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‘Hello, Jane. It’s Eric Ringer.’

Jane stood with her mobile held to her ear.

‘You probably don’t remember me.’

She remembered him very well.

‘It’s probably been twenty years.’

It had been twenty-three.

‘We worked together on the Point Cook shooting.’

How could anyone fail to remember that?

‘Hello, Eric,’ she said at last. ‘I must admit you were the last person I expected to phone. Especially at half past eight on a Friday night. Are you still in Canberra?’

‘No, I came back to be closer to the family. I was happy with the Federal Police, but this Covid thing made travel too hard – and with the ex and the kids still in Melbourne . . . I’m back with Victoria Police again, as Head of Homicide.’

‘So, how can I help you, Eric?’

‘Work, I’m afraid.’

‘Don’t apologise for that.’

‘This one you probably won’t thank me for.’

Which seemed a strange thing for a policeman to say.

'I'm at the crime scene now if you're interested – and available. It's one you should see for yourself. I don't usually say this, but I genuinely don't know where to start.'

'*Something I won't thank you for?*' she said, her imagination already racing. She was at the same time attracted and repelled by the invitation.

'I won't even begin to describe it. If you can come, I'll send a car.'

Jane hung up the phone and got herself ready: a tailored jacket and a plain white shirt; never over-dress for work. She had the lift to herself as she descended from her apartment on the seventh floor. A police car was already waiting outside. Apart from the usual greetings and talk about the weather, she barely spoke to the female constable for the twenty minutes it took to drive to Toorak, nor did she ask anything about the case. Ringer seemed to think it important that she assessed the crime scene, though photographs or first-person accounts usually sufficed. Did she really have to see this for herself?

The memories of the Point Cook shooting came flooding back, the mass killing that had more to do with counselling survivors than solving the crime, though they managed to do that too. It was the first time she and Ringer had met, he a newly minted detective who looked like Hugh Jackman, she only a few years older and comparatively new to forensic psychiatry. She remembered too the New Year's Eve they had spent together, an unexpected digression from the pressures of that particularly distressing case, a sweet moment in time when they both were young and single. Would he remember it as fondly as she? Opening the presents under the Christmas

Tree, her ‘magic trick’ with the champagne, her apartment high above the city, a less luxurious version of the one she had now.

The police car wound around the river and turned up St Georges Road, the houses becoming more opulent as the better-heeled burghers of Melbourne displayed the elegance and acreage their wealth allowed. Police vehicles outside the crime scene announced they had arrived at their destination. In any other suburb, crowds of onlookers would have assembled by now, but not in Toorak. It’s not becoming for the rich to stand and stare.

Jane signed herself in at the gate. The mansion and its expansive gardens were illuminated by a battery of arc lights. She was handed gloves and plastic over-boots and told to stick to the laneway marked by police tape that snaked across the lawn as the driveway was still being checked by forensics. As she approached the house, Ringer was waiting to greet her.

‘Hello, Jane.’

‘Hello, Eric.’ It was good to see him and see that he still looked like Hugh Jackman.

At fifty-three and fifty-seven they had both aged very well: he didn’t have the spread of the usual policeman, nor she any signs she’d surrendered to middle-age. She supposed he could credit his exercise regime; she her mother’s genes.

It was hard not to relive their original meeting all those years ago. Jane had prepared for the dead bodies the Point Cook killer had left in his wake – apart from the last one, the one she’d stumbled upon as she’d pushed through a side door in search of fresh air, heeding too late Ringer’s warning to ‘look away’. You can attend pathology classes over years of university but

you can't unsee what a high-powered rifle can do at close range to the brain, bone and flesh of a living head.

'It's good to see you, Jane.'

'You too.' But she wasn't here to reminisce.

'You need to know that the victim is Nigel Woods and that this is his home.'

'Nigel Woods, the billionaire?'

'The same. I don't know what you'll make of this, Jane. As I said on the phone, I've no idea. If you're ready, I'll take you through.'

Jane nodded, though she wanted to turn and run.

'Walk on the plastic.' Ringer indicated the runner on the floor and opened the door with his gloved hand.

Nigel Woods's house was as much a gallery for his extensive collection of Australian art as it was a home for his family. The vaulted foyer, more than two storeys high, was dominated by a sculpture by Jaroslav Petranovic, *The House of the Stolen*. Jane knew it well. She had been to the launch in Jaroslav's studio, one of the last-remaining Collingwood factories that hadn't been converted into a dwelling. Petranovic had emigrated to Australia from Czechoslovakia in 1971 and had gone on to establish himself as one of its most celebrated sculptors. Embracing the life and culture of his adopted country, Petranovic had learned to believe again. He had not felt that way since he'd been a student during that time of hope they called the Prague Spring, but in Australia, his belief returned: the belief that things could change, the belief that life could be better. He knew what it was like to face the invader. He had suffered dispossession. He had stood arm in arm with his friends when the Russian tanks rolled in, and though he had chosen to flee, he had selected his path

and he knew how it would go: outlaw, exile, refugee. Grateful citizen of a welcoming nation, a nation which at last was facing up to its own transgressions.

Moved by the struggles of Australia's Indigenous people and to show his support for their cause, Jaroslav Petranovic had made *The House of the Stolen*. His inspiration was *The House of the Suicide*, a tribute to Jan Palach, a student who had given his life to protest the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia by setting himself on fire. The sculpture featured a large central spear to represent hope for the future surrounded by smaller spears of declining size to acknowledge the losses of the past.

Like its inspiration, *The House of the Stolen* was tall and majestic and fashioned from steel. It was designed for a public space and the sculptor contented himself with the knowledge it would stand one day in the National Gallery as part of the Nigel and Melissa Woods Bequest, ensuring Nigel – and hopefully Jaroslav Petranovic – would be remembered long after they were dead.

Both men would be remembered all right, but not for the reasons they hoped.

The first thing that caught Jane's eye was a pool of what looked like blood at the base of the sculpture. As she looked up, she saw what she hoped was some kind of macabre installation: the white, waxen figure of a man, the bottom half of his clothes removed, skewered on a spike that ran up through his rectum and out through his neck. But this was no artistic statement about the white invader, no nightmare monument to man's inhumanity. This was utterly and chillingly real. Jane was looking up at the recently deceased body of Nigel Woods, a man who, by the torment still etched on his face, had endured

a slow and agonising death. His knees were spread outwards as if to push back against the pain, his hands open, fingers curled against the direction of his arms. His rigid body hung above her, suspended in time and space, lifeless but alive with his suffering. Though Jane could barely breathe, she could not look away from the horror.

Jesus, Mary and Joseph.

Ringer took Jane through to one of the reception rooms to introduce his team, the distorted figures of Brett Whiteley paintings mute witnesses on the walls. The art was eclectic – Tuck, Shead, Quilty, Petyarre and Mombassa – but there was no time to appreciate any of that. Senior Sergeant Nita Marino, compact and watchful and on the right side of forty, was Ringer's 2IC. She had been promoted to Homicide from the Sexual Victims Unit, where the worst side of human nature was constantly on display. As Marino would say herself, she had seen it all – though nothing at all like this. Sergeant Graeme Gawler, or 'Showbag' to his mates, was fifty, a bulky old-school cop who liked to work on his own. As hard and tough as a cop could be, he was so affected by the body in the other room, he could barely grunt 'Hello'. Senior Detective Raymond Cheung went the other way, with an outpouring of speculation about the crime and the offender until Ringer quietened him down. At twenty-eight, he was the youngest member of the unit, but his IT and technical skills made up for his lack of experience in the field.

'Do we know how the body got there?' asked Jane.

'Well, we know he didn't jump from the landing,' said Ringer as if to eliminate the obvious.

‘We think the perpetrator used the mechanism that lowers and raises the chandelier for cleaning,’ Marino explained. ‘Some kind of harness was attached, we think, then removed to leave the weight of the body to do the rest.’

‘Was the victim conscious at the time?’ asked Jane.

‘That’s yet to be established,’ answered Marino.

‘And the time he took to die?’

‘That too.’

‘Anything else? Any threats or demands?’

‘Nothing as yet.’

‘Family situation?’

‘Happily married,’ said Ringer. ‘The widow is on her way back from their holiday house at Portsea. Woods was supposed to join the family there later this evening. I’ve ordered the body to be removed before she gets here, so this is the last chance for everyone. After this, we’re down to photographs and videos and written accounts. But what I need is first reactions – raw and unadorned. It’s always the best shot we have.’

The team was silent. They had already given Ringer their impressions and now the spotlight was firmly on Jane.

‘It’s probably an unfair question, Jane, but do you know what we’re dealing with here?’

‘I think there are two possibilities. Either someone cruel and deliberate who had something very personal in mind. Or a psychopath or thrill killer who did this for his own gratification. I tend towards the former, though at this stage it’s speculation. In which case,’ she said, looking kindly at Cheung, ‘the detective’s prognostications are probably as useful as mine.’

‘But if I’m right, the killer is organised, knew this location and came prepared. He’s also meticulous, obsessive and extremely

sadistic. I don't think the crime is ritualistic – but with an example of one, I can't rule that out. There is torture involved, which is extremely unusual: something quite medieval, like the obscenities committed during the Crusades in the name of the Catholic Church. So, I would look for a hate crime or a religious motive or extreme prejudice of some kind. But most of all I would say this killer is clever, vengeful and quite probably narcissistic. And there is something else I would like to add. There's an arrogance to this crime and quite possibly a challenge, a challenge directed at you, the police. *See what I've done, try and stop me, for I am cleverer than any of you.* Let's pray that isn't the case.'

Jane and Ringer headed outside. The fire brigade had arrived to remove the body, not something they wanted to watch. The air was sweet with night-scented jessamine so they stood as far away from the smokers' pungent bubble as they could. Ray Cheung remained inside to ensure the integrity of the crime scene, to the extent that that was possible.

'Did you really need to put me through that?'

'Nobody can read a crime scene like you can, Jane. That's something I remember like yesterday.'

Yesterday. It seemed both far away and close. Was he remembering their sexual encounter on that New Year's Eve in 1998, Jane telling him the relationship had no future and his wry response, 'I don't know; it could last all the way into next year?'

So much had happened to them both since then. With so many colleagues in common, they weren't totally unaware of what the other had done. He heading off to the Federal Police when his marriage fell apart. She retreating to academia to recharge her batteries, and beginning a relationship with Ben, which would last for seventeen years. But did Ringer know

how Ben had died? Did he know of the tensions between Jane and her stepdaughter, Zoe, after Zoe's mother was found guilty of her father's murder? Jane knew nothing about Ringer's private life beyond the fact he had come back to Melbourne.

'Thanks for coming at such short notice,' said Ringer, his eyes examining her face with the fondness of someone who had been a special friend.

'Wouldn't have missed it for quids,' said Jane, hiding her feelings behind her irony, feelings she was yet to process.

Ringer grinned. Jane could tell he liked her ease and familiarity with the black humour world of a cop, a world few on the outside understood.

With the body removed and on its way to the morgue, Marino announced that the car with Mrs Woods was at the gate. Ringer gave instructions to avoid the foyer and escort her in through the kitchen – he would meet her in the lounge. He looked at Jane. He didn't ask, but she could see he needed support. She was curious, anyway, so when Marino suggested she might like to join them, Jane agreed.

With the aid of a personal trainer and a skilled cosmetic surgeon, Melissa Woods looked much younger than her fifty-three years and not at all like the mother of four children, two from her previous marriage now aged in their late twenties, the younger ones in their teens. Being the wife of a rich lister had helped; wanting for nothing can do wonders for your worry lines. Her clothing came from Milan, her jewellery from New York, her poise from the knowledge that her position in society was secure. As head of the Nigel and Melissa Woods Foundation, she bestowed her husband's largesse on a number of cultural and philanthropic institutions and glowed in their reflection.

But none of that was comfort now. She was, like anyone else whose husband had been the victim of a sudden and violent crime, in shock and despair.

‘Mrs Woods, I’m Inspector Eric Ringer. This is Doctor Jane Halifax and Senior Sergeant Nita Marino.’

Melissa scrutinised Jane like she was someone she may have met.

‘Please, call me Melissa.’ She introduced her companion, Maurice Engels, a lawyer and family friend, and invited everyone to sit.

‘Do you have somewhere to stay tonight?’ asked Ringer. ‘I’m sorry, but your home will be a crime scene until we’ve completed forensics.’

‘We’ll go back to Portsea to be with the children. Maurice’s wife is with them now.’

‘Inspector, could you tell us, please, what you know?’ said the lawyer, showing impatience on his client’s behalf.

‘Not a lot more than I said on the phone.’

‘Is there a chance this was an accident?’

‘No. We think he was lowered onto the sculpture.’

‘Lowered,’ whispered Melissa. ‘How?’

‘We think the mechanism that controls the chandelier may have been used.’

Melissa Woods closed her eyes to blot out the image.

‘Do you know if your husband had received any threats?’

‘What kind of a question is that?’

‘A necessary one,’ said the lawyer gently. ‘I am sorry, Mel, but they have to ask.’

‘This whole thing is a nightmare. Can I see my husband’s body?’

‘Of course. We can take you to the morgue after this. Before we do the autopsy.’

‘I’m sure you’re trying to protect me, but I need to know what happened.’

Where to begin? She was barely holding herself together.

‘Inspector, can I see the crime scene, please?’ It was an unnecessary request from Engels, but Ringer wasn’t going to be pedantic. And it would be easier to tell the lawyer what they knew without the widow present.

‘You’ll need to be kitted up, Mr Engels. Marino will find you some gloves and over-boots.’ The detectives went off with the lawyer, leaving Melissa and Jane alone.

‘Did you see him?’

Melissa’s question caught Jane off guard.

‘My husband’s body?’

‘Yes, I did.’ She couldn’t lie.

‘And?’

‘I don’t think he suffered too long. He would have lost consciousness.’

‘From the pain?’

‘And loss of blood.’ Despite the bluntness of her answers, Jane knew Melissa needed to know.

‘Why would anyone want to kill someone in such a horrible way?’

‘We’ve no idea at this point, but I promise you, we will discover what happened.’

‘You’ve been through something similar, haven’t you?’

So that’s why Melissa had looked at Jane so intently when they were introduced. Ben’s violent murder had filled the newspapers the year before, shot in the head as he sat beside Jane in her car.

His murder and the investigation of the Melbourne Shooter had dominated the headlines for weeks. It was publicity that Jane didn't seek or want – but she got it anyway. And now Melissa Woods was about to find out what that was like.

'Is that why you're here?'

It wasn't of course, unless Ringer was smarter than Jane imagined. He had said it was Jane's work with the Point Cook survivors that made her involvement so valuable. Was she back now for more of the same?

'Stay close to your children, don't read the papers and seriously think about going interstate for a while.'

'You begin to believe life is perfect. Apart from the usual issues with children. Do you have children, Jane?'

'I have a stepdaughter who lives in New York. A musician. She's twenty-four.' But Melissa was only asking to be polite.

'Nigel was the centre of everything. Such a busy life, such high expectations, the children never quite up to the mark. Everything done on the run. Business, functions, travel, holidays, obligations. The foundation was a full-time occupation. Rewarding, of course, but exhausting. And now everything stops. Our world has lost its planet, Jane. We're moons around a black hole.'

'Melissa, I'm a doctor. I can prescribe you something, if you like.'

'No, you can't. Unless you've got something to go back in time. Do you have any concept of a billion dollars? Well, Nigel had fourteen of those and he wanted more. It becomes an addiction. A competition for where you sit on the list. A measure of how important you are. It defines you and it defines your friends, who can't be normal people. Normal people don't understand a billion dollars. No wonder your kids get lost. But it doesn't make

any difference. You can't spend that much money. It multiplies so quickly, you can't even give it away.'

Melissa Woods seemed suddenly small and in danger of being swallowed by the enormous couch on which she sat. Despite her wealth she looked vulnerable and without resources. Jane wanted to put her arms around this stranger, this woman all at sea in her own home, suffering the pain of unbearable loss.

'Melissa, I'm so sorry.'

The two women sat together in silence, the sad eyes of Reg Mombassa watching from his self-portrait on the wall.