

A Reunion of Strangers

By

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Sample Chapter

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Prologue

The cell door closed with a weighty clang, then the lock went home with the finality of a Dickensian judge passing the death sentence. A half dozen breaths later, the single bulb went out, and I was left with the blackness and the silence.

When locked in a prison cell, most people would spend the night afraid, terrified, every noise amplified, their fears compounded by their unknown future. In the darkness, they see themselves surrounded by ghosts, beasts and fantastical monsters hungering for their blood and bone.

As a ragged boy, I'd seen the wrong side of a cell door many times and took the slamming of the door and the lock sliding home as a challenge.

The long hours of the night were precious to me. It gave me time to think and importantly, more importantly, time to plan ...

Chapter 1

'She's dead,' Sergeant Richard "Tut" Bryant said and thrust a stick of gum into his mouth between yellow and silver teeth. I watched him, imagining a cow, laying under the cooling shade of a spreading eucalypt tree, in the long grass by a cooling river contentedly masticating, its eyes empty of all thought. Masticating seemed the right word. Tut was blessed with a Cro-magnon jaw that neatly matched the rest of his plump and veined face. The "Tut" came from the sound he made as his teeth molested the gum. The continuous sound drove some men crazy.

Tut's hair was like the grass in my father's backyard at our place out west in winter, clumpy and growing at all angles. A bad haircut two weeks wouldn't fix.

'The bullet hole in the middle of her forehead give it away?' I was tempted to say.

He might get it, but I kept silent. A woman lying dead on a lonely hidden beach on the Hawkesbury river was no laughing matter for one. For another, the dead woman was Erin Chelmsford. We had a past, I owed her.

'What the fuck's she doing here?' I asked.

'Not much,' Tut replied.

As you might guess, I'd been saddled with Tut and, despite his age, was attempting to make a useful detective out of him.

'SOCO been through?' I asked. There were footprints all over the sand.

'Yeah. The coroner's got a boat coming along. Using the Water Cops.'

I eased down onto the side of the boat and then jumped onto the sand, hearing the soft crunch of my shoes. I'd managed to land just above the waves. I didn't want my shoes or pants to get wet, though I'd still have to get back on board. Tut followed. His cursing and the sound of soft splashes suggested he'd timed it wrong.

I moved around to Erin's head and looked down at her face. She was lying on her back, her feet towards the river, her head like an arrow at the bush. As there were no footsteps coming out of the bushes, I assumed she had travelled here by boat. It appeared at first blush that she'd been shot just after she'd gotten off a boat, just as she'd turned around. I also assumed whoever had taken her out had not landed on the beach but fired from the boat, and Erin had fallen backwards to land on the sand where and how she was.

Two Water cops guarded the beach and kept gawkers away, not that there were any as yet. Too early. Later, as the word got out, reporters would hire boats, TV stations would launch their choppers, and the place would be a noisy hive. I wanted Erin gone by then.

'Do we have a time of death?' I asked, looking at Tut.

Tut looked at his notepad, flipping over a page or two.

'Too early,' Tut said, working at his gum. 'But they're guessing 7 a.m.'

'What time was she found?'

'7 a.m.,' Tut said. 'Fishing boat coming back.'

'So sometime before 7 a.m.?'

'Probably.'

'Probably. Amateur or professional?' I asked.

'Amateur or professional what, gov?'

His face was scrunched, like a used tissue, wrinkled in thought.

'Fishermen. Was he a professional in a trawler?'

'Cabin cruiser makes him Semi-Pro,' he laughed at that. Semi-Pro was the name of an old movie. 'We got his details.'

'Has he been interviewed?'

'Thought you'd like to do that,' Tut said.

'So, he's gone?'

'Yep, but we got his details.'

I searched Erin's face. I'd known her so well, the cascade of her hair that settled on the curved sweep of her shoulders, how lively were her eyes, the way she spoke. She had a beguiling way of speaking, teasing, playful when she wanted to engage with someone. Cold, sharp and cutting, a cup filled to the brim with cruelty when I'd given her an assignment for my MBA I'd not worked on hard enough.

The dead have a fascination. It's as if their humanity had been stripped from them along with their lives. The body is still, too still, like a doll, but the body isn't a doll. Erin looked not serene nor at peace. There was no expression of fear on her face or in her eyes. She was a woman who had simply stopped. Frozen in the moment forever.

Erin had always been a vivacious woman. A woman who stood out amongst models, her eyes gave her away, the intelligence there. Erin learnt quickly, was a far better judge of character than I'd ever been and had a passion to succeed. These qualities drove men to choose her when she was a prostitute and encouraged them to visit Erin's girls when she opened her own place.

Her hair had been mussed or not combed this morning, which was unusual for her.

'See her hair?' I asked.

'Yeah, we checked. It aint dyed,' Tut said.

I groaned silently.

'It's a mess. She didn't have a chance to brush it recently. Maybe she was caught unawares. She had to have been forced to come here.'

'Maybe,' Tut said, tutting with his gum.

'Any sign of a gun? A shell casing?'

It was a faint hope, I knew.

'We had a bit of a search but got nothing. Hey ... Did you know her?'

'Erin Chelmsford.'

His eyes flickered briefly, then he snapped his fingers.

'Really? Hey Chelmsford. She aint ...'

'Bernard 'Burns' Chelmsford's daughter.'

'Well, blow me down!' Tut said. 'They only put the poor bastard in the ground yesterday. Did you go?'

'Yes. I saw her there.'

'Jeez!' Tut said. 'Christ, and she gets hit the next day. Bugger!'

Her arms lay roughly by her side the way they had fallen on the sand as she fell to the sand. The same with her legs which meant she hadn't been disturbed.

'It was an execution,' I said.

'Bugger!'

I pulled out my phone and took a couple of pictures, feeling how macabre it was. I can't remember how long I stood there looking down at her. Tut had wandered off, probably to chat with the other cops. I'd known her so long, well, when I was a greenie, my uniform still had its new smell. I remember the moment we first met, the exact moment. Because that moment changed the trajectory of my life and for the better. I sometimes wondered what my life would have been like if I'd not met her. I'd always believed I'd end up a crusty old desk sergeant crossing off the days till my super came due. Like Tut. Maybe, maybe not. But she gave me unstintingly of her time and experience, despite being a madam and the way cops treated her, and she helped me get to the top. Youngest Detective Super in the state, the country. It wasn't her fault I'd pissed it all away. But then I'd climbed back up, with the help of another woman, and was back; money in the bank, new mansion down Manly way, and an open road for my career.

I became aware of a few strong words, a couple of "Yeah, Ok's", then noticed a pair of shoes beside me. I knew the place in Rome they were made.

‘What are you doing back in Australia, John?’ I asked, then looked up into his troubled brown eyes.

John Rooklyn had put on a little weight. Italian pasta must agree with him. He’d learnt how to dress, meaning his suit was handmade, bought from a little alley shop that you heard of by word of mouth only.

‘I should have been here,’ he said. ‘I asked her not to come.’

He looked down at Erin, his jaw working. I knew the man well enough to sense his pain.

‘What happened?’ I asked.

‘You finished?’ he asked.

I scanned the area. There wasn’t much to Croppy beach. Vaguely coat hanger shaped, about sixty metres wide and twenty deep. Enclosed by bush, the only way to get here was by boat or hike from the hill above through the bush. Erin didn’t come that way. The beach looked southwest across Broken Bay to Kur-ring-gai National Park. Normally a lovely sight. Today day, it was a lonely place to die. Someone had gone to a lot of trouble to transport her here, then kill her.

Which brought me back to her dress. A strange outfit. Nothing Erin would typically wear. Made of red satin, ankle length with folds of red and white satin down the front, like the petals of a carnation.

I looked back at John.

‘Yes.’

‘Can we get out of here?’

I looked down at Erin once more, then over at Tut.

‘Sure. Hey Tut,’ I called.

Tut lumbered over to us and stood on the other side of Erin’s body. We made a strange sight; John and I in our Italian suits and corporate shirt and ties, Tut, in his brown sports jacket, missing a button on the front, fade white shirt, with the tie undone, black pants that struggled at the waist. His belt had nearly given up.

‘Yeah, gov?’

‘Wait for the coroner. Make sure they treat Erin with respect. Then start the paperwork. We’re taking this one.’

‘Gov? I thought Homicide’d run this case?’

I shook my head firmly.

‘Our group takes on the odd, the strange and the jobs no one wants,’ I said, struggling to keep the emotion out of my voice, and looked around at the wide Hawkesbury river, the mangrove trees and the rising bush leading to the tall hills behind. ‘Can you think of anything odder than this?’

‘Righto, gov,’ Tut said and heard the doubt in his voice.

‘If Gregson gives you any heat, tell him to call me. When I get back, I’ll give the boss a call and make it legal.’

‘Righto, boss.’

‘And put a rocket under SOCO and the coroner. I want their reports yesterday.’

‘As you say, gov.’

I followed Rooklyn over to his waiting water taxi. He leapt nimbly onto the boat. I somehow managed to get my shoes and pants splashed. As the taxi took off, the engine roaring away and a strong wake and turbulent water behind us, my mind conjured up Erin again. The dress she’d been wearing was quality material, clearly heavy by the way it lay. A fussy dress, the kind an actor might wear on the stage, or the costume of a Dance Hall girl in an old Western.

‘A statement,’ I said to John above the engines. ‘A definition of what she’d been: a prostitute and a madam. Maybe to force her into a role. Maybe to take away her power. Still too early, though.’

We rode the way in silence, the water taxi bouncing over the low rolling waves that came in from the Pacific. I couldn’t get the image of Erin out of my mind. I felt a lump at the back of my throat and a blackness like a wall closing in on me. I couldn’t have talked, even if I’d wanted to. I owed Erin everything but lost track of her as I’d climbed the pole. Guilt cut into me like a dagger. Could I, should I, have prevented this? And what was this, Erin’s murder? A serial at work, a casual killer, or something, someone else?

We alighted at the marina in Berowra Waters. The café was open, so we hopefully tried the coffee. Hope springs eternal.

It was warm enough for July on the beach under the fresh blue sky, but here, under the café building’s eaves on the narrow walk, it was cold. A chill, darting breeze didn’t help.

Our table sat above the waters of the marina. In front of us, a couple of million dollars danced and snubbed at their moorings, reflecting the sunlight around us. Unfortunately, our table had an umbrella giving unwanted shade.

The café faced the ferry that catered for the river. Around the corner was a small chandler. On the first floor was a restaurant, above that a carpark.

I breathed in air laden with the scent of brine, dead fish, machine oil, eucalyptus, burnt coffee and hot fat.

I put my cup down and stared at Rooklyn and asked, ‘Tell me why you’re back here?’

He sipped, and it was a mark of how much he’d changed that he put his cup down and pushed it away.

‘I tried to persuade her not to come.’

‘You knew where she lived?’ I asked. I’d lost track. It had been many years.

‘Me and her dad. He asked me to keep an eye out for her. And when I moved to Italy, I popped over every few months.’

‘Where was she based?’ I asked

He looked a little surprised.

‘She’d bought this little chateau in the south of France. You’d never been?’

‘We lost contact once I started moving up. Then I heard she’d left Australia.’

‘That’s one thing I got right,’ John said. ‘After the death threats started coming, I managed to persuade her to leave. She loved her girls and her clients, and she missed her dad. I saw her a couple of weeks ago when I heard he was checking out.’

Cancer. Burn had been a pack a day man all his adult life.

‘... told her not to go to the funeral ...’

‘I saw her there.’

‘Yes?’

I’d arrived late. It was a dull, overcast day, cold. Those present were mainly old friends, which meant old cops. An Erin. A lonely island.

‘I tried offering police protection.’

‘You knew about the death threats?’ He asked.

‘Found out at the funeral. She laughed and knocked it back, right?’

I saw the irony.

‘With her past “relationships” with cops. I wasn’t too surprised. It was the least I could do.’

‘You got that right.’

His face was a rigid mask but then dissolved into sadness.

‘I wanted to be here, but we’re selling the business, and I had to be in Rome.’

‘You couldn’t cage her,’ I said. Erin ran her own world. You didn’t tell her what to do.

Rooklyn stared out over the yachts moored in the marina and watched the ferry as it chugged between the constrictions of its guiding wire ropes back and forth across the water.

‘You know Burn wanted to open a restaurant when he handed in his cards,’ he said.

I’d known of Bernard Chelmsford, not known him. A cop with a madam for a daughter was too much to let run by, so the boys arranged these raids on her place – just a joke, a running gag – and I, as green as freshly laid grass, was roped in on one of them.

‘Great cook. I worked under him just before I went into drugs and got my sergeants. He taught me what it meant to be a cop. Put a word in for me. I promised him, I owe him.’

Cops take personnel debts seriously. I knew what was coming next.

‘I want in. I want to get the bastard who did this.’

There was no need to tell him to do it by the book.

‘I can bring you on as a CD,’ I offered. That is Consulting Detective. They were a big thing these days.

I wondered if he’d get the irony. You’d have to read the previous volume of my memoir, “The Shadow of an Absent Man”, to get what I’m talking about. The slight raising of the corners of his lips told me he did.

‘Thanks,’ he said, looking back at me.

‘Better than having you and my people falling over each other.’

He laughed humourlessly.

‘What are you getting for the business,’ I asked.

‘About ten. That and the investments should see us through.’

‘See you through?’ I asked.

Now his smile was genuine as if he saw something or someone special in his mind’s eye.

‘It’s been what? Three years?’

‘Near four,’ I said.

‘Four? Time flies. We’re selling up and moving to England, so I can do my PhD at the University of East Devon.’

I noticed the way he spelled out the last bit as if he was sending out a message.

‘It’s been a while,’ I said. ‘What’s going on.’

‘Once the business was up and running, it pretty much took care of itself. I was at a bit of a loose end. To be honest, Nicky did most of the work. And she encouraged me to study.’

I could almost guess his major.

‘Distance, through the Open University.’

‘Your major?’ I asked.

‘Medieval History, specialising in the Arthurian legends.’

I couldn’t hold back a grin.

‘And your PhD?’

‘Figures of the Arthurian Myths, with a special focus on ...

‘iMorgan of the Silver Lake. You can’t leave it alone, can you?’

He looked at the ferry on the far shore once more and said, ‘Nicky’s pregnant.’

The change of subject derailed me for a moment, and his hangdog face didn’t help. I realised, though, what I’d taken for the reluctance to bear the burden of a new human, of suddenly becoming a father, was, in fact, a concern, real worry to him.

‘Great! Congratulations!’ I said, but by his expression was driven to ask, ‘Is there a problem?’

‘She’s never been pregnant before.’

‘So? What do the doctors say?’

‘She’s just fine. The baby’s just fine.’

‘There you go. Why worry. There has to be a first time for all women. Women have been having babies for ...’

‘No, you don’t get it,’ he said. ‘She’s never been through anything like this before. Anything.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘There’s never been anyone like her before.’

I couldn’t hold back a wide grin.

All expectant fathers get the first-time jitters.

‘John, it’s ok’

‘No, you don’t get it ... Never mind. How’s that house of yours. You’d just renovated last time.’

‘Long gone.’

‘Hadn’t you just moved in?’ he asked.

‘Too small,’ I said.

‘It was a mansion,’ Rooklyn said.

‘Only five bedrooms,’ I replied. ‘Six if you count the office.’

Helen’s business had grown so much that it had reached the stage if she wanted to work from home, she’d need a proper office. Helen was very family orientated. It was important to her, to both of us, really, to have someone at home for the kids of an afternoon. I’d been a latch key kid, so I knew where she was coming from. So, the hunt was on for a bigger place. We settled on a house on the northern slopes of Manly. Only seven bedrooms, but all the rooms were larger, and it sported a two-car garage. One of the selling points for Helen was the basement. Few houses these days had them. When I’d returned the previous Saturday from a seminar in Hawaii, I found the extra room her friends in the ‘Game’ had added down there.

‘... Helen has an office of her own now, so she can run the business from home and be there when the kids finish school. As much as she can.’

‘What kind of business is it?’ he asked.

That was always a hard question to answer, but I had my reply ready.

‘It’s an online shop, makes it easier to run off-site. There’s the warehouse and a few staff.’

He seemed satisfied. He looked back at the ferry, then down the river the way we’d returned.

‘Murder’s your game,’ he said, ‘not mine. How’re you going to run this?’

We had processes in place.

‘First off, we have a regular team meeting on Mondays. I’ll get my people to question everyone at the funeral.’

‘Mostly cops,’ he said.

‘Mostly, and their wives. Maybe one of them had an old grudge. You know cops as well as I do. I’ll get the team moving on that.’

‘Ok.’

‘Any leads on who was threatening her?’ I asked. ‘Was it any of her enemies from the old days? I’d put money on it that it’s an old client.’

‘She kept that part of her life close,’ he replied. ‘I knew she’d been threatened by the whispers I’d picked up on the streets and from her dad. I put it to her, did she have any idea who, could she point me at anyone, but she wouldn’t say. I realised later she only took the plane to France for the adventure. I went to her place to try and persuade her to miss the funeral’

He gestured with his open hands.

‘Why do you think it was a client?’ he asked.

‘Most likely. Erin would have been made to dress up in that costume. I’d say an ex-client trying to demean her, drive home he was superior to her. A “Something-in-the-city” type while she was just a lowly prostitute. She was taken from somewhere, taken somewhere where there was a boat, landed on that beach and shot. Orchestrated. Do you know where in Sydney she was living?’

He shook his head.

‘Besides you, anybody else knew she was back?’ I asked.

He opened his arms wide, then dropped them on the table.

‘Cathie Garrity called me. They had coffee. But Erin could have called anyone. She loved her girls, and there were some special clients. God knows.’

‘Do you know when she landed?’ I asked.

‘Early July. She called me in mid-June saying she’d received a letter from her dad, telling her he was dying of cancer but for her to stay in France. I knew she’d want to fly over, so I visited her towards the end of June. I thought I’d convinced her to stay in France. Then I hear from Cathie she’d landed. I got in this morning.’

‘Do you think this Cathie might know anything?’

‘Didn’t seem to. We could try again?’

‘Right. On Monday, I’ll get the team to check with Border Force to find out when she landed and if she took a taxi and where to. With luck, someone might remember her.’

I thought for a moment before I made the offer, I really should have passed it by Helen first. I knew how much she’d hate having to delay her playtime, and this case could take weeks to crack, maybe months.

‘Have you got somewhere to stay?’ I asked.

‘Thanks,’ he said. ‘I’ve kept the old place. The agent had emailed me that the tenant had moved out, and I told him to hold it. Just in case. After this ... after this, we’re selling.’

‘What do you mean?’ I asked. I’d sensed something in the tone of his voice.

‘It’ll be nice to see the old place again, go through the old memories. But ... Europe is where it’s happening. Nicky wants to raise the family there, and so do I. So we bought a place just outside of Sienna. It’s rundown, and it’ll take years, but it’s a project for me and Nicky’s keen. She wants me to get my doctorate and then back to Italy for the time being.’

‘You any good with hand tools?’ I asked. I wasn’t.

He grinned at me.

‘Worse than useless, unless it’s bike engines. I’m pretty good with motors, and I can transfer the skills. We’re planning on starting around the back first.’ His grin broadened.

‘What about your bikes?’

A wave of melancholy swept through him.

‘I couldn’t let them rust away. Not fair on them. What’s our next move?’

‘Not much over the weekend. I’ll make some calls. Monday, I’ll brief the team, and we start.’

‘Are they any good?’ he asked.

‘Not all of them are like Tut. Sue, young Sue Kellaway, she’ll be a Super one day if no one blocks her path. What are you going to do?’

‘Walks the streets, listen to the whispers, speak to Cathie or anyone else I can find. Get as many of the girls’ names as I can, learn what I can, get any leads.’

‘Ok. But nothing else. You’re not a cop, or a CD yet. We do this together if it’s going to work.’

‘You know me. I’m no rogue. Remember when that bitch shot me ...’

He was talking about Ivana Coshtoff, see ‘The Shadow of an Absent Man’.

‘... and you went after her’ I said.

‘Yep.’

‘I knew I could trust you then. I know I can trust you now. Come to Campbell Street on Monday. 9 a.m. sharp. I’ll head back to the office now and start the paperwork to get you on board.’

‘Monday then.’

We stood and walked to the car park. There was a coroner’s wagon and some cop cars, and a few cops hanging around. The coroner’s boys would be back soon with Erin. I probably should have had a word with the boys there, but they’d be carrying Erin through soon. I think John felt the same. He stooped and we shook hands, and reaching into his pocket, brought out a set of keys and a second later, the hazard lights on a new Ford flashed.

‘Oh,’ I said as I remembered something. ‘I read your novel.’

He paused as he was about to slide onto the seat of his hire car and looked at me. There was a noticeable, almost tactile pause before he answered.

‘It wasn’t a novel,’ he said and climbed into the car, starting the engine, he drove off. Where the car park joined the road, he turned right, which meant he’d have to take the long way around to get to Berowra Vale, to the northeast of us, where his house was. Maybe an hour out of his way.

*

Back at my desk, I looked at my calendar and let out a sigh at all the meetings listed there. Still, I managed to shift a few around for the coming week, then spent the rest of the afternoon playing catch-up with the paperwork. It was my own fault. Hawaii had been worth the effort if we were going to get CRIMES off the ground, and as I’d been a part of the design team and was pushing it, I had to go. This was my second bite of the cherry at being Chief Inspector, and I’d learnt to delegate. Still, I made it harder on myself because I wanted to be on top of my people’s cases, so there was a lot of reading to do.

I nearly forgot to do the paperwork to get John on as a CD. Fortunately, it was now all done online, which helped, and realised I’d forgotten to call the boss to get Erin’s investigation allocated to my team, so I was late leaving. I made two calls: Helen always wanted to be informed if I was going to be late, preferably before I was running late – I got a bit of a cold, ‘Ok’ when she answered the house phone. And the call I should have made earlier to the boss.

‘Dick,’ I said as I manoeuvred my car onto Wattle Street in preparation for the run to the bridge.

‘Ross? What’s up?’

‘There was a murder on the Hawkesbury River this morning’

‘I heard,’ he replied. ‘Burn Chelmsford’s little girl. So very sad. Burn just gone to god too.’

‘I was there. I want the case for my team,’ I said.

‘I was I was thinking of maybe passing it on to Bray’

‘Knox?’

It was always hard for me to keep my temper, not to grind my teeth when I heard that name.

‘Yes, that’s right. He was in here just yesterday saying his boys are looking for work.’

‘This one’s mine, Dick. It’s personal.’

He was silent for a moment. He was thinking exactly what I’d be thinking if the situation was reversed.

‘All the more reason to give it to CI Knox’s team. Homicide is overloaded, so I’m sure they’d be glad to keep it off their books. And your team has a full plate. You knew Burn?’

'No. I knew Erin.'

'Really?'

I saw he was going to go down the wrong track.

'A long time ago. She gave me good advice, told me to do my MBA, taught me how to manage my boss'

I got the laugh I was looking for.

'... but I was never a client, nothing that would embarrass the force.'

'Ok, that's good to hear,' he said in a considered voice, but I knew there was something else coming. 'And his names come up. Bray'll be a Super anytime now. With all the changes ... Well, it's more than likely he could be your boss.'

Now I laughed.

'Two things'll happen in that case, Dick ...'

