly. Acting as the world’s policeman propping up unpopular governments until they’ve had enough...walking away leaving a huge vacuum that can only be filled by those who have the greater number of guns...the general population being hit from the left and the right...suffering by being killed by a more

savage extremism covering the country”. There was real anger in his speech. It ascended as his words spilt out...thousands of people would have been sent to re-education camps which he felt responsible for...

“Did you know Peter Furness?” The question coming from left field. Shelley leaned toward the guy as she asked him the question, staring at him with a stare that could kill...she was good with it.

“Um...who?” His easy-going attitude slipped for a moment. “Sorry, the name doesn’t click”. He had adjusted his reaction. Quick, professional. I wanted to know what he may have done over there in that south-east Asian cess-pot but there was little chance of getting that from the guy sitting opposite us.

There was silence, both of us thinking over our utterances. In the end, I rose with a groan and opened the door.

“I’m free to go?”

“Yes...but you are still under suspicion so stay in this area for now...we may want to speak with you again...”

He nodded as he stood, walking past me as I still held the door open. Shells and I walked to an external window of the building and watched as the man was once again re-united with his best mate, Souze.

“What do you think?”

“That the guy has a real bond with his dog...good to see...and I want a nap. These early morning flights out of Sydney are for the birds. Let’s get a bite to eat...”

“Yeah, but what do you really think?”

“He’s not our man”.

“Yeah, I agree with you”.

## **CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT**

I arrived home promising myself that I would at last get stuck into all those projects that I had in my head. It was not as though I was a novice as I had made the Dining Table which everyone still cooed over; and the Entertainment Unit which was still getting rave reviews. I was good at it, and while I was concentrating on making another piece of furniture, my mind was free of everything else.

I parked the Unmarked in under the Carport with the three dogs lined up waiting for their greeting pat after I had closed the back gates.

In all the time I had been doing this, driving the Unmarked in under the carport, not once would any of the three bolt out through the open gateway. I have no idea how the three came to this arrangement, but it was the second...yeah well... fourth best greetings of me arriving home...they smiled at seeing me. My mind did a quick back flip of me and Shells watching Morris Galligan reunited with his dog Souze. Both Tellie and my girls should...yeah...should be one to four in the greeting stakes. Something was up though as I entered the Kitchen to kiss Tellie, she gave me that look and sign to be quiet to-night.

I frowned at her. All she did was shake her head. 'What?' I mouthed as I sat my overnight bag and Laptop bag onto the Lounge Couch.

"Bill..." She whispered into my ear. "He's been let go from the DPP's Office on a full disability pension. He's gutted but I think he would have seen the writing on the wall a while ago..."

"Where is he? Is Mal home?"

Tellie shook her head and then pointed upwards. I went to the fridge and pulled out two stubbies.

"Leave my Dinner on the boil will you please. I don't know how long I'll be". I gave her a kiss and a squeeze before walking into Bill and Mal's side of the house. Stepped up to the next level and out onto the higher deck. I knew he would have been sitting out there in the dark, the only light from the streetlights and starlight. The moon was not showing tonight. I handed him a stubby and took the chair beside him.

"Tough, huh?" My opening gambit...not that good I thought. He nodded as he twisted the top off the stubby.

"Thanks...and yeah, tough. To be fair, I knew it was coming. That day you saw me make the opening speech for the Prosecution on the Vance Murder Case; I knew I was on the downhill slope. It got worse and the only way it wasn't called a mistrial was the

benevolence of the Judge...yeah, I knew it then I would never cut it...I'm too slow, can't identify the peculiarities of the Law and the Defence Barrister and then cannot place them to my advantage...and I forget the one-oh-one basics of Law, of Court demeanour and of strategy...I knew I was on a knife edge but still, it's hit me bloody hard..."

"So, what now?" I asked softly.

"I don't know. I haven't really thought about it. I want both you and Mal to come with me to discuss the arrangements for compensation versus lump sum versus payments equal to my current salary package. There is so much to think of including what is best for me long term, with it having ramifications on Mal...I get a head-ache just thinking about".

"No worries just let me know the date".

Mal walked quietly out onto the deck followed by my three girls and Tellie. A big hug from Mal with my four climbing, hugging, and kissing him.

"Okay guys..." Bill objected. "I don't know if this deck was designed for so many people". This earned him the normal Australian put down. A stir to show him he didn't have a clue.

Tellie invited both Bill and Mal down for tea, their response drowned out by my girls who spoke on their behalf. Suddenly, we were also joined by the three dogs who wanted in, with the response being it was now way over the safety load of the deck.

We all walked down into our Dining Area, my three having an argument over who should sit next to Bill.

## **CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE**

We did not make our desks as we returned to the Office after having lunch on the banks of the Parramatta River. It was one of those beautiful Autumn days with clear polished blue skies and a temperature not too hot and not too cold. Crisp mornings that were starting to get into my bones. I had to wear layers to keep out the cold of a morning but by mid-morning I was tearing off layer after layer...it was a bit of a joke especially with my colleagues and Shells and Tellie.

It was worse on those early morning take-offs from Kingsford Smith Airport with a fog hugging the ground, giving you a chill looking at it!

In the middle of our lunch, Kindle dropped the bomb that she had selected the AFP over the NSW Police Force. This decision purely based on the fact she did not think she could look at another decomposing body; a body with bullet holes or stab wounds and a grovelling spouse or furious, outraged former boyfriend who could never accept he had been dropped...for a better person. He was top of the heap in his humble opinion, and he would fight and kill anyone who thought he could be deposed.

“I can’t...I’m sorry Joe. Shelley... but I have thought about it a lot. It was you Joe who said Murder Dees are a different breed...you’re right and sorry, I don’t think I can be force-fed into that breed”.

We offered our support, understanding and hope for the future without once saying she was leaving a very distinct band...and that we were disappointed with her decision as we could see the promise she exuded. I especially, thought she would die a slow death looking at a computer screen all day...not having any connection to people, dead or alive! She was a people person through and through.

Both Shells and I thought we managed it quite well when we spoke about it later...still not convinced Ruth had made the right decision. Another good operator going to an area where her attributes were not being used to their fullest! What was wrong with us? Yes, we were carrying on like a pair of drongos, especially thinking it was our doing that caused Ruth to flee. It was simply the sight of blood and mangled, discarded bodies that had done the damage...not us!

Regardless, we were in a funny place as we entered the Squad floor, not expecting to be blindsided before we even walked to our desks.

“Joe? Shells? Come in before you get comfortable at your desk”.

She stood at her door as we filed into her Office. She closed the door after us and commanded us to sit. It was very noticeable that Kindle was excluded...she was now on the ‘outer’, in that in between area where she existed but not for any Murder Squad duties.

“This is Father Tan Sung. He is the Priest at the Eastwood Catholic Church”. She turned to us. “These are two of my best Detectives who are investigating the death of a twelve-year old girl in Nineteen Seventy-five. Could you relay to them what you have told me, Father?”

“Certainly...” Perfect English in a softly spoken voice. “As I informed Detective Inspector Turner here, I conducted a Confession with an elderly gentleman whom I had not seen before. His voice, the way he sat and spoke told me he was an elderly man...I’d say between seventy-five to eighty...maybe a little older than that...snow white hair but he did

not have that usual thing of fighting for breath at every word...he was quite robust, even in his movements”.

“This gentleman? He was not a regular in your congregation?”

“That is correct...he confessed to four murders with three bodies buried under his carrots, broccoli and cabbage beds. He thought that was funny. All girls around the age of ten to twelve he admitted freely...”

“He told you four girls, yes? Did he expand on where the other young girl was buried?”

“Yes and no...he said she had recently been discovered...she was his first victim...the other three came much later...”

“How did he come across? Nervous, anxious, jittery?”

“No, not at all...he could have been reading off the grocery list to his missus...in fact I would say he felt comfortable in his confession. Whether he had prayed for guidance or help, I do not know...I am unaware of the depth of his beliefs though I can say he was aware of the confessional vows”.

“You stated he said four young girls?”

“Yes...and I would say this may have caused him to confess. There was a TV request with a reward of one million dollars looking into the death of Beverley Priest up Grafton way. Her body being discovered after the bushfires went through there during this last summer...up on the coast near Grafton...he did say the name of the beach, but I did not get it...but he said it was on the coast due east of Grafton...”

“He stated that he killed the girl, Beverley Priest?”

“Yes...I am most definite on that...yes, that was the name he said”.

“Did he say he was a visitor...a camper perhaps or that he was a native of Grafton?”

“I got the impression he had lived half his life in that area”.

“But you have no idea who he was?”

“No...I’m sorry. He did say at the time, going back through his life he was halfway through a Journalism Course at University and every Uni Recess, he would go up to Grafton to gain

experience in a local Newspaper Office...he eventually settled up around there...only returning to Sydney to live after his kids grew up and flew the roost”.

I glanced at Shelley and then over to the Boss. We had something to go on and I knew who we needed to contact. My pulse had risen, and I had that ‘gotcha’ moment. I could feel it in my bones.

## CHAPTER FORTY

“You don’t have to fly up...especially the two of youze...”

“Oh yes we do Hendo. We are a team, and we know that we are getting towards the end of the Investigation and anything we can gain by talking to Glenda Staples or anyone else up there will be most important”.

He slapped the paper that held our flight times for to-morrow morning. Sometimes I feel the way Hendo goes on, the money for travelling Intrastate comes out of his pocket. He had us flying in and flying out on the same day. I shook my head, smiling at him and his little jokes, us always the butt as though we were something special.

“Keeping you honest, Joe...and arrh...with this Covid-19 thing, things are tightening up as far as flights around the State are concerned so don’t fuck about wanting to extend your day up there as there may not be a flight back to Sydney”.

“Mate...when and if that happens, we’ll drive...”

I moaned as I saw the time of the first flight out that meant I’d have to be up around three. Shelley too...this will be twice in the same week...give me strength!

For the rest of the afternoon, we trawled through the MPF specifically of an age between ten to fourteen. We ended up with six names, five of whom had been identified after death with the Perps in prison for their crime. Two had done the time, now walking free in society...a terrible thought!! Their whereabouts another task to complete. That left one whose remains had not been found or the Perp named. The young thing aged eleven went missing from the Yamba Beachside Caravan Park two years *before* Beverly Priest was abducted...a coincidence!? Not in my books!

“You across the disappearance of Tracy Hegarty?” I leant across my desk to ask Shelley.  
“In Nineteen Seventy-Three? January Two, Seventy-Three during the NSW School holidays”.

“Mmm...why didn't the local blokes pull up her name?”

“I give up...why not?”

“Because they never linked the two Cases together...ring Yamba and/or Maclean Cop Stations and see whether we can get a copy of the investigation files”.

“Both in that pre-pubescent age group. Both taken from camping grounds...perhaps both having reached puberty a little early...and I'd say both taken during either school holidays or University Recesses...or when both periods fell in line with one another”. I had no idea why I placed Uni recesses with school holidays...it was more than a mere slip of the tongue.

I rang Sergeant Tanner at Grafton first, outlining the similarities of both Cases. He listened, taking notes as he thought fit.

“Okay...um...I'll try and dig out some of the details. It may save you a trip up to Yamba. I'll ring and go through what paperwork I dig out with you...until then”.

## **CHAPTER FORTY-ONE**

We watched the sun come up as we flew north. First stop Grafton then the plane flew onto the New England area. Most of the passengers Public Servants doing their regular routine. I doubted I could do this on a regular basis. It would kill me!

Shelley broke the silence and me dozing off.

“What do think about Ruth, Joe? You know, going to the AFP?”

I pretended to be yanked forcefully from sleep. My charade having no effect on Shells. I rubbed the tip of my nose forcefully and yawned. Still not impressed. In fact, she began to giggle with my act not supposed to be comedic!

“An Oscar winning performance, my good man...”

“Yeah...I’m improving huh? Well...Ruth? She is making a terrible mistake. She is a people person who thrives on that interaction with other people. Looking at a computer screen all day every day will slowly drown her...I mean, if the promise of continued battered and bloodied bodies was getting too much for her, then a sideways shift to say...White Collar Crime...or Missing Persons...or even Fraud...now that Branch would be right up her avenue...no, she is going to be stifled in that job...”

“Mmm...I’m with you on that Joe. All the way. What do you think about this Trudy Hegarty...a first for our Perp...or just a red herring?”

“Don’t know, Shells. We are a little light on facts...the only connection at this stage is both taken from a camping area in the vicinity of Grafton but on the coast and maybe both girls were joggers and of that embarrassing age for young teenagers who are growing too quickly. Not much to hang your hat on”.

We signed out a vehicle from the Avis girl who seemed to have a smile plastered on her face every time we looked up at her. A Hyundai Getz. I could almost hear Hendo laughing as I expected a 4WD at least! I’ll give him what for on the morrow as I had trouble with what leg room was on offer.

My mobile buzzed in my pocket before beginning its ring.

“Detective Lind...” I answered officiously, not in a good mood with my knees up around my armpits. A slight exaggeration but with the seat rolled back to its maximum, I still had slightly bended knees!

“Joe? Muscles. I’m aware you no longer have those three OD cases in that suburban drug den...but I thought you should know. Mate? This is off the record, and I will deny ever giving you this information. Um...Photographic Recognition Techniques used on the three Deceased persons give confirmation of identity when compared with photographs on the Missing Persons Register. The three died from overdoses...they took almost pure heroin on top of Ice tabs. The question must be asked as not one of the three were known to mainline heroin...and there was no sign they had ever mainlined before...not a track to be seen, how in hell could they die of a heroin overdose? May be one out of the three could have been experimenting...but the three? Not on! It was a complete aberration outside their usual pattern of drug usage...why were they killed in such a manner? Mainlining heroin? I bet both balls that the fix was administered after they were chilled on Ice. Don’t ask me why they were killed as that is your area not mine...deliberate Murder One in my eyes. I do not know what or how the AFP is going to deal with this...I could suggest that the AFP may have been involved to give them a greater fulcrum when bartering with the Drug Dealers. I know I am now talking in fictionalise settings, but what else could be the motive?”

“Mmm...intent is still not proven. As a by-play to the larger question for them...those three will serve some purpose...like bartering with a murder one charge against a manufacture, supply and selling of illegal drugs. The alleged guilty parties used to increase or decrease charges, I'll bet. Nothing more”.

“Yeah...I can see that happening. A full Tox and blood work-up sent to the AFP HQ this morning. I doubt I will hear any back-chatter if you get my drift”.

“Young lives are cheap to them, I reckon. Thanks for letting me know and I shall for-ever say I have no knowledge of the Case as it was removed from our tenure a couple of weeks ago. See you next week...my place...one thing mate. Bill has been stood down from the DPP's Office...he is gutted but knew well beforehand that was going to happen...”

“Shit...sad news, huh?”

“Yeah”.

Shelley looked at me, eyebrows raised. I filled her in on the conversation with Muscles. She shook her head and mouthed expletives repeatedly. She bashed the steering wheel with an open hand. I could see the steering wheel buckling under her blows. I asked her to take it easy. All I got was a black look...not pretty at all!

“Shit Joe, they are using the death of those three as ante in their bloody poker game is all I can see. That is so wrong, so cold!”

“Mmm...as the Boss said to me, those kids were always going to be victims what with their habit. Regardless, that is so sad...and yes, so horrific where their lives mean so little. If this is the way society is heading, I want out of here!”

We drove from the Airport to the Newspaper Office. The front door closed and locked of the old warehouse building, so we walked around the block to the rear yard area of the premises. Sticking my head through the open roller shutter, I shouted out to anyone who was within earshot. I needed to repeat this before a young bloke with industrial earmuffs stuck around his neck looked me up and down. The reason for the tardiness was those bright orange noise suppressors I concluded...I'm quick like that! I flashed my badge asking whether the Boss was in.

“I'll go get the Boss”. The young bloke informed me before he disappeared back into the gloom of room. The roar of a printing press giving me a headache.

It was some time before a squat bloke sauntered towards us, a smile on his face as though he could be the Avis woman's father.

“Hello Detectives. You and your partner were up here when they found young Beverley Priest's body a month or two ago. What you doing back up here? Gunna arrest a local bloke, huh?”

“No...but we'd like a little time with Glenda Staples...”

He looked at me for some moments before shifting his gaze to Shelley. He pinched his nose and shuffled his feet.

“I suppose you wouldn't know...arrm...Glen is in Hospital...Royal Brisbane. Pretty bad and they're saying she won't walk out of there if you get my drift”.

“Shit!” I responded, waving my hand as an apology. There goes our Number One person who had a clear memory of Grafton of old with all its pimples. I often felt in reading all the stuff she had collected, there were several holes...the suspicion to me was she was consciously filing those important 'bits' under something else in her Laptop.

“Can we help? Um...I'm the Boss at the moment, as we have to get out the paper tomorrow morning...um...the Boss...Reginald Petronni will come in...” He looked at his watch. “He'll be in within the hour...he's worked all night to arrange each page and its advertisement load. Can I ring him for you? To come in early like?”

“Yes, much appreciated...um...could you steer us to a Coffee Shop that you could recommend? The stuff they serve you on the plane needs to be rinsed out of our mouths”.

“Hah...Yes...Rosie's Place...down the street at the front of our building, turn left into Carlton and yer can't miss her two cross-streets down. Ten minutes away. I'll tell the boss to meet you there. His missus runs the Café...they live on top...okay? That's where they get a lot of rumours and scuttlebutt for the paper...from the coffee shop”.

## **CHAPTER FORTY-TWO**

I was mad at myself for not asking for further Back Issues of the Paper. Then again, Glenda Staples did not inform us of that earlier crime. And yes, none of the coppers in the two distinct Police Regions informed me of the crime...so you have the same old

problem...failure to inform the Grafton lads of this earlier crime. Shit, we could accuse any number of people of not informing all the adjacent Regions of the sickening crime though back then, they worked as autonomous identities rarely sharing any information on like crimes...only sharing information over a beer on the rare occasions the coppers mingled.

Some would say...which includes me, that nowadays with computers and ease of access, such corelated crimes would be easier to spit out...if that be the case then I was also guilty of not tapping the right keyboard letters.

“You’re the two Detectives from the city, aren’t you? Reg will be down in a moment”. The attractive middle-aged woman uttered with a smile. Her face more attractive when she smiled.

“You’re Reg’s wife, so I understand?”

“Yes...and the reason Grafton people love their own Newspaper. I give Reg the heads up on any scuttlebutt I hear from my customers. A lot can be discussed over a good mug of coffee. You’d be surprised”.

She laughed, her face almost lighting up with an inward glow. Her laugh was also contagious which had both Shells and I joining in.

I cannot tell you what I expected an Owner of a regional Newspaper to look like, but I was obviously a long way from reality when I saw the man sit opposite me. Reg Petronni introduced himself as he sat at our table. He was tall, an athlete in his younger days. A marathon runner by the look of his build. A sliver of a moustache, his greying hair swept straight back over his head, parted in the middle. Alert blue eyes with a small rim of dark blue around the pupil. Unusual and almost hypnotic.

“You wanted to see me?” He asked already nursing a coffee mug that had printed on its side, *‘I thought you were interesting until you opened your mouth’*.

I wondered if he had chosen the mug for this meeting alone, or whether it was just his favourite.

“Yes, we actually wanted to speak to Glenda Staples. We understand she is in Hospital up the Gold Coast...”

“Yes, without belittling or ridiculing the medical attributes of the Queensland Health system, I doubt that she gets the free ride in the wheelchair out to the pick-up zone. A pity. Me and the missus were going up to see her this afternoon. Even when she was only coming

into the Paper once or twice a week, she was still irreplaceable...now?" He flung his hands into the air. "What is it you wanted of her?"

"She mentioned to us when we were up here a couple of weeks ago that she would always have a student, one or more come up from Sydney when the Uni was in its normal break. We wanted the names of all those who did come up here under those circumstances during that period when Beverley Priest went missing. I got the impression that the entire population in the north of the State at some point, were interviewed over the girl's disappearance...but it would appear only a small proportion of those students were subject to an interview. We're hoping it's just an omission by the coppers back then, but we are, at this moment pissing into the wind and going over what your local Police had done previously...um...additionally, we wanted all details that had been amassed on the disappearance and death of Tracy Hegarty. Taken during the Christmas School Holidays from the Yamba Caravan Park in remarkably similar circumstances as our Beverley Priest...in early January, Nineteen Seventy-Three...and I have no information suggesting her body was found".

He looked from Shelley back to me, a faint smile creasing his face. It was a face that became more handsome with a smile. I guess he may have thought there was a news piece in our request...both requests.

Typical! It was starting to get up my nose this habit of digesting and dissecting every word, looking for that hidden story.

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"One thing at a time. Why do you wish to have that list of names?"

"Arrh...I thought I explained myself clearly...yes, to ensure they were included in interviews back then...comparing one list with the other...just dotting the 'I's'. When the local guys interviewed someone, they would only put a name to what was recorded. With just that, we really don't have a clue who those people were...and we'd prefer to clear that point up. We can ask the same questions but in a different manner. They could be helpful into finding Bev's killer...we don't know yet. As I said, we are looking for the obvious oversights and omissions made during the first investigation...they may be helpful...they may not be, but we must investigate them no matter what. It's one of those loose strings of a Case that gets up my nose as it means hours of sitting on our behinds sifting through those early files on the investigation".

He nodded, looking down at the small table. A single red tulip in a long thin vase separated us.

“Yes, you do”. He challenged. “You think one of them maybe the culprit. Isn’t that correct?”

Bloody newspaper people, they can sniff a story from five kilometres away and against a stiff breeze I thought, starting to get a head of steam up.

I tried to stare him down which was the worst thing I could have done. That smile again showed he was on the right track. I then did the second worst thing I could have done. Threaten him with a Court Order to run rough shod through the old files looking for the list of names.

“Look Detective...just because we are country folk doesn’t mean we are stupid...or dumb. I’ll hold any breaking story on the poor girl’s death until you tell me I can run with it...meaning after you have interviewed all those on the list and isolated the guilty party. Then I can have the story...”

“Fraid not!” Shelley jumped in, sensing my frustration levels climbing. “Because the murder took place up here, the alleged guilty person shall be placed before a Judge up here. The last thing we want is his name bandied about in this Newspaper well before the Court date...insinuating so and so person may be the guilty party. That could mean that a jury trial may be in jeopardy of occurring. If push comes to shove, we could press for your exclusion on reporting of the matter until the Trail is well under way”.

“Freedom of the Press...” He murmured, that smile still evident.

“That’s bullshit and you know that. We have given you an ‘in’ into the matter which you can report or investigate at your own pace keeping in mind your responsibility to the truth and how and when you should ethically report on the Case”.

“Mmm...how long do you intend to be in town?”

“For as long as it takes and no...we really do not want to revert to a Court Order to obtain that information”. Shelley gave him her best smile. “That can draw fangs and teeth, if you get my meaning?”

He was nodding slowly, his mind in overdrive on the possible alternatives available to him.

“That information should be digitised knowing Glenda...she will be missed in a big way...”

The three of us nodded.

“Has she ever discussed with you her plans to write a book on the disappearance?”

“No...” He leant back in his chair. Real surprise displayed by the tone of his voice and his very mien. “Hah...that’s the first I have heard of it...” He looked across at me, agog at this piece of news. There was a bit of disappointment that his long-term and much-loved employee could keep that from him.

“Yes...I think you could by-pass her password codes to gain entry into her computer...she had stuff on that file that I can safely say the local coppers of the time were not aware of...if you have trouble entering her filing system we can provide a copy for you...as long as you hold the presses on the story of Uni Students who came up here during their breaks...specifically around the time of Bev’s disappearance...and we would like to take possession of her Laptop...after you have downloaded what interests you. We think there could be bits and pieces having relevance to the Case buried under other Files...deal?”

He looked steadily at me, smiled, and offered his hand.

“Deal, Detective. Deal...now Tracy Hegarty? What’s the connection?”

I had him in one!

Every Paperman worth his salt wanted to be the author of a successful book of size and importance. Glenda Staples had those secret desires and the thing that sealed the deal was my appreciation of Reg being similar. It clearly displayed Glenda’s attitude of not including her Boss in on her dream. She would know that he would want to go down the same track. To me all this secrecy was stupid. Why couldn’t the two collaborate on the exercise? She wanted to be the successful Author without having others competing against her and her subject matter. She had progressed down that path with the collection of all the News snippets and more...a lot more than her Boss who had not even appeared from the shed!

“Um...have you heard of Tracy Hegarty?” I was of the opinion he was trying to ignore the Case and our want to learn all we could.

“Should I have?” He shot back.

“Went missing from a caravan park at Yamba. During the School Holidays and corresponding with the Uni shut-down in Nineteen Seventy-Three”.

Petronni exhaled strongly...ran his hand through his greyish hair.

“We have a serial killer in our midst...”

“No, we don’t, and it would be completely irresponsible to even intimate that fact. No, Trudy went missing...we have no information on how and why but know the date of her disappearance. I was hoping you could pull all information you have on the incident and make it available to us”.

## CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Reg Petronni rang his Private Assistant at the Newspaper Office requesting she investigate the names of all University Students who had been up here during the Seventy-four to Seventy-six period of University Recesses. He suggested the ATO list of all employees around that one-year period would be the best way to dig out the names. She could then separate the Uni Students from that list.

“Arrh...another thing...sorry love...could you pick out any mention of a young Tracy Hegarty...around two years before Beverly Priest’s disappearance...yeah...okay do that”.

Two hours later the young PA Pamela Petronni, Reg’s daughter, was introduced to us.

Seven names with addresses, mostly in Student digs as the list was a Nineteen Seventy-Five list. I doubted that many of the ‘digs’ would still be around. The surprise was the inclusion of each person’s Tax File Number. I couldn’t believe our luck as that number is yours for life. As he handed over the single sheet of paper, he looked at me.

“Those listed...they always stayed with Glenda...a bit tight as she had a brood of her own. They paid board deducted from their weekly salary which I declare, wasn’t much. Glen always seemed to love having them there. Um...her file? It’s been deleted...she has cleaned out her entire memory. She must have had a sense of her failing health. I think you may have said that you had a copy of all her work on the investigation of the Case?”

“Yes...except for those ‘hidden’ files”. Shelley replied. “We’ll send it up to you when we return to Sydney. If there is any hidden files, our blokes should be able to dig them out”.

He nodded, thanked her, and smiled at her largesse.

“I’ll keep my word. The book will not be published until after the case ends in Grafton Court...and there will not be any mention of your appearance up here or your reasons why...but I will introduce a piece that I will build on each week that will cast suspicion over the veracity of the original investigation... A deal is a deal”.

It was mid-morning on the second morning of our stay. We had survived the verbal outburst from Hendo in extending our stay for another two days.

“What about seeing if we can get a flight up to the Gold Coast and get the evening flight back to Sydney from there”.

“Good call...you speak to Hendo as my ear is still ringing from the shellacking he gave me when I asked to extend our stay by a day...and now we wish to extend it again for what? A trip up to the Gold Coast. Jeezuz, he’ll have a heart attack! He trusts me more than you”. She could see me giving her a dig. “Hah...” I continued. “Your mask is the thing. Everyone suspects a person who wears a mask in public...they don’t trust that type of man unless he rides a pure white horse and has pearl handle revolvers”.

“A lot of people are wearing a mask out in public...their personal persona against their public image...”. She seemed to run down waiting for the drive-spring to be wound up again. She smiled. “Zorro too!!” She quipped. “The Phantom...why didn’t Superman wear a mask? Strange huh? And stranger still, no-one recognised him while he was Superman or Clark Kent...now that’s almost unbelievable, don’t you think?”

“Yep, fraid so...and when you think about it, he did wear a mask...just reversed. His black rimmed glasses that he wore when he was just a normal person was the disguise...that has always amused me...how many suits did he leave in Telephone boxes? He must have been his Tailor’s best friend, I reckon...and...are you going to tell me wearing just a mask means you’ll never be identified”.

She had that look that women have mastered too well. A look of aloofness; of a patronising air and that look that shits all men especially when it is levelled at them...like me now! A moth under glass, pinned to the backing board unable to escape a lifetime of being watched by others. I knew exactly how they must feel. Empathy for a moth pinned under glass!? Now that is a worry, I thought.

“You know all those insects pinned under glass? How come they don’t rot away...like...if we were pinned the same way, we’d be shedding skin inside a week...”

She gave me that look again. Why? I did not have a clue.

“I mean, they couldn’t stuff an insect, could they?”

I moved away from her as she began to speak to Hendo, filling in our need to go via the Gold Coast to interview a prime witness. I glanced over at her, that expression frozen on her face...or it was just me with a gigantic guilt complex blurring reality!

## CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

We stayed overnight at a Service Apartment on the thirty-second floor of one of the tower blocks that fronted the long sandy beach. Views for miles out to sea and into the Hinterland.

A visit to the Hospital plopped both of us into a melancholic mood that only eating in a well-known Seafood Restaurant could cure. Glenda Staples was in another world kept alive by a string of machines that flashed assorted colours and beeps and pings on a robotic pulse line. While we were saddened by what we saw against how we both remembered the lady, we were delighted to meet her eldest daughter Marlene Pinta and two of her teenage kids who were taking turns as deathbed observers.

“She has always said that she didn’t want to die alone...so here we are. We never took that much notice of her ramblings so the least we can do is pay her attention on her death-bed”.

I knew this was just the humorous way they were dealing with the imminent death of their mother, but regardless, I applauded their strength at such a sad occasion.

It was Marlene who recommended that Seafood Place. She asked why two Sydney bound Murder Detectives would be interested in her mother. We spent some time answering her questions, she slowly nodding through our extended explanation. We should have realised that ‘like mother, like daughter’ with the woman eventually admitting she was a Reporter for the Gold Coast daily newspaper and local television station.

That shut us up.

“So, you think my mother may have been able to help in your search for those names. Give you some insight into each person if she could...possibly even sharing her judgement on who the Perp could be”. She looked over at me, a smile going with her suspicions. “You seem to think one of them could well and truly be the murderer of Beverley Priest some forty-five years ago. What makes you suspicious of those visiting Journalism students? Oh! They weren’t all Journalist Students...there was a fair selection of other university courses

as well...um, architectural students, medical...you know, too many to mention and too many days since that time”.

“Nothing really, but it would seem that the person in question was never interviewed...and in fact, they all returned to Sydney without any interplay with the local cops back then...where we assume someone on that list conducted three additional murders of young teenage girls well after he had murdered the young Beverley...years after in fact before stopping the habit...and there is a tenuous link to a young girl who went missing from the Yamba Caravan Park roughly two years before Bev Priest went missing”.

Marlene straightened, placing a hand on her hip while she ran her fingers through her hair with the other hand...it was all her mother, Glenda Staples. I said as much which I guess may have been the wrong thing to say under the circumstances as she hurried from the Wardroom, followed quickly by her daughter.

Shelley slowly shook her head.

It was a good ten minutes before Marlene came back into the room. She had washed her face and applied that minimum make-up she always applied.

“Okay...what makes you sure that he stopped at four...and why would that type of person stop at one...or four? How can you be so sure that is how it went down?”

“We’re not sure of anything with the whole thing one giant supposition. But a fusion of several witness accounts brought us to that conclusion...plus with the help of our Felons List, we are sure that he *did* stop at that number. We could be so far out in left field we have failed to look at a simpler solution...um...you say you are a Journalist”.

“Yes...I work for the Gold Coast Gazette...and I do a fair amount of freelance work. Um...Mum sent up everything she had on the Beverley Priest disappearance and murder. I want to finish what Mum had started...a book on the crime”.

I groaned. *‘Here we go again’* I thought.

“Um...we are sure that your mother hid some material inside other Folders on her Laptop. She burnt everything that may still have been on her computer but if she gave you everything before busting her Laptop, then those Folders could be important to our investigation...could you hunt them out for us. I do not want to threaten you with Court Orders and stuff but wish we could work together”.

She smiled as she nodded slowly. I didn't trust her. She lacked that inner warmth of her mother when she smiled though the smiles were very similar.

"Um...I understand that Petronni is also thinking about writing a similar book..."

"But he doesn't have all the information that Mum has...what? What aren't you telling me?"

"He has a copy of everything your mother had on the subject...except for those missing sections. I guess they may have discussed it at some time and your mother was prepared to include Petronni in the Book formation...as a co-author. It may be prudent for you to negotiate a similar deal with Petronni".

She spent some time mulling this over. It was obvious she did not want to collaborate with anyone in drafting the book.

"Um...Marlene, can you remember those days when the University Students would spend their Recesses boarding at your place?" Shelley asked, breaking the silence.

I was glad for the re-start in the conversation as the continuous hum and zip from the various machines keeping the old girl alive was starting to get on my nerves.

"Struth, around forty-five years ago? No, I've just turned forty and am the youngest of the clan".

As I heard this, there was that sudden tweak in my brain, travelling too fast for me to grab hold. I sat back and closed my eyes, a position the woman thought that the question-and-answer session was over. She and Shelley began the normal womanly discussion, leaving me out thinking I was nodding off. Instead, I was waiting for that tiny morsel to circle around again so I could lash onto it. Unfortunately, it wasn't meant to be and as we walked from the Hospital, Shelley was mad at me, continually giving me the cold shoulder.

It didn't abate until she had a couple of prawns and half-a-dozen oysters under her belt.

"Mmm...these are excellent, Tonto".

"Tonto is a Plains Indian and wouldn't know what to do with those strange looking things. Spit balls from an aging Chief is what they look like. Buffalo balls are our delicacy, and their hearts are especially good too!"

"Another broken heart eh 'Small One with One Feather'".

I refused to add to her stupidity which did not dilute her silly mood.

“That would be atrocious!” Shelley retorted, giggling which caused something to lodge in her throat. She drank an entire wine glass of excellent quality White Chardonnay in three or four gulps.

“You okay?” A silly question as she reached for the bottle of iced water...chewing on a piece of bread before downing several gulps of water. Her eyes were misty, and her smile forced. She waved the question away with a fluttering hand, her other hand bashing her chest. I got back on the silly conversation we were having.

“No more so than goats’ balls and sheep eyes that the Steppe Herdsmen of Tibet think are the panacea of every known disease experienced up in the high country...”

“Where do you get this information from and how do you know so many long words, Tonto?” She half said, half sobbed.

I showed her my iPad. Rocked my eyebrows which was an old party trick. She nodded knowingly, tucking into another half-dozen oysters as though I didn’t exist. I had to help her walk to the cab and then up to the Apartment...no more than an hour later, I heard her vomiting into the toilet bowl!

I rolled over and went to sleep with a smile on my dial.

## **CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE**

I’d just finished my ‘Continental Breakfast’ left at our front door when my phone began its buzz. I had just taken my first sip of coffee, it tasting deplorable with it going down the wrong way. I gesture to Shells to answer my phone as I stood to bend over into the nearby sink hoping that water would get rid of the taste of shit stale and quick-fix coffee. Shelley nodded as she signed off, giving a smile meant for the person on the other end. A silly habit as that person on the other end could be miles away!

“Marlene Pinta...she’s been up all night, so she has said. Um...she’ll be here in about half-an-hour with decent coffee...”

“Anything has got to be better than this”.

The woman turned up exactly thirty minutes later. The aroma of quality java had me in raptures. The three of us settled in at close quarters peering at the Laptop screen.

“You were right...”

“Um...this is your mother’s laptop, huh?”

“Yes...and she had another at the Newspaper...clumsy I know, as it is the best way of losing data without even knowing you had done so...um...call me paranoid but I don’t think we should be so close together...touching, you know. I’ll download what I have found and send it down to you...that will have to do...”

“Hang on!” I exclaimed. “Jeb Collins...does that name ring a bell?” I asked as the three of us stood and self-consciously stepped away from one another. I leant towards the Laptop screen which was as large as my desk-top screen at home. “Um...Jeb Collins...and Connor Burke...I know that name...” I muttered, more to myself.

“Yes, the name was on that list of University Students that Petronni gave us yesterday...do you mind if I read what your mother had on the guy?”

“No...no worries...um, it’s included in the Flash drive I have for you”.

Regardless, I sat down in front of Pinta’s Good quality Laptop and began to read the entries.

“Mmm...your mother didn’t care much for the young man. She caught him masturbating in the shower...not her idea of a clean, wholesome young person so it seemed...she was a bit of an old-fashion biddy in her own way. Funny, but I never got that opinion of her when we spoke last time we were up here. There has to be more on the lad that we aren’t aware of...”

“I can’t stay long guys. I have to do a piece on why young people in the twenty to thirty age group are not taking this pandemic seriously”.

“It’s a real worry isn’t it, but I think the next generation up...if you close your eyes when you can include me in the mix, are not that much better”.

I skimmed quickly through the number of files Staples had decided should be buried discreetly on her computer. I was not sure of her grounds but I needed to sit and digest all the things...a lot were copies of filled pages of scribbles, shorthand and cryptic notes that filled two or three exercise books...those having a spiral binding...which she used to scribble into...cryptic utterances that meant nothing until you turned over a number of pages when the original point became perfectly clear. I groaned inwardly as this was going

to take just as much time interpreting as the three days Shells and I spent going through the Police Files on the Case and Glenda Staples collection of newspaper clippings...these notes may have been meant for inclusion into the daily story of the young Beverley Priest. Whether they made it and became common knowledge I didn't have a clue about!

“Um...you have booted up your Laptop? Get onto the Grafton Advertiser back copies and put in that name...Burke...Connor Burke. I remember sitting in the office reading back through past copies. Connor Burke was big for a while around Grafton”.

“Here he is...killed while on remand at Grafton jail. With good behaviour, his sentence of twelve years could be cut to ten years and three months. He charged and found guilty of kidnapping and killing an eleven-year-old girl. Macy Gardner. Her body never found, and he never disclosed her whereabouts...he took it to his grave...the act occurred around two years...a year...in nineteen seventy-two or three. It was a terrible thing with the whole town outraged much the same as when Beverley Priest went missing. Funny thing is his death was a beautiful pantomime. The inmates got approval to play a game of Rugby League, and when one of the scrums collapsed, he died from a broken neck, pushed into the scrum the wrong way so they said. Child killers were the lowest of the low, way down on the totem pole of criminal acts. The Super of the Jail at the time said that it was a terrible accident but when the mikes and TV cameras were shut down he was heard to murmur something about poetic justice...oh, it was big news back then...I read every word...not so keen on the Priest murder...I can't tell you why but I had to be around twelve when I use to help in the Office with Mum. I remember promising myself that I would be a Journalist when I grew up so I could report on terrible crimes committed around this area...silly really”.

“No, not at all. I promised myself that I would become a cop when I was with my mother and father...a group of thugs took to my old man...he was a Dee himself...he managed to pummel a few of them before they got the better of him. We had an Ambulance ride to the hospital...”

“Why a cop and not an ambulance driver?”

“Shut up, Joe”.

“Um...Macy Gardner...eleven years of age. Her death around three years before Priest's disappearance...maybe a year before Tracy Hegarty aged eleven was taken and killed...do you see a pattern here?”

“Who...arrh...who is Tracy Hegarty?” Marlene Pinta asked, straightening as she felt there was something she was missing out on. “Um...Reg Petronni? He was also one of those uni students who would volunteer their services to the local paper...he is now the Editor and

Manager. Fell in love with a local girl Gwyneth Paltry who was still going to school. He finished his studies as a gold star student, came back up here and the rest is history as they say...”

I glanced over at the woman blinking several times wondering what on earth that had to do with three young girls abducted and killed around the same period many years ago.

I inched my chin before explaining as clearly as I could the connection that we felt was between the three girls.

“Didn’t you say there could be another three such Cases...down in Sydney...”

“We haven’t looked into those disappearances...or even identified the victims yet. We would like to concentrate on Hegarty, Gardner, and Priest as they are carbon copies of one another. We need to see the Investigation notes on both the Hegarty and Gardner Cases. I presume Hegarty would have been conducted from Maclean with both Priest and Gardner conducted from Grafton”.

We extended our stay in Grafton by days with a day spent in Maclean waiting for the Tracy Hegarty Case notes. They had not been digitised as that takes money and resources neither in satisfactory quantities around this part of the world, so we were told on numerous occasions by an embarrassed Station Sergeant.

“You see it?”

“Yeah...I don’t think it is a coincidence based on what we know. We could safely assume the death of Macy Gardner went the same way...”

“This’ll put the cat amongst the pigeons. The wrong guy arrested, charged, and sentenced only to have him...arrh...killed by persons unknown when he was in prison. Somehow I don’t think it will rattle the can too much as both those cases are older than Bev Priest’s death...”

“...and look at how that has affected the townspeople of Grafton after forty-five years...these other two will be explosive, I reckon”.

## CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

We had to wait three days for approvals from on high to search for these seven individuals through their Tax Records by entering just their Tax File Numbers. The Tax Office doesn't work on a buddy system! Both me and Shells sat in front of my Screen just looking at the information supplied as though it was directions for the missing gold bullion purloined by the Nazis during the last months of the Second World War.

“What do you reckon?” Shelley asked.

She had taken it on herself to make sense of Glenda Staple's hidden files. I had yet to follow suit, delaying the exercise for as long as I could. I just hoped our next Case was a cut and dry Murder Case with the Perp standing over the Vic with a bloodied knife still in his hand and him yelling out his confession as he held a Bible in the other!

“That there are too many radio waves ripping around the world that is slowly eating away at our intelligence and causing major decreases in the sperm count of all males on the planet...”

Shelley dropped her head, letting out a groan that I knew was caused by those radio waves killing a couple of her brain cells. It can be painful if they go at it the wrong way. I am convinced that a headache is just that...zillions of brain cells dying!

“Apart from that, I think we should start at the bloke who lives close to or in the Eastwood district. He could have visited the Eastwood Catholic Church sooo...hang on, let's look to make sure all those listed are still alive”.

“Won't the Tax Records list that fact?”

“I don't know...let's have a look because in the end, it could save us money and sweat and a lot of shoe leather”.

We sat for close on an hour trawling through the Records. Of the seven, one now lived in Thailand, three were deceased leaving three names for us to concentrate on. One was Jeb Collins, now living in a South Wollongong suburb.

“Okay. Um...three names, the first would be Graeme Ponds. In a Retirement Village at Brush Farm which is a stone's throw from Eastwood...”

“That's a plan. Let's go as it's as close as a crow's spit from here...”

It took us longer to find the Manager of the complex than to drive from our Parramatta Office to Brush Farm. Longer to convince the Receptionist of our good stature and standing in life. If this was an example of how this investigation was going to go, I was seriously considering taking annual leave.

“Graeme Ponds? We understand he resides in this complex...”

“Yes, he does”. The spritely, greying lady responded suspiciously. She took more interest in my badge than anything else we may have uttered. “Murder Squad Detectives...what business do you have with our Mister Ponds? Has he killed another One-Armed-Bandit at the Bowling Club across the road...or done mischief to someone on the greens last night?”

“We are hoping he may be able to help us in our enquiries...” A stock standard answer pulled out every time we met a stickybeak...like now!

She looked up at me for some moments, still unsure why I should be trusted. Eventually she made up her mind and with a grunt that I took as a yes, she picked up the phone to ring the lovable Mister Ponds.

“I’ll ring and see if he is in...”

“If you could just direct us to his Unit, please...” Shelley butted in, that wonderful warm smile lighting up the dim Reception Area.

“Yes of course...second level Unit two three. Use that stairwell to your right beside the Reception Area just here...or the Lift to your left...whichever is easiest for you”.

A man stood with his door open as we climbed the stairwell. We both knew that the little lady at Reception would have rung Mister Ponds and told him of our visitation along with ensuring all the other elderly residents of the complex were ‘made aware of our presence’ as there were people standing on the open walkway to their tenancy...or heads were visible peering from ajar front doors. Our presence will be the talk down in the Meals Room for months!

“You the coppers...come in...you’ve given the missus a right royal dose of anxiety...come through”.

This was not my idea of a serial killer even if he did stop at four. We were led straight out onto a veranda area of generous proportions and told to take a seat around a small outdoor table setting. Out came the coffee, tea, and biscuits. Things had to be organised in a rational progression according to old people. Small talk, introductions to the missus who groaned as

she sat. Graeme Ponds eventually sat opposite me; the little round glass-topped table not able to accommodate the four of us easily. This resulted in a conversation between husband and wife on the possible need for a larger setting and the benefits or not of a larger setting.

“The veranda is not big enough for a larger table and chairs setting. Dear, this conversation occurs every time we have the family here and we try to fit them all in...once every blue moon my dear. Now...Detectives. You are murder detectives...how can I help?”

I cleared my throat and delicately returned the coffee mug to the glass tabletop.

“Have you ever been to Grafton?”

“Oh yes, many times...” A smile at his reminiscences. “I started going up there with a mate when our Uni Course was in recess...hah...that’s going back to a time when they were waiting for the Great Flood to recede. We’d help with the running of the Newspaper learning everything from ink replacement to the Obits...my mate cornered the Sporting Results of the District every weekend. Me? The roving Reporter...” He smiled at the memory. “Not a demanding position...hah...I remember the good times. I stayed up there for around...”

He turned to his wife.

“Four years...” She replied. “That’s where we met. And then you got a ‘come thither’ from the Fairfax group here in Sydney. We had a furious row about you returning to Sydney while I wasn’t that keen...I was a Grafton born girl who didn’t think that much of the Big Smoke, but by then we had three kids, so I had no choice but to follow you. The kids weren’t impressed, let me tell you!”

“What happened to your mate? The one who always went with you up to Grafton?”

“Yes...I lost track of him. I vaguely remember Glenda saying that he had gone funny...for the life of me I cannot remember his name”. He turned to his wife. “Can you remember his name?”

She looked myopically at her husband, shaking her head several times. She didn’t recall his name either.

I thought this may have been the first time either one of them had raised the question. Then again, the old bloke seemed dottier than his wife, so this could have been the umpteenth time the discussion had occurred.

“You stayed with the paper until the end. Turfed out...a Senior Editor meant nothing. Graeme fired alongside the Copy Boy...but I guess he was due to retire as he was sixty-six at the time...seven years ago now. We’ve always lived around Eastwood after we came down from Grafton. The kids flew the coop leaving us in a large house losing our way to the toilet every time. Sold the house and bought in here when they were brand new...Eastwood has changed...you’d think you were in some Korean city there are so many of them about...a couple have even bought into here!”

She may have looked old, but she spoke as though a lot younger. There wasn’t a shortening of breath or a fight finding the correct word. She was on the ball.

“Graeme and I play bowls twice a week and have a meal out at the Bowling Club at least once a week...just a short walk to the Club rain hail or shine...but with this Virus thing, the Club has shut its doors...and we are supposed to stay indoors as we are in that age group susceptible to dying if we caught the bug...oh dear, I’m not liking how the world is going”.

I realised we would get stuck very shortly on the history of the family. A quick squiz at the various photo frames as we walked through the place told me it was a large family which could take weeks for the elderly couple to sift through the family story. Something I did not want to sit through!

“Mister Ponds...Graeme, yes. Were you in Grafton around the time a young lady...twelve-year-old Beverley Priest went missing?”

“I remember that...when was that?”

“Nineteen Seventy-five...”

“Yes, that’s right...Seventy-five. That’s a long time ago...yes...a disappearance...they never found her body, did they?”

“Her body was unearthed by those vicious fires of last summer...January this year”.

“Mmm...her body!? Are you sure?” Debbie Ponds enquired.

“Yes ma’am...irrefutable proof. The remains are the young lass, Beverley Priest”.

“Oh...the poor dear...” Missus Ponds responded. The old bloke sadly shook his head as the memories clicked into gear. His missus was quicker than her husband in putting her thoughts into words.

“She was a lovely girl...always smiling. She had a slight limp...if I remember correctly, she fell off a horse I think...broke her leg badly and was airlifted to Royal Brisbane Hospital...I knew her...she was a couple of years younger than I but in those days, Grafton was a lot smaller than now...and everyone knew everyone. The whole town was in shock for quite some time...everyone helped in the search for her...to no avail”.

Graeme Ponds was trying his best to keep up with his missus.

“There was that cop...sorry, police officer who thought he was in some Nazi SS Division. A strict disciplinarian. Used to come down on the kids who were playing up...a friendly kick up the backside by the local cop...good or bad? I don't know”. His contribution to the conversation a little skew-if to logical progression. “The Fisherman...he was tagged as the killer. He disappeared only days after the lass went missing. Looked bad for him though Tander...yes, that was his name...Sergeant Tander...”

“No Graeme. Colin Tander is the big boy in the Grafton Police Station now. The bloke you're thinking of is Bill Waites. He was Senior Constable back in those days. The Number Two. He fell apart and pensioned out not long after the young Bev's disappearance. Some said good riddance; others said it was a sad day for Grafton. There was quite a story of him in the Paper...about all the good things he did for the town. He was an Umpire for the local Cricket Club. A Referee for the Junior League games. He set up the local Youth Club and was the original bloke who championed for girls' sports...he's a little sour now so some reckon...but you should interview him as he knows heaps what goes on in that town. Back then and now”.

I glanced at the old woman wondering how she knew the present Sergeant and how she knew of Waites. Sure, she was a local lass to Grafton and in seventy-five would have come under the umbrella of Waites interest, but still, it struck me a little strange.

“You knew Waites? Personally, Missus Ponds?”

“Yes...I was the champion two hundred yards and four hundred hurdles...under twenties...I came third in the Combined Schools Athletics Carnival a couple of years before that. He was my coach for a while...while I was still at School”.

“Oh...why did he stop being your coach?”

“I never experienced any funny...you know, anything dirty but there were plenty of rumours that he...you know...that he touched certain girls in a dirty way...I really don't know as he was always the professional with me...he helped a lot of kids right around the

District. Grafton had a good name in just about every sport while he was at the helm...when he left...it was a little rudderless until Macca took over the reins”.

“You know a fair bit of what went on in Grafton back then. Do you travel up there often?” Shelley enquired, pinning my thoughts up on the ‘conversation board’.

“Yes, two of our children live up there still. We visit once a year getting that pensioner discount for rail travel...me, I enjoy catching up with old friends who have remained in the district...once a year and the occasional telephone call”.

It took us another hour to extricate ourselves from the Unit, making promises to keep them in the loop. Our coffee half-drunk and not a biscuit touched!

We sat in the Unmarked with the windows down.

“One down and two to go...I don’t know whether I will survive the onslaught and like Bill Waites, be pensioned off because of my brain snapping under the load!”

Shelley giggled, leaning forward to turn the motor over. She then sat back and did up her seatbelt, letting the vehicle idle.

“Yer know? We have several times talked over what would stop a person from killing more than one person...”

“Killing another...” I interrupted, a deadpan expression. I broke a smile looking at Shelley’s look of disgust. “Well, I’m right, aren’t I?”

“What!? Grrr. No Joe. We have theorised on what would stop a bloke from savagely killing his prey once...then he stops. Look at Bill Waites. Sounds like the typical country town copper inserting himself into every sporting aspect good for the kids. Champions the cause...mixes with all the town kids and others further afield...he is liked and respected by all the townsfolk and for all account and purpose...he *is* the copper in town. Then we have this disappearance of a local popular girl who was showing promise in a lot of fields...this causes the whole town to act and for several weeks everyone pitches in...until the truth dawns on them all. She had been abducted and murdered. Her body could be anywhere within the State...or even further. The popular copper? He has something akin to a mental breakdown. No-one is suspicious theorising that Bill Waites was the Pied Piper for all the town’s kids. He takes Bev’s disappearance hard...now turn it around and look at it from the opposite direction... he is horrified at what he has done...an impulsive thing to him even though his insertion into the very centre of kids’ lives is a...you know, an indication to his darker side...if you are the suspicious type. He is so gutted at what he had done...and

possibly what torture and sexual depravity he had practised, it fucks him up so badly he free-falls into a nervous breakdown...and out of the Force without a suspicious thought held against him”.

“Mmm...yeah, I can see what you mean...and it ticks a lot of boxes...let’s see whether any of these other two names mentions Bill Waites. These students at Uni are learning to look behind what news is breaking and to ask what, how, why, when, and who. Let’s see what happens with the others, eh? We don’t want to spark any suspicion in the old bloke. Remember, he was a cop for a lot of years...”

“Mmm...I don’t know whether I can stand another half day lost, listening to old people reminisce over old times...and we should not draw conclusions just because Waites was a cop...and a darn good one by all accounts...he was one of us and should be treated as such...not as a guilty person merely because we have suspicious little minds...”.

“I know what you mean”.

She shoved the vehicle into gear, gave me a look, shrugged her shoulders, and joined the traffic heading back towards Paramatta.

## **CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN**

We’d just come back from our morning exercise regime when Ruth came up to Shelley, giving her a hug, allowing the tears to flow in front of the entire Murder Squad. The Boss too, joined in, she too spilling tears as though they were given an hour before the world was to blow up...you know, something mammoth like that, not a farewell hug with a promise to keep in touch...the promise never kept. Being an extraordinary Detective, I deduced her acceptance by the AFP and was here to pick up her belongings and to say hooroo to whomever.

She next came to me, and we embraced in a tight hug.

“You know Joe, I’m going to miss you so much. You taught me so much...please stay in touch”.

“I don’t think I’ll have a choice as your line boss will be...Dallas Courtney I think, and your Section Head is Malisa...she practically lives in my pocket. Dallas, we visit at least once a month”.

I gave her a smile and another hug thinking she was heading in the wrong direction. Still, you will always butter over that opinion to wish her the best.

After the usual banter about staying in touch and saying hello to Malisa and Dallas Courtney, both of whom would be Ruth's Line Supervisor and Section Boss, I doubted we would lose track of the young lady who had shown talent being an up-and-coming Detective...it was the blood and gore she had trouble with. Those things would be missing in an enclosed air-conditioned Office where the excitement was something that came up as digital 'computer speak' items!

Not my cup of tea and I really had my doubts it was Ruth's prime choice.

"Let's get out of here, Joe. I've had enough farewells to last a bloody lifetime. Don't like them, never have".

"Okay...how about we visit the last bloke on our list of three who are still alive who may have gone to Confession...Harry Winters. He lives at Denistone...where the hell is that?"

"I think it is the Railway Station between Eastwood and West Ryde. Near here, only a decent spit away. He could have visited the Eastwood Catholic Church, no worries".

Straight along Victoria Road obeying the calls from our GPS Miss Direction, we were soon at the address, a private home. A precocious five-year-old answered our knock.

"I'm sorry". She said confidently. "Poppy says I'm not to speak to strangers..." She began to close the door before my size fourteens intervened. She yelled out for her Poppy in a nervous, high-pitched voice. We heard soothing tones from the ajar door before it was slowly opened.

I flashed my badge at the gentleman who was in a wheelchair.

"You did good, Libby but it's okay. They are Police people". He looked up at me, a nervous smile overshadowed by a frown. "Yes, what is it you want?"

"Are you Harold Winters?" I knew that this wasn't our 'confessional' man. The Priest had not mentioned a wheelchair or a feeble voice. In fact, he had said that the gentleman's voice was quite robust.

"Yes...and you are Murder Squad Police, so it says. What do you want with me?" This while he was soothing the young girl who was sobbing noisily.

“We are investigating the...arrh...” I glanced at the young lady. She may have been sobbing, but her ears were on full volume. “Arrh...skeletal remains were found at Minnie Waters Beach some weeks ago...um...we have been informed that you were in Grafton around Nineteen Seventy-Five. Is that correct, sir?”

“Good grief, you expect an old bloke like me to remember back then...half a lifetime ago...more than that, actually...arrm...forgive my rudeness. Come in...through to the Dining Room. Libby, could you do the honours and close the door when the police people follow me? Yes?”

We were led through a larger house than you expected to find in suburbia, out to a covered in back veranda. There had obviously been major extensions to the house. He pushed a button several times and I could hear the chimes up the back garden.

“My daughter...she works from home. One long buzz come quickly. Two...I need to go to the toilet; three...I’m awake; Four...I forget...”

“Good grief, Dad...you’ll never get it. Forgive me, I’m Libby One”. She demanded to see both our ID Badges before she busied herself making coffee for all. Little Libby had milo. A freshly made cake still smelling of that beautiful aroma placed in the middle of the table with a bread plate and coaster placed in front of each of us.

“Do the honours, Dad. You made it”.

That surprised me and the look on my face must have said it all.

“One of the things I can do while confined to this bloody thing...it’s a life sentence, I’m afraid...while Libby does the honours with the coffee, let me give you a slice of cake. Little Libby, you going to help Pops?”

After the duties were completed and I was on my second slice of cake, Harold asked what our enquiries were about as he scooted little Libby into her room to play.

“Grafton! Yes, a long time ago, I’m afraid. That missing girl...I remember that. A friend...I wonder whatever became of him...we had Uni Recess, and like so many others, we headed for rural Newspapers to learn the business from the beginning...you didn’t get that by working...um...work experience in the large city dailies...that friend and I were excited by the frantic searching of a fair proportion of the population of Grafton at that time. It was a small town back then...not like now, so I am led to believe...rather coldly, we were excited acting like famous Reporters going in to the thick of things...to put it mildly, we were crude, rude and couldn’t give a damn if our questions were...you know, out of line”.

“What religion are you, if you don’t mind me asking?”

He blinked several times, thrown by the sudden change in direction.

“Arrh...what has that got to do with the price of eggs? If you must know, I’m Callithumpian...not even Agnostic! Religion and me parted ways a long time ago...I have no time for anyone preaching ‘The Truth’!”

“So, you didn’t go to Confession at the Eastwood Catholic Church maybe two weeks ago?”

“Hah...unless I walked in my sleep...silly...rolled in my sleep, you would never catch me entering any Church, most assuredly not a Catholic Church...it’s a matter of principle”.

“What’s this about...a visit to a Church or the state of a missing girl in Grafton forty-five years ago?” Libby One queried.

“Yes...sorry”. Shelley begun, filling in for me while I attacked my third slice of cake.

“The poor dear. One wonders on the humiliating treatment she must have gone through...and it takes forty-odd years for her remains to be found. She out there in the wind and the cold. There is real cruelty out in the suburbs, isn’t there?”

You hear it so often where the words of sympathy suggest the remains somehow have ‘lived’ through those intervening years.

“You were in Grafton at the time, yes?”

He nodded his head.

“There would appear to be quite a few of you...you know, Uni students majoring in Journalism spending your Recess time at the Grafton Daily Newspaper...the arrh...the Daily Examiner...” I had to think about the name as the Advertiser kept spinning around in my head. “There would have been around seven who did the sabbatical several times a year. We have advice that the seven has shrunk to only three”.

“Dead? Struth!” He exclaimed after I nodded. “Journalism must have been quite dangerous back then...how did the four die?”

I shook my head to show I hadn’t a clue. He shook his head in unison before wiping his eyes.

“Not as many as usual that year from what I can remember...I’ve seen up to half-dozen I guess...up there with us...we would walk around town to report on poor Mister Smith who once again tripped over a warped section of the Council footpath that was made dangerous by the root system of a nearby Jacaranda Tree...this time he ended up in the local Hospital with a broken hip...he died three weeks later when he developed an infection. Stuff like that so when little...Beverley? Yes, Beverley Priest went missing, all of us became novice Crime Reporters...silly really, but it fed our dreams. I never did finish the Course, dropping out because me and Libby’s mother married. I started at the bottom in the Reich’s Brewery there at Central Station. Worked my way up to Shift Supervisor...a decent job that I enjoyed...that is until a load of full barrels of beer fell off the back of a delivery truck and crushed me. Been in a wheelchair for...twenty years...spent two years in Hospital”. He gave a tight smile, a cocking of his head.

I nodded my head sympathetically to the man’s fate.

“Did you discover anything untoward on your sojourns to Grafton?”

“Like what? Nothing earth-shattering, No. Arrh...old Bill Waites you mean...there were a lot of whispers about him and possible child molestation accusations but no-one would come forward...and the School Teacher who was convicted of rape around the same time...funny how these memories come into focus once you begin talking of them...I have no idea where that came from...but if you think about it, if he was predisposed to touching young girls where you should not as an adult, its two easy steps to be suspicious about his movements at that time. That friend and I...isn’t it terrible not being able to name him...”

“But you named him the phantom ‘Tickler’...” His daughter half-laughed at her offering.

“Yes...a bit odd now I think of it...he was the Senior Constable...the Pied Piper was how he was described as he was the instigator of so many of the regular sports involving the five-years and up children...boys and girls. King of the kids. I would imagine he’d be dead by now”.

I shook my head, describing how Waites had told us how he spent his days.

“Mmm...rumours are cheap. He did a lot of good for Grafton kids that I would imagine, is still being felt to-day, forty-odd years later”.

It was time to go and as Winters wheeled down the wide Hallway to the front door, he suddenly yelled “Justin ‘Joey’ Goodreich...that was his name, I wonder what-ever became of him. A good thing for me to do while I’m sitting around doing nothing...chase him out. I got the impression that the last time we went up to Grafton together...he stayed up there,

working full time in the Newspaper, and boarding at Glenda Staples home as a lot of us did for a week here, a week there”.

“How many times did the two of you go up to Grafton?”

“I...look, I forget. One, two, three times...I’m not too sure”.

“Where did he live in Sydney?”

“I can’t recall, but it was only a short bus ride for him to get to Uni...so I guess in the Eastern Suburbs somewhere...yes...I remember...his father was a drunk”. He shook his head, apologising for not remembering. “Used to belt him about. I think that’s why he made the decision to get right away from Sydney. I remember one night when we had a beer and a meal together, he started crying...like really crying. He was worried what would happen to his mother as he would normally take the blows for her...he had this exaggerated opinion of women, placing them on tall bases...I can’t remember the details...no, I’m sorry”.

We said our farewells and promises to keep them in the loop, flopping into the front seats of our Unmarked as though we had just completed a marathon.

“You keep eating like that Tonto, and we’ll need to get you a stronger horse...Justin or Joey Goodreich isn’t even on the list that we got from Reg Petronni. An honest mistake or a conscious omission?”

“I don’t know, but it gives us a start in another direction. The only name left on the list who hasn’t died or moved overseas is Alf Thomas who we have already interviewed...we’re at that bloody brick wall again...shit!!”

“Mmm...we may need to have another talk with our Mister Thomas. He is swirling around that same pool that several others have confessed to...like a secret sect...they would have been a close-knit unit back then”.

“Mmm...thinking about that group in isolation, I am not getting an itchy nose from any of them...”

“They’d be most thankful about that, wouldn’t they? You’re doing it again, building up a case for an individual to be found guilty then completely demolishing it to a point that I am totally confused...”

“Stay with me Shells. Stay with me”.

“Jeb Collins...like Thomas and Goodreich, they’ve kept lowkey since those days...let’s dig out what we can on the three...a direction at least”.

## CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

“Where in bloody hell do we go from here? Every avenue we have driven up leads to a dead-end...someone has to know something about that morning...buggered if I do!”

“That Joey Goodreich wasn’t on the list of Uni students who went up to Grafton during those recesses at University...neither was Alf Thomas. Why not?”

“Give...um...the daughter a ring. She made up the list on her father’s orders...arm...look, an avenue we haven’t entered is the children of Glenda Staples...Marlene Pinta’s siblings. I know years have passed, decades in fact, but one of them may know something that just jigs this investigation along. There is no evidence in the Police Volumes that any of the siblings were ever interviewed...maybe another major slip-up, huh?”

We were less than impressed about returning to work, so we parked at the memorial commemorating Australia’s first two submarines of WW1 up on the high ridgeline at Carlingford. It gave us fantastic views out over the valley scoured out by Parramatta River washing into Sydney Harbour.

“Call me confused, but why would there be a Memorial to submarines on one of the high hills overlooking the Sydney Basin. A submarine, like...there doesn’t seem to be any logic in it...or am I pissing into the wind...feeling my tootsies getting wet...”

“Maybe if you were a submariner, you would want to get to high ground after you docked, having been underwater for so long...”

“Mmm...”

My phone buzzed and began its first chimes as I went to take a sip of my coffee. I was confused as to which one I was going to deal with first. Shelley started giggling at my conundrum. The constant ringing of my phone won out though the aroma of the coffee was mesmerising.

“Detective Lind, is it? Um...Ridgey-didge Morris here. When we spoke the other week, you wanted the name of the other bloke who was living rough in the same National Park as me

up here. I've been racking my brain trying to remember his name. It came to me this morning as I hunkered down for a nap. Been fishing all night. It's good the School Holidays are over leaving the area free except for a few 'Stray Greys' doing their thing...um...I'm here at Grafton Police Station. They've let me ring you from here. His name...Joe...Joe...bloody hell...the name of a tyre?"

"Goodreich!" I offered.

"Yeah, that's it. Joey Goodreich...he's been around these parts for a lot of years. He's gotta be getting too long in the tooth for this type of tough existence...he'd be in his seventies, I reckon. His main camp I stumbled onto a while ago now. I remember thinking as I walked around poking my nose into his business that he was watching my every move. We shared a gutter one night...that's where he introduced himself...he liked to fish too...but he had old gear which I suspected he had flinched...that's the first and last time I've seen him on the beach. I think he prefers to fish down Woolli way. Down south. I know his digs are not far off Woolli Road up near the head waters of Woolli Creek".

"And you stumbled across his 'digs' as you were walking through the bush. That's a long way from your usual beat, isn't it? You seeing him? That was a while ago, eh?"

"Yeah, some years ago now. I often leave him coffee and sugar, some self-rising flour...I knows he gets it as a look-see a couple of nights later and it is gone. Yeah".

I heard Shelley going at a feverish pace over her Laptop keyboard, able to give me a rundown before I had rung off.

"Disappears off the records early to mid-seventies. No notice of him after that time. Yes, he was doing a Uni Course majoring in Journalism at UNSW in nineteen seventy-four...then nothing...he cuts all ties and goes bush at the age of twenty. Why? What major incident occurred that pushed him over the edge?"

"You hear that Galligan? Yeah...okay, thanks for the tip. We might see you...you can show us around your salubrious dwelling". I heard him laughing as I rang off.

"Let's find out. An early flight out to-morrow morning, a trek into the bush as it will be quite easy with only touches of green emerging after the fires of this last summer. We can go via one of those ATVs as there will be still little to no underbrush".

"Ring Sergeant Tander".

## CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

The earliest we could get a flight and return was two days hence. Covid-19 had caused Intrastate flights to be reduced or completely cancelled.

I re-read the 'Hidden Files of Glen Staples' again. Most of it hearsay as though she had them noted down to investigate later...their veracity proven later for inclusion into her book...or thrown out into the wastepaper basket.

"You read these files of Glen Staples, Shells?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Mmm...don't know..."

"I've pulled out the whereabouts of our Mister Jeb Collins. A Retirement Village up the mountains. Katoomba...how about a drive this afternoon? He lived at an address in Wollongong for all his life. He worked for the Cumberland Press as a Reporter, then in charge of Advertising before retiring years ago as a Sub-Editor...nothing spectacular just a bloke who worked all his life. Not even a Parking Ticket or a speeding charge. It's good to know there are people out there like that...what do you reckon?"

"A bit chilly...yeah, we need to interview him regardless. Yes, let's go".

Thank Christ it was a warmer than average Autumn as I would not have survived the trip.

I rang the bell on the counter-top and had to wait for some-one to eventually appear. A stout woman in a Sister's Uniform strode up to the counter, keeping her distance from us. I flipped my ID Card at her which did not seem to rattle or impress her. She still had that stern matronly expression as she looked from my ID card to my face. A quick glance at Shelley to indicate she was aware of her presence.

"Mister Jeb Collins..."

She cut me off before I could elaborate.

"Detective...I am sure you are fully aware we are in the midst of a full-blown pandemic and any visitation to any of the patients here is forbidden...mainly because they are in the age group that are more susceptible to dying if they unexpectedly catch the virus".

“You’re saying we cannot even speak to him at the recognised distance?”

“That is correct, Detective. A good afternoon to you both”.

## CHAPTER FIFTY

We returned a week later with a Court Order giving us approval to speak to Jeb Collins. This time, the Matron made a thing of placing Collins into a separate room from which he could not stray for fourteen days after we had finished speaking to him.

“She’s not too bad though when she gets a bee in her bonnet, watch out. Why do you wish to speak to me?”

“Grafton, Nineteen Seventy-Five...the annual Christmas school holidays...were you there during a uni recess period?”

“Hah...Grafton...those were the days...yes, I’d say I was there at that time. I usually went up there to get the experience in working in a newspaper office of a reasonable size. I learnt a lot...the old dear...Glenda Staples...I would stay at her place, but it went sour...”

“Oh? Why?”

He shrugged, turned, and filled up a glass with water from a jug.

“Missus Staples...yeah!” He wiped his glasses before placing them on his forehead.

“Yes...Why would the mother of several growing girls offer board to a number of us from Sydney...total strangers...with these young girls running around in underwear thinking all was the same as it was for all the months of the year when we weren’t there...but you’re not here asking what may have happened when Missus Staples wasn’t around...we obtain precious experience from working in the newspaper up there for which I will always be in debt to Missus Staples...what are you looking for?”

I thought it strange that with every conversation we had with these past uni student boarders, there was never any mention of a Mister Staples. He was an unknown character. I made a mental note to chase that out...

“Beverley Priest...” Shelley asked quietly. “Macy Gardner...Tracey Hegarty...” She continued. Collins fell quiet and bowed his head. It was moments before he replied and when he did his words were tinted with sarcasm.

“Have you got any idea...” He shook his head angrily. “The seventies...the early eighties? They were killing my friends...tossing them off sea cliffs south of Bondi Beach. Rolling them in darkened parks, kicking them to death...over eighty guys killed during that period...a knew a few who had gone to uni with me...coppers involved while others turned a blind eye not even having the decency to investigate the deaths...still!! Even to this day!! Back then even society was against gay people from either side...the devil’s work according to those prudish, one-eyed church-goers...”

He took a deep breath and carefully wiped his eyes free of tears. Again, he also held his glasses to clean before placing them back on the top of his head.

“Yes...” He said sadly. Quietly. “There was a clique in Grafton strengthened by a few of the uni students coming up from Sydney on uni recesses...Waites...Bill Waites. Dan Staples and Joey Goodreich and a couple of others...locals...they felt bolstered with Waites being the Number Two cop in the district at that time...yeah, me too I guess...but that was the very thing that would stop any of us from being involved in such terrible things...but we were still believed to be debauched according to the God-fearing people of the town...while who-ever was guilty of kidnapping and killing those young girls was not considered as bad as us...can you believe that?”

## **CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE**

“Sergeant...I understand everything is under control”.

“Yes. After you rang and gave us an approximate position of his camp, we flew a couple of small drones over the area. We found him immediately and it was just as well we did. He’d fallen somehow, somewhere and suffered a compound fracture of his lower left leg...he would have had to have been in a fair amount of pain. He managed to get a makeshift splint on his leg somehow, but that really took the wind out of his sails. The Doctors estimate he would have died from dehydration if not found in the next couple of days...he doesn’t seem to think he was that lucky...”

“Mmm...can we go see him? Have a word with him?”

“Yes...I have him under twenty-four-hour guard though I doubt very much he'd be going anywhere...but you never know...if he can apply a rough splint while in great pain, he is capable of anything, I reckon”.

We made quick arrangements and flew out on the last plane heading out of Sydney onto Grafton and New England towns. The flight was full which amazed me, wondering who all these people were and what was their business getting the last flight out from the 'big smoke' during this pandemic. Had we missed something...?

We went with the Sergeant and his Number Two in a large 4WD to the Hospital. There was little discussion and even less as we strolled down the wide corridor of the Hospital wing. The young Constable on guard duty looked up as we entered the Wardroom. The patient also turned his head at our entrance.

“Joe Goodreich? I am Detective Lind from the Murder Squad in Sydney. This is my partner, Detective Shelley Shields”.

His eyes quickly drifted off me to give Shells the undressing stare.

“You killed Beverley Priest in November Nineteen Seventy-five, didn't you?”

He tried several times to talk, finding it hard to get his voice box working. He gave up, a nod of his head all he could muster. He half leaned out of bed to grab a glass of water.

“Ye...yes”. He eventually croaked. “We agreed to meet on the beach, some distance...” He coughed a couple of times, had another gulp of water. “Um...nor...north of Illaroo campgrounds where she was camping with her parents...I was only nineteen and...” He shook his head and waved away any further talk until he had a drink of water. He then settled back on his pillows and placed an arm over his eyes. “I didn't care too much about how I treated her...I was so embarrassed with my actions at that time...and still are. So disappointed in my actions I withdrew from society...yeah, it gutted me when I thought about it...I tried for all these years to have the incident totally removed from my mind. I haven't been successful”.

“Where did you meet her?”

“At the Athletic Field...I was compiling all the weekend sporting results for the Paper in the Monday morning edition... she was good but could have been better if she had not broken her leg a couple of years before...but she would not let that beat her...she had incredible inner strength. We started talking...yeah”.

“You did realise she was only twelve? At the time, you were near twenty, weren’t you?”

He nodded, took another gulp of water asking Shelley to refill the glass. He again looked up and down her body as she came in close.

“She was tall for her age...taller than most adult women...and for twelve, she was...you know...um...well developed”.

“Why did you kill her?”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“I don’t know...it got out of hand. Something came over me...we were kissing, and I groped for her boob. She shied away saying no...this happened several times as I kept on trying, then...something came over me like...like...I don’t know...I couldn’t stop...I had a fishing knife in a leather sheath on my jean’s belt...I began to nick her with the tip of the knife...drawing blood...she was almost paralysed with fear...you could see it in her eyes...then she screamed a couple of times and tried to stand...I kicked at her...stabbed her...yeah...”

I noticed he was playing with himself under the light hospital blankets. I turned away embarrassed, glancing at Shelley to take the reins. I guess a bloke in his late seventies...good on him but not in front of people!

“You kill anyone else?”

He looked up at her, his face reddening.

“No”. He croaked out staring at Shelley’s boobs.

“Why not?”

There was a sudden exhalation, a groan as he let his head sink back on the pillow with his eyes rolling back. I turned away in...anger, shock and yes, embarrassment. A glance at Shelley. She gave me an embarrassed grin before turning back to the man. A sour look on her face.

He coughed several times and again emptied the glass of water, his face covered in a sheen of sweat.

“Um...’cause...because...once was one time too many”. He sobbed, saying over and over that he was so sorry for what he had done...glad that it was all over. He had placed himself into his own form of imprisonment for forty-five years for the deed that rocked him to his very soul. Somehow the display of contrition didn’t ring true with me. If you asked me to explain myself, I doubt I could! A look at Shelley had her thinking the same thing...there was something false about the confession.

We were back in the 4WD with Sergeant Tander. He had started up the vehicle, but still having it in ‘Park’.

“Um...I don’t know about you two, but I have my doubts about his confession...there was a ring of bullshit about it...as though he had been compiling it for years, waiting patiently for the right moment to occur to read it off a couple of cue cards to an audience...and I reckon each time he thought of the act, he would shoot his bolt...a powerful reason for him to eventually believe in the story as I guess it was repeated repeatedly when that was the only times he could ejaculate...”.

“Yes...I think he may have spied the act occurring...or come across it at the end which had thrilled him to some extent but that was all. He built the whole thing up in his mind...there’s a technical term to explain his psychosis...” Shelley muttered, not helping that much with her opinion.

## **CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO**

I wiggled to get more comfortable.

“Joe, for Christ’s sake!! You jiggle about every time we fly...what, the seats not to your liking?” Shelley complained. “Or are you one of those people who do not like flying? Yer’ve done enough of it to become used to it?” She remarked that sideways glance that could pin you to the opposite wall.

“Yeah...” I didn’t sound convincing.

We were flying back to Sydney from Grafton, having extended our stay to five days. We were picking up the strings that every Case has, ensuring everything was AOK for the Trial. Our Perp had admitted guilt, and through his Legal Counsel would be pleading guilty to all charges, making the entire Trial Period that much easier. It would not be a Jury Trial but a proceedings held in front of a Judge where outside News Reports are curtailed until the

Judge completes his findings and the guilt or innocence of the person standing in front of him.

I at first was intending to oppose Bail, but at the last moment supported it. Why? I rightly don't know...I think the Magistrate may have given Bail no matter what.

He at least could spend a little time back in the bush away from the glare. This proved fruitless as the fires of this past Summer had cleared the ground of any underbrush or obstacles, making it quite easy for nosy Journalists and TV cameras to interrupt his very existence. Spying on his humble abode...

“What's got you, Joe? Something isn't sitting right with you, huh? What is it?”

I shook my head, grinding my teeth as I looked over at my partner coming up for twelve years.

“We have no proof, Shells...no collaborating proof, no DNA trace, no witnesses, not a single person alive who knows our alleged killer and can comment on his character...is he our killer? I have serious doubts and I know you do too. Even Tander was not convinced by the theatrics”.

“Jeezuz Joe. He did supply details, you know. You do this on so many Cases we have had over the years...worrying yourself over the guilt or not of our Perp...you question every little detail wondering if you had heard it right...nearly every Case you second guess yourself...you'll send yourself crazy, you know?”

“Mmm...but think about it Shells...we are solely relying on the confession of a guy who has lived in the bush, away from society for almost fifty years...what is his mental prowess after all that time living by himself? Can we accept his word as gospel? He has had forty-five years to construct a reasonable picture of what may have happened...I mean, he may have held a conversation with the real Perp...or even spied the action...living a fantasy that you know...he required some sexual relief from...still does by the look of it... but we have no way of collaborating his version of events...”

“We have Joe...in accepting his confession”.

“And there lies the problem...we have accepted he has constructed his own form of confinement because of his abhorrence of what he had done...he hid away from society and himself...in self-imposed isolation”.

Shelley looked over at me and frowned. I could hear the cogs click into gear. At last, she shook her head and held up her palm.

“Joe, I’m not going there, okay? End of story”.

## **CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE**

It was Friday night and the last flight out of Grafton heading to Sydney. While I was more than happy at being home with my family, Tellie commented on my...my...not sadness but a feeling of separation from everyone. She knew better than to try and buck me up, leaving me to sit out on the back deck taking an hour to finish each Stubby. As you can imagine, I may have drifted off for a couple of hours on the Friday night but not much more.

I walked around like a zombie at work on the Monday. Shelley spoke for me at the usual Monday Morning Staff Meeting wondering why I was out with the birds. Both of us congratulated by all our colleagues in closing a forty-five-year-old disappearance and murder Case.

Somehow, I conveyed the impression that we hadn’t!

“Joe? Shells?” The Boss ordered. “Stay behind will you after the others have left my Office?”

I sat still, my head bowed, my elbows sitting hard on the chair’s armrests, my fingers entwined.

“Okay Joe...I’ve been your Boss long enough to interpret your body movements and facial expressions. What is it that you are not happy with on this Case?”

I took some time to answer, eventually saying what I had said to Shelley on the plane trip back to Sydney on the Friday night. Denny listened to my speech without interrupting, nodding at times as she sat forward taking it all in.

“He hasn’t given any details...but he has admitted to killing Beverley Priest?”

“Not actually...he has admitted to killing her. It was me who said her name...”

“And that’s it? Nothing of substance...of detailing what she may have gone through before dying?”

“No...that’s right...um...he did not even confess to raping her...so what was the reason for him killing her halfway along a pristine beach and up amongst the bush a hundred metres up from the beach sand?”

“Have you been able to track down his family in Sydney?”

“There’s the rub. No...from the Records he was an only child and everyone...everyone who may have offered an opinion of the boy...from the boy to the young man of twenty...is dead. Even the woman living up in Grafton who boarded a fistful of these eager young blokes majoring in Journalism is dead”.

“Joe? Glenda Staples children...she had six from memory...they may remember him from those days he boarded with them...worth a shot if you haven’t already carried out such an interview”.

I slapped my forehead.

“We spoke about that avenue of investigation...but we never chased that out, did we?”

“That’s a way forward perhaps...another trip to Grafton...or have the all the siblings been flung to the seven corners of Australia...except Marlene Pinta?”

After having lunch up on the sixteenth floor Cafeteria because it was raining, we attacked the problem of finding all of Marlene Pinta’s siblings. The oldest brother still lived in Grafton, he the owner of a large Civil Engineering firm up that way.

He was more than curt when we phoned him, not wanting to waste time talking about something that occurred forty-five years ago. He would have been around ten...twelve.

The next was the oldest daughter but one of the recently departed Glenda Staples.

“Yeah, I remember those days. The house was always full of love and laughter especially when the young city blokes came up to board...”

“Do you remember any of them?”

“Faces I guess...but you want names...sorry, but that is too long ago”. I had the opinion she was suffering the first signs of Dementia. With her, there was but one brother we hadn’t spoken to and the youngest male in the family seemed to have just drifted into the ozone layer.

I stood and swore under my breath. Another door opens then closes...the story of this investigation!

## CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

I had just sat and accepted the coffee container from Shells as my mobile began its chirping.

“Detective Lind? Sergeant Colin Tander. Bad news, I’m afraid. Um...Justin Goodreich found this morning at his bush camp...dead, I’m afraid. It would appear he has drunk an entire bottle of Bleach...a bloody horrible way of ending your life, I reckon. He didn’t appear for his Saturday appearance at the Station as per his Bail conditions...nor did he turn up this morning, so we sent out a few Constables looking for him”.

“Shit! How in hell with a heavy cast on his leg...it must have hurt like hell...he really meant to do himself in but there’s gotta be a better way than Bleach...”

“Yeah, I agree...it perhaps says a lot about his mental state, huh?”

“Any note as to why?”

“No. Sorry Detective...will you have a need to return here?”

“Maybe...we aren’t too sure as this case is really giving us the heebie-jeebies”.

I rang off to tell Shelley of Goodreich’s death. She reached for a tissue to blow her nose.

“You okay?”

She waved my question away. Standing, she headed for the toots to have a moment alone. For the life of me I couldn’t figure out what had upset her so much. Goodreich’s death just a hiccup in the march of humanity that could not be stopped.

I slouched in my Office chair, clicking a pen on my teeth. I suddenly sat forward to grab my mobile, dialling up Enquiries to be put through to the Newspaper switchboard. I asked for Marlene Pinta, instead told cheerfully she was in a meeting and could not be interrupted. I left a message for her to ring me when it was convenient.

“Murder Squad! You’re a Detective in the Murder Squad in Sydney!? Yes, I’ll make sure she gets back to you. I hope it is nothing serious...”

Shelley still had not come back from the toots and after a brief visit into the Ladies, I began to worry about her as she wasn’t there sitting on a toot. It wasn’t like her to do a runner like that and as far as I knew, she wasn’t that involved with Justin Goodreich or the Case. As I sat back at my desk, my phone buzzed before giving its infuriating ring.

“Detective Lind”. I answered.

“Marlene Pinta...you wanted me to ring you back...”

“Yes...thanks...um...you and your siblings. I’m told there are just the six of you...only five now because of the death of one of your brothers. I’ve spoken to all except the youngest brother...”

“Hah...you spoke to my sister! Did she make any sense...I’m sorry, she was diagnosed with Dementia when she was in her mid-forties...she had been a real livewire...now...just a shadow of herself, I’m afraid...and my youngest brother? I haven’t a clue where he is...he just left never to return”.

“Was there any reason for his sudden departure?”

“None that we could discover...Detective? Why the questions about my siblings? And don’t tell me a bullshit story about tying up loose ends. Goodreich I’m told, committed suicide by downing a bottle of bleach the other day so you really do not need to tie up any loose ends...so why are you continuing with enquiries?”

“Truly, I know it sounds lame, but that is what we are doing, getting a hold of any loose strings to stop anyone in the future of accusing us of not investigating fully...I know as a Journalist, you may have suspicions, but I can assure you...”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Okay...ask away”.

“Your older brother?”

“He is not the eldest...Gordon. He has an incredibly good Excavation Company here in Grafton...he’s had a contract with the main Contractors doing the upgrades to the Pacific Highway north and south out of town...my other brother next to me...moved down to Sydney not long after finishing his Apprenticeship...for a Motor Mechanic. Um...he fell in love with a girl who was spending her School Holidays with her grandparents in

Grafton...and as they say, the rest was history. Two sons with he and Karen still happily married...living in a Retirement Home a stone's throw from his Business. His two sons have taken over the business, though Toby annoys the crap out of them as he drops in unannounced...to dither about and get in the road, so they say". A giggle.

"Where is the business?"

"Chatswood..." She gave me the full address and the name of the firm. I rang off as Shelley walked back onto the floor, looking a little self-conscious.

"You okay?" I asked as she sat and spun around to face me.

"Yeah...I think so...um...yeah". She looked up at me as I stood, putting on my coat and gathering up my badge and gun and my iPad and its bag. Trying to remember which coat pocket was large enough to hold the darn thing.

"We going out?" She asked, a surprised look that had me fishing for its cause.

"Yep...a little drive on this glorious day to Chatswood...to a Business called Staples Mechanics".

## **CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE**

"Is Toby Staples in?" I asked after Shelley and I introduced ourselves, flashing our badge wallets for ID purposes. The knowledge not causing any reaction from the man who paid little attention to our ID.

"I'm his son, can I help at all?"

"Sorry, no. We wish to have a talk about his life in Grafton before he moved here...well before you were born, I suspect".

"Whoarrh! What did the old man do way back in his 'iffy' teenage years that warrants two Murder Cops asking him questions?"

An old bloke walked towards us from the rear of the Workshop. Grey haired, a little bent. A couple of days growth that was all white. Spectacles that were quite thick. A twisted nose

off-centre displaying his young days of playing Union or League. Ears that was proof of him playing Union. Gnarled hands tightly grasping a walking stick as bent as him.

“You looking for me? Huh...mmm...Marlene rang me. What do you want to know?”

“Dad, Dad...you don’t have to tell them anything...”

“It’s okay, son. There are no skeletons in my closet and there is nothing that I have done throughout my life I would be ashamed of...settle down son, okay? How about you make a coffee for all of us”. He pointed towards Shells and me. We nodded our heads in unison.

“Milk, one sugar for both of us, thank you”. Shelley replied.

“A lovely day...let’s sit out the back. It’s out of this breeze, which is starting to get a little chilly, eh? A sign the season is changing. We’ve got a table setting of sorts to sit around. Follow me”.

For a bloke that I would put at late sixties, and who required a walking cane to step about, he strode ahead of us at quite a clip!

“Marlene told me about Joey Goodreich...I’d forgotten all about him existing until Marls mentioned his name. He is the reason you two are sniffing about, huh?”

His son slopped coffee on the weather-worn table. Apologising as another version of the same man placed a tin of biscuits on the table. He went to sit but both men were told angrily by their father to get back into the building to work.

“Twins?”

“Yes...and both have a pair each...” He chuckled, shook his head before picking up his mug to swallow several mouthfuls. I wasn’t as enthusiastic about the brew. The coffee was stale and the milk turning...I had my doubts about the sugar as well and I wasn’t going anywhere near the biscuit tin. I suspected little bug-like things crawling about hiding under month old bickies!

“Joey...he came up to Grafton and boarded with us. Mum couldn’t say no to these people doing their Journalism Degrees. She had completed her Course years ago up in Brisbane. She remembers being helped by strangers in the same way. Taken into their home so she said. It was on her to do the same...so we boarded quite a few. There were some good times with these guys and an occasional chick...” He smiled broadly. “Joey? He came up every Uni break and around that time that young girl disappeared. He wanted distance between

himself and his father...can't give you much else. He eventually decided to stay up there, and he moved into his own digs. He continued to work for the local Paper until he disappeared". He frowned. "I remember there was some type of falling out between he and mum...no...that's not right. There was a hell of a fight between mum and...jeez, it's on the tip of my tongue...Jeb..."

"Jeb Collins..." I uttered.

He nodded his head slowly.

"Yeah...him...something about him spying on me sisters as they got dressed or undressed...something like that...Joey took Jeb's side of the argument as though he could have been in cahoots with Jeb...um...yeah...I think mum may have pissed them both off! Jeez, I was only young meself so perhaps...". He let it drift away.

I nodded, glad that another name surfaced with possible rusty beginnings. I'll see how things work out. I got back on track dealing with the large Staple brood and the crowded dwelling whenever those uni students turned up.

"Are there any recollections on why he disappeared?"

The old bloke stiffened; his hand shook for the first time in picking up his mug. He placed it back on the table made of hardwood planks. I glanced at Shelley who raised her eyebrows, misunderstanding the shaking as a guilty reaction.

"Do you know why he disappeared, Mister Staples?"

He turned to look towards the Workshop, worried perhaps that his two sons were listening. When he could hear the usual sounds of activity, he turned back to us.

"Joey...he was a brilliant guy in a lot of ways. He could have a motor purring in minutes, could build a motor blind-folded so he reckoned...and I have no reason to disbelieve that claim as not being the gospel truth". Again, he smiled at something that had flashed into his mind's eye.

"He was a mechanic himself?"

"No, no. He was self-taught. Everything. He and...what's his name? It'll come to me in a moment...we built a sand buggy out of a wreck of a FJ Holden. Everything that was bolted on came off...including the front windscreen, doors, hood, boot lid, front and back fenders, front grill...and we put these wide tyres with aggressive tread that ensured the buggy could

drive over both wet and dry sand. Within about a year, there were around half-a-dozen other contraptions racing up and down Minnie Waters Beach like us. Firstly, the Rangers tried to stop us and then it got serious, the cops started stopping us as we drove out of Grafton towards the beach in these things...driving an unsafe, uninsured, and unregistered vehicle on a public road...so ended a good time...a fun time back in those days. We left our creation hidden in the bush up off the beach and would use it to go fishing along the coast whenever we felt like it...but it just got less and less as our enthusiasm waned...especially after the Beverley Priest disappearance...the whole village of Grafton changed with some looking for scapegoats...I guess you can see every gay person male or female was suspected of foul things”.

He shook his head sadly.

“Bill Waites and Dan...and Joey Goodreich? That was his name, Bill Waites. They started...you know...playing with one another. They kept on asking me to become involved. Back then...in the Seventies...it wasn't like now. You could do time for such carry-ons...and I was disgusted with the behaviour. I had some heavy talks with Dan about his...you know...his propensity to be involved in that type of behaviour. After all, I was his older brother. I promised him I would never tell Mum...or Marls”. He ran his fingers through his greying hair. “You couldn't really tell as he wasn't that really effeminate type of guy...know what I mean? He was just an ordinary bloke...but I guess it takes one to know one of the crowd...”

Even now, people have a twisted outlook on gay couples and their behaviour. I would have thought such far-out views would have been stymied years ago...I guess not.

“Bill Waites was a cop, wasn't he?”

“He was ...no, that's not right. I think he could have been Second-in-charge, so he had a lot to lose. He didn't have much weight...and he was um...it was rumoured he was even touching young girls...he was King of the Kids is how he called himself...boasting. I stopped going with them even on fishing trips. He and Joey...you'd see them, and you just knew, they were having it off with one another...so there were alternate rumours on Bill's...you know. How can you be one...you know gay...a gay guy...but still touching young girls in the wrong spot?”

“What happened to your younger brother?”

He shook his head sadly.

“He left a small note for mum...and he took off. Mum was really devastated...she knew he was different, and it made no difference to her, but Dan? I think he was having trouble with his...his sexuality...back then it was you know, a very touchy subject”. He shifted on his seat, a little uncomfortable for him to talk about. “I was hoping...you know, for mum’s sake more than anything else...for him to turn up at Mum’s funeral...in a way, that was a stupid wish as Gordon wouldn’t wear a bar of him...he’s a bit like Dad was in that way...a little straight-legged if you know what I mean...even if Dan was his younger brother...I think Gordon thought there may be a dusting onto him...he was dead set against the set...still is...quite vocal as a matter of fact”.

“Were you still in Grafton in Seventy-five when Beverley Priest went missing?”

“This is what this is all about, isn’t it? You’re not too sure whether Joey Goodreich was the bad guy in her disappearance...or whether he and Waites had something to do with it together? Nah...I left town earlier than that. I was in love...yeah, she was in her last year at School...but I followed her down here to Sydney straight after I completed my Apprenticeship...that was November Seventy-four. Her parents weren’t that impressed, but we proved we were meant for each other. We were married before she turned twenty and neither of us have ever had any qualms on the way life has worked out. I have been a lucky boy”. He nodded his head sternly to emphasise the point. “Good luck with your enquiries”. That was our hint to call it quits.

## **CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX**

I placed my Glock and badge into the lockable drawer, saying to Shelley I was going down to the Sub-Base for a swim.

“Bit early Joe...” She replied looking up at the clock on the end wall.

“You coming?”

“Me? Um...I have other plans. I’ll see you tomorrow, huh?”

This was the third week in a row that she had refused to do laps with me.

“Yeah...okay. I need to do laps to clear my mind and think what we have not been doing in the Case. See you tomorrow”.

I came back into the Office as the majority were heading home. A couple of frazzled looking Dees were still at their desk trying to sort through a difficult Case. I, during an unknown number of laps had solved our Case. I rang Shelley, getting her at an inconvenient time, so it seemed as she told me she couldn't talk. Forcefully whispering that really shat me off!

"Fine. I'll pick you up from your place around nine tomorrow morning".

"Oh! Yeah, okay. Where we going?"

"I'll tell you tomorrow morning. See you at nine".

## **CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN**

I knocked on his door, hearing shuffling feet as he came to answer. He looked at me, a grim smile our welcome. He nodded as he greeted us then turned away gesturing for us to follow him and close the door behind us.

"Was wondering how long it'd be before I saw you again. Come through so we can sit and chat outside...it's a lovely day for it".

We followed him through his small Retirement Unit and out onto his little patio. He groaned as he sat, a mug of steaming soup his Lunch.

"If you want a coffee, I'll ask you to make it for yourself".

Shelley and I shook our heads. We'd not long had a bite to eat and a coffee sitting out on one of the fingers to the Kiama Boat Harbour. I figured the man would not be moving about that much so we enjoyed our Lunch out in the sun. Seagulls waiting expectantly for a chip or three. I knew better than to feed them.

I took my time filling the silence. I was wondering if he would break it...no...he was looking at the birds skylarking in the nearby trees. A smile to show he was enjoying the show.

"You know, you...and one other person were the only persons who confessed to being on the beach that morning that Bev Priest disappeared...two of yers...out of hundreds of people who gave witness statements...and all those people camping at Illaroo at the time".

He nodded his head, stirred his soup, and took several sips. His head seemed to retract between his rounded shoulders as though he was some form of human turtle not wanting to lift the scalding liquid too far to reach his mouth.

“Very nice”. He muttered “It’s pleasant weather to enjoy a good mug of soup, isn’t it? It always goes down well”.

I sat still, looking at the old bloke who didn’t have long to go on this earth. I wiped my hand over my mouth before asking the obvious question.

“How come you’re allowed visitors?”

He looked over at me as he used his two hands to lower the soup bowl onto the table. His hands shook...

“Don’t know...” He raised his eyebrows at the question.

“Did you know Dan Staples? Jeb Collins and Justin Goodreich?”

“Joey Goodreich...he always hated been called Justin...them names...a long time ago...”

“Bill Waites...”

He nodded his head, his hands now grasping the edge of the table, the soup forgotten except the aroma from it caressed his nostrils. He lent forward to take a deep breath before commenting.

“They all swam in the same pool...not me if you get my drift. They were practising gay people if that is the correct...arrh...the correct name for them...they’d not be interested in young girls...even I knew that back then”.

“Does Macy Gardner or Tracy Hegarty mean anything to you?”

He didn’t move a muscle.

“Do you know that you were the only person questioned over the disappearance of those two...and Beverley Priest...the only person on the coast...questioned on the disappearance of all three? What do you make of that?”

Again, there was little movement. After some moments he moved the soup mug away from him further onto the table.

“A fella called Connor Burke was arrested and charged with the disappearance of Macy Gardner. Her body never found, and Burke was killed in jail...a friendly game of Rugby where Burke did not stand after a scrum collapse...his neck broken. Do you remember that incident? No? What are the odds of a young bloke being in the vicinity of three separate murders? All of pre-pubescent girls who were tall for their age and had developed to some extent...all taken from camping grounds where their families were tenting, enjoying the school holidays...what’s the odds of you being in proximity when the three girls were taken. You were surprised I think that the local cops didn’t put two and two together...a bad blue by the local cops in the three areas”.

He slowly sank back against the chair back. Little movement as though it was some game of who could sit still around the table for the longest.

“You stopped fishing a little later than you told the local cops that morning. Late enough to see Beverley Priest running up the beach heading north towards Sandon Point. You were putting your gear in the back of your Ute as you were calling it quits for the morning...you were almost at the northern extremity of the beach yerself. A deep gutter I would suggest. As she passed you, you asked did she need a lift back to the Illaroo camping grounds. You’d watched all these women and girls...camping really causes women especially, to throw off the usual...arrh...habits of common decency. You enjoyed the display didn’t you...and Beverley’s tent wasn’t that far from your caravan, so you had ample time to peer through your Van’s window, watching her every move”.

For the first time he looked up at me, his eyes misty with tears.

“You never mentioned to the cops who interviewed you that you had gone for a swim...but a witness who saw you drive back to your ‘digs’ told the local lads that he thought you had gone for a swim. Your skin and your hair looked wet”. I took a deep breath to calm me down. “And yes, getting back to the beach...you asked if she needed a lift...she said she needed to run the length of the beach and yes, she would need a lift heading back south. She may have laughed. You waited for her...she hopped into your Ute...and the rest is history...the coppers back then even commented on the blood on your knife and jeans. You did go for a swim to clean the blood smears from your body. But the blood on your jeans did not clean out as you had stripped down to go for that swim...you even washed your T-shirt to rid it of her blood...but not your jeans which seems a little odd with the amount of blood on them...I reckon in areas where you never wiped that knife there were signs of the young girl’s blood...the blood of the young Beverley Priest. The local coppers failed to follow standard procedures in identifying the blood on your knife and jeans as that of the young lass...DNA wasn’t in existence back then, but tests would determine if it were fish blood or of the humankind...that was one of the major slip-ups of the local coppers”. I stood and hoisted my pants up, looking at the man getting smaller as time passed. “You got to live

in peace for another forty-five years for that one procedural mistake...you will now die in prison, sir”.

“It’s been a while me being with a woman...a long time...I was always scared those feelings...those violent urges would return just at that moment...and yes, there was something about young girls just entering puberty that made me...um, Detective. I can confess to two others up around that area ...and several attempts that I was not proud of...”

“She was a twelve-year-old girl...” Shelley yelled out.

“She was tall for her age...and you know, well developed...they all were...” He trailed off now knowing his fate. There seemed no point in continuing.

“She was twelve!” Shelley reiterated angrily.

He dropped his head, running his hands down both sides of his face and then through his hair. A sadness had enveloped him.

“There was a couple of chicks at Uni...and later who I dated, but every time it was suggested we go up to ‘tail-light’ alley...or to go camping...or get into a clutch, all I saw was her body cut to shreds...I never saw them again...” He looked down at his hands and then up to scan his surroundings. “What happens now?” He asked.

“We arrest you, take you up to our Office at Parramatta and officially charge you with a string of offences, the worst coming last, a charge of Murder One...three times! You will need to have a legal Rep present as we officially charge you”.

He nodded, but I was of the opinion he had not really understood what I was saying.

“Can I make arrangements with my neighbour to continue to put feed out for the wild birds?”

“Yes, as long as we come with you”.

“Detective, I couldn’t run fast enough to work up a sweat...let alone get away from you two”.

As we begun to walk back through his Unit, he propped and looked around.

“I’ve been here for around ten years in this little prison of mine. Prison won’t be that different now, will it?”

## CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

“Detective please. You do not have sufficient evidence to hold my client, let alone charge him with a capital crime...three times! That is preposterous!”

I spun a colour A4 photograph across to the Solicitor. A person I have had previous dealings with. He noted for his gruff and bull-dog manner that has earned him the nickname of ‘Winston’ only behind his back.

“What’s this then?” He enquired before spinning the shot back towards me. Showing scant interest in the subject of the shot.

“He has admitted being around each of the abduction and killing of three young girls, all taken in similar circumstances. He was the only person questioned by the local constabulary about each of the disappearances...the only person in proximity and questioned out of the almost nine hundred persons in total questioned regarding the three missing young girls...”

“So...that does not represent firm evidence of his involvement in any of the three disappearances...and murders...two of which have never offered up a body...and the remains of one Beverley Priest does not offer a shred of evidence that joins my client at the hip to the remains. Those remains have been half-buried for over forty years...the mind boggles as to what animal may have clawed at those remains during those forty-five-year period. If you have nothing else, we will say good day to you, Detective”.

I ignored the words as I continued.

“You went for a swim to clean Beverley Priest’s blood off your person, even washing out your t-shirt to be rid of her blood...but you took your jeans off before entering the water...why? I doubt you could answer that yerself after so many years. But you hung the t-shirt and jeans on a rope line that you tied between two trees when you got back to camp. The Lead Sergeant of the time even commented on that being a no-no...to which you replied that you would wash your jeans later in the day and take down that rope line...”

I let the silence drift. Shelley laid out another half-dozen photographs clearly detailing a pair of jeans and various close-ups of various parts of those jeans.

“The Ranger? He was furious when he saw your clothesline. There is a sign that is still there at the entrance track into the Illaroo Camping Area detailing the ‘does and don’ts’ that all campers must abide by. As I said, the Ranger was furious and threatened to fine you, but with all the hullabaloo about a missing young girl all he did was to cut down the line and

give your jeans and t-shirt to a Constable nearby. There was no reason for the Constable to do what he did...he placed the jeans and the t-shirt into separate Evidence bags, sign and seal the bags which he deposited into the Evidence Locker back at Grafton Police Station...where they were forgotten about...until our presence in the area after Beverley Priest's remains were found jogged someone's memory of a pair of jeans...Forensic Science has come a long way since the mid-seventies...a long, long way..."

"This is preposterous!" The Solicitor stammered out.

I again ignored his concerns which were becoming less nit-picking and of less volume.

"Blood as shown on those photos happens to match the DNA taken from the Priest family...old man Priest has been dead for some time, but two brothers are still alive and there is a matriarchal connection to the blood. The remains were subject to elevated temperatures when Black Summer roared through that area which meant DNA traces could not be taken of any of the bones...but the teeth could yield a DNA match...we will ask for your DNA so that ownership of the pair of jeans can be confirmed...we may not be able to prove your guilt in the deaths of two of the young girls but Bev Priest? We have you..."

Pcb 02/04/2020

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