



THE

WHEELS OF

JUSTICE

(CAN ROLL EXCEEDINGLY SLOW)

A MURDER SQUAD DETECTIVE JOSEPH LIND STORY
BY

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MURDER SQUAD DETECTIVES

JOSEPH LIND

AND

ISABELLA ‘SOPHIE’ GRASSO

THE WHEELS OF JUSTICE

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Revised Edition 2024

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Precis

A small NSW country town in the rich farming area of the MIA of around one thousand citizens where little causes a ripple.

The ten-year drought the toughest in the region...the whole of NSW, Victoria, and Queensland suffering from the worst drought for more than a century. Then the drought broke with floods...but regular rains now meant a bumper winter harvest and a decent year or two...crossed fingers and confident smiles the 'new' norm; the black moods and scowls noticeably clear on townsfolk and cockies only months ago disappearing...amazing what regular rain showers will do to an agricultural area.

A popular well-known local girl shoots her abusive partner to death. Confesses countless times...even at Trial.

A Television Investigative Journalist prepares a semi-doco that is televised at the same time the young woman is released from Prison having served her time. Out on an eighteen-month parole period needing to be served before she returns home to that small country town in the rich Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area.

Because of the TV Program an Order from on high is issued for Detective Four Joseph Lind and his new partner Detective-in-Training Isabella 'Sophie' Grasso to re-investigate the crime and put to bed all the innuendo, half-truths and straight-out fabrications sensationally presented.

Detective Lind knows he and his young partner will be in a tricky situation not welcomed by many of the townsfolk who think their presence is a slap in the face of their local much-loved coppers. It was too late to turn over cowpats according to the citizens of this law-abiding community...or is it?

CHAPTER ONE

Homicide in the ‘big city’ was a dying breed as us Dees on the floor did not have a current Case to satisfy our existence. We were dabbling in the ‘Unsolved’ Cases and investigations sent down from the Night Shift guys who were terribly overworked. We were hoping that the drastic actions of the State Government to force the entire State into ‘lockdown’ because of the Covid Delta strain that was escaping across the State would cause a peak in Domestic Violence homicide cases, giving us something to do. The lockdown would cause tempers to flare and domestic violence to increase...there was a slight spike but nothing to stimulate our interest or make us dance with glee.

The very want of extra Homicide Cases a little worrying to us all...but what the heck, everyone wants to feel as though their contribution causes positive vibes in the wider community.

A Domestic Violence Homicide was never going to stretch our investigative skills...you knew who the guilty person was just by looking...

It was now after the Lunchbreak, and I’d done my ‘lunchtime stretch’ down in the Sub-Basement gym. I was now relaxing with a decent coffee. My eyes closed; my stocking feet rid of the safety boots’ restrictions. My feet in new socks upon the open lower drawer of my desk and me leaning back as far as safety and common sense would dictate in my office chair.

This morning my partner, the young, pert Sophie Grasso and I had written off another terrible case of a former husband bashing his ex-wife and young child to death. His anger and illogical conclusions fuelled by an Ice habit. The DPP was satisfied with the paperwork involved and another angry man was slated for twenty years in prison.

I was half asleep when Hendo headed for my desk...it would be nothing but unwelcome news whenever the Chief Clerk zeroed in on your desk...you could bet your house on it and a quiet ‘heads up’ from my young partner had me cocking one eye open at him as he came my way pushing a four-wheel Document cart.

“Joe?” Hendo stopped the file cart beside my desk and returned to the front of the Squad Room to wheel up another cart full of official looking white Folders.

“The current Correctional Services files, her Arrest and Charge Files which give step by step information into the investigation of the homicide death of one Barry Paul Grieves formerly of Katoomba NSW and all the Court Documents detailing the alleged Perp’s Court Appearances and Sentencing...that should keep you busy for some time just going through

the whole collection, eh? Your present layback stance a bit of an embarrassment to anyone entering the Squad floor so the Boss wants you dutifully employed instead of lounging about”.

He thrummed his fingers over the white Folders heaped onto the two Document Carts...we would need to learn every word in every Case File Folder, so he reckoned. At least they were ‘beefier’ than the ‘borrowed’ Cases we had been perusing of late.

“Yes...and? The woman is alive I suspect, so why am I being given her Record of Incarceration?”

“She’s due to be released at the end of the month from Emu Plains...there are loud whispers she was incorrectly charged and sentenced for a homicide she did not commit...so say some especially after that Exposé on the TV last week...”

“Didn’t see it...I hate watching those types of shows...innuendo and supposition...many questions asked; few answered”. I replied disinterestedly. “Another Case where the partner kills his better half...so what can be more transparent than that?”

He shrugged. “Yeah, me neither...I very rarely watch those types of shows...deliberately made to be sensational and largely inaccurate...no, this time the girlfriend pays out punishment on her abusive partner...a little different to the norm to make life worth living”.

“Mmm...so? Sophs and I must re-investigate the initial homicide and prove beyond doubt her innocence *or* the wheels of Justice had turned correctly this time placing her in prison for her dastardly actions...that recent TV exposé to be debunked...that about it?”

“Yer got it in one Joe...yer’ll thank me some day for my largesse. Word has it the instructions came down from on high with your name attached...yer reputation precedes you, ma’ man”.

“Oh! To be less popular...” I pouted, hitting my chest like a satisfied sturdy Silverback still in charge of his troop!

CHAPTER TWO

MARGARET HEATHER CAMPBELL aka MAGGIE CAMPBELL

DOB....04/04/1982 JERILDERIE NSW. The oldest of three sisters all born and raised in that country town.

EMU PLAINS WOMEN'S CORRECTIONAL CENTRE NSW for entire 5 years' incarceration.

DoIncarceration....22/10/2015

No Bail was sought at the 21/10/2015 Hearing.

DoRelease 30/06/2021

CHARGE...First Degree Homicide with Intent (Mitigating circumstances Battered Wife Syndrome)

SENTENCE...SIX YEARS 4 MONTHS (with time spent five years at the Emu Plains Correctional Facility)

Non-Parole Period...1 Years 4 months

A woman's sorry life in Government-speak. Thirty-nine years rolled up into nine lines on her Departmental File.

I wheeled one of the large File Carriers into the Boss's office...me still bootless. I think I now knew why I go through so many pairs of socks...padding around the Squad floor sans boots. The cart held the umpteen Trial white folders that held every word of proceedings in neatly typed long hand. It also held the Murder Files that were the operational folios during the investigation. The local boys conducted the investigation...I wondered why we were not involved. The Crime Investigation Folders diligently recorded by all persons involved in the murder investigation by the local lads with the four files of the perp's time in incarceration balanced on top. The rest of the Folders on the second cart still beside my desk.

"Boss? Why? The woman is being released at the end of the month. She was found guilty of homicide with mitigating circumstances and has about done her time...soon to be paroled...this is a knee-jerk reaction..."

"I totally agree Joe, but as you have no current Cases, no upcoming DPP or Court appearances, your habit of lolling about half asleep at your desk an embarrassment to all of us. It will fill out your day...yours and Sophie's..."

"C'mon Boss! We can pick up a couple of 'sleepers' from the night-shift boys and be more gainfully employed...and help them out into the bargain. They'll be forever thankful for such a move on our part".

“Joe? I have no say in the matter. You and Sophs have been earmarked for the job...the Eagle has shat, so suck it up and enjoy the aroma. Be thankful the boys above know of your existence and your ability to crack any hard nut...”

“Boss? This doesn’t need cracking. The Case is about to be formerly put to bed with the guilty person doing her parole period standing on her head. She has given herself an Accountancy Degree and now has a Masters in Australian Literature...all gained while she was inside...the model prisoner who didn’t waste her time and showed she had the brains and savvy to use the time productively...”

“You watch that show the other night? It really showed her up as the model prisoner”.

“No...I’m lucky if I turn on the TV for the news...I have a four and a half thousand dollar flat-screen TV hanging off the wall looking blank! As I said, this is a knee-jerk reaction because of that show. They’re all the same, half-truths, ignorant of the facts and sensational titbits to make the viewer think there has been an injustice of major proportions...but nothing substantiated...and now we are supposed to run with it...c’mon Boss”. I whined. My voice taking on the cadence and tone of a complaining shrew.

“Yep, that’s right until you can verify either way her innocence or guilt...so don’t waste anymore of your or my time...onwards and upwards I say as I obey the orders from above. Keep me in the loop...you ever been to Jerilderie? A nice little country town. I think you’ll be spending some time out there”. She glanced at her watch. “Arrh...I have a joint Heads of Branches meeting in five minutes...you know where the door is Joe...good luck and good hunting”.

CHAPTER THREE

I was angry! As pissed off as I’ve ever been!

I’d been on similar Cases where the hierarchy ordered the ‘Big City’ Dees to help the local lads who it was felt, were dragging the chain on a Case...or not adhering to policy and procedures in progressing a case of homicide murder.

The local lads angry at our intrusion...rightly so... and the unsaid truth that they were not up to producing the goods hung heavily in the air. Whether we solved the Case or not, we were the outsiders not even given a ‘thank you’ if we had indeed wrapped the Case up successfully. Just a one finger salute as we left the bush town with not even a ‘ta’ for your help... *‘we could*

have come to the same conclusion without you being here' was the oft heard remark by the local lads on our exit...the population of a small town was worse in broadcasting our involvement...our names not the spice of the month. I don't blame their antagonism towards us. We were not keen to be in that predicament either! Yes, we had the experience as Homicide Cops which was grades above the local chaps usually. Sure, there were instances where the local coppers were extremely pleased to hand the Case over to us...but I doubted that existed in this Case.

The Case had run the gambit of an intense examination, taken to Court where twelve men proffered a guilty verdict with the perp serving her time and being on the verge of being released on parole!!! Regardless, we were expected to jump in and stir up the memories, the thoughts, and the opinions of the locals because someone in the Corridors of Power got itchy balls over a recent TV Show. It may have suggested there was more to the story than had been uncovered in the investigation run by the local lads. The Trial eighteen months after the dastardly deed labelled as 'The Trial of the Century' by the local press...be buggered...it doesn't happen that way...that everyone involved had got it wrong...

Bloody Hell!!

I sat at my desk and simmered for a good thirty minutes before jumping to my feet.

"Sophs? Let's go for a walk, eh?"

"What about all this stuff?"

"It'll be here later this afternoon...and has sat unattended for something like five to six years now...it's not going anywhere...we are! Okay?"

I had trouble putting on my Police-issue safety boots with steel-cap toe inserts, trying to tell Sophie to now slow down...she was confused!

CHAPTER FOUR

I wasn't too sure how I was going to manage this exercise but there were two things we needed to organise first for the coming week. One...to view the TV Show that seems to have kindled this wide-spread doubt of the truth and two...to interview the Complainant while she was still 'inside'...although after spending six years inside, she would have become used to the

environment. She would be more relaxed than others and looking forward to her release...not wanting to upset that procedure from occurring, I would imagine.

To obtain an unabridged version of the Show with all 'bits' intact and not on the Cutting Room floor, I would need a Court Order. It would be best having a Court Order signed from 'higher up' which may alert our Prisoner that this was not a hunt just to inflame the situation or to show certain persons we were taking the matter seriously...but would show there were those in high places who believed her innocent of shooting to death her partner of the time as portrayed in that TV Exposé of a week ago. This drifted around in my head as Sophie and I walked the streets of Parramatta. No direction, no thought of where we were going.

"We should get permission from either the Commissioner of Police or the State Minister. This to show our prisoner that this re-examination of the Case was not just a 'show pony' exercise brought about by that TV show...we do not want to shake the tree if there is no need". Sophie offered unexpectedly walking quickly beside me...almost jogging to keep up with me.

"But that is exactly what has happened, Sophs. This re-interest fuelled by innuendo in that Exposé. No two ways about it...based more than likely on shitty evidence and pure guesswork just to arouse interest!"

"Yeah...well...I wonder what she thinks of the Journalist who fronted the episode...whether she is on their side or not. She may well think it all ho-hum at such a late stage in her incarceration...um...I wonder what evidence...or whispers ignited the interest in the TV Reporter to begin her investigation in the first place? And how she came to be the recipient of those insinuations...and who contacted her to commence her professional interest in the Case..." Sophie said, thinking aloud.

"That's one thing I want a straight answer for though I suspect they will 'two-step' all around the place trying extremely hard to not answer a single question...especially those about who energised the interest in the Case. You know, the same old '*we need to protect our sources*' bullshit that they'll use repeatedly".

"Yeah...well...we use the same tactic when we don't want to expose where we have gained information. You seem to love using that response regardless of the validity and strength of any information gained".

I nodded, giving her a smile...my anger had dissipated with this quick walk around the Parramatta CBD and our two-way conversation.

We found ourselves heading back to the Office...

CHAPTER FIVE

“Joe? Sophie? Before you sit down...” The Boss had summoned us as we walked past her Office. I thought there was going to be accusations of not being on deck during working hours, going missing for over two hours without advising anyone of our whereabouts, with us wandering off without permission.

Instead, she extracted a folder after unlocking her small safe to spin back around handing me a folder. I was flabbergasted upon opening it. A signed Court Order instigated by the Attorney General of the State and counter-signed by the Commissioner of Police instructing that all information requested by Detective Four Joseph Lind and his partner Detective One Isabella Grasso of the Murder Squad of the NSW Police Force in all matters considered pertinent to their current Case supplied either as written statements, video, opinions, or signed affidavits. I was surprised by the double signature...that rarely happens...if ever...there must be something untoward to get them to agree to their signatures being on the document.

This dated and signed two days ago! A bloody Sunday!

My paranoia climbed into the stratosphere!

The second pro-forma was a written request by the same Commissioner of Police to interview Margaret Heather Campbell on her charges of the homicide shooting death of one Barry Paul Grieves six years ago in October 2015. All conversations recorded and kept within the boundaries of the Murder Squad Floor. This too signed and dated on the preceding Sunday...the hierarchy had been burning the midnight oil, so it seemed.

“And Joe? Just so you know, there was a party of half a dozen at that meeting including yours truly. I do not like my Sunday...or more correctly, my Saturday evening and Sunday morning wrecked by such duties, so I hope we can get to the bottom of this alleged fuck-up...pretty quick...I’m relying on you Joe, so don’t disappoint me...there are many eyes watching just to place further pressure on you”.

She looked up at me, an indecipherable expression which worried me. She had always been open and honest with all her subordinates including me when I was having one of my dummy spits. She would never leave one of her people hung out to dry without a bloody good fight...she was a brilliant ‘in-close’ slugger!

“You’re certain of her innocence, Boss?”

“I’m not certain of anything the same as you...so...do your job. People in high places have confidence in your abilities...investigate the case again and provide proof of her guilt...or innocence”.

“Yeah...seems like it...they are two steps in front of us...what other surprises awaits us?”

“You’ll know as you get to that point...Joe? Watch your back...huh? I can’t say anymore”.

That caused a shiver to pass from my head down through my spine to the tips of my toes...the Boss was warning me in a roundabout way, that there were knives unsheathed ready to plunge into my career...old crimes and old school coppers still existed, and all had long memories. I wondered why we were selected for the investigation. I would never think my past ability and success had impressed the Attorney-General! I had this terrible thought we were the sacrificial lambs and our presence in Jerilderie was a part of a larger plan...then I felt honoured as we had been hand-picked to lead another examination into the Case...I wondered what jurisdiction the Attorney-General represented in his role as a State Parliamentarian...that would make sense to this heavy-handed approach after the TV Exposé aroused the sleeping government officials...he had personal knowledge of the participants...which had me returning to the sacrificial lambs scenario...I was getting myself into an absolute tizz!

CHAPTER SIX

We knew we were on the outer when the Receptionist didn’t greet us with a dazzling smile. More so as we were passed from the Assistant Manager down to be eventually escorted by a junior to a back lot with the proverbial nest of ‘Transportable Offices’ nestled on concrete blocks. A knock on the open door of the mismatched ‘cubicles’ with the ‘junior’ identifying himself in a nervous voice before scurrying away reinforced my concerns. His scampering retreat almost comical as though earlier experiences with these ‘back lot’ beasts had not been pleasurable.

Scornful looks and murmurs were our greeting. The only smiles were from the two of us...which became forced when not returned.

We sat around a small table that doubled as a desk for someone, greeted by all with less cooperation than Chamberlain had with his meeting with Hitler in ‘thirty-eight’...and with less warmth!

“It says here you want a copy of the story...you can pick that up yourselves from the ‘streaming channel’...easy as”. The woman offered who took control of the situation, a little moodily. She stood opposite looking down at us...a position of strength and control. She was mid to late forties, looked after herself and dressed accordingly. In two-inch-high heels she was around 165. A trim figure which may have been Gym brought. Caring eyes and a ready smile I would imagine, but I had not seen that yet...

“Um...no...not precisely. It says we want the original Master Tape before bits were cut, organised, edited, and re-edited...”

“The Master Tape? Can they demand that?” One of the surly group of women challenged. “A copy maybe...but the master?” Disbelief in every word she uttered. The young woman in direct opposition to Dame Edna and her colourful dress and ‘designer spectacles’. The ‘arty’ type dazzling the world with her alleged talent through bad choices in dress, hairstyle and colour, and her ridiculous spectacles so I thought.

I nodded; a smile fixed on my face trying hard to remain sociable.

“We will permit you to take a copy for your own library, but we would like the original as per the Court Order...we’ll wait...the original is a requirement for any future legal prosecution”. A forced smile to help future cooperation between the Police Force and these Media giants. They seem to think they have the right to enter anyone’s life and turn it into a soap opera or by inference, name the guilty party...the same as us when we are investigating a homicide though we will never publicise the name of our Number One suspect. I almost smiled at the thought so unlike these types of Shows that do not have any trouble naming and shaming based on...who knew! I thought better of showing my most friendly smile under the circumstances.

“They can’t do that, can they? That is our property...” The multi-coloured person asked...she had a husky voice. Either an ex-smoker or an ex-rugby forward who copped it one too many times in the throat! She had that certain body mass and stance about her.

“C’mon people, settle down. It is not going to work going cap in hand to our Legal Minds for advice and direction. This Order signed by one of the Politicians who has the State Premier’s ear. One must ask why a man of his standing has signed this document...do you know?” She looked at me, the journalist’s mind ticking over loud enough to be heard.

“We were as inquisitive as you...but it often is better not to look under that bush, if you get my meaning”. Another smile that wouldn’t melt Antarctica.

“Yes...if you’ll wait a few moments...” She advised as she turned to leave the small, cramped room...one half of the ‘container building’ though there were at least half a dozen containers all joined together in the cluster.

“We’ll come with you...” I responded, another smile not melting anything! I stood taking a step towards her. She stopped to turn back to me, her arms crossed over boyish breasts. She rubbed the back of her neck with her hand as she bowed her head to inspect her shoes...she had a shoe fetish I thought momentarily. I bowed my head to peek at her shoes...nothing to write home about I thought to myself...in fact a little matronly style. Okay, her actions were showing she was getting a little riled.

“Yes...of course”. She eventually replied softly as she bent to admire her shoes again. A bloody annoying habit! Either that or she hated eyeing people toe to toe. “That’s what is wrong with this world to-day. Too little trust...” Except she couldn’t look at me when she stated that little gem.

These people are so engrossed in their little world they have trouble coming up for air, I thought sarcastically.

“I wonder who would be responsible for such a state...” Couldn’t stop my mouth from opening. All I wanted was to get the hell out of this place as quickly as possible...okay, after leaving a friendly but sarcastic comment or two.

A tight smile, an embarrassed wave of her arm as she led us down a narrow corridor, firstly to their Data Library where she showed me the container marked “*The Truth of the Matter/ Margaret Heather Campbell...Master Tape of four copies*”. She pulled the DVD out of the sleeve to again show me the details ‘Master Copy/Margaret Heather Campbell 2021’ before slipping it into one of a row of DVD ‘readers’ in banks along the opposite wall in an adjoining alcove. She placed another DVD into an adjacent machine. She marked this as a copy of the Master with the same details, the time and date the original tape was handed to us. There seemed to be arms waving about everywhere with the three of us standing in a tight...yes, a too tight a clutch that the small alcove area dictated. One of us would have to back into the narrow hallway to ease the situation...none of us did!

“Your signature Detective, if you will”.

It took less than a couple of minutes for the copy to be made. She slipped that copy into another machine checking that the copy ‘had taken’. Satisfied, she withdrew the Master placing it back in its original sleeve. The copy she slipped into the original container.

It reminded me of one of those street ‘magicians’ with the ‘under which cup is the peanut trick?’ I slid the DVD out of its sleeve several times to check we had the original ‘master’... I was that dubious.

“Thank you...” I responded, tapping the container on my knuckles with a certain rhythm. This time the smile was genuine. I realised that I had just relaxed from a semi-frozen state.

“What are you hoping to find?” She asked, now more relaxed herself. Her smile now showed an attractive middle-aged woman who wanted to protect her job...and career. With us now involved, it could mean she was doing something risky with this whole Exposé. She would be the Producer and/or Director with the usual popular ‘anchor lady’ the pretty face to the story. She would not be the one who received the kick up the arse if things didn’t turn out properly. She as the Director and Producer of this little exposé would. For an instance I felt sorry for the woman...than it was gone.

“We don’t know. Neither of us saw the original show so we are unsure of why all this hullabaloo around that screening time...we may learn something...or not. If it is found she is innocent of the crime as you seem to think, she may still find herself back in prison for lying under oath...or with time served and a considerate Judge, that could be enough...but whatever, she will have that label hanging from her neck forever even if she is found innocent by our investigation...have you thought of that scenario?”

Her eyes fluttered and again she bowed her head to look at her shoes, rubbing her neck with her free hand, the other arm held tightly at her waist. It was obvious she had not extended her thoughts that way. I nodded letting the silence linger, hoping she may feel a trace of guilt for her actions even though she was being the typical Media Journalist out for a story not thinking of how the chips may fall.

“Thank you...one thing...what started you off investigating the Campbell Case? A simple case of a Domestic Violence homicide in a small bush town...around Australia they occur every week...what was special about this one? Doubt it made the Sydney Papers or TV News when it occurred...what...six...eight years ago”.

She smiled. Again, it was genuine.

“Sources...” She challenged.

“Yeah, right...can you be a little more explicit?”

“If you are asked the same question, what would be your usual response?”

This conversation continued as the three of us were closeted in a tight clutch. She was egging me on while her womanly ways and perfume were clogging my nostrils...it was a superb perfume! The funny thing was none of us were embarrassed or challenged by this proximity of bodies...not even Sophie!

“Yes...we normally need to protect our sources the same as you...but this case? Maggie Campbell will be released on parole within weeks...what’s the point?”

“Understand...let’s just say that a senior State Member of Parliament took me out to lunch...unexpectedly I must say...and a sheer delight...the meal was superb and expensive...on the Taxpayers chit...he dropped a few clues of impropriety when the local coppers were investigating the case back then...the whole reason for this clandestine dinner. I mean, I’d be a dumb bitch if I didn’t do a little research as we’re always looking for stories...the juicier the better...and when it entails a misjudgement by any other name my antennae starts to spin...know what I mean? I knew there was a story...a juicy story there for the telling”.

“The local State Member who happens to be the Attorney-General perhaps? The man who co-signed the Court Order. The man whose parliamentary district surrounds that area in southern NSW?”

She leaned into me which wasn’t hard and whispered in my ear.

“Maybe...” That smile again. She was an expert in seduction that showed how she usually got the secrets.

“Yes...” I continued with the flirt. “If we find that the woman accused of the shooting did indeed pull the trigger, will we see a retraction either during a News program or some such from your side?”

Her reply was a hearty laugh!

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sophie blew out a sigh of relief as she escaped from her layers of winter woollies. The last to go was her handgun and shield to be deposited in her gun drawer...the rules were that while in the Police precinct and in any of the twenty-one floors of the building, you were not to be armed.

I had to smile to myself as I watched my young partner partially disrobe. The problem I saw was that in an emergency, she would be incapable of reaching let alone unholstering her Glock. During winter I hoped I would never need a back-up in a ticklish situation! I doubted I could rely on my partner to save my neck! This she had done at that dangerous ‘stand-off’ at the house next door to her place around six months ago now. Earning her a Certificate Award for her quick actions that were faster than mine...I’d be dead if not for her...but she fell apart after the adrenalin slowed.

She caught my wry smile.

“What!?” She challenged.

I shook my head and turned away, having a little trouble in disarming myself what with my puffer coat getting tighter around the mid-rift every winter, so I thought.

“It’s supposed to be tight...that’s what keeps you warm...it traps the body heat in...that’s what it’s supposed to do. Do you want me to reserve one of the smaller Lecture Halls with that bloody big screen, so we can sit and relax as the Master Tape rolls through?”

“Um...no”. I stood still, thinking. “Um...I want to see the woman first to form an opinion that is not tainted by something that I’ve seen on that TV show. We’ll watch it tomorrow afternoon after we return from the Emu Plains Correctional Facility...book it for either tomorrow PM or the day after AM...okay?”

“Yes Boss...I understand your logic”. A little sarcasm which I noticed was becoming more prevalent...I frowned glancing at her just in case she was being smart...she didn’t show any such sign...was I being a little thin-skinned? I didn’t know.

CHAPTER EIGHT

She was attractive even with her hair cut in a savage ‘butch’ style. Thirty-nine years of age, her skin taunt, her arms having tone and muscle the result of daily workouts. A quick smile that ventured unabated to her eyes...when she smiled you couldn’t help but smile with her. Her eyes a light blue with a dark blue halo around the iris...they made you glued to their beauty...

“Bloody hell, what’s going on? I’ve had more visitors in the last month than my entire six years combined! Go on, tell me...you are all concerned for my welfare when I at last leave this place...”

“You’ve earned yourself quite a reputation...in fact the Super has been trying to figure out a way of keeping you in here...you’re considered too valuable to leave...”

She looked at me, a half-smile frozen on her face. Not too sure how to take my comment. It looked as though the comment may have concerned her...she didn’t want to stay inside for a day longer than required. All this activity over the past four and a half years was to keep her mind off her predicament...she really wasn’t enjoying her time here, engulfing herself in a deep concentration on her studies.

“An Accountancy Degree. An Australian Literature Degree which would allow you to be a University Lecturer. Running classes in English, Grammar, and Spelling; running a group of girls called the Emu Joggers who run the perimeter of the prison morning and night...every day ignoring the weather...members having won inter-Prison marathons by huge margins...ditto the one hundred dash and the four hundred...” I nodded, looking closely at her. “You’ve remained busy for your entire incarceration period...good for you...there’s too few who do utilise their time in a constructive way while serving out their sentence...more’s the pity”.

She looked down at her fingers, picking at the quick of a thumb. I reckon this was an inward form of keeping her mind...and concentration on an even keel.

“I had no intention of wasting my time in here by sitting on my arse doing nothing...I would have gone stark raving mad hemmed in by these cold grey concrete slab walls. I have promised myself this will be the only time I see the inside of a cell and to do nothing was self-destructive. I will never again have so much time on my hands for positive things...I am *not* coming back inside no matter what!” She spat out.

“A model prisoner...”

“Yeah...well...why are you here? I doubt your intent is to continue with your admiration statements for too long”.

“The Judge in sentencing you...he stated that you should give thought to the suggestion you are hiding some-one...what did he mean by that?”

She shook her head as she lowered it to look at the tabletop. She couldn't make eye contact with me or Sophie. She kept on wandering, her eyes never stopping to look too long at the one spot...a nervous disposition or a sign of guilt still felt. I wasn't sure...

"Six years...six bloody years...I have no idea..." She eventually muttered, shaking her head. "I don't even remember the remark".

She focussed on an area of the table between us. Her eyes-lids fluttered, and she grasped her hands so tightly together her finger knuckles went white.

"I think you do..."

I casually clasped my hands together, still looking intently at her. She was finding it difficult to look up at me.

"You know, if it is unearthed that you are taking the fall for some-one else who shot your partner to death, then you could find yourself back in...the Court doesn't take kindly to omission, half-truths, or straight out fabrications...how many times did you confess...in front of a Judge and Jury, that you had committed that crime...Miss Campbell? I am going to find out who...and why you are lying to protect someone else. That someone the true perpetrator of the crime you are inside for..."

"Those bloody bastards TV people spreading falsehoods themselves, stirring it all up again...jeez...I'm almost out of here". She looked around, a glint of tears in her eyes. "...and those AO's have to kick over shit again...for what? A bloody story that forgets there is a human being with feelings at the centre of the fuckin' vortex".

Real anger in the tone of voice. She slapped the tabletop. Called for the guard to take her back to her cell...the interview was over. She was going back to her cell to bash her head against the wall...well...she would feel like doing that such was her anger.

I stood, thanking her disappearing figure for her time, and quickly walked from the room. Sophie had trouble catching up to me.

"Joe! Joe! What was that all about?"

"She's taking a fall for some-one else..." I stopped to turn to her. "Who would be worthy to cost her six years out of her life...was she having an affair with someone else in town? Was she seeing anyone else? We need to re-interview everyone involved which will not make us popular, let me tell you...she's taking the fall for someone else". I repeated more certainly. "Let's now go and watch that Master Tape of the TV Show, huh?"

“Where did you hook that idea from? Out of the frigging clouds? What in holy hell was that comment based on? It never occurred to me that her voice, her actions, and the way she sat said any such thing!! You’re saying she is innocent!? If she *were* having an affair with someone else and she wanted to end the relationship with her abusive partner...she would have to kill him as he wouldn’t take kindly to be given the old heave-ho...that just verifies her guilt to my way of thinking...it doesn’t prove her innocence!”.

“Mmm...”

I was pleased with the way Sophie was evolving...she was offering her opinions and thoughts with confidence...I needed to continue to encourage her.

“Yeah...you’re right, he’d kill her under that scenario, so she’d realised she needed to get in first...”. I turned to face her. “The thing is...we must approach this Case as we do in any similar homicide case. We must keep our minds open to who the Perp is...and erase from our minds that Maggie Campbell was guilty of the murder. All suspicions that we unearth...they’re not transferred to the factual column until we can verify each in turn...that’s why I said what I said...to convince myself we have an open case with no suspects, no facts yet, no incriminating evidence...understand? We haven’t even trod down that road yet...pretend that Hendo has just given us the Case with the coppers in Jerilderie asking for our help...understand? There’s a body...sure...but no hint of who the Perp may be”. I turned to begin walking, Sophie having problems keeping up with my fast gait.

“Oh! Another thing...” I stopped and pointed a finger at her. “When we start kicking over cowpats out in the paddocks, we will not win any popularity contests in town...so be prepared as it may hurt”.

She looked up at me, a glint of a smile before she shook her head. She turned and began to walk down the prison corridor, her heels echoing along the length of the hall.

“You’re one cool dude, partner. One cool dude...” She concluded talking over her shoulder. I heard her giggle.

“Yep...yer got that right”. A smile to convince her.

How the young can be easily impressed! This investigation was going to be a steep learning curve for her, and she will need to always have her wits about her.

She nodded as she half-ran/jogged to keep up with me.

CHAPTER NINE

I couldn't sit still, instead annoying the crap out of Sophie with my constant squirming in the cinema type seats.

"For Christ's sake Joe, stop fidgeting about, will you. I can't concentrate on the film with you diverting my concentration all the time..."

"Sorry..."

I stood and walked up to the highest aisleway, walking back and forwards on its length as the tape continued. I couldn't tell you why I had a pants full of bull ants except I was further angered as the tape continued...there were so many loose ends...so many insinuations not backed up with facts.

"Play that bit again, Sophs...and slow it down a touch...there...that look. She's the Show's Producer...she has an itch she cannot scratch...replay it...and turn the volume up so I can hear what she is saying".

"Again!? Bloody Hell Joe!"

"Yeah, again". I stood still as the twenty second vision played through.

"That wasn't on the broadcasting version, was it? No...I wonder why...it seems she is not convinced there is a story to be told on this homicide...not sure at all...she is second guessing the whole story".

"She still went ahead with what she had...that's a little irresponsible don't you think?"

That was how it went for the entire afternoon. Me requesting playbacks repeatedly. Sophie getting the shits as she could not see what I could see. It was close to five thirty when we called it quits, me heading for the Gym and pool, Sophs on her way home via ferry.

The only trouble when heading home in that manner was, she was whisked into Circular Quay as the ferry didn't stop at Abbotsford on the way in...only on the way out...still on a day like today, it would be a pleasurable trip.

"Oh! Sophs? Leave that master disc copy on my desk on your way out the door will you please..."

After returning to the Office from obtaining the master disc of the show, we organise three copies of the tape. From that point on we did not use that tape but instead one of its copies...common sense, huh? The master disc locked away in the Boss's safe.

"You going to take it home?"

"Yeah...I think so". I could stop, reverse, or slow motion the tape to my heart's content! Another late night coming up!

CHAPTER TEN

"I appreciate you giving us some of your time, Your Honour..."

"Not at all...your opening gambit had me intrigued...and besides, I have a clear chit until two forty-five this afternoon. Tell me, you are investigating...re-examining the Case of Margaret Campbell against the State of NSW...that was four years ago...no...almost five. I looked it up, she is to be released at the end of this month all going well. A 'gold star' inmate according to everyone I spoke to. Is she aware of this re-investigation? More importantly, is she aware of the sentence for lying under oath? She could very well stuff up her parole period because of it".

"Yes, she is aware of us re-examining her Case...and yes, she is due for parole at the end of this month, and I would think that she may have spent time searching the Internet for the facts on committing perjury before a Judge and Jury...that is something I should search out and if I find evidence of such a search, you must ask yourself the question why she was so interested. If she is guilty of the crime, she wouldn't bother...but if she has taken the fall for some-one else...it makes sense for her to research that aspect".

"Mmm...it was an interesting Case which should not have gone the way it did...thus a good enough reason for me being hauled over the coals for that comment in my Closing Statement before sentencing the poor woman. I was appalled by both the Prosecution and Defence strategies, procedures, and arguments...and yes, I summoned both parties into my Chambers on several occasions to ask pertinent questions which have all escaped the Court Reporter more than once as the proceedings continued ...why are you re-examining the Case?"

"Orders from on high...at the top of the heap in the State of New South Wales so I have been told...the Attorney General has shown an interest after that show was screened on TV".

“That’s interesting. Worth digging about looking for the why...” He looked over at me with hooded eyes though they still had a sparkle. “Interesting...the politics behind the screen...um...you have a reputation as a no-nonsense type of Investigator, so I understand...I’d like to know why this sudden interest after all this time. She has almost served her time...you selected by name to conduct the examination? Be careful my good man, your balls could be on the offering plate, if you get my drift. Why now? At the end of her sentence. According to all I spoke to, she is a shining example of the ‘gold star’ inmate...I’m sure you have discovered that much...but the fact that the whole re-examination was instigated by the Attorney-General’s interest after the show was televised, I find that very worrying...politics over-riding judicial apparatus...not good and something of a precedence. I think...yes, I think there was a personal attachment for him...and not just because he represents the area in the NSW Parliament”.

“Your Honour? Why that extraordinary comment before sentencing? Completely against protocol and all Courtroom procedures”.

“Mmm...” He leant back, closed his eyes, and clasped his hands as if in prayer. After moments he cleared his throat and while in the same position began to speak.

“This is a two-edged sword that is hanging over my head. As I have shown that comment has cost me dearly...not the sort of behaviour from a Judge who never takes sides or voices an opinion that intimates such a stance. To be so disappointed in *both* the Prosecution and Defence Court strategies and arguments must be a precedence... and to expect the Court to accept such strategies that involved tactics that are no longer enacted legislation in this State...not once, but repeatedly in front of the Jury. Oh, yes! I could see what he was doing which was not going to occur in my Court...but it did and yes, regardless of what I stated in summation, the Jury had been reminded of her plight endlessly...of her being a battered partner and subject to similar behaviour as a child...whipped by a drunken abusive father. I wanted the young man disbarred for ignoring my instructions repeatedly”.

“The Battered Wife Syndrome...”

“Yes indeed. I had to interrupt on occasions when the Defence Solicitor introduced it as part of his strategy...I am sure he expected to get his Client off the Murder Charge by using that strategy. In the end it was another ‘In Camera’ discussion to warn the young man once again he cannot use that strategy in my Court...but he insisted...I was on the verge of having him spend a week-end in custody...he doggedly maintained the tactic to imbed her previous life’s burdens onto the jury...and to a certain extent, it prevailed...it was the Head Jurist who asked could they find the woman guilty but with mitigating circumstances...in a sense, that young Solicitor won a victory for his client...he was a Legal Aide fellow who I understand has left

the Practise and now works quite happily at Bunnings...he had some sort of breakdown that restricted any time in Court...how about that!”

I chuckled, shook my head before leaning forward to find a comfortable spot in the maroon leather Chesterfield Lounge chair. You sat on it, not in it and the rich leather had you constantly sliding towards the floor...expensive pieces of furniture that would never see the inside of my home.

“Could the Client have used her nous against the young greenhorn? Convinced him of certain strategies?”

“I’ve never looked at it that way...I suppose that could be so. She has shown a keen mind and a boundless intellect while incarcerated...yes...she could have orchestrated that approach...which would mean she was as guilty as hell and had thought the Battered Wives’ Syndrome was her way out...she was manipulating the Case and the Court long before she pulled the trigger confident her plotting would prevail with a ‘get out of jail’ card...yes, I can see that now”.

“Yes...that’s one take on it...but take it one more step. She was not the guilty party but managed to convince ‘who ever’ that she could take the fall and get away with it...while the person who did the actual shooting had as much chance as Pinocchio of telling a lie and getting away with it...and if found guilty, that ‘unknown person’ would have gone down for a longer sentence than Campbell did...and I’ll lay a bet and say that that person also had a reputation in the district that would have been destroyed if it was he fronting the Court as the alleged guilty fellow”.

There was silence in the room as both men pondered on the guilt or not of Margaret Heather Campbell.

“You think she is taking the fall for some-one else, yes?”

I nodded slowly.

“It is something that has continued to trouble me as this investigation continues. I am not saying for certain she is taking the fall for someone else, but it is a scenario, one of many that I think about. Depending on what we find down there will orchestrate the way I will conduct the examination...those suppositions will solidify or be tossed...it is still open season for us at present”.

The old man nodded slowly, thinking deeply of what I had just voiced.

“Yes...so do I...or...I have my doubts to her guilt. That’s as far as I will go. Have you read the Court Transcript yet?”

“That’s my next job...I have already read the Murder Folder prepared by the local guys...I intend to read it several more times before going up to the town...I will say to you it appears to be haphazard investigation, jumping to a conclusion and not taking it any further”.

“Are the two of you going down to Jerilderie...a case of entering the Lions’ Den...” The Judge said lightly.

“I’m not religious so I can’t place myself into that scenario...”

“Into the Valley of Death rode the 600...or is it the brave one and his partner...”

“Now that I can relate to...”

“Will you keep me in the loop. I have always thought there was a huge failure of Justice, but the sad part is, if you can discover the rightful guilty person, then Miss Campbell may face another term of imprisonment for lying under oath...a sad thought...a sad outcome”.

I nodded.

“It’s sad in a way...because of the manner I permitted the Case to be unfurled and my comments to the jury before they retired, I have been told my days on the Bench have come to a close. The next time you communicate with me I’ll be a retired Circuit Judge. They put any such behaviour down to old age...the ravings of an old bastard! Oh, well!” He stood to go with me to the Chambers door, a heavy looking mahogany piece. “To be truthful, I am ready for retirement...south-eastern Queensland my wife has been talking about lately. Too many Victorians in that part of the world...I’d prefer Port Douglas, but I get one vote, my wife two!”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Sophs? I’ve given us until the end of next week to be prepared for the visit out to Jerilderie. What I want is for you to go through all the Murder Folders to pinpoint any discrepancies in the local coppers’ investigation which will help us once we begin to question again all parties involved”.

“What are you going to do?” She asked as though she thought I was going to lie back in my chair and have a nap...or something. Clearly, she didn’t like going over old ground repeatedly.

“I’m going to get a list of all visitors Campbell has had...I want to check into their backgrounds and how they are connected to the woman...and I want to examine her use of the Internet to see whether our young lady searched out ‘perjury’ as an exercise...and I want to go back through that Murder File and the Court Documents to become familiar with both like you...every bloody word of it”.

Sophie attacked the Homicide Folder prepared by the Investigating Officers out west. At some point of her examination of the Investigation Folder, Sophie gave a yelp, quickly picking up her purse to leave the Murder Squad floor. I didn’t like the look on her face and after she had left, I wheeled by chair around to her desk to see what had upset her so. The Folder was open at the crime scene photographs with different angles taken of the Deceased clearly showing the bullet hole penetration wounds inflicted on the sod. Officially, seven wounds to the man’s body...there was anger in the sheer number of shots...with a repeating rifle...a prohibited weapon in Australia.

Sophs had baulked at the gory photographs of the crime scene...

It had been four months since the Tony Harrold incident at her neighbour’s house with the event never mentioned by Sophs...or for that matter, by me. Now this...a series of colour shots taken at different angles showing each penetration in all its glory. She again had had a reaction...I silently knew this was not going to end well for my young partner. I would let the thing slip waiting hopefully for Sophs to mention it...and the reason for her sudden reaction.

We hardly spoke to one another what with our heads down and our tails up for the rest of the week. Halfway through the following week I had achieved much, feeling as though I knew the Case back to front and in every direction. The examination of her Internet usage did not reveal any examination of ‘perjury’ or ‘lying under oath’ or its punitive sentences. Additionally, her visitors were lean until the last three weeks of her incarceration when that TV Journalist visited her every second day.

Her two younger sisters had gone with their mother to visit on occasions but not regularly...though the sister purported to be closest to her visited her regularly, at least once a fortnight for the entire time of her incarceration...a good trip from Jerilderie and back just for an hour visit...that made my nose itch! I forgot to mention to my young colleague this piece of evidence...one of a few omissions. I cannot hazard a guess as to why these oversights occurred.

“Okay...we now have both perused the Murder File several times. The File prepared and presented as the investigation unfolded...what do you reckon, Sophs?”

“Um...I’ve got around six pages of notes to chat over with you. Questions and negative points on the way the investigation went ahead...was controlled, and supervised...is that good enough? And was I expected to address the case in such a manner? Looking subjectively at the examination to pick out loose strings and neglected follow-ups...”

“Funny, I’ve got about the same. Yes...you have the gist of the examination. Um...there’s no straightforward way of figuring out the correct method or what was a fuck up. Often it depends on the way you look at life and your cup half-full or half-empty character. Let’s compare notes...you first...”

“I’m under the spotlight, eh?”

“No, not really, but it is a terrific way to learn when you have the chance of sifting through the documentation, the protocols and the conclusions reached when a string of facts become known...comparing that with the training programs you attended at the Academy...okay, away you go...and learn by what you have found”.

“Okay...I’ll go first. The crucial point that hit me between the eyes on that first day and every day after that...they, meaning the local coppers knew the Vic and the Perp...there was an extensive list of ‘callouts’ to the address all to do with Domestic Violence issues going back months if not years. It was noticeable that the woman’s injuries were gradually getting worse with longer and longer hours spent at the local Medical Centre. One such attack was severe enough for her to be airlifted to Wagga Base Hospital...but there was never any charges laid against the sod! Now that must be a charge of dereliction of duty right there”. She looked up at me, convinced her summation was fact...but she didn’t question *why* no charges were laid against the man...

“You’ve got to remember; this is a small country town of some one thousand inhabitants. Everyone knows everyone else and a quiet word with the threat of arrest from the local copper is often sufficient to quell unsocial behaviour...most times in any case”.

She looked at me...the expression had me waiting for an angry response. It didn’t come. Male dominance was still a rural aspect of living for a fair few of its citizens...she opened her mouth, then closed it, nodding in agreement...the facts are sometimes hard to chew. I looked at the far wall not focussing on anything.

“The point you made about how you thought the local cops were derelict in not charging the sod repeatedly...why would such leniency be given? Why would the local coppers lay off the

man? Think about it, it could open a pandora's box..." That got me thinking in a new direction but regardless, whether she was guilty, or innocent of the act was the revolving question I continually asked myself.

"Um...okay...I got the impression well before the homicide date that the local coppers had already drawn a conclusion on the Vic's character...and this negative attitude was carried right through to the Court Case and the months leading up to that date. Sure, they were privy to all this shit...in the woman confessing, it only added confirmation to what the local coppers already knew...the biggest problem with that is that information shared by all of the Officers on the investigation blinded them to any other plausible alternatives...or to look further afield...broaden the investigation instead of resting on the fact they had historic evidence and several clear statements of guilt..."

"Like what?"

"I don't know...but neither the Deceased or the Perp were examined that closely. She had admitted fault in shooting her partner to death so end of story. We know why she killed her partner...because of the growing intensity of physical abuse inflicted on the poor woman...but..."

"But what?"

"I don't know...there is so many missing facts...or bits of information that may have led the Investigators in a different direction that were never chased out...Blind Freddy would be able to identify those mistakes in the investigation".

"Remember them clearly as they will be points you should chase out when we get to the town. Um...you've got to remember you are privy to the overview...um...having hindsight is a marvellous thing...but you must ask yourself at every turn...at every little titbit of information that doesn't sit well with your thinking and training...would you have dug deeper on *that* point if you had been in control of the investigation...the answer should always be *yes* on that point. While I'll never belittle or criticise the way the investigation unfolded, the fact that we as a Unit were not involved shows me an over-confidence in the investigation by the local lads. *'We have a body...we have history of abuse...enough abuse to cause such a reaction...and most importantly, we have a confession'*. The Officer having overall control appears to be a competent, enthusiastic, and diligent Officer. A Senior Sergeant with a lifetime of service and experience...I don't know, but I get the impression this was going to be his swansong...a feather in his cap that would be mentioned by others out around these parts for years. Him being proud of his service and his input on this Case".

I leant back hard into my desk chair to stretch. My back and arms stiffening up from being seated for too many hours. I needed to get up and move around...a coffee downstairs would ease the stiffness.

“To me we are in a no-win situation...if we conclude with a different outcome, the local blokes will be abused and belittled...laughed at as imbeciles shown up by the smart bastards from Sydney...and yes, maybe we will be accused of elbowing our way into a tight community to show up the popular Senior Sergeant...or everyone nodding at our conclusions knowing the local blokes were not up to the challenge and it took a bloody TV Show to set the wheels of Justice into motion...which as we know, can roll exceedingly slow...and have...eight years after the event”.

I went to stand but instead, settled back into my Office swivel chair.

“One crucial point which I almost forgot...we know that the pressure placed on that TV Producer to investigate and prepare a TV exposé was instigated by a Member of Parliament who represents those people of Jerilderie...was the MP approached by one of his constituents suggesting a balls up by the local cops? Or was the MP personally involved with one of the ‘players’ in the Case? Or is the whole situation seen as an unexpected windfall by the MP to further his popularity within the area? These questions we should always include in any dissection of the Case...as it could be particularly important either now or in the future. Keep them in mind when we get to the stage of questioning pertinent persons in the township as they may have relevance”.

“Can we interview him?”

“We could, but politicians have an uncanny ability never to answer a question directly...let’s see how things unfold before we travel down that path, eh?”

CHAPTER TWELVE

“You ready?”

“Yeah, yeah...don’t hassle me...”

“We’ll go in my car and leave your Unmarked here, okay? You okay? You look nervous...the Lead Detective and Interviewer in the State is nervous of being interviewed”. She chuckled

before leaning into me, kissing me on the cheek. That should have made me feel better, but it didn't...

"I'm just concerned what the meeting is all about. Danni has got to be a model student...all her Class Reports and Teacher conferences say that...but she sometimes gets riled by other kids jealous of her superior results every time...she's had a few red dots against her name where she has reacted with anger...more than Al or Sam combined".

"Joe? Don't get yourself in a pickle...relax love...okay?"

We were guided to chairs straight from the State Government Emporium where everything has zero personality, charm, or comfort. To sit for only brief moments confirmed they were implements of torture!

"We've met before Tellie...and your husband Joseph. This is the District Educational Child Psychiatrist Jaqueline Klerk and Jo Kennedy our School Counsellor. We all have paid your Danni specialist attention but at arm's length as certain children can use that as a red zone action device. There are a couple who have reacted to Danni's intelligence and knowledge in a negative way ever since Dan has joined this School. With Danni's...um...with her terrible start on life, we all have been watching her closely. I don't think I need to say that Danni is one special child. Her ability to overcome the tragedy in her life has been extraordinary. We at first thought she was ignoring the hurt felt in her earlier life and what she experienced the day both parents died, but her submitted school essays on subjects that may have triggered certain reactions shows the complete opposite...we all have been happily surprised...have either of you seen her work? No? That's understandable...there may be a certain degree of embarrassment on her part in showing you those essays...nothing wrong with that. In fact, it is an expected response...she may or may not show you her efforts in the future...all I'd recommend is not to push it".

The Head Administrator looked at her colleague, a cue for her to join in.

What was wrong with the moniker 'Head Teacher' as in the old days you were confident you were talking to a bloody Teacher...to me it amply displayed the role the person played. Head Administrator could mean she didn't have a Degree in Teaching but was a darn good Accountant! Give me strength!

"Danni's playtime with her two sisters? At home, what is that like?"

"Normal, I guess...the usual sisterly spats on occasions. Dan was more into reading than the other two and she showed a knowledge and comprehension way above Aleesha, but she would never tease her about being dumb...or slow. In fact, she showed a degree of tutelage to both

girls, and I'd often find her explaining things to the other two if they appeared to be lagging..."

"They do homework each day?"

"Yes...I have insisted on that, out at the Kitchen bench as I prepare the Dinner...the first thing is they take off their uniforms, check to see whether another day is possible, place their underclothes in the washing machine, shine their shoes, have a shower, change into their PJs and then sit at the Kitchen Bench to begin their homework...or revision. I used to lead them, but most times now, it is Danni who fills that role..."

"Does she show any signs of being impatient at the other two if they find it hard to grasp something?"

"On the contrary, she shows enormous patience in trying to make them understand. It is one of the others who will walk off in a huff if something doesn't gel. Dan brings her back, sits her down and goes through the problem repeatedly until either Al or Sam gets it...she is fantastic that way. I sometimes wonder where the other two would be without Dan's tutelage..."

"At the level most of their fellow class kids are...she is teaching her two sisters in Maths that are a year or two ahead of the rest of the classes..."

"That is not why we wanted this meeting". Jo Kennedy, the School Counsellor said quietly. "Dan's IQ is out of this world...I doubt Einstein had a comparable score at the same age. Um...we are holding her back by accepting she at a certain age must attend this class or that class. This School is holding her back. She is a highly gifted young lady who deserves to be challenged...bluntly, that is beyond us".

"You want her to go to another School? Tellie and I discussed that scenario at the time of her parents' death as the School Head at the School she was going to at the time said something similar. We were of the opinion she should be with Al and Sam as there was an instant bonding...she would be best suited at the time to go to the girl's school as a comforting balm...I...arrh..."

I looked over at Tellie who was nodding. She took over the conversation.

"Yes...both Joe and I believed this day would eventually arrive...we wanted Dan bedded in first before such a drastic act was undertaken...her parents, her change of school and her adoption into a strange household..." Tellie giggled. "Not strange...strange...simply different from that she was used to...we were told horrific stories of abuse, shouting, the

throwing of things...she would have experienced the lot...and then there was us. A typical boring suburban family who didn't need to tread lightly...we were not like that..." Tellie tittered at that statement, holding her hand over her mouth to lessen the embarrassment...she was nervous, I could tell...but not as nervous as me.

I hadn't realised how tight I was holding myself. Tellie patted me on the arm and then leaned over to kiss my cheek. I looked like the little embarrassed boy who could not look at anyone in the room.

"There are several brilliant Schools across the nation that cater for gifted pupils such as your Danni..."

"We're not looking to send her interstate away from us..."

"Your girl's future is paramount. The way she is guided through this period could either make or break the genius in her..."

"Genius!?" I replied, surprised at the tag.

"Yes...your Danni is in the top one quarter percent of all people having an IQ over 140...she is higher than that...one of a rare breed, indeed. There are two Schools in Sydney, one in Armidale attached to the New England University...I'm sorry, they all are Boarders only. The thought for these people especially of Danni's age is constant supervision...in her academic hours, athletic and sporting hours, what she eats and her sleep patterns...they are treated like delicate chicken eggs..."

"Or as a specimen under glass. I don't want Dan being treated any differently than our Al or Sam..."

"But there's the rub...she is different in about every way from your other two. I suspect her earlier experiences in life made her stubbornly attach herself to you and your family...I'm sorry for being so blunt, but Danni...she is special. I cannot emphasise that enough..."

"The fees..."

"All the Schools I have mentioned are accredited by the Federal and State Governments. They will put in one third each with you paying the rest...it is between one fifty to one seventy-five dollars per week dependant on which School you choose...I will say that the school in Melbourne is the best in the country...by far the best".

“Let’s see what Dan thinks of that...a visit to the school...and the two in Sydney...one in Newtown attached to the Sydney Uni and the other in the grounds of Kings at Parramatta. They have ties to the Western Sydney University Campus. All those attached to Universities have lectures of some subjects at each of the Universities...”

We sat through another two hours of discussions, a coffee break, and a ten-minute interval when the Headmistress had to take an urgent call about one of the students self-harming.

“I’m sorry...” She said as she gestured for us to re-enter her office. The two professionals walked in behind us. “Um...to finish up, I’ll organise you to visit both Sydney campuses we recommend and really, I urge you to visit the Melbourne school attached to Melbourne Uni before you make up your mind”.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

We sat in the car like stunned mullets fearing the future for our Danni. I broke the silence with a cough. My throat constricted as I found it hard to say anything! I had not up until this point, ever considered her as a Boarder in an interstate School.

“What’ryareckon?”

“I’m not that keen on Dann being away from us...like if she goes to that Melbourne School...”

“In a way it doesn’t matter. Melbourne...Parramatta...it would be the same. She would be a live-in Boarder full time...away from us...Al and Sam will miss her heaps...”

“Who are we thinking of here...Dann or us?”

“Good question, Joe...what is the best for Dann may not sit well with us...her future has to be considered above all other things...easier said than done I suppose...we’ll need to sit down with the three girls to work it out”.

“What worries me is she being like some growth in a Petrie Dish with countless strangers peering in on her...know what I mean?”

“Mmm...you’re making it worse Joe than it already is, my love. Just think back when she first came to live with us...we kinda treated her with kid gloves, until she said she didn’t want to be treated any differently to the way we treat Al and Sam...remember?”

I nodded leaning over to give the wisest person in the world a kiss on the lips.

For the next week, the topic of conversation at the dinner table was the excitement of going to Melbourne. The girls were tremendously thrilled, being able to spend school holidays in the southern capital forgetting their age as they planned trips together without Tellie or I being a part of the plan at all!

And for the next week we were getting closer to Maggie Campbell's release date.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

She'd heard it repeated incessantly...

'As soon as they know you're an X-con, they drop you like a hot cake...there's no such thing as an ex-con, you're a life-long bloody con as it's in your blood...it can't be exorcised...you're a con for the rest of your life!'

She wondered whether all the persistent demanding work in achieving a Masters in Australian Literature and a Degree in Public Accountancy was worth it...or whether she'd be branded as a crim for the rest of her life even though she had done the time. It wasn't fair in so many ways and as she made the counter of the Personal Repository, she smiled at the woman behind the counter. A hard-arse Screw who showed a different side to Maggie as she was tutored in the pleasure of reading by Maggie. Ruby came out from behind the counter to hug Maggie, tears in both their eyes. Maggie didn't want to leave this place in such a depressive mood as the years spent here had given her chances which were not available 'outside'. The Super and her Deputy nervously suggested that Ruby return to her position behind the counter as Maggie gave her one last hug and kiss.

She wondered whether she would ever cross paths with any of these inmates again who would be forever grateful to her and what she had given to her fellow inmates...she doubted it as they would tread paths so differently when they were released...it was the Prison that was the common denominator for all of them during her four-year stint.

She nervously checked through her private property and the sum of money she had earned while being on the inside. She nodded, surprised at the amount that had accrued...surprised too at her meagre earthly belongings she had come into the prison with which now meant very little to her...and she knew they wouldn't fit her...most of her 'outside' clothes. With all her exercise, she had bulked up but lost body mass. She nodded at Ruby, her most inspiring

student, forced a smile and wiped away a tear as the Super steered her out onto the front of the Entry Vestibule. Both the Super and her Deputy left her, standing on the top step watching her as she walked towards the guarded front gates.

Each step made her more nervous, her whole body shaking uncontrollably. One of the guards stepped from the small guardhouse and saluted her as he went to raise the pedestrian barrier something that had never happened before, and which showed the respect the guards and screws held for her. This made her worse with tears falling uncontrollably down her face...she didn't look back, she didn't turn but walked gingerly to the Taxi and Bus rank, both empty at that moment. She wished for a bus, a taxi, or an Uber car to appear quickly so she wouldn't show her discomfort and sadness. She felt it hard to hold herself together. Regardless that it was a prison, it had been her home for many years...and certain people in there were more deserved of a friendship than any 'Joan' on the outside...

None came to fulfill her wish which only made her whole body shake even more.

"Do with a lift?"

The question didn't register until it was repeated. She half-turned to see a familiar face which she had problems trying to recognise.

"Detective Sophie Grasso. My partner Detective Joseph Lind and I came to see you a couple of times...earlier this month. I can take you to the Halfway House if you want..."

Small. Attractive. A friendly smile. A little over five feet but not by much.

"Um...yes..." She moved the carryalls from her right arm to her left, lifting her right hand to massage the back of her neck. "Yes...I remember you. Is this how the NSW Police Force is going to keep an eye on me during my parole period?"

"Not at all...no. I'm sorry, you have the wrong take on my intentions".

"Is that right..." A disbelieving and cynical tone. "I'll accept your offer though, as I don't know how long I could have stood here before losing it. I never thought I'd have such ready emotions in leaving the place...and the people...not a hard arse amongst them".

"Yeah...perhaps you should take it easy for a while to allow yourself to learn to judge the average Joe...you wouldn't have seen one of those for some time...let me take some of your things...the car is across the road not far away..."

She was sorry she made the offer as half of the bags she took appeared to weigh a tonne! Mostly full of text books she surmised.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I leaned into Tellie to whisper in her ear.

“I think the choice has been taken out of our hands...”

She nodded, turning to me smiling.

“I was very impressed with the way they considered Danni’s age and the problems she will face as a young teenager exacerbated by beginning periods, growing boobs and hair under her arms. They are aware of this surreal world she is entering...being clever can have its downsides, huh?”

“I liked the way they considered Dann as a complete package that must have everything monitored as she grows. Physical exercise, rest, diet, sleep and they were the only ones who touched on allowing Dann to experiment with every subject that takes her fancy...they are not going to try and place her in a test tube or a set path...or force her onto a pre-ordained path...she is given freedom to experiment...to try and not be afraid to discard if it doesn’t fit”.

“That Deputy Head at Parramatta the other day...the way he looked the three girls up and down...not a good look...he was almost salivating...”

“A slight exaggeration but yes, I wasn’t impressed with him or the Boss. Of course, do you know what this means? We are talking ourselves into accepting Melbourne over the two Sydney Schools...and the three girls have already made up their minds”.

“Do you think she’ll be okay?”

“She’ll go through several homesick bouts...we’ve already talked about that...can we afford the fees each month?”

“Where has my wages been going each month? Straight into our Savings and Superannuation Funds...so that amount is going to be halved... that’s not a problem if I am dutifully employed as a Forensics Officer for the next six years about. I’ll need to spend some time down in

Melbourne getting her warmer gear...it was bloody freezing this morning when we hopped off the plane..."

"You have to take the girls if you're going shopping for clothes... they know the appropriate and cool gear...bloody hell, she's just turned twelve for God's sake...the school holidays begin next week, don't they?"

"Mmm? Yeah, I think...but Covid restrictions may stall any arrangements we want to make...and Joe? She turns thirteen next month my love...they grow up quick when you take your eye off them, huh?"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

We booked ourselves into the local 'Town and Country' Motel for two nights, giving us three full days on the ground, flying out on the Friday night flight back to Sydney...if we didn't turn over a new piece of evidence in that time, I doubted we ever would.

The flight delayed for thirty-five minutes due to a thick blanket of fog over Sydney. To fill in the time, we got a McCoffee to while away the minutes.

"You're not that keen on it, Joe?" More a statement than a question from my young partner who looked thrilled for the plane ride.

I swayed my head not sure how to answer.

"It's not that..." I eventually responded. "It's just...you know...she's still young...too young to be flying the nest...if I were her, I would be petrified, you know. Dann? She is looking forward to the new experiences...man...that's an old head on young shoulders".

"A young thirteen or an old thirteen?"

"She's developed fast...stands as tall as Tellie...she's never had a 'sleep over' with friends like Sam and Al...who have riotous times at least once a month...Danni always gets involved but she stays...you know...she doesn't join in all the girly stuff they carry on with... in fact she has few friends...Al and Sam would be it I reckon...she's an old thirteen...she can carry on a conversation on the latest Covid outbreak with any adult where Al and Sam are more interested in clothes...the latest boyband, and the latest bitch in class..."

“She’s an old teenager then”. Sophie remarked as we stood in response to our flight being called over the speaker system. “Go girl...” She added, a smile on her face.

The small twenty-seat twin prop commuter plane shuddered and vibrated as it taxied slowly out to its ‘stop’ position on the connecting taxiing runway. We were informed by the pilot that we would be stuck here for an indeterminate time as the fog banks continued to roll over the airport.

It was a good thirty minutes before we felt the plane inch out onto the main runway and without stopping or pausing it accelerated down the runway, all trembling, vibrating, and shaking worrying the hell out of me. In that moment I promised myself that this would be my last flight in a plane...instead any need to visit country towns would be by rail, car, or bus as alternatives. I wasn’t thinking of periodic visits to see Danni in Melbourne...I would have to come to terms with that soon. By road seemed like the way to go...but Tellie and the girls may have something to say about that...

Flying over the Great Divide only enforced that promise with turbulent air causing frightening drops with the engines having trouble holding altitude. They often seemed to have a problem holding revs as the plane shuddered and noisily vibrated, falling dangerously before the revs picked up and the plane groaned as it ascended to the correct altitude. Yep! Never again, I promised myself. We flew in circles around Jerilderie as it too was blanketed in a thick fog layer. The pilot twice came onto the cabin speakers explaining we were going to be diverted to Deniliquin which was cancelled to be replaced with Griffith as our alternate destination. I was beginning to panic with so many alternatives proposed in such a brief period. Finally, the plane seemed to drop suddenly as an opening in the fogbank appeared allowing this dizzying and frightening flight to end.

I walked unsteadily across the tarmac towards the shed that housed the Arrival and Departure Halls...and a lonely Avis stand not staffed. Instead, a phone would link you to an office in Griffith one hundred kilometres to the north where a car would be available to you...if you caught the only bus heading that way.

Sophie was skipping across the tarmac beside me, thrilled by the scariest ride she had ever been on wanting a repeat performance back to Sydney.

“Not on, my girl...we’ll be either driving, catching a Bus or catching a bloody train back to Sydney...no questions asked!”

She stopped in her tracks; her mouth open...so much for the brave Detective who had endured so much during his career as an undercover police officer before joining the Homicide Squad.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

A young police officer in uniform stood head and shoulders to the rear of the small bunch of well-wishers who were seeing off loved ones who would be joining the same plane on its return leg to Sydney...that, or they were welcoming friends and family home, getting away from the Covid Hotspots of Greater Sydney.

There had been another ten persons onboard...all noticeably grey around the gills from the flight...a quick glance as they all gave me a smile as they too were glad to be on solid ground.

I offered my hand as we approached him.

“Detective Lind. My partner, Detective Sophie Grasso...” There were instant reactions, blushing faces and embarrassing glances as Sophie and the young Constable shook hands. I could see the sparks flying from where I stood!

“Yeah...um...Constable Gavin Small. Um...I am to apologise for the Sarge...he was waiting to come out to greet you when we got a call-out...he’ll meet you back at the Station. I’m to settle you in to the motel or hotel and make myself available for anything you may need...during your stay here”. He looked across to Sophie who was slightly nodding her head. “I understand you’ll be flying out to Sydney on the late flight this Friday coming...” This said with a modicum of sadness that he will not have the time to experience more of Sophie.

“Can we get a Bus...or a train? On Friday? I’m not going to fly ever again after this morning’s hell ride”.

“Yeah...a train from Griffith to Sydney three times a week...” He informed me.

He wasn’t really paying attention as his smiles and eyes were for Sophie only!

I thought I may need a whip and a bucket of icy water to keep these two young horny devils at arm’s length from one another...Constable Small offered to pick up Sophie’s suitcase leaving me to ferret around for mine on the small four-wheeled cart that stood near the doorway into the ‘Shed’ used as both exit and entry...no security-type formalities to be seen ...not a good start I muttered to myself.

After going via the Motel to drop our things and confirm a booking for at least the next three days, we were sitting in the small but warm Lunchroom of the Jerilderie Police Station when a solid, clean shaven middle-aged man walked into the room. Authority written all over him.

“Sergeant Cody Withers...” He stated sternly. “You...arrh...you’re Detectives Lind and Grasso...” He shook our hands then slumped into a chair opposite me. “Gavin? Make us a coffee lad...please”.

He rubbed his hands down the sides of his face as though exhausted. It was still early, not past ten yet!

“What a shitty, small town this can be. Great people...friendly, thoughtful, peace loving, everyone knows each other...one big happy family...then you get an AO doing a drive-by shooting leaving fifteen bullet-holes in the front of a house. No-one hurt but we’ve got to get the Forensic and Ballistic guys from Griffith and Wagga to come down and carry out an examination of the house...ta...”

He thanked Constable Small who placed a steaming mug of coffee in front of him. We had not been included in the offer!

I wondered how he’d be after a quartet of arson, rapes, and murders if a ‘drive-by’ has him close to the edge.

“I’ve been here only two years...came in to replace Senior Sergeant Small...yeah, Gavin’s father when he called it quits...he’s retired to a beautiful home near Batemans Bay...he goes out on his deep-sea boat nearly every day to fish...doesn’t care about the weather...or whether he catches a fish for tea”.

He took a tentative sip as though judging the quality of the making. Satisfied, he took three or four sips, nodding his head as he gently placed the mug back onto the table in front of him. The Sergeant looked up at the tall, bean-stalk thin young Constable, nodding his thanks for the quick response.

“I don’t think we have ever had a ‘drive-by’ shooting here in town...ever. Another useless tactic copied from those drug gangs in Sydney...illegal bikie gangs who have left us alone up to now...”.

“The house involved. Was it connected in any way to the drug market coming from Sydney...or Melbourne?”

“Not that I know...there is no rhyme or reason for the shooting that we know of...an elderly couple live there...have done for yonks...”

“Mistaken address...” I offered.

He nodded, rubbed his eyes.

I was having trouble accepting that as there was only two dozen streets to the town.

“The elderly couple...do they have kids?”

“Yes...five but they’ve all gone to the big smoke...Sydney or Melbourne”.

“Maybe one of them...in the drug trade with the drive-by a warning for something one of the kids did or didn’t do...it’s usually over money owed”.

“That makes sense. I’ll trace that out with both the Sydney and Victorian Drug Squads...yes...that may be the go...”

I felt one good turn deserves another, but he wasn’t happy when I flipped an A4 sized piece of paper over to him.

“What’s this then?” He asked, looking down the list of twelve names.

“People we wish to have a talk to on the Maggie Campbell Case...”

The Sergeant slowly shook his head, moving his coffee mug as he placed the paper onto the table in front of him. He took out a Fountain Pen and began to tick off the names.

“Charlie Peters...he’s still alive but is in a Nursing Home up in Griffith...still has all his beans and more beside...um...Libby Sawyer nee Campbell...Maggie’s younger sister. She’s got herself married, had the property out along the Urana Road stitched up years ago halfway through the worst drought we’ve ever experience out around these parts. She and hubby moved into the shearing quarters while they did up the Station home...have done a terrific job. They’re down the Urana Road about sixty kays out of town...they’re closer to Urana than Jerilderie...part of their property has a section of boundary with our illustrious State Member of Parliament...his family have lived hereabouts for yonks...”.

“That’s interesting...” I murmured not wanting to fill the Sergeant in on the connections to the MP and the Campbell Case. “Can you place his local address onto that list?”

He looked up at me, a frown his reaction.

“He rarely lands at his farm. His MP’s office is in Griffith...so is his missus and kids. He has his farm managed by a very competent bloke, his missus and five kids. He may visit when the House isn’t sitting in Sydney. Stay for a couple of days...never longer...”

He scribbled the new address of Libby Sawyer nee Campbell from memory...

“You knew her new address off the top of your head...”

“Huh? Yes...the address is known to us...a call-out on average every couple of weeks...” He leant back in his chair, removing his glasses to give them a clean.

I thought it a staying tactic.

“It’s quietened down to zero call outs...he’s got himself off the grog, so I’ve been told...good on him. A lot of these problems are endemic to the bush with farmers doing it very tough with the longest drought we’ve ever had...a lot of them have been hanging on by the fingernails...we’ve had good rain since February this year with most now smiling whenever they come into town”. He smiled which came and went quickly. “Funny, isn’t it? Maggie Campbell killed her partner because he was continually abusing her...her younger sister is attracted to a guy who does the same...don’t know about the other sister...she was last heard of after the Court Case of living in Deniliquin...The three girls’ father was a brute of a man...a big bloke so they say...a bull neck and a chest as big as a bull’s...a Shearing Contractor who had at one time three crews of shearers working for him...so he was seldom home...well...for at least only a few months of the year. The rest of the year he was following the shearing season down through Victoria and up through western NSW into central Queensland. When he was home, he would hit the bottle and use his missus as a punching bag...it was an open secret in the town some twenty years ago...put her in Hospital a couple of times...cried like a baby promising never to do it again...until he again had that skinful of grog”.

“What happened to the man?” Sophie asked.

“He was shot to death...on a property south of Hay...a coupla hours’ drive from here...at the shearing shed of a large spread...no-one has ever been charged though one of the daughters was suspected...had just got her Driver’s Licence so she could have made Hay and back...I’ve promised myself that I would sift over the Case once I have a free moment”.

“The Murder Squad not called in?”

“Arrh...not too sure as it was well before my time”. He looked down at his desk a little guiltily. He knew that the Murder Squad was never called to investigate the shooting. This local Divisional Area were averse to include us...and it went back years, so it seemed. That attitude was from the local Area Commander down and handed from the outgoing chief to the new incumbent.

He gave me a tight smile shaking his head as he leaned in to examine the list once more as though the question was unnecessary. He scribbled out four names as being deceased, one a suicide and another a motor vehicle accident. He looked up at his ZIC, bouncing his pen on his chin.

“The McKenzie family...they’re not here anymore, are they?”

“No...they moved to Griffith not long...arrh...around the time of the Court Case for that Campbell woman. More’s the pity as he was the best diesel mechanic in town. He now works in the Nissan Dealership while his missus...she is a Receptionist at Griffith Base Hospital...”

“Mmm...then that’s about it. Of your twelve names, we’ve trimmed it down to around five I think...you won’t need more than a couple of days to go through the lot, eh?”. His tone was one of hoping our stay would be short...three days max!

That got my nose a-twitching to the point where I thought it noticeable!

He flipped the page across to me, having at once forgotten it and giving us the impression he didn’t want us around. In a way, he had good reason for the frosty reception. Here we were plodding through his town kicking up emotions and opinions long buried...giving the impression the Dees from the city didn’t think the locals had managed the Case successfully. Yer can’t blame them I suppose, but we still had a job to do.

I slipped the page into my leather-bound notepad and went to stand. Instead, I had a change of mind and slipped back onto the chair I had been warming.

“The timeline of Maggie Campbell’s arrest and sentencing? Have you any person still serving in the Force that was around at that time...some six...seven years ago?” I asked innocently not expecting the response I got.

“Why?” There was a challenge in his response...and a certain degree of suspicion as he looked across at me.

“To get an idea what it was like at the time...to have a person’s opinion on how the Case went down...you know, knowledge of the affair and an inkling of local peoples’ attitude towards the Case...the arrest and the sentencing”.

“Mmm...umm...Senior Constable Albie Colusa...I’ll instruct him to be your chauffeur for the duration of your stay...okay? Usually there is just two of us stationed here with any relief staff coming from Griffith or Deniliquin. Albie is in Griffith so I will need to make a formal application for his transfer and time...it may take time or just a telephone call...who’s to

know about these things”. He added disinterestedly. This was not the way I wanted the investigation to begin...a question over the integrity and interest of those we expected help from.

He didn't expect a reply and I wasn't about to question him on Colusa's take on the whole sorry Case. I slowly nodded thinking there could be an ulterior motive involved. He seemed quick in making the offer...too quick as far as I was concerned. I thought he may have wanted an ally reporting back to him on our activities.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A lone large 4WD was parked in the rear yard of the Police Station. It was the vehicle used to pick us up from the Airport. I turned, wondering how in hell we were supposed to get around when there wasn't a spare vehicle in sight. Sergeant Wither's ride was a heavily decaed Pursuit Holden Commodore sitting out the front of the police station on the main drag through town.

“Albie will bring a vehicle with him from Griffith...more than likely it won't be a 4WD. The two other vehicles we have here are out at that 'drive-by'...sorry...plus my ride”. I thought to myself his vehicle was not available to anyone else! “Usually, Constable Small and I are it...spending our time picking our noses”. A tight smile from Sergeant Cody Withers. “Unfortunately, you came at a time when I was pleading for back-up to help in last night's fun and then your arrival...if I have sounded unfriendly or not welcoming, I am sorry...so, let's start again, shall we?”

Even though it may have been below twenty, standing in the sunshine out of the wind was pleasant. I nodded at the man, detailing that my partner and I were not that thrilled to be placed onto this duty. We doubted we'd bring anything new to the table...especially when the woman was released from custody two weeks ago.

“That TV show?” Withers responded.

Again I nodded, saying that I hadn't see the show.

“Yeah...hah...I watched it...with the family. I almost put my foot through the screen it made me so angry. Detailing us country coppers as no more than Keystone Cops...there was demanding work put in by a small but enthusiastic group who had drawn opinions long before the Campbell woman had confessed. They couldn't believe it and spent some time trying to

pull the confession apart...but none of that made the show...they came through town like a locust plague, asking questions of people who would never know the truth of the Case...worrying people with their demands”.

“Um...look...we are not here to pull apart your investigative protocols and procedures or to criticise or debunk your exploratory practises for the Campbell Case. We want to conduct an examination completely divorced from your efforts. We do not want to be negative or picky at certain practises you undertook many years ago...we have already perused the investigation papers and drawn conclusions...nothing to be concerned about...we are not here to crucify anyone who was involved...I’d like to think we can still rely on you or your allotted man to get us around the district...mmm...I’d like to speak to Doug McKenzie first...is he the same McKenzie who took his family to Griffith not long after initial interviews?” Sophie coughed. “Arrh...but yes...first up, we would like to be taken out to where the shooting occurred...you know, to walk around and kick over cowpats...” The last to lighten up the proceedings as the air was getting a little oppressive.

As I was saying this, we heard a vehicle driving slowly up the side of the police building, its wheels crunching on the loose gravel.

“Arrh...here’s Albie now...he’s got one of those new fancy pursuit BMW’s...they’re still not as good as the last Falcons or Commodores...both those vehicles beat them hands down in my opinion”.

“Yer not wrong there”. I concurred. Smiling as I commented.

I watched as the bloke unfurled himself from the pursuit vehicle, wondering how in hell he had fitted into the vehicle at all. He came towards me and I to him. We shook hands and nodded our recognition.

“Sydney Conference on something I’ve now forgotten. Something silly that the hierarchy thought would be to our advantage and help in our day-to-day activities as smart coppers. Summer 2011...a couple of beaut afternoons spent pub crawling through the city...those were the days. How are you, Joe? You’re looking well”.

“I never forget a face...or name. My partner Sophie Grasso...Sophs, do not get caught up in a pub crawl with this bloke...”

“She’s safe Joe...I’m on the wagon...have been since me wife said enough...either the grog or me...I picked her which has curtailed any boys’ night out since. A pity as some say now, I am a right royal bore!” He laughed, something that began in the pit of his stomach. “You here

to stir the pot...you haven't changed Joe...Maggie Campbell...now there's a name I'd like to forget. It still riles people. I believe she's been released..."

"Two weeks ago, as a matter of fact".

"And you've been instructed to re-investigate the whole sorry mess, eh? I'm here for you Joe. I'll help in any way I can...it's been a thorn in my side since she yelped guilty unexpectedly many years ago...none of us on duty during that period saw that coming".

"Did she have legal reps at that point?" Sophie asked wanting to be a part of the conversation and not just an onlooker.

The big man scratched his head then turned to look solemnly at my young partner.

"Now little one...I am expected to chauffeur you around and watch as you kick dirt and turn over cowpats to see what is living under them. I lived that Campbell Case convinced of her innocence until she changed her plea to guilty...and I still didn't believe her, and I still do not believe her guilt after all these years...but the wind went out of our sails when she changed her plea...we stopped looking under those cow pats...understand young lady? Whether it was her Counsel's instructions or not, it still smelt of fresh dung! If you'll excuse me..."

With that he turned on his heel and headed towards the police building...a simple cottage design with internal modifications to suit the police administration workings of a small rural town of around one thousand...give or take a hundred or two and whether it had been a good year with steady rainfall when the cockies wanted it...it had been a good eighteen months that had wiped the ten year drought from farmers' minds...they at least saw a couple of good years ahead.

A young Constable-in-training went with Albie to Jerilderie as a straight swap for the young Constable Gavin Small who would go with us for our stay in the district. I was not that keen on the idea as I had seen the sparks from both Small and Sophie at the Airport.

After him objecting to making Griffith and return twice on the same day, we prepared for an overnight stay there...by the time we had left Jerilderie heading north on the Newell Highway, Albie had lost his frostiness and began to speak to us about the Case. A relief to both Sophie and me.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

We turned right off the Newell Highway onto the Jerilderie/Urana Road. It suddenly became Cocketgedong Road heading towards Urana. As a secondary country road, it was not of the standard of the Newell Highway. Its potholes and repairs over repairs had us weaving all over the road trying to pick the smoothest route. I wasn't impressed with the effort.

We eventually slowed at property gates on either side of the road. Albie nosed into the gate on the righthand side of the road.

He nodded, jerking his head in the direction of a house about one hundred metres in off the road.

“The house here was originally on the McGregor Spread but after the shooting, they subdivided this area including the house...about thirty hectares...a decent size ‘hobby farm’ with fertile soil and one side flanking a creek that normally has a flow. I think Maggie Campbell bought the Lot while she was in Emu Plains Correctional Facility...from the money left by the death of her father. Libby her younger sister, bought a large run closer to Urana...about another thirty kays further on...well before all the ruckus...Libby may have been around eighteen years old at that stage. That raised eyebrows...so young and buying such a large property. It borders the Vergas property here...” He swept his arm in an arc to show the property across the road. “The Vergas property is the largest spread around these parts...they’ve swallowed up several farms over the years...good investments on their part...and the grapevine says that Libby went in and placed a price on the farm that the Vergas family couldn’t match”.

That piece of information made me sit up and take stock. I hopped out of the car and walked to the edge of the road’s rough macadam and pointed up the road.

“She has a property further along the road closer to Urana. Has owned it since her father was shot...well...she was given the money after her twenty-first. The money from her father’s estate. That right?”

Albie nodded as he unfurled himself from the vehicle. Straight away, we had flies buzzing about, landing on our faces and the back of necks sucking up the beads of sweat that had popped out in leaving the air-conditioning coolness of the vehicle.

Something clicked in my mind as I stood there, looking up then down the road.

It also struck me straight away as being a little absurd...Maggie shoots her partner at this very gate, but a couple of years later, she bought the property when it was sub-divided...I scratched my head at that piece of information...to me, it just didn't fit!

“The Shooter...Maggie...where was she positioned?”

I noticed someone come out onto the veranda of the house shading her eyes from the glare. Albie looked up and raised his arm in a friendly wave. The woman returned the wave before going back inside. The dogs settled down ceasing their barking as though they were aware of who Albie was...or they guessed we weren't a threat to their lives or that of their lover...

“See those two large Blackbutt Gums up the road?”

“Albie, I couldn't tell a Blackbutt from a Ghost Gum or a Christmas tree...”

“Those two large trees right on the bend of the road...on the left hand side of the road close to the boundary fence-line...there's a large fence post just to the left of one of the trees...she stood there using the fence post as a natural rest for her rifle...that's about the only position that gives a clear line of sight to the 'home gate'...and it had a fair deposit of GSR on the top of it, so the forensic people reckoned...”

I nodded and began to walk that way. After taking several steps, I realised that 410 metres was a fair distance, especially in this heat. It was a different heat to that of Sydney where the oppressive December heat included a high humidity count. Here, the humidity tended to be low. Sophie walked with me up the road. A thousand bird calls heralded our progress. At the two large trees I had to step carefully as the strip of land bordering the road was knee-deep with dead detritus from the trees and dense undergrowth above. Blackbutt were notorious for dropping leaves, branches, and boughs at the drop of a hat, so I learnt from the locals.

“A bloody good shot...” Sophie exclaimed. “Seven bloody good shots...the guy must have stood there exposing his chest daring her to fire...”

“Yeah...I was thinking along similar lines...if you were shot once, I reckon you'd do everything to escape...but to stand in the same spot to take another six shots doesn't make sense to me”. I looked around finding beauty in the bush and arable land around me. Something rustled in the undergrowth beside us...we didn't need an invite to scurry back onto the edge of the road. Enjoyed the walk back peering at the tall trees and bush on either side of the road before the open paddocks began. The smell of the bush was invigorating. That's what I wanted when I retired, not a sea-change but a tree-change...that smell of the Australian bush cannot be appreciated anywhere else on this planet.

“Where was Grieves’ body found?” I asked, as we returned to the gate.

“There...where you are standing...he’d hooked himself up on the barbwire somehow...he was hanging there...didn’t drop until the Morgue guys cut him down...”

“Which made getting off seven shots a lot easier...yes? Did he have drugs in his system?”

Albie shook his head...shrugged...he didn’t know, and I’ll lay odds a full autopsy was never conducted. Said as much inferring a shoddy investigation...he was showing signs of not liking our trespass as he was of the opinion there was not a second or third alternative.

I pointed at the property across the road. It’s entrance gate and roadway curved in around a slight rise. The house, Barn buildings and grain storage tanks not noticeable from the road but we glimpsed them from where the shooter had stood.

“They were the people who called the shots in, weren’t they?”

“Yes...Connie and Harry Vergas...”

“There was an immediate response by the Jerilderie coppers, but they say they didn’t pass Maggie Campbell as she drove back into town...I find that extremely hard to believe after us driving down this road from the Newell Highway...the only explanation was she stopped for a while to let all the official traffic race pass. Where? And where did she hide the gun? Or was it someone else who fired those shots that killed Grieves?”

He glanced over at me, his expression one of disbelief. He was not going to join in the conversation or offer alternative theories. I scratched my chin as I stood looking up at him.

Our original teaming up during those halcyon days in Sydney years ago had given me the impression the man was a good copper. Now? I had my doubts he had extended himself during the investigation. By insinuation, none of the country coppers on the Case had exerted themselves. I slapped my calf before returning to the vehicle, its engine ticking over with the A/C on full blast.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Albie opened the gate while Gavin Small drove the Police Vehicle through, stopping to allow Albie to close the gate. After walking up to the farmhouse to let the woman know who we were with Sophs and I left sitting in the Highway Patrol vehicle, Albie waved at her as he came back to sit in the driver's seat.

“Hang on a minute mate...” I quipped as I alighted quickly from the car. I had this feeling we were being left out of the circle...either a definite ploy or an unintentional tactic.

“Missus Hudson, is it? Arrh...I'm Detective Lind from the Murder Squad in Sydney...”

“I know who you are, Officer...what is it you want from me?” She stood there feet apart, arms across her breasts...the picture of unfriendliness. She disinterested in anything I said or wanted to discuss with her.

I stopped at the bottom of the steps up onto the veranda allowing her to take the ‘high’ ground with her looking down on me.

“How long have you lived here?” I asked hoping to chill the woman of her frostiness.

“Um...since...arrh...not long after Maggie was found guilty of murder...we rented it off the McGregor family who still own a large slice of land...after what happened they wanted rid of this section...that's when Maggie purchased this strip...while she was still in prison...”.

“Her young sister lives up the road aways...towards Urana...yeah, Libby. She's had bought that run well before all this nonsense with Maggie...she bought the property at a very good time...in the middle of the drought so she got a good deal with the drought only breaking in the last eighteen months but it gave her the time to spend a bit on paddock dams...fixing up those that existed, fencing and stockyard improvements...and yeah...her hubby spent a lot of time fixing up the farm sheds, and the farmhouse...looks really good now...and yes the farm? About two...three kays away...that way”, she indicated with a sweep of her arm. I wasn't too sure which way she meant!

“You know her?”

“Yes...we're good friends. She often comes here for a cuppa...a chat...and back a couple of years when her abusive hubbie useta belt into her she'd come and stay here overnight...that hasn't happened for a while now. That greasy bastard was afraid of my husband...he'd never touch Libby when she stayed here. She says he's now off the grog and has been dry for years.

He's better for it, so she says. I used to go to school with the three Campbell girls...and Libby's husband...you wouldn't know then he would belt into her...not like Garry Grieves who was always a sour sod...even back then...I can't understand how and why Maggie hooked up with him...I know it wasn't for the drugs he used to peddle..." She shook her head. "She was never the one for any type of drug...her drug of choice was caffeine..." She softly giggled.

"Maggie Campbell has been out of clink for a couple of weeks now...do you expect her to want to move in?"

"No...we had a talk with her and Libby...it doesn't look as though she wants to return down here...the country girl has left her..."

"She lived here, didn't she? With Barry Grieves? They rented the house off the McGregors?"

"Yes..."

"Don't you think it strange that she buys the house and land? You know, after she shoots her partner here...at the front gate? It must be a terrible memory surely?"

She shrugged as she shook her head.

"It was a good buy that Maggie could afford..."

I nodded, looking down the house track to the front gate.

"Do you think she shot Grieves?"

"Nah...me no...definitely not but my partner, he is just as adamant the other way..."

"Mmm...what does your husband do?"

"He runs the local Butcher Shop in town, is half owner of one in Griffith and Coleambally and is licensed to kill and cut up most animals on-site on properties...that is more profitable and keeps us in meat...but it is frowned upon by the authorities who are always looking to make money out of any enterprise...they want to make the practise illegal so's the local Abattoir can do all the killing. That'd put a huge hole in money coming in...just like the Government and that sleazy local Member...he can lie through his bloody teeth can that man!"

I nodded, half turned before commenting, "Thanks for your time..."

I turned and walked to the patrol car...gave her a wave as we turned slowly and headed towards the property gate...she had returned my wave...just being a friendly bushie or what? I got out of the car to open the gate and wait as the vehicle went through. Missus Hudson was still standing on the veranda shading her eyes from the sun. As soon as I closed the gate, she turned to go inside.

“A pleasant woman...” I stated.

“Yeah...her elderly mother...she lives there too...Helene looks after her and drives her into Griffith and Wagga Wagga for medical check-ups. A day out shopping. She has three kids all from a failed relationship...she was a bit of a tear-arse when she was growing up. The three kids, they’re all school age. She was immensely helpful for us when both Libby and Maggie were being abused by their partners”.

I nodded not wanting to confide in Albie my suspicions concerning the woman...and her friend Libby.

“Umm...where did she live prior to renting that house and land off Maggie?” I asked off-handedly.

“In town...next to the local Butcher Shop...they still own that house which makes you wonder why she rents out here away from it all...”

Maybe that’s the reason enough I thought.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

We drove back out to the Newell Highway and turned right to head north for Griffith.

“Why McKenzie first?”

“Reading through the Investigation Notes both of us got the opinion Doug McKenzie polarised the people of Jerilderie. There were photos of signs he had prepared and fixed to the front of his business saying that Maggie Campbell was innocent...there was no follow-up as far as we could see that delved into his reasons for believing the woman was innocent. As I stated, McKenzie was on the local radio and TV news going on about how blind the local cops were and why wasn’t the Murder Detectives from the city involved...he even said that Campbell hated guns and would never lift a rifle to her shoulder to shoot anyone. If that be

the case, how could a complete novice and a hater of guns drill her target from four hundred metres away? With seven shots finding their target. That's from the top of the tree! Where did she get the rifle? It was a Remington 700 Repeater...a lovely gun but there was no evidence of ownership or follow up of that point...how come? Where is that rifle now? When the verdict came down and a sentence calculated, McKenzie became the pariah of the town..."

Albie nodded.

"A terrible situation as he was the best of only two Diesel Mechanics in town at the time. He closed shop and relocated to Griffith...the McKenzie mechanical business had been passed from father to son and was an institution in the town...by the time he and his family left, he didn't have one supporter on his side...strange to my way of thinking...and bloody sad as he was a fair dinkum bloke...yeah...a bit more than that...an honest bloke". Albie responded as he drove up the highway at just over the limit.

The road straight and true with nary a rough spot or curve of substance anywhere. It was different once he turned onto the secondary B87 road, Kidman Way that went to Griffith through Coleambally.

The countryside lush from regular rain, paddocks of winter grains giving a patchwork of colour as we sped along. Canola fields a lush yellow against the dirtier washed-out colour of wheat and barley. The road skirted on both sides by ancient Eucalypt and Acacia. A strip of about thirty metres either side before the treeless paddocks stretched as far as you could see that were either in fallow or bearing a pale golden haze of grain. Our speeding progress frightening large flocks of Galahs and Cockatoos into the air, screeching their opposition to our speedy advance. Most flying straight towards the car before veering suddenly to just miss us...it was a sort of game they played as their raucous chatter increased as they did the kamikaze flight!

"Yeah...he was a good mechanic alright..." As though that excused any further investigation into why he was so vocal on the lady's innocence.

"Have you any explanation into why he was Campbell's vocal ally...even after she reversed her plea to guilty. Was there any family connection...friendships perhaps...anything like that?"

While I was half interested in the unfurling panorama that rolled out in front of us, I was also aware of Albie's nervous reaction to my queries. Sophs and the young Constable Gavin Small were having a conversation in another language in the back seat, neither paying attention to what me and Albie were talking about, so it seemed.

I would need to have a little talk to my partner if she were to continue in that role.

“Yeah...um...” He glanced at me as we sped across a dip in the road that was a flood-crossing. The vehicle bottoming out at the dip. “Yeah, I guess the two families...the Campbells and McKenzies were close friends...the friendship going back a couple of generations...loyalty is demanded in such a small town like ours...”

“Funny way to show loyalty!” I quipped which did not get a response. I wondered how much the man knew and wasn’t telling...his uneasiness tickling my nose.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“Mister McKenzie, thanks for allowing us to have a chat with you...” I commented as I walked towards him.

“Did I have a choice? You two are Detectives from Sydney here to kick the dust up...a bit late don’t you think...Maggie is out on parole, isn’t she?”

“How do you know sir?”

“It made the local TV News and the local papers even if it didn’t make the city media outlets”.

I nodded, sitting uninvited at a table in a small office in the Vehicle Dealership. It was clear we didn’t have enough chairs to accommodate all of us. McKenzie was undecided about sitting as his overalls were splashed with oil and grease as all good Mechanics boilersuits should be.

“Sir? Is there somewhere just as private but a little larger where we can all sit comfortably?”

“Um...I’ll see the Boss whether the Conference Room is available...and get out of this gear...he’d have a heart attack if he saw me sitting in one of his chairs in my work-clothes”.

He disappeared to eventually return in his ‘going home’ gear asking that we follow him through the main Showroom area. The stares from people looking at the new models was alarming, and I guess our entourage would soon make the local TV and Print Offices. We settled into much more comfortable chairs. A steaming coffee mug placed before each of us with sugar and milk containers in the centre of the elliptical table on a small elliptical cloth

that mimicked the table shape. When we had settled and I had taken several sips of coffee to wet my throat, I began.

“Mister McKenzie? Are you still married to the same woman?”

He blinked nervously, wondering what the question of his married status had to do with the state of Denmark or the price of fish!

“Arrh...yeah”. A frown wrinkling his brow.

“How long have you been married?”

“Arrh...how long? Um...twelve years...about...I guess”. Nervousness in the train of questions.

“Kids?”

“Yes, two. A boy and a girl...we’re not planning on any more...”

“A happy marriage?”

“What type of question is that!” A certain belligerence and a want to protect his privacy. In a homicide investigation, privacy was often lost as we pushed the boundaries to get at the truth.

“You had an affair with Maggie Campbell...for how long?”

“I’m sorry...you are mistaken...I’ve known Maggie from school. I was several years ahead of her...” Again nervousness...and a sheen of sweat popped across his brow. His right leg began to jig nine to the dozen and he constantly wiped a hand down the side of his pants.

“You dated her...” It wasn’t a question. Albie had his head lowered though I could see he was frowning.

“Yeah...if you must know, for a number of months...”

“And you began an affair with her before your boy was born...that lasted...”

The man seemed to shrivel up. He lowered his head, nodded slowly. Eventually he looked up at me. A guilty expression. A nervous fluttering of his eyes.

“Okay...yeah...we had an affair that lasted off and on for a number of years. Maggie was a free-spirited type of woman who should have been a teenager in the sixties when ‘free love’ was all the rage”.

“Is that why you were most vocal in your support of her being innocent?”

“Yeah, I guess...not the only reason as I was positive of her innocence because I knew she couldn’t do such a thing...she was incapable of shooting anyone!”

“Who else did she have an affair with...before she shacked up with Barry Paul Grieves...a poor choice don’t you think?”

“Grieves was a train-wreck long before she and him got together. I could never understand why she would be attracted to him...um...I reckon he was being protected by the cops here, allowed to sell small quantities of drugs in town...went on for years before he was shot...” He looked accusingly at Albie who didn’t move a muscle, forcing McKenzie to look away. “Yeah...I reckon that was why he was shot...someone else wanted in on the drug thing...nothing to do with Maggie at all...yet she takes the fall for the local coppers who had Grieves in their pocket”.

“Do you have proof of that?”

He shook his head muttering that it was a gut feeling only.

I repeated my question.

“Um...as far as other affairs? Yeah, I guess that could be so, but she never confided with me though I knew she was seeing other guys around the district...a young cockie or two, I guess”. There was a tinge of jealousy which I may dig into on another occasion.

“Take a guess, Doug. You must have an idea”.

He shook his head.

“Were you and your family run out of town because of the legal circus?”

“A circus!?! Yes, that’d be close to the truth. Me missus, she knew of the affair...it was hard to keep such a secret in a small country town. She said either we move out of town, or she moves out of town with the two kids...didn’t have to think about it for too long”.

“You said it was hard trying to keep a secret in town of such a dalliance...who else do you think she had an affair with? And...who else may have known of your dalliance? You were the one who said it is extremely difficult to hide such a thing...”

“Where is all this going, Detective? She has been released from prison...she’s done the time for the crime...” He swayed his head as though he had a stiff neck. Sipped on his coffee as though it was liquid gold and then picked at his calloused hands, his fingernails permanently dirty from grease, oil, and shit that he’d never gouge out.

“Which you still say she never committed...”

“Yeah...well...maybe...but what does it matter now? What is there to be gained by kicking over the shit again...what? Over five years since the Trial about?”

“The truth...if she didn’t commit the homicide, she lied in Court...an indictable offence. Why would a woman place herself in a no-no situation? She must have known that the ‘Battered Wife Syndrome’ was not a defence for freedom which would excuse her from a capital offence here in NSW...she is an intelligent, very astute woman who thought she would have a better chance of beating the ‘wrap’ than the person who did shoot Grieves. An excellent series of shots...seven into the guy’s torso...seven quick shots...do you know anyone who is that good with a rifle?”

I scribbled *Gun Club?* and *ex-Army person?* I slid the paper over to Sophie sitting beside me, nodding to get her to follow up on both lines of enquiry. She stood and walked quickly from the room, taking her laptop with her.

“Mister McKenzie? Can you give me a timeline of when you last had an affair with her? You stated before it became an off and on sort of thing...for casual sex?”

“No...no! There was more than that in it! It was never about casual sex. Sure, at the end it occurred when we felt like it. We were comfortable with each other...there were times when all she needed was to be held...that’s all”.

“Yes, I understand...but when did it stop?”

“When Grieves started punching into her she didn’t like me seeing the bruising...you know...bruises over her body...it made me so mad. I often told her to leave the guy before he killed her...yeah...or before I killed him...I think that is why she stopped...to protect me from doing what I promised...she was like that”.

“Are you admitting *to having thought* of shooting him?” I asked, surprised by the admission that could have him facing charges if I could prove he fired the rifle that shot Grieves.

He again lowered his head and nodded slowly. I guessed to both points.

“But you saw the bruises, didn’t you? At some point”. I leaned forward towards him, threatening to get into his space. “Which must have pissed you right off, eh?”

He snapped his head up to glare at me, his face blushing.

“I didn’t kill the bastard, though I was tempted for a bit” A half smile. “I seen him, yeah...got him alone at the back of my garage...to scare the bejeezus out of him...I thought he got the message, but instead he accused Maggie of telling lies to certain townfolk...of him hitting her...he then whacked into her that left her in Hospital...everyone knew...and I reckon Grieves saw the writing on the wall...he was staring down the barrel of the gun...with more than one person in town looking through the sights...”

“Eloquent...yes...um...how long was this after Maggie was admitted to the local Hospital because of her injuries?”

“No, she was transferred up to Wagga Base Hospital straight away because of her injuries...and two days after she was released with her head still bandaged, Barry Paul Grieves was shot to death”.

“She’d have to be the Number One Person of Interest in the shooting, but you still said no...which left you out on a limb with most of the townfolk...she was found guilty. Are you still so adamant about her innocence?”

“Um...I don’t know...I’m not sure now”.

“What are you like at shooting a target...say Kangaroo shooting?”

“Like all young blokes reared in the country, you go through a stage of shooting anything that moved, egged on by your mates. Now?” He shook his head. “No...I don’t believe in shooting anything even wild pigs and dogs which are a bloody pest out this way...I couldn’t raise a gun to my shoulder to take aim. A mate wanted me to join a Rifle Club up here...you know, target shooting...yes, we go occasionally...every second weekend...but I don’t know...I’m still having troubles with it...not that enthusiastic”.

“But you still attend regularly?”

“Yeah...because he is a mate...”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“Let’s have a break, shall we?” Albie suggested irritably. “Doug, could you stay there. I’ll organise a coffee for you, okay”.

Albie always wanted to appear neutral in our dealings with anyone we interviewed. This was no different, so it appeared to me.

Followed the man into a small Tea prep area off the large room and stood there as he made five mugs of coffee. He turned to give me my steaming mug...at least the aroma was pleasant. He looked at me intently.

“You were a little rough in there, Joe...you may think you have a murder to solve but I must live with these people every day. I nod g’day to the townsfolk every day as I walk down to the shops...stop and chat asking about their problems...their health...how things are out on their farms...Detective? We gotta live amongst them so I suggest your bulldozer tactics be dropped for a while. You are not in the big smoke...hear me?”

He used his sheer size to try and intimidate me...it hadn’t worked on the by-gone pub crawl days, and it didn’t work now. We stood there, toe to toe before he broke the spell, turning to give me one of the mugs as he picked up the remaining three in two hands. Followed him back into the conference room, sitting down with the screeching of chairs on the vinyl floor assaulting my ears.

The coffee was good...instant but passable... the break counterproductive as I had worked up a rhythm in my questioning...that was now lost. I was sure that McKenzie knew more than he was disclosing...it was up to me to gouge it out of the man. My fears on how the earlier investigation was conducted was now answered...the local coppers went softly, softly through the Case ignoring certain areas of examination so as not to tread too hard on local toes!

“Doug? Shall we continue?” I asked pleasantly. I doubted he knew what the correct answer to that query was...looking at him, the coffee wasn’t making it any easier for him. He had that gaunt, tired look with his hair wanting a cut and a comb.

“Where were you when Barry Paul Grieves was shot?”

He looked up at me as though I had exposed my middle eye!

“You’re asking where I was on a particular day some six...seven years ago? Yer gotta be joking! I haven’t a clue! Bloody Hell! Do you know where you were six bloody years ago, copper? Bet you can’t answer conclusively either”. Anger but logic in his answer.

Give the man a tick for the correct answer, even the tone of voice was spot-on. If he had detailed such an event on that day, I would have known he was lying and by inference, all his responses could also be lies and fabrications.

“You’ve known Maggie Campbell for most of your life...and you are adamant she was not the shooter...then tell me, who do you think was?”

Again, he looked aghast, blinking up at me as though I had declared war on Jerilderie! He shook his head as he lowered it.

“Barry Paul Grieves? Know him? Or was he just one of those faces that you nodded to out of habit”.

“Not that well...his family is in Narrandera, but I understand they didn’t want that much to do with him...um...they run a large mixed grain farm with sheep on the side. He started coming to me after Jack refused to do any more work on his vehicle...Jack Morgan...he was the other Mechanical Business in town. Jack rang me to warn me that the bloke was a bludger...didn’t pay his bills for work done on his Ute...drugs, he reckoned...seems he was always a drifter until he hit town. Been here ever since...got to be close to ten years now...there were good reports back then of his reliance, honesty, and hard work...I guess the drugs got him as he’s not a reliable farm hand no more”.

“So that was as far as you had dealings with him?”

“Yeah...oh...I gave him a couple of bucks for work around the place...yer know, handyman stuff. At least he finished what he started which is more than I can say about some of the layabouts around town...maybe that is where Maggie and he met...what a terrible thing with me being responsible for the two getting together...” He slowly shook his head, him now feeling as guilty as hell. He again rubbed his face with both hands and wiped them down the side of his clean ‘going home’ jeans. “It’s always troubled me about the two of them shacking up...”

“Why? Jealousy perhaps?”

“What? Jealousy!! You’re trying to stitch me up for the murder...no fucking way, Detective. I wasn’t jealous just concerned for Maggie as Grieves was a loser...a capital L”.

“Oh! You weren’t upset with Maggie shacking up with a loser?” Sipped on my coffee letting the question linger. “When was that? Any idea?” I was going softly when compared to my usual style of interrogation.

“What? The two of them shacking up together. Jeez...um...a year maybe...fifteen months before he was shot...they seemed to shack up quickly after they met...what she saw in the bastard has got me bugged”.

“How long after that did you notice a change in Maggie? Due to the man starting to bash into her, eh? Or maybe she liked him as he had a ready supply of pot and other drugs”.

“Jeez...I really can’t remember...and no! Maggie didn’t do drugs...never! And she was down on any person who did partake!”

I found it difficult to believe him on that score, but a sudden image of her in the Clink put any sort of drugs outside the equation as it was clear that drugs were not her tonic...it was freely available inside, but it was obvious she didn’t use. What other attraction was there if it wasn’t drugs? He was known around the district as a guy who could supply. Why would she be attracted to such a loser? An unconscious thing that people can notice...while she remains oblivious to the connection to her abusive father...it was known to happen.

“You knowing her well, you would have spotted her changing emotions through the weeks and months, eh?”

“Yeah, I guess...”

“And been aware that the abuse was getting worse?”

“Yeah, I suppose”.

“Do you own a rifle?”

“Most people out here do...”

“You didn’t answer the question...do you own a rifle?” I repeated firmly.

He again bowed his head for a stifled yes to be heard.

“Sorry...I didn’t hear you. Do you own a rifle? Like a Remington 700...a modern rifle...a fine rifle according to those knowledgeable in things like that...as you know, that was the rifle that killed Grieves”. I parried wanting him to admit to its ownership.

“No...that ain’t my long gun...don’t know whose it is. I own a Remington Shotgun, a Ruger, two Browning long-guns, two excellent Brno’s and my preferred rifle the Benelli Lupo bolt action with a Steiner Ranger optics...the parcel about two and a half thousand dollars...they’re kept in a locked cabinet with the bolts locked away in another cabinet...Albie’s seen it and been given police approval for the ownership of a number of rifles...and stuff”.

“You a sports shooter?”

“No...more of a Collector...yes, and okay, I belong to a Gun Club here in Griffith...we have had several Olympic shooters come out of the Club. I do not fire my rifles out in the field. The killing of animals, all sorts is not for me...”

“Huh-ha...you had cause, motive and means to kill Grieves...” I spoke quietly as I stared him down.

“I do not point a rifle at any human being no matter where he sits on the tree...it’s not for me”.

This he spat out angrily but quietly...the effect convincing even me, the old cynical copper.

We sat with him for another hour with the man tiring quickly. I wanted to visit the Gun Club to verify certain facts. Sophie had gleaned that the Club was open to-day with a closing time in another hour...mid-afternoon.

We bundled ourselves into the BMW patrol vehicle with all the bells and whistles...decals also so you couldn’t miss it as a police vehicle.

“Now that you have crucified the man, what relevant information have you garnered from him?”

I turned in my seat to look at him. We were heading for the Gun Club on the outskirts of the town.

“We have learnt a lot more in three hours than you did in six weeks...he has just risen up the totem pole for ‘possibles’ in the shooting of Grieves...and it has produced several new avenues for us to examine”.

I felt pleased at our progress. Not good enough to be smug and throw shit over the local cops but satisfied with what extra details we had found in our first interview. I wasn't confident future interviews would reveal as much.

Doug McKenzie wasn't our man I felt sure...but I was still convinced he knew the shooter's ID. He like Campbell, was covering for someone. It was a contagion out around here and I wondered why so many people were willing to hide the truth.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“Albie! Bin a while...”

“Yeah Holly, it has. I had to forgo my weekly visit here as we are on shifts watching for any silly bugger coming up from Victoria...or out of the Greater Sydney basin...or South Australia while there is these Covid Shutdowns in all States except NT, WA, and Tasmania...up the Newell Highway...the back way for Victorians heading north towards Queensland...be back as soon as all this shit is taken care of...Covid shit...could be a while yet...some say not until at least the end of October...”

“By the sounds of it, yes, it could be a while...it's not affecting us as much as Sydney and Melbourne, but they reckon NSW will be shut down completely...the whole State which will affect us. We will not have people coming from Jerilderie, Coleambally...places like that...each town will be isolated...supply lines to these bush towns will be severed...when you think along those lines it means shit for every town outside the Sydney Basin...”

“Yeah I know what you mean...there'll be little supply traffic even in the Sydney basin...”

“Arrh well, what can you do? What can I do for yer?” He glanced at me as he said this, lingering a little too long on Sophie. “These the hotshot Detectives from the city trying their hardest to stir shit when there's no need...” A sneer on his face that didn't quite get there.

“Yes sir. Detective Joseph Lind and my partner Detective Sophie Grasso...please to meetcha...we'll try hard not to stir too much shit”. A smile on my face more a sneer better than he had tried for.

“Now there's a name that's familiar round these parts...you related?”

Sophie shook her head not too sure about what he was talking.

“Grasso...our district Representative for the Federal Labour Government back when Gough Whitlam was our esteemed Prime Minister in the seventies...a colourful character who must have had a cupboard full of wide, colourful ties...he was known for them...some say Whitlam was the best PM we have ever had...it was all the lackeys he had around him who let him down...”

Sophie still looked confused...she hadn't even been thought of back then in the seventies!

We were led to one corner of the Barn-like structure which was a café-type section. There was a counter at the far end with photos of smiling people with ribbons, medals, and cups for various target shooting events on all the walls. We sat where invited...

“Arrh...I need a print-out of all your financial members and another of all those who frequent your establishment on a regular basis but are not paid-up members...can do?”

He glanced at Albie.

“Arrh...Albie? Do I need to comply? It's a bummer trying to work the bloody computer...me missus is better at it than me...I know, I gotta catch up with the rest of the world...but it's going a little fast for this bloke to keep pace”.

I noticed that Albie nodded slightly, not offering a firm opinion in reply.

“If you want it done properly, here is a Court Order requesting all materials that we request ASAP. Can do?” I asked. A smile fixed on my face.

He looked at the Court Order while not looking at it. It didn't impress him, so it seemed.

“Um...now!?! Right now!?! I'll have to get me missus to print all that stuff out for you...I'm bloody hopeless with things like that...”

“We'll wait here...shout you a coffee, Holly?”

“Um...yeah, why not...me missus works the Café...I guess I can do it while yers are waiting...I'll be a bit slow though...I gotta chase the missus down... she more than likely out on the range popping a few. She likes to keep on top...” He pointed to a large photograph of a woman beaming after receiving her Bronze Medal at the Sydney Olympics in two thousand. Other photo montages of people holding awards in one hand and cradling their long guns or handguns in the other.

There was history here in this Club.

We sat around a table in one corner of the building...a typical farm building of corrugated iron on a steel portal frame with thick insulation on walls and roof. A polished concrete floor that had a sheen finish. This Café at one end while there was a business counter at the opposite end. Two small rooms off that counter; one an Office, the other a Store. I ambled about looking at the photographic displays while Albie, Sophie and Gavin Small sat talking at the table. I noticed it was small talk which was the order of the day. That annoyed me as my long-term partners of another era would always...always discuss the Case in question when we shared a quiet moment with a mug of coffee in our hands...bugger the rainfall average being exceeded for the first half of this Winter...now there were complaints of too much rain...the constant pain in all farmers' sides...too much or too little...

I sat slowly as though my back was playing up...it was in anticipation of sleeping in a strange bed for at least three nights straight! I'd forgotten how my back had controlled my life on other overnight forays of earlier times. I kept a frozen smile as I glanced from Albie to Gavin to Sophie and back again. Sophie caught my eye, a slight frown her only reaction. Holly placed two mugs at a time onto the little table now dominated by Albie and me as Holly's missus plopped a dossier of half a dozen pages in front of me. Sophie and Constable Gavin were slowly walking about viewing the wall montages of photos.

"These are the financial members of today's date. Alphabetical order, address, phone number and number of years with the Club. Your second request will take me longer as we haven't a program that will immediately sort the people who are regular visitors without being financial members. I will sort that list as a monthly register...drink slowly as it will take me a little more time...okay Detective? I understand you are already kicking shit which is worrying citizens hereabouts. I'm doing this under duress mainly because you have a Court Order signed by our local State Member".

"Thank you..." Said to her disappearing figure. She was a no-nonsense type of woman...no flies.

"We're not doing that well, are we? First day that you hit the ground and the entire District has you kicking patties down the road...people are not crazy about your reason for being here...and cannot understand the feeling that Maggie Campbell may not be the shooter. That's not good for us bush coppers and peoples' warm cooperation in the future, huh?"

"Albie? We're not here to win popular copper of the year awards...we're here to do a job as best we can...if that draws criticism from the locals, I'm sorry, but..." It wasn't the first time I'd been held over the coals with that risk of being railroaded out of town a constant threat.

Albie's attitude was starting to shit me...I took a sip of coffee...very acidic...too many beans...as I scanned through the Members' Register. What I was looking for I wasn't too sure about...

"Four from Jerilderie...that's a long way to come to aim and fire at a target..."

"Not really...and if there is nothing closer, they tend to book a weekend...or a couple of days during the week work permitting. Book into the local Pub as the meals are excellent and the Bar Talk invigorating. It's surprising what titbits you pick up especially when the grog loosens lips".

"You organise these forays usually? From here?"

"Nah...one of the four guys does but they include me in their visit if I am available and my work roster permits...nothing solid but one of them rings around to see whether all are available...being cockies they can normally move priorities around where I can't. Duty always comes first with me, I'm afraid".

"You been a member for long?"

"Um...I think I joined when I was first rostered out here...ten...twelve years ago I suppose..."

"Good at it?"

"Nah...if my Gun Instructor back in the Police Academy saw my results, he'd have me flayed I reckon..." He chuckled, dug a finger into his right ear. "Yeah...I enjoy it though...the camaraderie amongst certain members...they become life-long friends regardless of your career path..."

I nodded, satisfied with his responses.

"Did I pass muster?"

I laughed, nodding at the same time. There was still this underlying distrust between us. We both recognised it, accepting that it would always be there because of our mission. No-one likes having an examination of their career placed under the microscope...finding fault by inuendo usually.

"Carlton Brimmer Junior...a terrible American tag that is infiltrating Australia...a real bugger!"

“He is a well-known Cockie around the district. When there was all those Council amalgamations years ago, Carl went from a sitting Council member to just missing out being on the newly proposed Council amalgamation in 2016. He has a residence in Jerilderie which he now rents out, spending his time as most cockies do on his property an hour outa town. A nice bloke if a bit of a ladies’ man, if you know what I mean. He and his family go back a fair way having bought holdings before the turn of the century...the nineteenth century...the homestead has a National Trust listing...eighteen eighty-seven...a beautiful building. Two storeys. A typical ‘Colonial Australiana Bush Farm’ design...you know, with wide low verandas and tall chimney stacks. Thick stone walls. They have gradually increased their holdings there near Jerilderie and have ‘runs’ north of Griffith with a ‘live-in’ manager running those properties. A fair dinkum bloke...”

I thought Albie was lathering it on a bit strong. I suspected a mutual relationship.

“How old is he?” I asked.

“My age...we went to Jerilderie Primary School at the same time. He then boarded at Armidale to obtain his Ag. Degree but when he came back, we struck up that friendship again...and he got his Law Degree by on-line activity...he’s proud of that as it was bloody hard work, so he reckoned”. He smiled in the telling.

The fact that he was a fair dinkum Lawyer had me listing his position further up the suspect pole...that and the fact he was an incurable skirt-lover made my nose itchy.

Holly came to join us, his mug cupped in his hand. He sighed when he sat.

“Doug McKenzie? He’s a member here...” A fact not a question. “A good shot?” I asked as I looked sideways at him. He rubbed his chin...

“He could be if only he paid attention to it...his heart isn’t in it...”

“He moved up here about the time that the Trial finished. I get the impression he had little choice in the matter...”

Holly nodded, not wanting to add anything else.

This was how it was going to continue I felt sure. A certain reticence in each person we interviewed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

It was getting on, but I insisted we visit Charlie Peters. I didn't want to double up too many times with trips from Jerilderie to Griffith. By the time we sat with Peters it would be too late to head back to Jerilderie. Albie admitted driving in the semi-darkness after dusk was not his style with stories abounding of vehicles hitting Kangaroos, Wombats and sheep causing major damage to cars...and people not to mention additions to the roadkill along every country road in the Nation.

Albie knew which Retirement Home the gent was in close to the centre of town, so we headed that way no more than twenty minutes away.

The sturdy Matron was a little miffed at us wanting to interview Peters so late in the afternoon and only an hour before the evening meal was due to be served. Charlie was a bit of a rascal who had that reputation since a boy though he was a treasure here, admitted the Matron with a knowing smile.

"You're a town personality Charlie". I offered by way of introduction. I identified Sophie and myself, with Albie doing the honours for himself and Constable Small. Charlie knew both town coppers, so it was Sophs and me he turned to with an interested expression.

"Must be bad if'n it takes four coppers to interrogate me..."

"We're investigating the Maggie Campbell Shooting..."

"That's already been done, ain't it. She was found guilty and chucked in jail up Sydney way..."

"Yes...she was released late last month..."

"So why are you fuckin' about with it now? She's done her time...arrh...if only I was a young bloke again, I'd give her a run for her money...she was a pearl. A beautiful person both inside and out..."

"Do you think she shot her partner?"

"Well, she went to prison for doing the deed..."

"That's not what I asked, Charlie...do you think she shot her partner?"

“Doug McKenzie never thought she did and look where that got him...out in limbo ...”

He coughed, catching a mouthful of phlegm in a dirty looking handkerchief that he pulled from a top pocket of his shirt. I had to look away as I thought it disgusting. I noticed Sophie smiling at my action. There's just things...I wanted to explain to her.

“She and Doug got it off...they tried to be so careful...their antics were so comical...and then he bought a double bed to put up in the attic of his business garage...in front of the entire town...everyone knew what was going on and they were oblivious to it”. He chuckled, coughed, and again spat out a glob into his handkerchief. Sophie again was watching me as I looked away...

“You think maybe Doug McKenzie was the shooter?”

“What are you blokes fishing for? Don't you blokes believe she shot that silly bastard...what was his name? Barry, wasn't it? Barry Grieves...that's right...Barry Grieves...I'd be sitting on the outdoor seat at the front of the Post Office...my usual station when the weather was fine and warm with just a slight breeze moving the air...me, Billy Hargraves, and Colin Stoner always sat together...the conversation stilted as Billy was deaf...they're both gone now but they were older than me. He'd come by at least twice a week...don't know what was so important in the mail that he must check twice each week...what're yer reckon...cheques from Centrelink...he having more than one name claiming cash off the Government...”

“You think that?”

“Yeah...that's what Jean...the Postmistress reckoned in any case...seems about right to me...he never seemed to be short of a quid...know what I mean?” He chuckled at that, again spitting a wallop of phlegm into that dirty handkerchief...the inside of that pocket must have a moisture proof lining I thought as I again looked away.

“The Government never paid by cash or cheques through the mail for Government benefits, Charlie. That being the case, what do you reckon was in those envelopes...not Government nor Business envelopes but ordinary envelopes?”

He looked around the room, glancing at each of us in turn. He sniffled, blowing his nose on the same dirty handkerchief...I looked away again. There was a certain aroma wafting about every time he produced the dirty piece of cotton.

“Drugs”. He concluded. “Gotta be...and the local cops were protecting him taking a cut of the profits each month...” He looked blankly up at me, a toothy grin to cast doubt on what he had said...another of Charlie's rumours?

Could be, I guess.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The Motel was an arm off the back of the historic Pub...the only one left in town. I had particularly asked for a room on the first floor of the Pub, knowing that these rooms were large, high ceilinged and gave direct access out onto the 'wrap-around' covered veranda. Usually, they now had their own attached Bathroom for each suite when in the old days you had to venture down the Hallway to the shared facilities. Having a pee in the middle of the night meant you could sometimes make friends...and having a shower was bloody dangerous at any time...by friends I mean snakes, lizards...spiders and even a frog or two... I chuckled at that thought.

We got back to the Pub after the official Dinner time had passed with the kitchen closed. The Pub put a meal on for the four of us in the Dining Room. Just for us. The fire roaring, heating the high-ceiling room up to uncomfortable degrees. Again, there was a moment when the four of us shed our outer winter coats and scarves. It was more comfortable I must admit to the opposite, sitting there rugged up finding it difficult to move. Knives and forks gripped in gloved hands a true talent!

I woke in the soft grey light just before dawn. Made myself a cup of instant coffee that you find in satchels either of the forty-three beans type or of a continental flavour. Neither were that flavoursome! Whatever is there at that time of the morning, I begrudgingly prepared as it was too early to wander down to the Pub's Dining Room. I wrapped a doona around me and padded out in bare feet onto the wide first floor veranda that ran the length of the historic pub. Sat in a rickety cane chair and watched the emergence of the sun over the far hill line, sipping on a mug filled with muddy water...or close to it. Have enough of the muddy liquid and I guess you could get used to it!

Last night was interesting sitting at the Bar enjoying a beer for the first time in forever. Albie greeted by the drinkers who frowned their disapproval at me, giving me the cold shoulder. As in most Bars across the country, all drinkers have an opinion on every bloody subject. Tonight, the favoured subject was the Maggie Campbell killing...funny about that! Six and a half years after the event and people appeared to be still emotional about the subject and its polarising effect...or it was the grog taking over as it was getting late. It was more emotional than the responses so far in Jerilderie, but the Trial was conducted here in Griffith so the memories may have been rawer. I reckon the Public Gallery would have been full every day of the Trial.

I didn't have a clue where Sophie or Gavin Small were which worried me...she as my partner was supposed to shadow me unless I gave her a specific order on something. To wander off doing her own thing without telling me was annoying to say the least...Albie didn't seem concerned with Gavin Small's absence, taking it in his stride. You'd think it a common ailment in these country towns the way he took the disappearance of his young help as though it happened often.

I'd had enough around eleven...closer to twelve I guess, but as I was trying to extricate myself from an angered crowd, Albie took a call on his mobile. He gestured for me to follow him outside away from the rowdiness as he continued with the call. The expression was one of concern, then impatience before he hung up, a list of orders given even though he was not in charge of the Jerilderie coppers.

“Arrh...a young bloke was shot about an hour ago...as he finished his afternoon shift at Legal Aid in Canberra. Claude Michael Young...know of him?”

I had nodded not sure where the name fitted.

“Claude Young...a brash young Solicitor working for Legal Aid...he was Maggie Campbell's first Solicitor...well...her only Solicitor during the Trial here in town...mmm...I thought he had given a practise in Law a raw prawn...turned his back on it because he couldn't hack the bullshit and pressure of Court Cases. Seems he may be back in the saddle as he was leaving the Legal Aid Offices when he was shot”.

“Hurt badly?”

“No, luckily. He's in Royal Canberra Hospital. Collapsed lung...um...broken ribs the result of the slug hitting a couple...he'll survive...but the shooter? A good shot from around seven hundred metres...Winchester point three-oh bullet. Can be used in a range of long guns having that calibre...that ownership includes most of the cockies in the district...although in saying that I am sure none of those citizens had anything to do with the shooting”.

“The young bloke? Any known enemies? No recent split with the better half? No disgruntled relative? Friend?”

“Nah...though it was said that it was he who tried and failed to introduce the 'Battered Wives' Syndrome' into the Maggie Campbell Defence...there are people with long memories...”

“But why now!? Maggie has completed her sentence and is on parole...what could possibly be achieved by such an action?”

He held his arms akimbo, unable to grasp the logic...if there was logic involved!

“Mmm...maybe...just maybe, some-one is paying back on behalf of Maggie Campbell...and because she is now out, can enjoy it much better...revenge is always a clear motive for some...and time is of no concern to them as the twisted thoughts can be harboured for years...just look at the McCoys and the McClouds”.

He looked at me a little confused wondering who in hell those folks were and what was their relevance to the Maggie Campbell shooting affair!

I'd gone to bed with that ringing in my ears...and something had woken me with a start...it'll come back to me I thought...just let it rest.

So, I'm sitting out on this exposed veranda like a complete dork wrapped in a doona sipping on a coffee that was an excuse for coffee ...watching the sun start its climb and begin to warm the air...I suppose we would head back to Jerilderie sometime this morning although there were two names on the Shooters' Club Members Register that I wished to talk to before beginning the return trip.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

I would never say it was a waste of time interviewing persons whose names were on the short list of suspects. Both were long-time members of the Shooters Club; both were active and enthusiastic gun collectors, and both had owned at different stages, a Remington 700 Repeater...for pig shooting though they both confided they always preferred a full auto when hunting them *'cause they're cunning bastards and were apt to charge just as much to run...especially the big Boars with their razor-sharp horns. That was when an automatic was needed...* a chuckle at the close shaves I thought.

They both admitted knowing where they were when Grieves was shot...on a bloody Cruise together with their respective wives...circumnavigating both islands of New Zealand in a figure of eight. This was well before the Covid shutdown of all Cruising Lines. They both admitted they'd shake Maggie Campbell's hand if they ever crossed paths as it couldn't have happened to a more deserving AO! His life was on the radar...and if it hadn't happened then, it was only a matter of time. This they both were adamant about...to their way of thinking, Maggie should have been granted a reprieve, not because she was innocent but because she had removed a grub from the town...

Why?

The consensus was he was supplying the hard and soft drugs coming into the area...and everyone knew this as fact! The same with the abuse he handed out to Maggie Campbell daily. One of those facts was true with only a suburban myth tag attached to the other as no proof could be garnered on the veracity of the first 'fact'.

What the two interviews did for me was to confirm the polarising effect the shooting had on all the residents in the area. What troubled me was there was only a tenuous link between Jerilderie and Griffith one hundred kilometres north. Four local target shooters who did the round trip every fortnight...that to me was an insufficient reason to produce this most evident split of opinion in a town so many kilometres away. There appeared to me to be equal amounts of emotion over the shooting in both towns...though there was little to substantiate the rawness of those living in Griffith except the Court House was situated there in the middle of town where the 'Trial of the Century' was held.

The local media must have given blanket coverage of the entire thing from the shooting of Grieves right through the next eighteen months when it went to Trial. The occasional 'bit' in the paper kept the population intrigued and interested which ensured the coming trial was going to be a sell-out. The topic of conversation at every town Pub between Griffith and Jerilderie.

These interviews meant we didn't head south towards Jerilderie until late morning...almost mid-day which meant a late lunch at the local Pub in town. After viewing the Menu, Sophie and Gavin Small elected to have lunch at a local vegan café in the main drag. Sniffing up the exhaust fumes of countless Roadtrains that groaned through the middle of town. This disconcerting and I promised myself that it was about time to have a talk to my young partner...with or without Gavin Small being present.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

"Sophs? A word please".

"Joe, I know what you want to talk to me about...while I'm sorry in leaving you out on that proverbial tree limb and not acting like a partner should, I am not sorry for having fallen in love with Gav...and he with me. Before you start, let me just say a couple of things...I am going to request a transfer either to Griffith or Jerilderie. If that can't be achieved, Gavin will request a transfer to the Parramatta Police Building so we can be together...or as a last choice,

we will both leave the Force and settle down near his parents on the coast at Batemans Bay...I've been down there with my parents when I was little...on holidays. I can remember it being good times before Dad died”.

I pursed my lips, tightened my jaw before taking careful sips of the steaming hot coffee. I was not agreeable to her throwing her career away for a lazy son-of-a-bitch who was only in the Police Force because of the ‘pull’ that his father had exerted.

We sat at a small circular table on the footpath out front of a Coffee House and Bakery on a side street to the main drag. It wasn't the best place to be mid late-afternoon as the sou-westerly blew strongly straight up the street. I crossed my legs, momentarily looking at my government issued safety boots. They needed a bit of a polish, I absent-mindedly thought, casting my sight along the string of shops. I vaguely remembered a Boot Repairer Shop across the street.

“Okay...so the two of you are serious...about each other and your future with one another. I am not your father or father-confessor. I am your partner and mentor, training you hopefully to one day stand on your own feet as a successful Murder Dee”.

Sophie nodded, not sure how I was going to react and what I might say about her news. I suddenly had this vision as clear as a TV screen, of the first time I met Helene...I knew straight away that I would marry her. For ten beautiful years we shared our love before she was brutally killed...shot and buried in a shallow grave out in the backblocks of South Australia...and then Tellie's image rolled across my mind's eye...yep, the first time I sat with her sharing a coffee before her oafish husband broke the vibes, I knew I would marry her...or live with her one day. It happened before she had even divorced her husband. How could I now point the finger saying Sophie had not spent enough time with Gavin to plot a life together...it was too soon.

I leant back in the hard-backed chair as though I was stretching...rocking the chair onto its two back legs. I was biding my time. I let the chair fall back onto its four feet bringing me closer to Sophie.

“Young lady, I could order you back to Sydney on the next available plane but...I remember how I felt when I first met Tellie...you give me compelling cause to make that decision...but first...arrh...” I again leant back still looking at my young partner intently. “I doubt your chances of applying for a transfer as a Detective”. I now got serious as though talking to one of my daughters...could be the wrong tact...but what the heck, I'd started so I had to continue in the same manner. “Transfer from the city to the bush is dependent on your years of experience. It is very doubtful that any Station west of the mountains would want you as a less than two years' experience Dee which is all you have...and as a murder dee at that. Not

good enough to grant you a transfer to a region of your choice...if you were transferred you could end up in Bourke...or White Cliffs at a one-man Cop Station. To drop down to a Uniform doesn't help in any way...if your transfer *were* approved which I doubt, again you could end up in Armidale...what-ever, miles away from Griffith...it is not the Force's way to grant relocations of your choice...the exact opposite in fact". I looked across at her. She now had that 'beaten' expression. "You can understand..." I continued. "The Force's attitude to this. If they allowed a transfer of choice, the north-east corner of the State would have more police officers than residents...so, they grant transfer on a 'needs' basis...if a country town...anywhere in the State...was shy of a police officer or two, that is where they'd send you..."

She looked across at me with a look I could not fathom. She slowly picked up her mug of java, taking little sips before placing it back on the table. Her hands were shaking. She looked across at me with the same unfathomable expression.

"...then I'll leave the Force, sell the house, and move out here...to be his wife...and bear his children...which thinking about it, scares the shit outa me". An embarrassed smile to go with the words.

I was afraid of that answer.

"You're too good a Dee...with a lot of promise to throw it all away..."

"Your first long term partner...Marge Hendricks did...and so has Shelley...both for love and the want to have kids...and D4 Peta Daniels had what? Five kids...while she is still working as the best Dee on the floor so most say..."

"Her husband was one of those rare kinds as a stay-at-home father and husband...and he worked from home for absolute years which made things easier for them and Daniels' choices" That sounded lame, but it was true. Daniels would be the first to admit she had it good both ways...she would often exclaim what a lucky bitch she was...and she still was the best Interrogator I had ever seen.

"Gavin can apply for a transfer up to Sydney...yeah, I know, he could be sent anywhere...I know...we have spoken at length about it with the only reasonable alternative for us is me resigning...which is causing me some grief if the truth be known...I don't know...my life was looking pretty good after I finished the house renos...I felt really good you know, but now...I'm in the doldrums".

I nodded, a little surer that she would not toss it all away...that pull was the house she has only just completed to her liking...it was in her blood and that 'shell' of an MGA now up on chocks in her garage beckoned her...she was her father's daughter...she loved the tinkering!

We sat there having top-ups of our coffee mugs before stopping for the day. The afternoon was waning, and the chill of night was descending.

We sat in the Dining Room at the Pub to have Dinner. Gavin joined us and we discussed in depth the chances of being transferred to their desired destinations was next to zilch...the Police Force didn't work that way...and if it did, most coppers would be up around the north coast of the State...Byron Bay...up around there with hardly a copper anywhere west of the mountains...or down in the rough suburbs of Sydney. The Force could send you any place where they felt an extra body was needed...and bugger your preference!

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

I again woke just on sun-up, getting myself another of those coffees in a satchel...every bloody Pub, Motel and B&B must have boxes of the satchels... if I kept this up, I may begin to like the muddy water! I finished off the coffee substitute, had a shower, left my dirty clothes hanging on the outside doorknob to be washed, with a suit to be dry cleaned. This was the first time in all my travels that this service was offered by the Owners of accommodation that I had stayed in for more than a couple of days. Because of our enforced layover, I was glad for it!

I'd have to tell Sophie the bad news...or the good news depending on which side of the street you were standing on. The Boss rang me when I was about to order my evening meal. Again, the Dining Room a little too hot from the open fire. 'Lockdown' had been declared for the entire Sydney Basin, Wollongong, Shell Harbour in the south and the Central Coast in the north. We not allowed to enter Sydney airspace until the 'lock down' is lifted...anyone's guess when that will occur!

I knocked on Sophie's door to give her the news. She began to panic thinking her little ball of fur would forget her in that time. Now, her mother was mothering the thing. There were hints that the hard border restrictions would not be lifted until late August...could even be extended into September! The truth was that borders began to open with most States during the early half of November! Western Australia the sole exception...

Nothing we could do about it...bugger!

I'd almost finished my second coffee in the Dining Room which reminded me of my first cup of the morning. Sophie sat opposite me looking bright-eyed and bushy tailed.

“We had a good talk last night...and I rang Mum afterwards. Before any decision is made of our future together, I want Gavin to meet my mum and uncle dad...and I will travel down to Batemans Bay to meet his parents...didn't you say you wanted to head down to Batemans Bay in the next day or two? It'll give me a chance to look at them under the guise of questioning them about Maggie Campbell...he was the senior during that time, wasn't he?”

I nodded, guessing there was more to come.

“Gavin is quite willing to become a house husband...” She looked around the room. A roaring fire was warming the room a little too much and it was noticeable people were shedding winter coats. “Um...I don't know. I wouldn't say I was an OCD freak, but I am super-clean...not a speck of dirt...Gavin? He's more layback...he has a woman come in each fortnight to do house-keeping chores, put dirty washing through the washing machine to then hang the stuff on the line, change his bed linen each fortnight which he thinks is ridiculous and she even makes and freezes stews for him for the following two weeks...I'm not too sure about him being a successful house husband...or being up to my demanding requirements...he wouldn't make the grade...failing dismally I reckon...and he doesn't have a real hobby...sure he runs every morning but...there's nothing else. As a joke, I suggested needlework which he got shitty about...the suggestion of him helping me on my MGA renewal exercise was frostily received...he's not into anything like that though he'd enjoy driving around in the finished product...not good enough for me...”

The cracks were showing...I listened intently and took notice of her expressions and the way she held herself when commenting on certain things. I did not remark on anything negatively instead offering words of encouragement when she offered conclusions on her relationship with the young Constable. It was obvious that she was now questioning the very decisions she would be making about her future life.

I had just drained the third coffee of the morning when Albie came to sit beside me, waving his order of a cup of coffee to the Kitchen.

“You look as though you've been up for most of the night”. I commented humorously though the humour was lost on him...

“Nah...but hauled out of bed at any hour before sun-up has the same effect as me being awake all night...a 'call out' at 0420 this morning not my favourite way to welcome in a new day! I usually suffer for the rest of the day...getting up at that hour is for younger men let me tell you...I'm too old for it”.

He leant back so the young female waiter could place a cup and saucer before him, filling it up with the muddy liquid that didn't smell so bad. Both Sophs and I nodded for the offered top-up.

“Thanks darls...how's your old man?”

She stood ramrod straight, waving a hand across her face.

“Not good Albie. Mum and Uncle Bert went down to Sydney yesterday. I'm going this afternoon with Josh and Susan, but the 'Sydney Lockdown' has bugged that up...dad always said he didn't want to die alone...looks as though he may if mum and uncle Bert can't get permission into the Hospital...sad...the Doctors say within the next twenty-four hours...yes...not good”.

She rubbed a hand down the front of her thigh, offering a tight smile before turning and walking head bowed, shoulders slumped towards the Kitchen two-way door.

“Her father...the family have a property out on the Urana Road east of Jerilderie...close to Libby's farm...four generations...a very profitable concern...old man Dave has brain cancer which they didn't pick up until it was way too late...a real tragedy...um...I was hauled out of bed because of a 'drive-by' shooting at Carlton Brimmer's homestead. The gunner drove up the homestead track...almost six hundred metres from the main road before letting loose with six bullets into the side of the house...most just bounced off the stonework or embedded themselves into soft parts...two slugs went in through a set of French Doors that is the main bedroom. The dogs would have started up as soon as the vehicle turned onto the driveway from the main road. Carl got up to see what all the fuss was about...he took a slug to the upper arm...blew away the skin and flesh down to the bone. Not life-threatening but all the same he was air-lifted to Wagga Wagga Base Hospital. No one else was hurt, though his missus was pretty cut up close to a breakdown as this was something new in the township...she had to have a night at the Medical Centre sedated to the eyeballs. That old couple in town that we thought was a mistaken address was the first. Then the young Solicitor, now Brimmer...someone is sending a message...who and why? A complete mystery to me...nothing like that has happened in this town before”.

The man was rattled, unable to offer a reasonable path of investigation...unable to offer a reason for the attacks.

“Anybody see what type of vehicle was involved?”

“A 4WD going on the tyre tracks...and the rear taillights...the colour of the vehicle may be white...or a light colour. Make and model unknown...there are thousands of similar 4WD's

in the district...take your pick as to the owner of our shooter's vehicle...it's got me beat what is the reason for these drive-bys around the time Campbell is released...and you City Dees sniffing around. Sure, we've been over this before but...". He trailed off. "Withers is pulling hair out. It has unsettled him, and he is furious these things are occurring in his peaceful, friendly town".

"You should get some indication from the tyre tracks, the size and the distance between the wheels..."

"Yeah...well...arrh...the tracks were obliterated by the traffic that came later...including the Ambulance, four of our vehicles and a Forensic Trace vehicle that came down from Griffith...it arrived just as I was leaving...not much there except for one empty shell...a Winchester point three-oh-bullet...I'll lay a bet and say that the rifle used was a Remington 700...betcha".

"Let's finish off our coffees and take a drive out to the Brimmer property. We might get lucky with forensic trace...here's hoping in any case. Brimmer is okay, yes?"

Albie nodded as he drained the last of his coffee.

"How far is Wagga Wagga from here?"

"Mmm...around one fifty...why? About two hours away, why?"

"To have a talk with Carl Brimmer..."

"I reckon he'll be transferred back here to the Jerilderie Medical Centre in the next day or two...or be discharged entirely...his injuries weren't that bad".

I nodded...

"Um...I don't know how long we'll be here for. We cannot fly back into Sydney until the 'Lockdown' lifts... it came into force from midnight last night ...it may not happen until the end of August...there are those who are saying it will be even longer before it is lifted...I don't think we'll be suitably engaged with work if we must stay for that long. I reckon the Jerilderie people will be well sick of us by then in any case..." I snorted as I laughed, the air escaping the wrong way. I coughed before having the last of my coffee to settle me down.

"Yeah...well...not only them, let me tell you...I doubt my boss in Griffith will let me remain your driver for more than the end of this week...the coppers will be reduced to the four they had before you arrived...with Sergeant Cody Withers in control...a word of warning...he

calls a spade a spade if you get my drift...he is not known for his diplomacy, but most local folks have learned to put up with him...shit! Could be a darn sight longer you say...into September...shit! What are you going to do to while away the days...and weeks? We haven't got that many attractions that will fill in your time for that long..." He chuckled.

"Mmm...it may be handy in a way. It'll give us time to visit the local Museum...the Newspaper Office to go through the stories on the shooting..." I replied flatly. Too many more weeks in town was not a delight for me. "They reckon the whole State will be in 'lockdown' before the end of the month...then we'll have problems just leaving town..."

He looked at me, blinking rapidly. "The local rag!?" He commented doubtfully as though the entire State lockdown had escaped him.

"Hah, yeah...it's amazing what you can pick up in historical pieces in the local rag...I will enjoy that". I smiled giving him the impression I was stretching the truth. I wasn't as it was a rule of mine...that and talking to the local journalists who may have recorded the entire sorry episode. Their memories can be more enlightening than the words they had written in the local paper.

"Yeah...all right. A car for you...um...you got a responsibility code for this investigation? I'll need it to organise a vehicle through the Avis Office in Griffith for you. I can get a Constable to drive it down, going back with me and Constable Small this afternoon...I'll keep in touch with you to see how you're going...how long do you think this Covid Lockdown will last you reckon? September!! Now that surely sucks".

I didn't have a clue how long the 'Lockdown' would last, but whispers from the Office in Parramatta said might be for six weeks...what in hell are we supposed to do in Jerilderie for that length of time? Sure, it's a lovely small town but is short by a long shot on world class sights and natural wonders.

I leaned back in the old-fashion straight back chair to rub my stomach...I'll put on bloody kilograms if we're forced to stay here for that long.

"Sophs? We need to sit down somewhere private and try to work out a work schedule that will keep us dutifully employed for at least two weeks...no four weeks..."

"Wouldn't we be considered essential services which would ensure we can fly back into Sydney anytime?" She asked frowning.

"What! You now itching to go home!!" I shook my head, pursed my lips. "I thought you'd be thrilled to have this hiatus here in Jerilderie?"

“Yeah...nah...at home I’d be several hundreds of kilometres from him and unable to get to him...here? I’m what? One hundred kays...an hour’s drive...too close if you know what I mean?”

I snorted, halfway between a laugh that I wanted to cover up. Kids to-day? I guess they’re not much different to kids of my era...except they’re better educated, more knowledgeable and aware of society’s woes.

“Right!” I eventually uttered. “Let’s see what we can do here for the next week or two, huh?”

I stood to make a beeline for the Pub’s tiny office, coming cup in hand wanting a writing pad. Satisfied with the results, I strode back to the Dining Room that was now empty of customers. The staff cleaning tables and replacing the tablecloths for the smaller lunchtime crowd.

“Right!” I exclaimed. “Who would we like to interview over the coming weeks?” Thus began a brainstorm as both Sophs and me were familiar with all aspects of the original investigation. Albie remained even after our vehicle was delivered from Griffith. He steered us to current addresses, who had moved, died and who would not be particularly friendly with our pesty enquiries.

“The local Newspaper Office...”

“And the one in Griffith...they’d have more on the Court proceedings...what about the local TV station?”

“Batemans Bay. To the retirement place of Senior Sergeant Small...and that first Solicitor who represented Maggie Campbell? He could still be in Royal Canberra which we can visit on our way to Batemans Bay...that Postmistress? She still here in town?”

Albie had to think on that one, eventually advising us she and her husband Norm, had retired to North Queensland...Townsville he thought. He held up a hand...trying to get a word in edgewise.

“The local newspaper...it’s the same as the one in Griffith. I would imagine the local museum would have all the back copies...that or they hold those back issues in the old Council Chambers...”

I nodded. That would make our digging about a little less difficult. We wouldn’t need to visit Griffith for that specifically, but the old TV news items would be shelved in the archives of the local TV Station and that would mean a trip up there in any case.

“Good! We can pick up that young bloke as we head to the The Bay... okay...that should keep us busy for the next couple of weeks I reckon...you with me on that Sophs?”

“Yeah...I guess. That’s a fair bit of travelling around...”

“...which we would not be able to do if it wasn’t for Covid...a blessing in disguise, huh?”

I wasn’t sure of the expression on Sophie’s face to that comment...

CHAPTER THIRTY

The Queensland coppers were first rate in cooperating with us. They organise Jean Lavetto and her husband Hugo to be present at the Townsville Police Station in North Queensland at ten this morning...to stare stupidly into a camera connected to a computer...they delivered.

Sitting rigidly in the small Interview Room at Jerilderie Police Station, us staring into a camera connected to a computer at this end, I introduced myself and Sophie to the elderly couple sitting in a small interview room at the Townsville Police Station. After the pleasantries were over and I had informed them that the conversation would be recorded, I began.

“Missus Lavetto? You were the Postmistress at Jerilderie Post Office from early two thousand through to twenty eighteen...is that correct?”

“Yes...that sounds about right...we both retired in twenty eighteen...it was getting a little difficult for us. Hugo ran the local Café and Bakery, and the early starts were killing him...I miss all the friends we made while we were there...what is it you want from us?”

“Barry Grieves? Do you remember him?”

“That was the biggest thing to hit the town in quite some time...except for the drought of the century. Yes, he was an untrustworthy young man...he was shot...by Maggie Campbell. If she gave the gun to half the population of the town, they would have done it for her...yes...that’s a fact, Officer!”

“We have information that he would visit the Post Office twice a week regular-like...”

“Yes...only Charlie Peters...a lovely old bloke but he could start rumours as though they were the truth. He was terrible at that...and he’d sit back and chuckle when the rumour did the rounds of the town and come back to him...a lovely soul but a bit of a rascal. He reckoned Grieves was robbing the Government of Dole payments, Unemployment Benefits, and several other Federal benefits...all a big fib but nice old Charlie got it out there, everyone went for it...” She cackled while her husband roared with laughter. I doubted the validity of what she was saying because of their reactions. I had this moment where I thought they were just continuing with spurious rumours.

“You doubt those rumours?”

“Oh yes. I do remember him coming into the Post Office regularly...he would pick up mail addressed to him c/o the Post Office. These were not government envelopes or even business envelopes...they were letters ...or cards...thin packaging or something...”

“Would you remember any return address that may have been supplied?”

“That wasn’t always supplied but on a couple of them, the return address was c/o Childers Post Office in Queensland...I’m sure of that...”

I sat silently looking into the middle distance trying to think in what direction I should go. I was cross at myself forgetting what the next question should be.

“Did you ever suspect that drugs were being transferred via the mail? If you did, did you contact the Police or the Australia Post Security people?” Sophie stepped in with a question that I should have thought of. I nodded and gave her a smile for her contribution.

“Yes, to both those questions, young lady. I was never informed of the outcome and Grieves kept receiving this mail twice a week up until he was killed...I have no idea of the content...”

That kind of ended the conversation with me reminding myself to delve into the local action by the Jerilderie coppers and what may have been discovered. With our Court Order we may have a basis to question the Australia Post Security people in Sydney...then I thought not as Australia Post was Commonwealth while our Court Order though impressive, was still State.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

“They’re keeping you on bed rest, huh?”

“Yeah...I was wondering when you were going to put me on your visitor’s list...”

“Huh-ha...would you mind if all your people could leave the wardroom? We’ll come by to get you all when we have finished having a chat with Carl...okay?”

There were groans and murmurs of dissatisfaction, but they all left single file from the Wardroom. I moved one of the visitors’ chairs across closer to the head of his bed.

“Keeping you in a little longer, huh?”

“Yeah...seems the bullet fragment in slicing through my arm and taking a great chunk of flesh in its passing also got dangerously close to my brachial artery...whatever that is but it must be important to result in all this attention...I could have easily bled out...so they say”

“Mmm...I’d say that signifies attempted murder...do you know of anyone who would want to kill you?”

He looked at me, a little taken aback.

“I thought you were in town re-investigating Maggie’s shooting of the shithead she was shackled up with...that’s the rumour around town...not looking into a harmless ‘drive-by’ ...”

“I think this was far from harmless...another half a hair and as you said, you would have bled out...so...any ideas? And it wasn’t a random shooting with the Perp driving up the length of your home track...this was a calculated shooting...so...have you any ideas on who? A disgruntled husband perhaps? You’re known around these parts as a ‘skirt man’ who will bed anyone of reasonable looks...you must have some idea, surely?”

He dropped his gaze to give Sophie a good look over her entire body.

“Yer gunna stay in the Force or give it all away to come live with young Gavin Small?”

A smile which I could interpret as a sneer. It was as though he had ignored every word I had uttered!

“I don’t think that has anything to do with you...or your present situation...some-one has tried to kill you...whomever tried knew your house...the layout and where you slept. The

first couple of shots to wake you up...if your dogs hadn't already...the last two accurately aimed through the French doors into your bedroom...who would know the layout of your house and who would know where you slept on the ground floor when most of the bedrooms were on the next floor up?"

"You ask too many questions, young lady. A word of advice...get your emotions in order and do not throw away your future on a 'drop-kick'...you do not know him..."

"Were you having an affair with Maggie Campbell?" Sophie persisted. Ignoring his want to rile her.

"What!?" He raised himself so he was sitting straighter in the bed. "Where on earth did you get that idea from?" His voice came in laboured sentences as he settled back against the pillows. The sudden movement had hurt him.

"So, you were?" I insisted, cutting across Sophie's next question. "You were known as a 'skirt' man especially when you were a Councillor with the local Council body...before the State Government ordered amalgamations of certain local Councils...isn't that right? The Local paper did a story on you inferring you had a roving eye...a permanent hard-on..."

"Jeez...fuck...a couple of innocent friendships that may have turned a little romantic...and you pay for it for the rest of your life...a man in the public eye has got to be so careful these days as the gossip mill is very strong in country towns...and those cameras in mobile phones are instant".

"So, Barry Grieves finds out about this romantic escapade you were having with Maggie Campbell and threatens to expose it through the local paper. You reckon with Grieves' constant abuse of Maggie, she would escape a sentence because of the 'Battered Wife Syndrome' if she confesses to shooting the guy when it was you who pulled the trigger...a Remington 700...you did own one...but you say it was stolen not long before the shooting homicide...convenient, huh? And that Defence Statute was watered down some time ago to prevent any further defences using that syndrome being brought to Court...I reckon you knew of the cancellation of that defence strategy but in convincing Maggie of its existence you would manage to get rid of her as well...you did serve as a Solicitor for some time early in your career. That is what got you that seat on the local Council...at the time you had a desire to enter State politics so anything like murder would put the kybosh on that, eh? Beside Maggie Campbell, you were embroiled in an affair with a nurse who had only begun employment at the local Jerilderie Medical Centre...that sound about right Carl? A scheme to satisfactorily be rid of Maggie Campbell...very Machiavellian indeed. Maggie was always so trusting...and a little naïve even though she may have been one very street-smart girl. I think she was the type that realised she sat on something that could be used to her advantage...anytime, anywhere!"

I was surprised that Sophie had grasped the situation so well...and how well she could construct a plausible counter to the man's objections.

He looked hard at Sophie, enough for her to check where the hem of her skirt was. He seemed pleased that he had obtained a reaction. He glanced up at me, holding my gaze. He went to rub his face with both hands, but the injured arm held in a brace prevented him from completing the action. He shook his head sadly before looking up at me. I thought for one moment he was going to confess to the shooting death of Barry Grieves...

"You're got gumption, I'll tell you that young lady...you've accused me of killing Grieves and convincing Maggie to stand trial for the murder...all because I was having a romantic interlude with a nurse that had just hit town...this to end the romantic attachment I had with Maggie...a nice try...nicely thought out but so fucking wrong, young lady!" He shouted angrily. He seemed to shut down, closing his eyes pretending we weren't in the hospital wardroom.

He took deep breaths to calm himself. When he again spoke, it was in a whisper though still forced.

"I regret getting involved romantically...and emotionally with certain women and I never meant any harm to them...that's a pretty good story of your young colleague but it is way off the truth..."

"Then tell us the truth..."

"It's a waste of time...turning over cowpats again. The truth was publicised enough when the Court Case was going ahead...it near broke life-long friendships and the trust of certain people. I cannot see any worth in prodding into something that was laid to rest what? Four years ago...there's no benefit to anyone just because a couple of young TV Reporters tried desperately to change the truth...leave it be, Detective. Leave it be...please...it's done and dusted, all right?"

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

"Look...we've covered a lot of miles today and we still have another one hundred plus to get back to Jerilderie...and I'd say we should have a stop in Darlington Point on the way back to the Jerilderie Pub...can we just go...all I want to do is curl up in one of those doonas, grab a cup of coffee and ring Mum...before I go to sleep..."

I remained silent as I headed towards the small barn-like building off the highway that led to Jerilderie.

“What are we doing here?” Sophie asked as she looked around.

There were a dozen cars or more parked willy-nilly on the grassy slope. The small building...a farm barn it looked like...was decorated with coloured splats, streaks, and spills, and in big dripping letters that would not look out of place on a railway siding on the Sydney railway system as graffiti, declared this was ‘Griffith Paintball Arena’. I was impressed with the signage. It would look good on any building side.

“For a look...you stay in the car. I will have a quick squiz...”

“No, I’ll come with you. You need some-one to keep you on the right track...”

She hopped out of the car and ran up to me. I smiled to myself.

The interior was dim with just spotlights illuminating various things. I didn’t want to hang around waiting for someone to walk up to us. Instead, I headed for a small office where I could make out an occupant. Knocked on the door and let myself in. The woman looked up surprised at our intrusion.

“I’m sorry people, this is one of those no-go zones. If you want to make a booking for time out on the range, please see the girl at the counter...” She began to stand as I flashed my ID card and badge. Sophie did the same. She looked at me before returning to her desk. She changed her mind mid-step as she came to the front of her desk, leaning her bum on its edge looking non-committedly up at me.

“Arrh...you’re the two city coppers digging about asking questions of Maggie...she’s out, isn’t she? Paid the price so why don’t you let her be?” An authoritarian note to her voice.

“Is this concern connected to the Rifle Range?” I asked as I turned, one arm outstretched.

“Yes...although we are more popular and drawing in more coin...but you’re not interested in things like that, are you? You want to know stuff about Maggie...why can’t you coppers leave her alone!? She’s paid her price to society, done good while she’s been inside like I thought she would...she’s amply shown what type of person she is...as far as I know, she never complained once while inside and from what she told me in a letter was that she had formed a running club with other ‘insiders’ winning medals and stuff when competing with other female prisons...she didn’t waste her time”.

“You knew Maggie Campbell well?”

“Very well...we swapped letters at least once a month. I counted her as a dear friend...she was one of those persons who could magnetise people to her...she had that clink humming along nicely I bet...”

“Your name, miss?”

I scolded myself as that was something I had not checked up on...her regular contacts by letter or e-mail with ‘outside’ people...bugger! It could have made our job so much easier perhaps...

“Glenda Curlewis...everyone calls me Glee”.

“You run this branch of the Rifle Range?”

“Yes...I’m connected by marriage to the two that own the Range...they suggested this, and the rest is history as they say...”

“And you knew Maggie from?”

“Here...she was a regular...and a champ...she rarely got shot...plastered with vegetable oil...”

“Mmm...she had good hand/eye coordination...”

“You’re telling me...she was a thrill to watch even when she fired from the hip...and her reflexes...no-one else like her, let me tell you...”

“Do you believe she shot her partner Grieves?”

She first bowed her head, then straightened, stood to walk back to her desk chair. She sat heavily leaning back in her chair eyeing me. I felt this was a delaying tactic with her mulling over her answer carefully.

“She had a mean streak which was rarely seen, but when she let loose...you stayed out of the way”.

“You didn’t answer my question...”

She stood and walked to the glass partition to look out at the customer zone. Smiled and waved to someone out there...

“Miss?”

She turned to walk back towards her swivel chair.

“She used to come here a lot earlier than when she commenced at the Target Range. When she did, she concentrated on targets in the 400 to 600 metre range...long distance stuff which she became very proficient at...I asked her not long before the shooting why she was targeting those distances. She said she didn’t want to see the eyes up close...”

“It’s been said that all this was...um...just an excuse to be with Brimmer all weekend...coming up here from Jerilderie each fortnight so they could spend time together...and to share a common hobby”. I stated pleasantly.

“Brimmer!? He’s full of himself...yeah, she may have slept with him...there were very few males around the district she hadn’t slept with”. She tittered at that as she sat with some effort. She straightened awkwardly...a back problem I guessed. “...she was a social butterfly...no...what do they call women who are always on the hunt?”

“Hungry Lionesses...”

“No...” She bowed her head to hide the smile. “...and yeah, it was he who gave her the rifle...she had it most of the time in any case as that was the gun she used to practise with...out on the Rifle Range...but she preferred to come here and get into a battle with other wannabes with the paint balls...she loved that sense of the hunt...and she was a regular winner with very few coloured splats on her camos”.

“So Brimmer wasn’t the hot property?”

“No...she got what she wanted...the rifle and a lift from Jerilderie to here, most weekends...if that was worth a fuck, she would say it was time worth spent...”

I nodded. I noticed the woman had lost her nervous habit of not sitting but walking around the small Office. She had described Maggie in one short sentence...a bit of a wild woman who was capable of shooting anyone who may have got on her wrong side.

“The local boys? The coppers? Did they interview you at all? After the shooting...here or at the Rifle Range?”

“Saw hide nor hair of them...they didn’t even go to the rifle range...a bloody poor show I had thought at the time...at one stage me and Holly were gunna go and have a sit-down talk with them...then we realised that what we had to say would only ensure Maggie was found guilty...we were only helping the Prosecution Case...so we stayed away. It has always surprised me that the coppers didn’t seem to have their noses to the ground if you get my drift”.

“A faithful friend, huh?” I clucked my tongue as I let Sophs then myself from the Office.

We slumped into the seats of the hire car, me letting out a sigh of frustration.

“What do you think?” I asked Sophie as I turned the engine over.

“What I said before when you last asked me that question...she’s guilty”.

“Yeah...I gotta admit I’m seeing it that way more and more...she’s manipulated the system to a point where she nearly got off for killing Grieves...a smart girl who knew why she wanted the inexperienced man to represent her...she could easily manipulate him...time to go see the young man”.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

“Matthew Buckley ‘Buck’ Bradbridge...” We shook hands. A soft, sweaty touch almost feminine. The room had that typical hospital smell that seemed to linger in the air no matter what other smell was introduced...

“And you are Detective Joseph Lind...and your partner?”

“Detective Sophie Grasso...”

I glanced around the Hospital room. Flowers, cards, and helium-filled balloons were the go as though he was a ten-year-old.

“How long do they think you will be in for?”

“A week...hopefully less...though the Doctor has a different take on that...someone doesn’t like me, eh?” His voice a mere grated whisper, forced out with each shallow breath.

“It would appear that way...attempted murder sounds pretty good...shot as you left the Legal Aid Offices in the middle of town...any ideas?”

“It’s...um...I haven’t a clue, but it seems coincidental that Maggie Campbell has only been released in the past couple of weeks...”

“You think you being shot and her release is connected?”

“As I said...it seems coincidental...and I do not believe in coincidences...neither would you coppers, eh?”

“Brimmer’s place was shot up also...he suffered an arm wound...he was lucky...like you”.

“Mmm...some-one is sour...it’s more than that and I cannot think who could be next...”

“Maggie is out...some weeks ago now as you said. Some have said you suffered a nervous breakdown...after you were removed from Maggie’s Case at its completion...you missed out on the final statement before the Jury began its deliberation...almost five years ago now...what do you remember of it?”

“Yes...it was the first such case I had taken...a criminal matter...a murder...a lot of responsibility with the fate of the woman in my hands...I found it extremely difficult to continue. When the Case was complete, I collapsed in a heap...I had held myself so tightly throughout the five-week period. I knew this line of work was not my cup of tea...I collapsed...it has taken me years to come out the other side...longer than I thought...sure, I’m employed by Legal Aid but not as a practising Solicitor but as a Research Officer which has helped me heaps...and now this. I’ll be looking over my shoulder until the shooter is known...and arrested...it seems queer though, that these actions against the major players in Maggie’s case are only now suffering payback...some-one sure has a long memory...and a larger need for revenge”. He concluded, scratching the bandages around his upper arm and shoulder...a good sign...

“If they are indeed connected to the Case...”

“What else?” A look of confusion as he asked the question.

Good...I was certain the lad was going to be honest with us...as though baring his soul was a cathartic event for him.

“Whose idea was it to rest your case on the ‘Battered Wives’ Syndrome’ when you would have known that that defence was not available or acceptable to the Courts anymore in NSW?”

He turned his head to peer at the ceiling wondering how he was supposed to answer. That thought of client confidentiality whirled about in his mind. He wiped his good hand across his mouth, not certain whether he should respond.

“To answer that would not break client confidentiality as the strategy was plain to see as the Case progressed...yes?” I added, hoping to coax him along.

He looked over at me, not certain whether I had been honest. I guess this entire interview would tread awfully close to that ‘boundary’ and if we were to wait until he decided to yay or nay in answering that question, we could be here for a bit of time. So be it as I wanted to empty his mind...a mind that had been scarred by the Court Case...he was out of his depth at the time...way out! Before he answered or not to that question, I asked another to heap further weight onto his shoulders.

“How did you become Maggie Campbell’s Solicitor. It seems to me you had no prior experience in such grave matters...criminal matters...how did you come to represent her?”

Again, he paused wondering what depth charges may be connected to that question.

“Um...Mister Bradbridge? I will endeavour to ask questions outside the realm of confidentiality, okay?” I scratched my chin and pulled at my earlobe. Questions that did not compromise the Solicitor/Client confidential clauses would be hard to assess. “I would imagine this would be common knowledge in Jerilderie...so...”

“Yes...I am Brimmer’s...oh...second cousin I think...he recommended me to Maggie...or more correctly, he recommended Maggie to me. I sat with her for an afternoon to try and get the gist of the crime. As her Defence Lawyer, I was not worried about guilt or innocence at the time, only how I could conduct a defence argument that would help my client...about your other question, Campbell was convinced she could use that Defence to escape a punitive sentence...I didn’t have the heart in the beginning to inform her of the deletion of that Law which had been a tremendous Defence strategy for some years...she seemed to have some...aarh...some advice from some-one with a law background...Brimmer, uh?”

“It was her idea?”

“I couldn’t sway her...so I used it as best as I could which placed me dangerously close to being disbarred”.

“Arrh...was it her idea or had some-one else convinced her? Some-one whom she trusted”.

“Oh! Sorry...I misunderstood you...to be truthful, I do not know though I suspected she had been convinced by a third party...”

“Any idea who?”

“A stab in the dark...as I said before...Carlton Brimmer but that is just a gut feeling...there is nothing to back up that thought”. He squirmed around in the bed trying to find a more comfortable position. I lent him forward slightly, my arm under his arm to place an extra pillow against his back, him sitting straighter. This seemed better as he thanked me.

There was silence as I digested that information. Bradbridge remained silent, now looking at a spot on the wall behind and above my head.

“So, you used that strategy knowing it was possibly detrimental to your career...”

“It got her a lighter sentence with the jury requesting she be sentenced with mitigating circumstances. If I had not driven the Judge to distraction by constantly referring to her continual abuse by the Deceased...and earlier, by her abusive and bullying father, the jury would have been less sympathetic. I felt sure that was the reason also for the Judge being lenient in sentencing her...although that is a gut feeling only...no, that is wrong. She confessed to a relationship of some time with Brimmer...I was sure that at one time he had a License to Practise...but I don't think he ever did...it was more a prestige thing with him”.

“Your bombshell...saying that your client was the guilty party...was that another part of your strategy?”

“Arrh...no. That was a slip of the tongue due to my naivety and inexperience with criminal law matters...and I must object as that was discussed in camera! How did you become aware of the comment?” He almost sat up straight as he commented. His face turning a beetroot hue that I thought could be hazardous to his health.

I ignored his question and rising anger...it could be to our benefit as the interview went ahead...cat and mouse...that was all this was. There would be moments when he felt he could not answer a question due to confidentiality clauses between he and his client. I would stress at those times that his client had been released from prison and was on parole living in a halfway house in Penrith, close to the city. Because she had almost completed her sentence, I doubted those clauses had relevance.

“She confessed to you that she *did* shoot her partner to death...and she also confessed to the jury several times that she *was* the guilty party...when she was in the ‘chair’ and when she was seated beside you...much to the chagrin of the Judge...hah, he must have aged some during that trial”. I laughed.

“Um...yes...theatrics on her part I always thought. It was extremely difficult to shut her up. The Judge forcefully requested I still my Client for yelling out her guilt. She was convinced she could sway the jury with my constant reference to her history with the man and her often tearful submissions that she had shot him...”

“Was there any thought of introducing that third party guilt of another person being responsible for the shooting?”

“Yes...I thought long and hard on that point. She almost throttled me when I suggested we introduce such strategy...”

“Who were you intending to introduce to the jury as that possible shooter which you would hope would cause reasonable doubt?”

“Carlton Brimmer...it was his gun...”

“Are you sure of that?”

“Without a doubt!”

“On what grounds?”

“That he had lent the rifle to Maggie? And that gun was not a common long gun...quite rare around these parts”.

“No...did you have proof that the rifle used...a Remington 700 semi-automatic was his weapon?”

“Yes...the ‘Weapons Register’ held by the Griffith Gun Club...and the Register held by the NSW Police Force...they had located and spied it several times over the years when they did the annual check on gun security...they have the maker’s registration code and number on their records...anyone can view those records”.

“Was the gun ever found?”

“Arrh...no...but Maggie swore that it was Brimmer’s gun...on several occasions...and as the Police Register of Firearms detailed, Brimmer did have a Remington 700 amongst other rifles”.

“Which he says was stolen...”

“Convenient...”

“Yes...especially when he did not report the gun stolen until the homicide investigation began”.

“Mmm...” Those facts I would write up into our investigatory notes. “She couldn’t handle a rifle according to the Trial manuscript...”

“Yes...that was another...arrh...red herring that I introduced to the jury...it was just a ploy that the Judge did not approve of...if I had continued in Criminal Law and come up against the old man again, I think he would have tossed me out...if he could”.

“Oh...what...are you going to now admit she was an expert with a long gun? A proficient target shooter over 400 metres?”

“She was a proficient target shooter and was a regular at the Griffith Gun Club. I think her reason in regularly attending the premises had more to do with spending the weekend with Brimmer...and getting hold of his long gun...but none-the-less, she was an above average target shooter from four hundred metres up...that’s there at the Rifle Club for anyone to see...and the people running the show were helpful that way. I always wondered why the local Police never went near the Rifle Club or the Paintball place...”

“The Prosecution? Were they aware of these facts?”

“Apparently not...they conducted an amateurish investigation...they’re not my words but the Judge’s. He also accused me of something similar but in reply, I can say that my client was subject to a lesser sentence because of my ‘amateurish’ behaviour...that’s all I could hope for”.

“Because she was as guilty as sin?”

“Yes...I can admit to that as she *was* found guilty...I am not betraying my client in disclosing that point”.

“Were you approached by the Investigative Journalist doing that TV Special?”

“Yes...several times...they even employed silly ploys to get me to talk...I refused them every time...” He looked down at his hands clasped together. “I think...” He said, glancing up at me to hold my stare. “I think that is why I have been so honest...and open with you Detective...in a way just to nark the three of them...” He looked embarrassingly around the small room. “They drove me to distraction...those smart-arse city slickers...fuck ‘em!”

“Do you think if you had permitted them that interview, the TV show may have been different?”

“Who’s to know...they were after a story...not the truth”.

I glanced at my watch surprised at the time.

“Hell! I think it a little too late to head for the coast. Um...Mister Bradbridge? Can you recommend somewhere to stay for the night? Not too fancy as the Boss would have a bloody heart attack...but a cut above a backpackers’ hostel if you could...close by as Canberra is a bastard to drive around for the uninitiated”.

“The Australia Club just down the road at Manuka has accommodation on several grades...overnight motel type rooms to large ‘apartment’ type accommodation...and the Dining Room serves very good meals at reasonable prices...I often eat there... and Manuka has a vast selection of Restaurants if the Dining Room doesn’t suit your palate...just program it into your GPS road map of Canberra otherwise you could get lost...as many people do...to me it is a darn sight easier to get around than say...Sydney which to me, has always been a bloody nightmare”.

“Is the Australia Club very expensive...it sure sounds expensive”. I chortled. “We must be diligent and frugal in spending the supplied ‘Living away from Home’ expenditure...live high on the hog some would say at the expense of the NSW Police Force...and the State’s taxpayers...that’s just not on!”

We were shooed out of the Wardroom by an irritated Doctor who muttered quietly his patient needed rest.

“We have it two ways by Campbell’s Solicitor...that his client was both guilty and innocent. Which one should we take?” I asked my young colleague. “Which one would you run with, my young partner?”

“Guilty!”

“You’re sure of that?”

“Yes...without doubt. Now let’s make arrangements to head for Sydney...okay, by train out of Griffith...I miss my dog...and my bed...and my mother”.

I wasn’t as convinced either way...we still had a fair way to go, and I wasn’t about to cut short our investigation for a bloody little fluffy dog...though I knew Sophie said it in gest...I think!

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

We found the Club very easily as it was a stone’s throw from the Hospital. Undercover car parking facilities which would mean the vehicle wouldn’t be frozen the next morning. Chipping ice off the windscreen was not my idea of a perfect start for the day.

I woke feeling groggy. I had had too much of a good wine the night before. I had to realise that my ability to drink copious amounts of wine...good or bad...was decreasing dramatically...a sign of aging.

I joined half the population of Canberra to jog circuits of Manuka Oval just on daybreak. More participants than an Olympic marathon event! The sound of snapping blades of grass a new experience for me...and my super joggers. They had cost me a couple of hundred dollars with a tag saying they were a general-purpose Sneaker that would satisfy the most selective of Athletes. Going to send them an e-mail stating their ‘super sneakers’ may be a good, all-round product, but they were lousy in a heavy frost, light dusting of snow or ice situations.

The things that drift through your mind as you circle the Oval at jog speed...I was overtaken by some and did my own overtaking tactics on others. A wave to show we were all brothers.

My feet were freezing!

While this was the first time I had ever experienced these conditions, there was little doubt that such a scenario would ever exist around the northern suburbs of Sydney.

Stopped at five laps where once ten circuits would be my fill. Returned to the Australia Club to warm myself in their downstairs gym. Spent time on a rowing machine, ditto a running machine and weight-lifting apparatus. Five minutes in a sauna sharing the timber-lined ‘cell’ with an old bloke who continuously flashed his king’s jewels at me. It was obvious he had not sighted the jewels for decades going on the girth of his guts as his jewels weren’t that pretty to toss about. Excused myself saying I was not into anything like that, feeling

particularly sad for the old codger. A fifteen-minute rub-down with a talkative Masseuse not the way I wanted to enjoy the massage...fifteen minutes of light jazz would have been more enjoyable.

Promised myself a light breakfast of a piece of toast, a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice and a large coffee 'chaser'. Somehow, I polished off a large serving of scrambled eggs and bacon...with the liquid previously detailed.

The Bill for our one-night stay was quietly slid onto the table before we had finished our coffees. I almost choked on the amount and felt sure our Finance Department would be asking questions. Forty dollars for the use of the running machine; ditto the rowing machine and ditto for the weight machine. Fifty dollars for the presence of a Coach whom I rarely saw; the same for the use of the sauna *and* the Masseuse...it was mounting up amazingly fast and I had not yet eyed the bill for our refreshments and meals of last night and this morning...or our overnight Apartment Bill!

Shit!!

I signed off the bill and left my 'charge card' to do the damages. I expected to see a line of accountant-type persons file into the Dining Area to remonstrate me over my use of the Police Force 'charge card'. Nothing like that occurred and I let out a huge sigh as we drove up the 'out ramp' heading towards Batemans Bay and the retired Senior Constable Small...Sophie's future father-in-law...Sophie didn't appear to be nervous about meeting them as she said the meeting would be about matters dealing with Maggie Campbell, not she and their son's romance...how wrong she turned out to be!

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

"Arrh...so you're the young lady who has stolen my son's heart, eh? He has a good eye for women I reckon..." He was beaming. "Please...both of you come in...I understand you wish to speak to me about Maggie Campbell and her guilty sentence...you've got the tongues wagging in both Jerilderie and Griffith let me tell you...come, come...please sit. Can my wife get you a coffee each? She was up late last night cooking a cake for you..."

During this greeting, the man had placed his hand in the middle of Sophie's back, softly massaging her back. By the look on Sophie's face, she did not take kindly to this imposition.

Missus Meredith Small came in, rubbing her hands on an apron and offering her hand to both Sophie and me. As the name suggested she was a wisp of a woman with sunken dark eyes and bent shoulders as though she had been shouldering the weight of the earth for too long. She bowed her head as she shook hands as though looking someone in the eye was a health risk! Or she was shaking hands with Royalty...a little bob would have been nice.

“You must be something special to catch Gavin’s eye...he needs a mother to keep him on the straight and narrow”. Garry Small suggested, glancing at his wife to provide the visitors with sustenance...that’s what the missus of the household was born to do...on cue she disappeared from the room only to come back with plates, cups, and saucers.

I groaned inwardly, now sure that Sophie had fallen for the wrong guy. Sophie a mothering type of wife? Not that I could see for the time I had known her...but I smiled politely at the comment.

“You love the Force?” Garry Small asked, leaning towards her waiting for her reply. I was beginning to dislike the way he was cornering my young colleague and was so close to saying something in Sophie’s defence.

Shit! I swore to myself. This was not going to be about Maggie Campbell but a grilling of a prospective daughter-in-law, I thought to myself!

“Very much so...yes”.

“The Murder Squad...a little confronting for such a young lass...dead bodies and the like...”

“No, not really...though I still have a bit of a problem with gory victims...” She looked over at me. “...but the sense of the hunt in searching out the Perp and the thrill in nabbing the bastard...that is something you cannot achieve in any other Branch of the Force”. I saw the beginning of a smile with me convinced she was lathering it on strong as the man was beginning to get up her nose already! She was laying it on a bit thick I thought...swear words and all on purpose. She did not want to leave her house in Sydney; the thought of bringing an MGA back to pristine condition in abeyance...and yes, she did not want to throw away a career in the Murder Squad. As if her language was a little ‘rich’ for this country couple, Meredith stood, a little embarrassed, rubbing a hand down the apron as she made her way to the Kitchen. I could smell the just baked cake coming out of the oven. She must have gotten up early to do the honours. Without a sound she placed coffee mugs in front of us, a teacup and saucer for her and her husband who spun the teapot six ways one way then six ways the other before pouring for both. A large plate of cupcakes and a freshly baked Orange Cake with almonds sat central for both us and them to reach over and take whenever...I didn’t need a second invitation...she again disappeared to return with a glass drip coffee kettle, pouring

a beautiful smelling java into both Sophie's and my mug. She gestured towards the sugar bowl and cream jar...she knew how to do it!

“You think you've made a decision about your future?” Garry Small asked, a smile to go with the question that I thought was way too personal. If this were the way they behaved on their first meeting with Sophie, I'd hate to see what they were like in a couple of years' time! I glanced over at Sophie. She had an unreadable expression on her face.

“Arrh...excuse me”. She replied caustically. “I thought we were here to ask you about the investigation into the Margaret Campbell Case...I think questions about my future and thoughts on marriage and kids and giving up the Force would be better discussed with Gavin being present...don't you think, Mister Small?”

This sat them both back in their seats. They were not expecting the future wife of their son to have a voice...and an opinion of her own...to sit them back in their chairs? God forbid! Their opinion of Sophie took a dive! You could see it in the way they held themselves; the way they looked at Sophie. Retired Senior Sergeant Small wanted to leave that subject behind, now concerned for his son being involved with such a person.

“Maggie Campbell confessed. Signed a Charge Sheet with it typed on the page for posterity. End of story! Then you two come picking at the ground making townsfolk nervous...and the local coppers feeling they had stuffed up! That Case was my swansong and I'll be bugged if I will let you two take away that feeling of a job well done from me...” He had worked himself into a bit of a state. His missus patted him on the arm and emitted soothing sounds as one would do to an infant.

Sophie had to hide a smile...this was how they wanted their daughter-in-law to act...it was not Sophie at all...she'd roar out something about a spoon full of concrete to toughen up!

“Hear there have been a few 'drive-byes' since you've been in town...Brimmer got shot and was taken down to Wagga Base Hospital...he's still there so the whispers intimate. That young Solicitor is in Royal Canberra Hospital with wounds also. Anything concrete on those incidents...the perp? The reason for the shootings and other recent 'drive-byes' around town? Could it have any connection to you being in town?”

“Those incidents are outside our investigation. The local blokes are looking into them”.

“Nothing concrete though...no charges laid? No-one suspected though your suspect pool would have to be small...” He let the silence build. “I think it all has to do with you two hitting town as this is the first case of 'drive-by' shootings we've ever had...yep...you hitting

town compelled some-one close to the Case to act...what do you reckon? Do you have any ideas?"

"Not that I'm aware of...no...to me there's no connection". Scratched my ear, tugged on the earlobe. This was not going the way I had planned. He was leading the conversation, staying well clear of the Maggie Campbell affair for as long as he could. He has transferred the drive-by shootings to have greater importance than the Maggie Campbell affair...and his pleasure in meeting his future daughter-in-law had soured.

"It was stated in the Court Manuscripts that Maggie was a lousy shot...couldn't even hold a rifle properly..."

"She's a country girl, Detective. I reckon that was a red herring as there was no follow-up proving that point from memory..."

"So, you knew she was capable of hitting a target four hundred metres away...a darn good shot...or more correctly...a darn good series of shots".

"She must have been...she confessed so she must have been a good shot..."

"Did you obtain any evidence to support that theory?"

"Theory? It was fact, Detective...she confessed so she had to have pulled the trigger..." He was again getting heated. Again, his missus suggested he have a sip of tea...a piece of cake to help cool him. "Bloody hell". He added angrily. "She confessed so she must have pulled the trigger...I confess I was amazed at the result from where she stood...yeah...a good couple of shots!"

"Did you ever get the impression she was covering for some-one?"

"That stupid TV Exposé...it's done more harm than good...she confessed Detective...full stop!"

"Because of that, you didn't follow any other leads...any other avenues of the investigation than may have corroborated those thoughts?"

"Bloody hell, Detective! What bloody for!!??" He was close to popping a people valve! He turned to his missus to apologise for the outburst, his blood pressure still reddening his face and neck. She again patted him on the arm like the good puppy he was...

"Were you aware that Maggie Campbell and Carl Brimmer were having an affair?"

“So??” He took several large gulps of air. “Look, I can’t see why you are turning over stones that we had already looked under years previously...she was found guilty by a twelve-man jury and given a sentence that she has now served...what is there to gain in looking any further?”

I pulled the Court Orders from my pocket, handing them to Garry Small.

“They have all been signed by the Attorney General...when he signs an Instruction, you obey without asking questions like why and how! Why he has been involved I have no idea, but the rumours are he is from around here somewhere. He has ordered us to make enquiries into the Case...we are obeying that Order...I’m sorry if people feel affronted but we must investigate to the best of our ability...we also are not enjoying this witch-hunt but...what do you do? We will continue turning over stones until we are satisfied that we cannot go any further with our investigation...and hopefully return to Sydney with a yay/nay conclusion to those enquiries. We are not here to crucify anyone or criticise the way the original investigation was managed...understand? We have tried to remain isolated from your investigations and conduct our own examination looking for the truth. We knew we would be stepping on toes, second guessing testaments given at the time of the trial. We are sure there are those who are affronted by our meddling, but we have been ordered to conduct this enquiry, so we will conduct ourselves in a manner hoping to minimise any feelings of us intruding”.

Garry Small flipped through the Court Order as he nodded, rocking back and forth in his chair.

“John Seymour Harris...he is our State Member of Parliament...he owns several houses in town...in Jerilderie...and a Home Unit block in Griffith. A large parcel of land to the west of town on the Conargo Road...the properties have been held by his family for several generations...I cannot see why he would want to stir the pot again...he is a too astute gentleman to believe anything of that silly TV show...bloody hell...he went to school with Maggie Campbell...well several years ahead, but in those days the Primary School was a two Teacher affair...he knows Maggie...maybe that is why he poked his nose into it...or maybe to get his name out there again to his constituents as they’re saying there will be a State Election sometime next year...seems like something a bloody politician would do”.

“Mmm...it was he who ordered another investigation into the shooting with us being named to be the Investigating Dees...would he have known the Campbell family that well? You know...he must have known this would be a contentious issue with most people who had formed an opinion of Maggie’s innocence or not”.

“Yes...yes, you are right. Most are angry that the event is to be re-worked for want of a better expression...this has again caused a polarising effect as it did when the original Trial went

ahead. Um...the Campbells have property about the town...and yes, they go back several generations on the land...I think their property abuts one of Harris's farm properties...or they were neighbours in town. I also am sure that Libby Campbell, Maggie's younger sister has her property sharing a boundary with the Harris spread".

"How were you made aware of the shooting?" A complete U-turn away from what we had been discussing.

Small sat back into the sofa chair, a slight smile that he tried to hide but failed. He nodded, signifying that he knew what I was doing.

"Um..." He looked up at the ceiling pursing his lips. "A phone call from the Robert-Keys...they live almost opposite the house Grieves and Campbell were renting...it was a former Shearers' quarters which they were in the process of doing up...even extending it...they were doing a fantastic job...they...the Robert-Keys heard a series of shots that were not normal...not like some young rascals taking pot-shots at local road signs...yer can tell the difference...and the reverb of the shots was a lot different to a point two-two or a point three-oh-three that the young juiced up yahoos use".

I nodded, glancing at Sophie who was enjoying a slice of cake. A nod to indicate her preference in home-made cakes...she was in no condition to talk!

"Where did you pick her up?"

"In town...we must have missed her by seconds going out to the crime scene...we reckon she made the intersection of the Newell Highway and the Jerilderie/Urana Road before we hit that intersection...the reason why we didn't see her vehicle was she turned right heading up the Newell Highway away from us...turned around to head south when she thought we were passed..."

A fair bit of luck involved with that scenario I thought...far too much I thought!

"So, you went out to the crime scene, organised people from Griffith, the Forensic people from Wagga...waited until the people from Griffith arrived and then you came back into town to pick her up...easy as..."

"Um...she was seen in town...we got a call to confirm that. Left my Constable at the crime scene waiting for the Forensic and Ballistic people. Came back to ask her to come into the Station for a formal interview".

“The timeline doesn’t fit sir...arrh...you never thought the shooter may have gone up the road towards Urana?”

“No...not at all. We would have seen Maggie drive passed us heading back towards Jerilderie as she would have for us to nab her in town...”

I nodded...he hadn’t acknowledged that there was always alternate scenarios that should always be investigated thoroughly...or at least considered.

“You felt she was guilty straight up?”

“Yes...the first principle is to speak to the immediate family...always...especially when there is an historic incident of physical abuse surrounding that family”. He was preaching to the converted and not swaying me in any way. Sophie was angry going on her squirming about. She wanted in on the conversation but realised anything she did offer was not going to go down that well with the Smalls.

“How did she appear?”

“You should have read all this in the Police Investigation Folders...”

“They are words...a dry interpretation of the events...no emotions in the thousands of folios...how did she react when she was told her partner had been shot to death?”

“Um...jeez...Yeah, it’s bin a few years...um...first she appeared to be in shock...then she began crying...you know, sobbing...from memory that’s how she was early on...then she kind of rallied...becoming belligerent...wanting to know why she was being arrested...”.

“Did you examine her vehicle?”

“No...what for?”

“The gun...was it ever found?”

He lent forward to clasp the teacup in both hands. He swirled what liquid was left...I thought for an instant he was going to read the leaves! He had his head lowered over the cup trying to pretend we weren’t there; I thought a second after the first thought. A smile made him look up at me as though I was taking the mickey out of him...but he would never be able to read my thoughts...would he?

“The gun...was it ever found?” I repeated softly.

“No...” He murmured as though this was the largest mistake he had made in the investigation. To me there were more than just one.

“When did she confess to shooting her partner?”

“Um...struth...two days later...when she was accompanied by that young Solicitor who did not specialise in Criminal Law. I would not have him if it were me on the wrong side of the Law...he was way out of his depth...”

“Mmm...any idea why she engaged the young bloke? No experience in criminal matters but he was a local bloke...could that have been the reason?”

“He was a relative of Brimmer’s...it would have been better if she had engaged Brimmer...I reckon he may have been a more capable Solicitor though he had never appeared in Court defending a client...to him his successful bar exams was purely for show I reckon”.

“I think she did in a way...engage Brimmer by remote control...”

“Oh!?” He was not interested in me expanding that point of view...I thought he already knew the connection.

“Where did she stay for those two nights?”

“I haven’t a clue...at her sister’s...maybe Brimmer’s...all I know for sure was that she didn’t stay at her place...I don’t know, Detective. Why is that important where she stayed for those two days?”

I shrugged not wanting to supply an answer, but the place where she stayed for those two days could be quite revealing...and it was one of those loose strings that I hated!

“She was never interned during that period?”

“Yes...she admitted guilt...we formally charged her, and she rejected Bail. She stayed in our cells for some weeks and after the Preliminary Hearing she was transferred to the Wagga Watch House...”

I stood calling proceedings to a halt. Small rose slowly...awkwardly and walked towards the hall and the front door to his home without touching Sophie once...he held his distance.

“Thank you for your time...and missus? That was the best Orange and Almond cake I’ve ever tasted...be...u...tiff...full!”

I turned to the opened door before spinning back to face the retired cop.

“One other thing...Barry Guiles...the Postmistress reported to you that she thought Guiles was receiving drugs through the mail...which as you know is an offence...did you investigate the claims? It would have been around twenty twelve...twenty fourteen? Around that time according to the retired Postmistress”.

The old bloke looked at the floor, scratched his head and then looked up at me with a grin...shook his head several times before answering.

“That was eight...nine years ago Detective. What the fuck has that got to do with anything?” He asked angrily. He glanced over at his wife standing some steps behind him. Apologising for the language.

“Nothing or everything, Senior Sergeant...what did you do to investigate the claim?”

“Old Charlie Peters...still has his marbles and has got to be around ninety...he was the town gossip and rumour-monger...he told some beauties...by the sounds of it, still is”.

I stood looking at the man waiting for him to answer the question.

“Sergeant?” I encouraged him. He had guilt written all over his face. Again, he shook his head I thought to defuse the question. I wondered then if there was an arrangement between Grieves and himself...a cutting of profits allowing the deal to continue. Allowing Grieves to be the main supply line into the town. With Guiles dead, the Senior Sergeant would have lost easy money every month...he would have reason to ensure Maggie Campbell was found guilty of murder as a revenge thing so there was no hard digging...and it could be a reason Guiles had a charmed life for so long...he was being protected by the chief copper in town.

“What are you inferring Detective?”

“Nothing Sergeant...but it would be another reason why the investigation was so shallow. If there was too much digging, rabbits coming out of the hats wouldn't be the only surprise...perhaps it could have been found that certain Officers maybe taking extra money to allow Grieves to operate his business in town for so long”.

“Good morning, Detective...and to you too, young lady”. He shut the door almost slamming it on our heels!

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

We were at a public parking area right at the shoreline having bought a fish and chips meal from the Co-Op nearby. There was a ghastly frigid cold southerly coming straight off the ocean, so we stayed within the warmth of our hire vehicle. I stretched, chasing a mouthful of chips down with an Iced Coffee.

“What do yer reckon?” I unexpectedly asked.

“Mum would have trouble with those two...and Uncle Dad? A ten-minute meeting would be enough for him...he’d just get up and walk out...and...you go in hard don’t you, Joe when you think you can smell illegal practises”.

“Maggie Campbell...there are so many side issues effecting the case...like so many country towns there is a dark underbelly that everyone knows about but will never divulge...and these side issues have a direct bearing on the Campbell Case...whether it is jealousy, revenge, or a couple of other negative emotions...they give weight or not to Maggie’s guilty plea”.

“I’m getting the feeling she was a bit of a party girl...a Jezebel some would call her in the old days...”

“What!? For having an affair with Brimmer?”

“And Grieves...Doug McKenzie was heavily involved which would more than explain his aggression around the time of the Court case...and I suspect a little fling with the naïve Constable Gavin Small. I think she shows interest in any male who may be able to help her in some way...if they don’t come across, she moves on...”

“I didn’t get that impression when we spoke to her before she was released”.

“You assessed her as a male assesses a female...I saw her as a woman...she had that prison ‘heavy’ as not only her protector, but I’ll bet as a lover...she could use her while she was inside”.

“You’re not painting a very good picture of her...you still think she was guilty? That friend of hers?”

“Tammie Carter...she was released about twelve months...no, four...six months before Campbell was paroled...I wonder what has happened to her...”

“Why?”

“Because she was once in the picture...for several years...with Maggie...”

“Do a background check on Brimmer and that woman then...to satisfy your misgivings...”

“Carter...Tammie Carter...it isn't a long stretch to insinuate her involvement in those 'drive-by' shootings. Here she was the lover and protector of Maggie while she was inside...then she was released some months before Maggie...but there is no communications between the two for that period between her release and Maggie's. Tammie Carter gets the poos well and truly and begins those shootings as a way of alluding there was something more in the Campbell Case...these shootings done out of spite...as you said, she would be riled by Campbell's cold shoulder...Carter would know of her innocence but would be aware of the sentence for lying under oath...which would ensure Campbell being incarcerated again for lying under oath...sheer spite...beware the lover scorned...where is the lady? Somewhere around this district perhaps”.

“Yeah, okay”.

I was surprised at Sophie's ability to plod through all the evidence and come up with a scenario that was very plausible...to offer it with a confident air...she was becoming more astute as the days rolled on!

“Let's see if we can find her, huh? And Brimmer? He still itches my nose”. I scratched my ear... “I don't know, I don't think we should be too judgemental on our Maggie Campbell...she is an intelligent woman who did what she had to do to survive...if that involved using a prison heavy as her lover to protect her as she laboured in obtaining an Accountancy Degree then good on her...she did what she had to do...”

“Like killing Grieves before he killed her...”

“Yeah...well...that's common knowledge”.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

One call to Tammie Carter's Parole Officer showed a current warrant out for her arrest. She had gone to ground and could not be found. She had violated her parole period by not keeping that weekly visit to her Parole Officer intact.

"Her background? Do you have details of her family...friends...you know the normal where she may have gone to lay low?" I asked the PO.

"Um...yes...hang on...I'll bring up her details..."

There was a series of clicks as the guy flicked his biro onto the side of his cheek. An annoying habit which shat me somewhat.

"Yep...yeah...here we are. Mother and father still alive living as a retired couple in Coleambally...a son...um...brother runs the family property at Darlington Point on the Murrumbidgee River north of Coleambally on the Kidman Way...A87. Um...a sister works as a nurse and receptionist at Jerilderie Medical Centre...and a younger sister is married and lives with her husband on a property close to Wagga...anything else?"

"You say a warrant has been issued for her arrest, yes?"

"That's correct..."

"When?"

"Only recently...she is a low-grade risk..."

"Why was she in prison?"

"She...she got in a quarrel at the Darlington Point Pub...the guy died some weeks later of his injuries...she was in on a 'Murder One' category downgraded to Manslaughter after she pleaded guilty...served two and a half with an eighteen-month parole period..."

"Did she ever report to you once she was released?"

"Yes...twice...then nothing..."

"It took you some time to issue that warrant..."

“Let’s just say that it slipped through the cracks...I have over one hundred parolees on my books...too many for one person but my complaints seem to fall on deaf ears”.

“Yeah...I know what you mean...thanks for the help”.

“Will you let me know if you find her?”

“No worries...easy as...”

I relayed the content of the conversation as Sophie listened intently, nodding occasionally.

“Time for a trip up to Darlington Point and the family farm on our next trip up the Kidman Way to Griffith, yes?”

“Not really our jurisdiction...let’s have a word with Sergeant Cody Withers to see what he has to say”.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

We wandered into the Jerilderie Police Station which was comfortably warm. Strolling into Sergeant Cody Withers office, we both sat opposite him without greetings. He leaned back in his Office chair with it squeaking its annoyance at the habit of the man.

“What’s this?” He enquired as he looked at the address. A frown as he looked up at both of us.

“Possibly the address of one Tammie Carter...”

“Who’s she when she not strolling the Champs Elysée’s Avenue in Paris?”

“She was the Protector and lover of Maggie Campbell while both were in the clink. She was paroled months before Campbell and ignored her parole conditions. We believe she is living on her family’s property out from Carrathool on the Murrumbidgee River Road...there is a warrant out for her arrest dated some time ago...”

Withers leant forward to tap away on his keyboard.

“Mmm...yes, so it seems...” He leaned back from the keyboard looking intently at the computer screen.

“We believe she may be responsible for these recent ‘drive-by’ shootings...”

He looked over at me, a little bemused by my information.

“So why is she shooting up the town?”

I had my doubts he was going to treat this seriously.

“We believe that Maggie Campbell, once she was released from Emu Plains Correctional Facility has not tried to contact her former prison lover. That has upset the lady in question and with all the publicity of our appearance in town, she has seen this as the right moment to cause mayhem...she sees this as a way of keeping the kettle boiling, hoping we can prove Maggie’s innocence, but in doing so showing that Maggie had lied under oath causing her to relinquish her parole conditions and have her shoved back into jail quick smart...which Maggie certainly doesn’t want to happen...but it will...could be for another two years...call it Lover’s Revenge as that is why she has been rocking the boat with these ‘drive-by’ shootings”.

Withers stopped rocking in his chair.

“Phew! You’re not only are going to show us bush coppers up on the Campbell business, but you also are going to nail a person who has a warrant out on her...jeez you two have balls! Why do I come to work every day when I have you two ace detectives fighting crime in this small township?”

We stood knowing we may need to pay a visit out along the Sturt Highway or the Murrumbidgee River Road.

Withers stood, gesturing for us to sit again.

“Look, I’m sorry...yes, I’ll contact Griffith coppers as I think there will need to be more than one copper paying her a visit...and it’s in their jurisdiction...we may be called in to help. Are you agreeable to help if it turns out that way?”

I nodded...I couldn’t now refuse the offer.

“Um...if a raid is organised on the farm, I would suggest a concurrent raid be conducted on her parents’ house in town...and her sister’s farm down Wagga Wagga way...”

“Yessss...of course...” He seemed affronted by the suggestions though I doubted he would have thought of them himself.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Even this early in the morning, the sun had a sting to it. We were in a small convoy of three vehicles driving up the farm drive to a rambling old stone and corrugated iron roofed dwelling sitting on a rise which commanded wide three-hundred and sixty-degree views of the farm.

They would have seen our approach along the main road and our slow turn onto the farm track hours ago.

There were two figures standing on the front veranda shielding their eyes from the sun watching our progress toward them.

Sergeant Stewart Ward, the Deniliquin Station Sergeant alighted from the lead vehicle as it slowed to a stop.

“Jess? Stephs? How yer going? Your sister? Where is she?”

“Which one Stew?”

“Don’t fuck with me Jess. We’ve known each other for too long. We want to interview her on several drive-byes committed around town...Jerilderie. Two persons are still in hospital with gunshot wounds...and she is wanted for parole violations...”

“Yeah...heard about them shootings. Strange...not something that is common around these parts. Sorry to hear about those hurt. Tammie? Yeah...she was here for a while. Did a bit of work for us shallow turning the back paddock...we’ll leave it that way until next Autumn ready for a winter crop. She came and went like the breeze...couldn’t really settle...had an itch she couldn’t scratch...what? Yer reckon she did those fly-byes?”

“We suspect, yeah...and she has done her parole conditions for doing them so she’ll be lumped back into prison when she’s caught”.

“I’d be careful in cornering her...she won’t come easy...”

“Knowed where she is now?”

“Heading for Queensland I suspect...”

“Yer not bullshitting us Jess?”

“Hah...nah. Be careful as she’s got her favourite long gun...and ammunition...and she’s driving the farm 4WD which isn’t registered or insured...and she’s angry in herself...not a good place to be”.

The Sergeant nodded with a tight smile as he turned to walk to our 4WD.

“An ‘All Points’ here in NSW and Queensland. Armed and dangerous. Approach with extreme care. The fact she is now carrying also breaks her parole conditions...she’s put herself right in the poo!”

“That’s it!” I exclaimed. “Yer not gunna search the homestead or farm buildings...is there shearing quarters on the property?”

“Detective? Cool it. I’ve known Jess from Kindergarten. He wouldn’t lie to me...and he has no cause to protect his sister. She was always the rotten apple...even during those early school days. Jess and his missus are straight shooters...no family love lost on Tammie. Might be a feminine name but she was opposite to that...often involved in Bar fights...she was always sleeping it off in the town cells...”

“Should we visit her parents? They’re in town aren’t they?”

He shook his head, looked at the ground.

“Nah...a couple of the local Constables are paying them a visit...we’ll hear from them soon. Jess told it as it is. That maybe a hard pill to swallow Joe, but out here people are honest...”

I didn’t believe him but this was his territory...his people.

Tammie Carter was pulled more dead than alive from her vehicle some four hundred kilometres north of the farm on that same day. She was flown to Royal Prince Henry Hospital secure prison ward in a sorry state. The Deniliquin Police Station was informed later that night.

With her now having to serve her Parole Period with a six-year stretch added on for a list of charges starting from driving an unregistered and uninsured vehicle, breaking the original parole conditions, firing a firearm in public and two counts of firing a firearm with intent to

injure plus a string of other charges, she'd need to find another lover inside to take away the boredom of prison life.

CHAPTER FORTY

After a joint meeting at the Deniliquin Police Station to discuss what processes were to be put in place to locate the felon, we left forgetting we had not eaten or drunk since the early morning 'call-out' well before sunrise. We had stayed in Deniliquin overnight.

"Can we stop for a coffee...a bite to eat? I'm famished".

"Yeah...we'll go up to the Rifle Range Barn...they serve a half decent coffee, and they make fresh sandwiches...okay?"

"Yeah...that's cool as there's bugger all between here and Jerilderie...I don't know about Coleambally or Darlington Point. There's a Truck Stop in town that is very popular with the Truckie Brigade so that suggests good meals...though I don't want a huge meal...yeah, a sandwich will do". She turned to look at me. "Why the deep frown, oh wise one?"

"Because she has taken the fall for some-one else. I've always had it in the back of my mind that it was Brimmer, but now? I don't know and I am running out of possible alternative parties...at a stretch...McKenzie, yes...though that remark from a good friend of Campbell's has me spinning my wheels...I really don't know".

"Nah...to me she is firming as the guilty party with no thought of covering for anyone, Derek! You're got yourself into quite a tizz because you have always thought in the back of your mind that she was innocent...and now?"

"Mmm...yeah...drive up to the Rifle Range...I'm hanging out too". I was a little concerned about the moniker she had labelled me with...it was a derogatory name tag doing the rounds on the various social internet sites.

"Derek? Where'd yer get that from?" I asked as we headed for the corner café in the much larger Barn-type building than that of the Paintball building. Holly's missus came out from behind the counter to take our orders.

"I'm surprised you two are still here...and still in one piece. Yer've been getting people off-side yer know? Big time let me tell you...and you ruffled the hair of the former Senior

Sergeant Small now retired enough for him to complain to people here in town and in Jerilderie. He didn't take kindly to your visit the other morning. Be careful as someone may get it in his head to take a shot at yers. What do you want?"

We ordered and as she turned, I coughed and called her back.

"Maggie's sister? She live around here?"

"Um...about forty minutes out a Jerilderie on the Jerilderie/Urana Road. She and her hubby have had a decent year so far like most of the cockies around these parts...um...I think it is Sawyer...her married name. Libby Sawyer. Funny, but she also married a bloke who belts her around a bit...not as bad as Maggie copped, but nevertheless...according to the Town Gossipers, it's quietened down to nothing...it makes you wonder though about girls marrying someone who reminds them of their fathers".

I nodded not wanting to expand on the theory.

"She a regular here?"

"Was...I don't know what happened, but she suddenly stopped coming up...a real pity as she was also a dead-eye dick...she and Maggie used to slug it out for the annual awards...that's the two of them in that shot..." She pointed to a near wall full of photos, ribbons, and medals. People standing proudly, shotguns broken over a shoulder. A medal dangling from around a bullish neck. I'd be lost trying to make out a photograph of the two sisters. "The last time they came together...jeez...I'd say about six...seven years ago...I'll get yer sandwiches". She scurried away to fill our order.

Sophie leant over towards me, a frown to go with her words.

"What in mercy's sake made you change your mind? You were all for letting the status quo survive...that yes indeed, Maggie Campbell was the guilty person as she said on so many occasions..."

"That's right...there's the rub...she broadcast it...loud and clear...repeatedly...and loudly as though she needed to convince the coppers out here to not look any further into the Case...and it succeeded...and she hires an inexperienced Solicitor who had not one criminal matter on his books...never any criminal cases...why? So, it appears she could manipulate him...and I'd say she was being manipulated herself...by Brimmer who wanted her gone as he'd found a new younger lover".

I leant back to allow Holly's wife to place a large plate of sandwiches onto the table, rushing away to fetch two mugs of steaming coffee. The sandwiches were brim full, making it difficult to get your mouth around for a bite. Dropping the innards onto our plates so we had to pick up the scraps with our fingers.

I waved my hand as Sophie went to speak.

"Leave it be for the moment. Voices rebound around this Barn no matter how low you whisper..."

Holly came back out to our table. A smile and a friendly disposition. I noticed his wife had moved up to the customer counter at the other end of the building to serve bods all decked out in the right gear for target shooting. It was another reminder of how there are those who blindly followed the gun-lovers of America! Vocal opponents to the tight gun-control laws of this land.

"Anything else?" He asked. I thought he wanted in on the conversation.

"Tammie? Tammie Carter?" Sophie asked, her mug to her mouth. She placed it carefully back onto the tabletop.

"Tammie...such a feminine name...she was far from it. Built like a bush shithouse...yeah, she was a member here once...she has got to be out of the clink with her parole finished...or near finished as I've seen her once or twice here...and Glee says she was one of her first customers when the Paintball place was opened...ten...twelve years ago about..."

My interest peaked. "Oh? You've seen her here? Recently?"

"Yes...though I seem to think she prefers the Paintball experience over us...perhaps it's the thrill of the hunt, the ambushes, the hands-on experience...there are those who can enjoy both I guess, but mostly you have the target shooting fraternity and the paint ball fun competitors...it's either one or the other..."

"A good shot?"

"Mmm...a reasonable shot...about average".

"Have you got an address for her? Not the family farm...we were there this morning".

"Let me look it up...and ask Glee...she may have a more up to date address, though frankly the farm would be her nest, I reckon".

We took our time demolishing the plate full of sandwiches. I hadn't realised how hungry I was.

"Gavin Small..." I began quietly looking directly at my young partner.

She shook her head.

"He's here in town but I have no desire in seeing him...I don't know...it was so up there for a while...you know...couldn't get enough of him...but...he said himself he was floundering since his old man retired and moved to the coast leaving him to his own devices and being bossed by some-one else...I can see him giving the Force away and going to live with them...some-one like that is not for me...full of insecurities and phobias...I know Mum would not be impressed with him. And Uncle Dad? I won't even go there! What do you think?"

"That's the first you've told me about his insecurity..."

"Yeah...nah...yes, that's right. He has a major insecurity streak that you don't notice for some time...I don't know, he came across first up as a real 'on top of it' kinda guy". She fingered her hair back over her shoulder, taking a couple of sips of her coffee. "I'd been visiting my aunt's place on about every school holiday that I can remember back to when I was in Primary School. I love that house and its memories...I had no idea she left the house to me in her Will...it came as a huge shock...and excitement...and aunt taught me how to sew, to cook, to enjoy reading stories...she was a brilliant teacher and that comes from her pupils who went to her funeral. They stayed in touch for years...most a lot older than me...how often do you hear that happening?"

She went to take another sip of coffee, instead changing her mind replacing the mug carefully onto the table. It seemed a habit of hers...bend the arm and another thought is wrenched loose from her grey matter!

"I couldn't...you know? Mum would be so disappointed...and Uncle Dad?" She shook her head. "Sell the house...or knowing and accepting someone else living there if I rented it out...I've got a one hundred-and thirty-thousand-dollar mortgage on a house that I was offered two mil for the joint some months back by a sleazy Real Estate guy...and a shell of an MGA sitting up on blocks in the garage that needs my attention. The heartache? Was it worth it? Yes...I can still remember my heart racing when he touched me...yes, it was worth the effort...every last sweat globule".

She finished off her coffee as Holly returned to the table. She smiled up at him asking for another.

“Tammie?” He slipped a piece of paper onto the table. “That’s the family farm near Carrathool, a small village west of Willbriggie...or you can take the Murrumbidgee River Road that intersects with the Kidman Way north of Darlington Point...about an hour from the Kidman Way intersection...yer getting into the backblocks so be careful”.

“We were there at the family farm this morning. It would seem she has flown the nest. Um...any other address for the woman?”.

He shook his head. If he had another address it was bound to be one of the properties raided at the same time as we hit the family farm this morning...for nil result so I heard over the airwaves.

We thanked him for his help.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

“Okay, go through it again while I drive sedately to Jerilderie...how can you say she was taking the fall for some-one else? You said that after we interviewed her before she got out of the clink, didn’t you?”

“Hah...yes, I did...um...she didn’t act like a woman who would shoot her partner...just the opposite...and all the work she did while inside? She even had most of the inmates on some form of daily exercise...she was training girls for half-marathons and cross-country orienteering...plus doing two...two courses that were not easy courses...that is definitely not like most inmates and what they do while they’re waiting out their sentences...definitely not like some-one who is guilty of shooting dead her partner...I could be wrong but I don’t think so...”

“Yeah...I’m with you up to a point...but to put it bluntly, if I were in her shoes, I think I would do a Law Course...you know, to keep my mind off the cell that I lived in. Reckon Campbell did all those things for that reason...not to improve herself but to keep her mind off the size of the cell...she was a country girl who loved the big outdoors. To hear that jail door slam shut behind her...a bed, a toot and not much else...most of her time would be spent in the library...on-line...to cut down the hours of realising she was in the clink...confined to a tiny cell”.

“Okay...yeah...I’m with you on that but that doesn’t help at all with her guilt or innocence...um...what she achieved inside has little to do with her Case...but you, like

Campbell would always do something constructive to while away the time...because you...and she are several steps up the evolutionary scale compared to most women who find themselves inside...truly. Also, she makes it common knowledge that she is practising target shooting at the 400 metre mark, so she doesn't have to see the eyes...this she confided to a girlfriend weeks before she does the deed...that just doesn't add up unless she intended to manipulate other things...everything is open with her shouting out her guilt...that's not how it normally goes...the guilty perp usually shouts his innocence *unless* you don't want the cops looking too carefully...then you would shout guilty". I shook my head. Ran my hands down either side of my face. I was feeling tired. Good, I'd get a good night's sleep to-night. "Um...I'm a bit surprised that when she pleaded guilty, they still went ahead with a jury trial...usually it becomes a Case rolled out in front of a Judge...and it is an antiseptic execution with little legal argument. The coppers out here acted the way she thought they would...they stopped the investigation on receiving her written confession. You would have noticed in the Investigative Folders that they ceased investigating the case. To them they had the guilty party who has confessed to the crime so why expend additional shoe leather looking for ghosts under bushes...as there were none according to their words and thinking...that was as plain as day".

My mobile buzzed in my pocket. It was the Boss checking up on us.

"Sophs...stop at the crest of this hill coming up...Boss, you got me?"

"Yes...nice and clear. Had a call from the Attorney General enquiring as to our investigation...very suss! But how goes it in any case?"

"I think we have worked out that Maggie Campbell took the fall for her sister. I'd say her sister was sending out a couple of messages. She was married to a bloke who belted her about a bit, and she was saying she could easily do the same thing to her husband...warning shots across the bow I think they call it".

"Proof Joe. What proof do you have?"

"It's a gut feeling Boss...but we'll get there..."

"Yeah, well...you better get there soon as I am calling you back within seven days..."

"What about the Covid shutdown...Tamworth, Armidale, Orange...they're all in lockdown..."

"The entire State is Joe...but us cops are considered essential services so we...you and Sophie...can come and go...you've got seven days Joe. Okay?"

I scratched my head as we would have been considered essential service personnel from the very beginning to my way of thinking. I reckon the Boss was playing silly buggers with us...sending us a message that we had to stay out here until we broke the case...or confirmed the original decision as being correct.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

There was a branch here in town for the Newspaper that was based in Wagga Wagga. We'd walked from the Hotel to the old brick structure, guided there by the Hotel Manager and Owner.

I tapped on the window trying to get someone's attention who may have been inside...to no avail.

We walked around the block trying to gain access to the back of the building, stumbling over old farming implements and rusty old stuff as we walked across a rear yard area...ordered rows of old vehicles, tractors, and farm trucks made the place look like a second-hand vehicle graveyard.

"This is the town museum, Joe...not the old print shop..."

"Yes, it is..." A croaky voice drifted across to us. We looked around trying to find the owner of the voice. "Here...sorry..." An old wiry bloke stood...he'd been lying under an old...who knew, some type of farming implement that only old farmers would recognise. Us being city folks had no interest or knowledge of such things.

"Can I help you folks?" He leaned toward me. "You two are the ones all the folks around here have been gasbagging about...pleased to meetcha. Harvey is me name. Harvey Thomas. Lived around these parts all me life...love the place...what you people looking for and I can take a hint, you're not interested in any of this stuff lying about...a real pity as every piece is part of the history of farming hereabouts...if it weren't for these bits and pieces, we wouldn't have one of the richest farming areas in the world. Come inside so I can sit down...what are yers looking for?" He looked myopically at me, leaning into me. "Yer the two city coppers here stirring up trouble...find what yers bin looking for?"

I shook my head not wanting to reply as the entire bloody town would know within hours.

We walked beside the old bloke as he hobbled towards the old building.

“In the old days we used to have our own newspaper...but then we were brought out and the newspaper was printed in Griffith...then Wagga where it still is printed as a weekly publication. We got a copy of all the old papers on computer now...my doing trying to get certain people volunteering in here to keep up with the times”. He chuckled which sounded like a hen laying a bloody egg!

“What are you looking for? Maisy? These people want to look up old newspapers ain’t that right?”

“We’re particularly interested in the months leading up to the Maggie Campbell shooting and then onto the Trial proceedings in Griffith...”

“Not a problem...no worries...come through...Maisy? Make us all coffees will you...a gold coin please”. He turned to me with his hand out. “You’ll need to shout me and Maisy...” A grin and a glint in his eye.

Before we knew it the day had disappeared, and Sophie had photographed countless articles surrounding the brutal physical abuse dished out by Grieves on Maggie Campbell. Also, a similar story on Libby Sawyer being hospitalised with similar injuries to her older sister. There were beefy reports into the investigation of the Grieves shooting with a noticeable drop-off of activity days after the crime...we needed to download all the articles onto the laptop to be able to understand the investigation and the later Trial proceedings...we would be reading for three or four days just to educate ourselves on the Case and the effects it had on the small community. The local paper was a good reflection on how the townsfolk felt about the crime.

Reckoned we’d be back tomorrow as I felt we hadn’t sifted through all the reports available to us.

“Harvey...a lot of the stories we have copied out have the story under the by-line of M. Barthelemy as the Journalist. Do you know what may have happened to her...or him...is she still local or has she moved on?”

“Maisy? Come out here will you...these folks want to meet you...”

The woman who had made us coffee for a gold coin walked out of the dim interior of the museum/ Newspaper Office. She held out her hand and as we shook, she confessed to being Maisy Barthelemy. A wonderful smile, alert blue-grey eyes, her hair in plaits woven around her head, her dress ankle length with a white cotton blouse that had a lace collar...she had stepped out of the last century.

“Maggie’s Murder Case...I came out of retirement to cover it...I pleaded with the Boss to let me be the journalist on all the articles...and as you’ve found out, there is a lot...glory forbid I used to write...yes type quite rapidly once...”.

“Can we sit with you to-morrow and listen to your memories of the events leading up to and the trial? You know, we could read every article you wrote but it will lack that emotional attachment if you know what I mean...that human touch”.

“Most certainly young man. I’d be delighted...I’ll bake a cake to bring in...tomorrow and the next day we are closed usually so we won’t be interrupted by tourists though they have fallen through the floor what with this Covid thing...yes, I’ll enjoy that”.

“Would you mind if we video and taped the proceedings...we’ll give a copy to the museum here...”

“That would be marvellous young man...a real treat!”

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

The following day was sheer joy. Maisy was a true country girl who had been born in the city and had begun her career after obtaining a Journalist Degree at Melbourne Uni. She met and married Abraham Barthelemy, a non-practising Jew who was attracted to the Bush of ‘Banjo’ Paterson and Henry Lawson. They worked together in the largest Melbourne ‘Daily’ before the pull of the bush had them travelling around Victoria and southern NSW before they settled in Griffith, both taking jobs in the local Central Murray Informer newspaper.

Her recollections of her time spent with her husband were warm, funny, and emotional for all of us. The man a true romantic until the day he tragically died not long before the whole Maggie Campbell episode erupted to spoil the peaceful atmosphere of both Jerilderie and Griffith.

Maisy was a storyteller and she shone when talking about major ‘headlines’ like the disappearance of a local Businessman and Politician in Leeton, the Vietnam war where hundreds, if not thousands of first-time soldiers were billeted in an Army Camp not far from Wagga Wagga...and the Maggie Campbell Trial...we constantly jibed her about writing a book of her lifetime starting with her travels with her husband. Six kids were the product of the union with a daughter living close by married to a well-known character and farmer in the

district. The others spread across the globe, all connected to the Media...funny how things can be passed on...

While the time spent in that rustic old museum did not lead to any eureka moments on the Maggie Shooting case, we considered ourselves extremely lucky to have been with the old girl. Unfortunately, she died not long after our return to Sydney. Because of the Covid spread to all parts of NSW, the funeral so we were told, was not of a standard or reward for such a beautiful person. At an amazing age of ninety-two which we never suspected, she had had a long and amazing life.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

We agreed to forego the usual gut splitting breakfast at the Pub, preferring to walk down the main street until we found a small early opened Café come Bakery. We took a small table on the footpath along with other early morning risers. Most looked like ‘Stray Greys’ enjoying the early morning delights of Jerilderie. In snippets of conversation, because of the Covid Lockdown, they were unable to recommence their wanderings anywhere outside Jerilderie for who knows how long...though most were in good humour about it admitting they’d stayed in other country towns not half as nice or friendly as the locals here.

‘It was the way the world was now, and there’s no use crying over it...enjoy the stay because it may not come by ever again’.

I agreed wholeheartedly but when it came to explain our presence in the small country town we ran into trouble. A couple of our fellow coffee drinkers were local townsfolk enjoying that java as it could well be their last...they found it awkward trying to tell the ‘visitors’ what we were doing in town...and how we could travel from town to town and even to the coast!

“You’re the city coppers come to stir up more shit about the Maggie Campbell shooting...perhaps you should have a talk with Maggie’s sister Libby...she’s driving into town right this minute. The dirty 4WD with that double wheelbase trailer... *‘come to drop off some hay, I’d say’* an old bloke on the next table mumbled. *‘You want a talk to her as she’ll set you straight’.* As though he held all the answers to the town’s mysteries.

We followed the combo until it took a left turn to go into the rear of the local General Store/Farm Supplies and Produce Barn. It was no Bunnings!

“What do you think?” I asked Sophie softly.

“Never a better chance I reckon...she’ll be out of her comfort zone and not expecting us...and Joe, I don’t remember her being interviewed as I’m sure it wasn’t mentioned in those Investigation Folders though she had plenty to say to one of the Journalists of the local Paper...that was a telling story that was never followed up by the local coppers”.

“They already had their man...sorry...woman”.

“Yeah, you’re right...okay, let’s do it...” She had a quiver in her voice that reminded me of Shelley when we were close to the end of an investigation...Sophie loves that stage as Shelley had.

I stood, zippered up my Bomber jacket, checked the fly on my jeans and took our empty mugs and plates into the Café interior. I had to step lively to catch up to Sophie. Drawing alongside her a little out of breath, I managed to get words out mixed in with heavy breathing. I had to get a check-up when I hit home as this out of breath too easily was starting to worry me.

“Change of heart, eh? You’re up to the hunt?”

“Mmm...I thought about all the stuff last night...yer know, what you said about the Case...I thought about it a lot! It’s crazy logic but you make sense in a roundabout way...somehow. Have all your other partners told you that you looked at things in an unusual way that was not like us normal people?”

“They...um...they may have hinted at it...not as bluntly as you have just stated but yes...though I still think myself as one of the normal people...you know? Not a crazy, off my head twit which others may think”.

“This habit of yours to want to peruse newspapers of the time...it’s not mentioned in any of the lessons on being a Dee...”

“There you go...you’ve learnt a valuable lesson, huh? And our chat with Maisy the other day was a highlight of being here in town...that’s not mentioned in Dee classes either...what a beautiful old country lady she is...a real pleasure to have spent time with her...that’s something we’ll treasure for a lifetime. What do you reckon?”

Sophie glanced up at me, yes written on her face along with a huge smile.

“You’re right Joe. You taught me a lesson not highlighted in any of the Detective Grade lessons at the Academy...”

We crossed the road and almost ran into the woman. She was unmistakably Maggie's younger sister.

"I got a call from one of the oldies who spends a lot of his time sitting in the sun...and watching the passing parade...not much of it what with the Covid shit...you looking for me? You're the two city coppers creating shit around these parts for the past week or two..."

"Yes..." I showed her my ID Card and badge. Sophie did likewise.

"Is there somewhere we can talk...in private?" I asked, scratching my ear, and waving away a cloud of flies.

"Yeah...yers have a choice. The Police Station, the old Court House or down beside the river...take your pick".

Straight away I saw the same self-confidence of her sister shining through. She spoke with a smile on her face as though there was something funny in the whole thing.

"Um...I'll get us some water, get me dog and let them know they can move me rig when they unload the hay..."

We watched her as she walked away, going up to a young bloke who was about to climb onto a Forklift. He nodded his head, looked up at us standing on the corner as Libby disappeared into the interior of the shop. She came out holding three large water bottles with her dog trailing behind her. An old Kelpie that still had alert eyes. Erect ears. It kept pace with her, heeling as she came back up to us though he hobbled, his back legs and both hips giving him heaps.

"I ran over him a long time ago...since then he has become my dog...I should put him down as he is in pain, but..." She muttered, again a smile on her face.

We didn't say much but followed her across the road and down a side street. We could see the river in the distance, the banks heavily wooded. I groaned as it was about 200 metres away.

"C'mon old man...a walk will do you good..." Sophie smiled, Libby joining in.

We picked a heavy timber picnic table and bench seats that gave views upriver, the current slow, the water muddy. The trees almost smiling having lost that forlorn, hangdog, dusty appearance that they get when there is little water or rain about.

“Isn’t it fantastic to see the Murrumbidgee flowing again...full bank to bank. You wouldn’t believe that it was only early this year there was bugger all water in the bed...waterholes that weren’t joined up...maybe a trickle...now look at it...beautiful”. She turned to me as she opened a bottle of water. “Okay, what do you want from me?”

“A few questions if we can...”

She nodded slightly.

“Is this where I should ask if I need my Solicitor presence?” She asked. Laughter in her voice.

She wasn’t taking this seriously.

“It’s up to you...if you feel more comfortable with him present, then we will organise another time...”

She looked upriver, a frown as she shaded her eyes from the strong morning sun. Thought about it.

“No...it’s cool”. A smile...she was over-confident. Good...many a felon was tripped up by his own self-confidence...it was something I could dig into.

“Um...we were ordered to re-investigate your sister’s arrest, charge, court proceedings and sentencing in her alleged shooting to death of her partner...this because of that TV program...did you see it?”

She nodded, looking at me with clear eyes. She swept her long hair to one side of her shoulders as there was a wind blowing from upriver. Her hair whipped into her face at every gust of wind. She turned into the wind and caught her hair, holding it over her shoulder as she worked a scrunchy over the ponytail, taking it from her wrist.

“Yeah, I watched it...full of bullshit, much the same as Barry Grieves himself. He was a bastard, but I don’t think I need to tell you that! He deserved to die! His continued abuse of Maggie was terrible...why she hung in there is beyond me...” This spat out. “And the fact that the local coppers turned a blind eye to his abuse is a worrying aspect...”

“Why do you say that?”

“You’ve checked the whole thing, haven’t you? He was bashing the tripe out of Maggie...and it was getting worse...but stupidly, she wouldn’t leave him...I still can’t understand why as

she was such a strong person...yer know? I reckon he was supplying the town and was being protected by one or two coppers so they didn't want to upset the milk cart".

"I understand your father was a violent man... he was shot to death...by a shooter lying in wait six hundred metres from the target so I have been told...shot in the chest...which was very ample but that doesn't detract from such a top notch shot...the murder never solved...you had recently got your driver's license at the time...but you were never interviewed, were you?"

She frowned looking at me as though I was a strange specimen under glass, worthy of a peek now and again. There was a sudden flitter across her eyes...of panic. The realisation blanched her face of colour.

"Yeah...nah...the cops never came near me...he was a vile man especially when he had a skinful...we didn't see him much thank God! Two...three months a year as he had a couple of shearing mobs, and he was away most of the time organising them..."

Her dog whimpered and sat up on the seat beside her...Libby patted his ear. I had this feeling he knew what was happening and in his own indomitable way, he was trying to warn her...a loving dog whose true age confirmed by the grey hair around his muzzle though his eyes were clear with not a cataract spot in sight...and his ears still stood erect and inquisitive with them twisting about.

"Good money..."

"Yeah, it was! Especially after he died, and we went through his stuff...it got me the property up the Urana Road...things were settled on the property in the middle of the drought back eight...nine years ago. The Owner had had enough of the boom and bust and was tiring badly...their kids had left to try their luck in the big city...like a lot of Cockies out this way they were old...and tired...we settled well before the rains came...a lucky break that's for sure".

"Your property? It is further along the Urana Road, yes? Further along the road than that allotment where Maggie lived with Grieves?"

"Yeah..."

"Mmm..." I was silent for a while, partly as a ploy to hopefully get her worried. Off balanced. "Mmm...I understand Maggie purchased that allotment...thirty hectares after the owners subdivided to rid themselves of that bit of land that they must have thought was a weight around

their neck. She purchased it while she was in the clink...I presume it may have been you who told her of the sub-division..."

"Yeah..." She nodded for further effect. She was uncertain of the direction I was leading her.

"Don't you find it strange that your sister would do that? You know, want to buy it as that is where she shot Barry Grieves...at the home gate?"

She looked up at me then turned her head to look upriver. She shrugged her shoulders not sure how to offer an opinion.

"Arrh...um...had a problem with the police of the time not being able to locate the rifle your sister used to shoot her partner...where could she have stashed it? They say beside the road somewhere...but you people don't disrespect your firearms like that. Same as you'd never leave one of your dogs beside the road...it just couldn't happen. And I find it difficult to think that she wasn't seen by the several cop cars speeding out to the scene. They'd have to have gone past her...she supposedly drove quickly into town after she shot the man". I scratched my head and pulled at my earlobe. "Arrh...having driven over that road several times while we've been here, there was not one spot where she could have stopped and hidden from the cop cars coming towards her...I suppose she could have driven towards your property further along the Urana Road...but then that didn't leave her enough time to be noticed in town...that is one of the many things that don't add up".

I again let the silence unnerve the young woman. Her ready smile was no longer noticeable.

"Could it be that Maggie was already in town and it was you who fired those shots at Grieves. You then high-tailed it back to your place which none of the official vehicles coming up from Jerilderie would have seen...what worried me was that if your sister had done the deed, she *would have had to* pass those cop cars driving in the opposite direction...the other thing...no-one found the rifle used...would you still own a Remington 700 Repeater? Could the shell markings and firing pin markings match? Hmm? That rifle is still in your care...the local coppers have approved the Gun Cupboard where that plus other long guns are kept...under lock and key...it must have worried you a bit when they last came to look over your gun cupboard...mmm? Their annual check-up of where and how guns are stored in farmhouses".

She glanced at me before lowering her head. She sniffled, wiped her nose then cuddled into her dog.

"Do you expect your sister to join you once she has done her parole period?"

“Dunno...we haven’t spoken about it...I’m the country girl whereas Mags I think, would be more comfortable in a big city...I think the wide open spaces would be hard for her after spending so much time in a bloody small prison cell...she didn’t like it at all...I think that’s why she did so many things while she was inside...to keep her mind off that small bloody cell”. A smile came and went quickly.

“There were rumours your hubby was a bit loose with his fists...put you visiting the Medical Centre here in town a few times...and a visit to Wagga Wagga Base Hospital on another occasion”.

“Ha...yeah. He was...yeah...I straightened him out. Scared the bejeezus out of him when I threatened him with the same punishment as what Maggie had dealt out to Grieves...he’s been behaving himself and has got off the grog...it was the drought that played on him...like so many others who still have mental things going on...he’s pretty good now...he rarely drinks and when he does, it isn’t to excess...”.

I looked over at her. She was an attractive woman, more so than her sister. I glanced at the languid waters of the river. A Swallow of some sort buzzed the water surface chasing small insects only it could see.

“Were you ever interviewed by the local cops about the shooting? Grieves’ death? Your opinion on whether you thought your sister had done the deed?”

“No...a bit queer I always thought, but why would I be interviewed?”

I shrugged my shoulders and smiled at her.

“Do you think Maggie may have taken the fall for some-one? You know in shooting her partner?”

She bowed her head, looking down at the crazes in the timber top of the table. Followed these small grooves made by wood worm with her finger. She remained silent.

“You know, there is a belief amongst some townsfolk that she took the fall for Brimmer...”

“Carl Brimmer!?” She looked up at me, that smile again making her an attractive young woman. “No...not on...he is a legend only in his own mind...he’s a loser with a capital L...he tried to get onto me...after I was married, would you believe. Saying I was a better looker than Maggie...I told him I was and if he ever tried again, I’d slice his balls off...he’s stayed well clear of me since then”.

“Then who...there’s not that many alternatives...perhaps...maybe you?” I exclaimed. My eyebrows raised, eyes wide open and a smirk on my face wanting it to be half a joke.

She lowered her head, her hair falling either side of her face as the ponytail had come loose. Her features hidden by the veil of hair...a warm honey blond-haired person that was a family trait...even her mother had been so blessed.

She began to sob quietly.

“Me?” She croaked. “What makes you say that?”

“You’re a good shot...better than your sister especially over long target distances. The shooter lay in waiting for a while knowing Grieves would come home. He’d been in town selling a bit of grass...a couple tabs of ice...could have been picking up his mail from the Post Office maybe...four hundred and ten metres...a shot just left of centre in his chest...a death shot...an exceptional series of shots. Maggie wasn’t that good, but you are...”

“She confessed...she’s done the time...” Her head still down. “I can’t see why this is being turned over again...most of us are sick and tired of it...”

“What do you think of these ‘drive-byes’ that have occurred recently around the district...two targets could have so easily died and they’ve both spent some time in Hospital...both still in hospital as a matter of fact...”

“Who? Brimmer and that lousy Solicitor who defended Mags...the world would be a better place without them...you can say what you like but I didn’t shoot them...what! Why would I?”

“That’s a bit rough, don’t you think? Unless you were the shooter...that young Solicitor...he did good as Maggie’s sentence was less because of the strategy he used...he was almost imprisoned himself and could have easily been disbarred. As it was, the trial was too much for him and he suffered a mental breakdown. According to him, he’s just getting back on his feet...but this recent shooting of him could cause him to relapse...a fair chance I reckon...the shooter doesn’t realise the damage that shot may have caused”.

There was silence as she held her head in her hands, her elbows on the tabletop.

“So...it still has nothing to do with me...” The tone of her voice different...she was confident in rejecting her involvement in those shootings as opposed to her tone when we were talking of the Grieves shooting death.

“We had an interesting conversation with Maisy Barthelemy...remember her? She did a beautiful story on you going back after your sister was charged with the crime...the young sister who adored her older sister...yeah...last week we sat with her...she stated she always thought you were the guilty party with Maggie covering for you...you had the farm...sure, it was parched dry back then, but your husband needed you...you were the strong one...Maggie didn't have any strings attached...funny eh?”

She brushed the hair from her face as she looked up at me, tears in her eyes. Her nose red and dripping.

“You reckon I'm guilty, huh?” She looked guilty. “Maybe...”

She was challenging me, but I doubted she would win...instead she'd fall in a heap...she was close to that.

“A good sister and she didn't waste her time while she was inside...they wanted her to stay...they considered her a teacher they didn't need to pay a weekly wage”.

“That'd be Maggie...always the organiser...”

“She assured you she could get off if she admitted to the shooting...on the ‘Battered Wives’ Syndrome’ Defence, but it was removed from the Statute some years before that...she was given bad advice...by Brimmer I think. He wanted the end of Maggie as he was becoming involved with a nurse that had just hit town...yeah, you're right...he is a loser...not a nice man at all”.

I looked out at the timbered banks and the muddy water slowly passing us. Let out a sigh as I dropped my sunglasses over my eyes. I was looking at the top of Libby's head. She again had placed the scrunchy around her wrist, her hair wafting about in the strong breeze.

“She took the rap...didn't say a word...done good for herself by not wasting her time inside...a bloody good sister I reckon”.

“Yeah...yer right...a bloody good sister”.

“A shame really as she will forfeit her parole period, instead serving the time out in the clink...plus an additional period for lying under oath. The Judiciary don't take kindly to people who lie under oath during Court time...” Took a squig of water ensuring I placed the bottle back onto the table in the same spot. The condensation forming the water mark ring on the table.

“You?”

I looked over at her still bowed head, her long hair shielding her face though I could still hear her sobs. She sniffled using a balled-up tissue to wipe her nose and her eyes.

“Guarantee you will get a longer sentence than your sister for the same crime. That no good young Solicitor did do good by his client...and the recent drive-byes? I’m sure they weren’t your doing...but your father’s death? Reckon they will reinvestigate his death. ...if I were you, I’d give serious thought to what Courses you may take to pass away your time...if you are better than your sister...”

“Am...hands down...” She softly commented, casually rubbing the dog’s scalp. He looked as though he was smiling, giving in to the euphoric treatment like a more than satisfied dog!

She suddenly sat up, grabbing her hair to corral it once again in the scrunchy. She wiped her eyes and blew her nose, tossing the tissue into a nearby Garbage Bin. She cleared her throat and looked steadily at me.

“Detective? I know what you are trying to do...since Maggie was arrested, I have lived with the guilt of wanting...understand? Wanting to shoot the AO myself. If we had the time over, I would do it before Mags did...I did not shoot the AO, Detective. Mags shot him and paid the price...which is now over...”

She glanced up the river, breathing deeply the odours from the river and the tree canopy above us. The wind had decreased to a gentle breeze.

“Is there anything else? If not, I must get back to the farm...we are starting to douse our small flock of breeding sheep this afternoon...a big job that I need to help with...we got two thousand to dip...a bugger of a job but it must be done...a good morning to you, Detectives”.

She stood, clicking fingers for the dog to follow her as she strode purposefully up to the road and very quickly was lost to sight.

“That went well, don’t you think?” I asked my young partner. “What we have is circumstantial evidence and a load of maybes and perhaps...all either pointing to Maggie Campbell’s guilt...or innocence. Ditto Libby, her sister. Take your pick!”

“Circumstantial evidence and a lot of gut feelings. What do we do now?”

I peered around at the lush grass in need of a mow as I noticed a small Tractor/Mower further along the parkland.

“Let’s get out of here before we lose our toes...” I stood and stretched. “Fuck!!” I yelled, knowing we had just lost this one. I was so sure we had her, but she gathered herself, knowing full well we didn’t have enough to arrest her on. We were looking to have her implicate herself...we had her I felt sure, until she confidently called our bluff. Not challenging us as she sensed that would be the wrong way to go...but instead, walking away sure of herself.

Bugger!

Our Report?

Margaret Heather Campbell had been found guilty of the shooting death of her partner at the time of the Trial. While discrepancies existed and were high-lighted during this revised investigation, they did proffer unsubstantiated evidence where there was insufficient proof to over-rule the original finding.

After two full days and most of one night, both Sophie and I were pleased to have completed the fifty-four-page report on the Grieves homicide. We completed a two-page precis that would be attached to the report with both of our signatures, grading, and official badge number. Most would read that instead of slogging through the rest of the tome.

While I was more than satisfied with our efforts, there were several points that would always cause me pain at the most inopportune moments.

- (a) The rifle used for the killing was never found though we had a fair idea where it was...so did the local coppers but they never added two plus two.
- (b) Because of the bullets removed from Grieves body, it was suggested the rifle used was a Remington 700 Repeater with Win bullets.
- (c) While the position of the shooter was located beyond doubt because of the amount of GSR on nearby surfaces, no empty shells were recovered from that location suggesting the shooter was ultra-careful picking them all up before leaving the scene.
- (d) The expertise of the two sisters was easily discovered. While Maggie was a proficient target shooter, her younger sister was so much better.
- (e) It was easier for Libby to fire the shots then escape up the road to her residence than for Maggie to do the crime and then speed into town.
- (f) To suggest that the shooter could drive towards town without being spotted by the number of official drivers heading towards the crime scene seemed to me to be a preposterous situation. Maggie Campbell’s, as is the case of most or all the vehicles in town, was easily identifiable by the local officers...they *must* have passed the

vehicle in their race to the crime scene...they *must* have if Maggie Campbell committed the homicide shooting!

After dilly-dallying all day and sleepless nights abounding, we boarded the train at Griffith to head back to Sydney. The status quo would remain, and Margaret Heather Campbell would complete her parole period and disappear.

Her last sighting was on a horse, droving a thousand steers or more from the Queensland border down to Cobar in central NSW. The partner of a middle-aged bloke who owned a Cattle Station in southern Queensland and across the border into NSW. It was said there were several youngsters also sitting on horses at the rear of the mob...his by a former marriage? Whose to know...

Pcb 18/08/2021

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