

Chapter One
by
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Day one.

The detective sergeant was a big man, but like a lot of big men the size of a blimp, he could float around like a feather when he had to. And around a crime scene, he had to. Especially this crime scene. There wasn't a lot of room in the disabled toilet of the Sydney Ferry, the Friendship, on account of there was a scrum of people occupying the space. One of these people was noticeably dead. He would be the guy stuffed in the toilet, head first.

The big detective sergeant, whose name, ironically, was Shapely – Ed Shapely – was leaving the force to help run his wife's delicatessen, but not before showing me the ropes. His last day in

homicide – today – happened to be my very first.

‘The bloke was dead a while before he was flushed,’ said Shapely.

‘How do you know that?’ I asked.

‘Because he wasn’t drowned.’

I was going to ask him how he knew, but he’d already floated on past.

The stiff came out with a sucking sound and they laid him on the metal floor. It was cold, but he was colder. ‘He’s a homeless guy,’ said Shapely, noting the dirty, calloused feet.

‘Any ID?’ I asked.

The examiner glanced up and said, ‘Nothing in his pockets except for holes. He’s got a long cut on his upper arm. Someone did a good job sewing him up. I’d be looking at hospital emergency wards.’

‘Really?’ said Shapely. ‘I was thinking maybe a plastic surgeon.’

The examiner's helpful smile died and he turned his back.

I leaned over the body. The man's long, unkempt beard was matted with blood and whatever else was floating in the s-bend when his head was fitted to it. He was also cut from one ear clear across to the other.

'I think I know this guy,' said Shapely.

'You know the dead man?' I asked.

'No, the MO,' he replied. 'It looks familiar.' He took a pencil from his pocket and I felt the sharpened point prick the skin under my earlobe. 'The guy was held from behind and the knife entered here. Then he ripped it across to the left, through the jugular and across the thyroid gland.' Shapely drew the line across my throat with the HB. 'Next comes the visceral column – the trachea and esophageus. The blade severs the musculare anterior triangle and finally,

another thyroid gland and the carotid artery. The guy was dead before the job was half done.'

'What's so special about the MO?' I asked. Getting a knife slash across the throat is murder's equivalent of driving an Italian sports car – not exactly common, but not rare either.

'No,' said Shapely, 'but the tattoo across the occipital lump at the back of the neck that links each side of the cut is.'

One of the medical examiners made a sound like Shapely had no idea what he was talking about. To prove it, he rolled the body over and squirted saline over the back of the neck to clean it. The tattoo of a hatchet sitting in one of two turquoise blue shapes, surrounded by thin lines that looked like wavelets, stood out against grime streaked skin. The tattoo was a recent one, much of it still scabbed over. Shapely pulled a camera from his pocket

and took a picture of the tattoo and the neat scar on the victim's arm.

'What happens next?' I asked, unnerved.

'We eat?' said Shapely.

I must have had a stupid look on my face because he added, 'Check the time.'

I checked. The little hand was on the ten, the big hand on the three. Shapely shrugged his pear-shaped shoulders and explained, 'Work makes me hungry.'

Rumour had it breathing affected the DS in much the same way.

The crimescene, otherwise known as the Sydney Ferry Friendship, nuzzled the old sea wall opposite the Museum of Contemporary Art. Shapely grunted up the steps and a uniform parted the tape at the head. I followed the DS as he waddled across the square towards the museum.

'Are you expecting to find some answers at the Museum?' I asked, unable

to prevent another inane question leaking out.

He shook his big head. ‘No, the MCA always leaves me feeling confused. But they do have a worthy lunch. Won’t hurt to check the menu.’

It was chicken done with a bunch of things so that it would taste like something else.

‘You’ve come from fraud, right?’ he asked.

‘Yeah,’ I replied.

‘Well, don’t let this job ruin your appetite, sonny,’ he said as he checked the café’s opening time. ‘Maybe we can come back. In the meantime, I know a good place for breakfast.’

In the unmarked car on the way to this good place, I asked, ‘said you knew this guy.’

Shapely nodded. ‘Yeah, the MO. Fifteen years ago a psychopath was collecting homeless people, putting them

in a locked cage – keeping them like animals. Then he'd tattoo them and drop them somewhere with their heads nearly off.'

'A tag and release thing,' I said.

'Maybe,' he replied. 'The tattoo was a clue. It told us where the next body would be found.'

'So what happened?'

'The guy got through four victims and then the killing stopped. Never made the papers. Who cares about homeless people, right? We called the killer Mr Smiley.'

Mr Smiley. I thought of the terminal grin given to the guy found in the toilet. The one from ear to ear.

DS Shapely pulled us up outside a Macdonald's. I had no idea this was what he had in mind. I looked around. Darlington Road, Kings X. 'Best bacon and egg muffin in town,' he said.

I was prepared to take his word for it.

For ten minutes I watched the parade of tourists and hookers, the grifters all going nowhere in a big hurry. Three homeless guys were asleep in a doorway, huddled together to keep warm. A newspaper poked out from a garbage bin. It promised Exotic Escapes – a full ten-page special. Plenty of takers here.

I heard a tap on the window. Shapely. I wound it down. He had enough food to gladden a heart surgeon.

‘I didn’t want any,’ I said.

‘Who’s offering?’ he replied. ‘You drive, sonny. Taylor Square.’

A short while later, we walked into a shopfront off Bourke Street. A neon sign said, ‘Joyous Tattoos.’ We entered and stood in the front room. Framed on the walls were examples of Joyous’s best work. It was nice, if demons, snakes and women with impossible breasts wielding

large swords can be called nice. Through a swing door I could see a young woman having matching dolphins etched onto her butt cheeks by a large Samoan. He saw us, stopped what he was doing, gave Flipper a swab with a brown face washer, and walked out to meet us.

Joyous, the large Samoan. I'd seen happier heads on an angry boil.

'Looks Russian,' he said when he got around to seeing the tattoo on the camera screen. 'Good composition. Good colour. Good scab.'

'Hold any meaning for you, Joyous?' asked Shapely.

Joyous frowned even more and shook his head. 'No meaning for me, boss.'

Shapely's turn to frown.

We got a similar response from the ER triage sister after we showed the pic of the victim's distinctive scar. 'They come in with no ID, mostly drunk,' she said.

‘There’s nowhere for them to go except maybe for a stop at the Wayside. What are we going to do? We patch them up, put ‘em in a bed and go through the motions with psych. But then they sober up and they’re gone.’

On the way back to the unmarked, Shapely said, ‘This is my last day, sonny. If I was you, I’d be stepping up to the crease.’

‘Then I feel like saying a prayer. We’re heading over to the Wayside.’

Shapely shrugged, ‘If ya think...’

The wayside Chapel was neither full nor empty. There was room for more, if more wanted to come on in. I asked the concierge at valet parking, ‘If you were missing regulars, would you notice?’

‘Oh yes, definitely,’ the woman said, volunteer badge on her chest.

‘So you missing people?’

‘Well, yes, as a matter of fact.’ Her eyes were wide. An hour later, I had a list

of thirteen names. I also had a name for the guy whose head someone had used to clean the ferry toilet. His name was Jim. Just Jim, no surname. Like a rock star.

‘Well, sonny, now you got yourself a starting point,’ said Shapely. ‘And my job here is nearly done. We just got one more stop.’

‘Where to?’ I asked.

‘Bondi Icebergs.’

‘You want to tell me why?’

‘No, sonny. Just drive.’

Two traffic snarls later, we were standing on the upper balcony of the Icebergs, overlooking the pool and the wide Pacific.

‘See anything you recognise, sonny.’

I glanced around. ‘Yeah, I’m from Sydney. This is like showing me a photo of my mother and asking if she looks familiar.’

‘Look down,’ he said.

I did as he asked, and then I saw it. The shapes of the pool, the tattoo on the back of Jim's neck. The same out-of-square shapes. The ripple lines, the sea. 'Shit,' I said. 'You wanna tell me what's going on?'

'We never caught the guy,' said Shapely. 'The case is so cold it's got stalagmites on it. You want to save those missing people, you're gonna have to talk to the only guys who know about it. You're gonna have to look at Sydney Central's homicide department from ten years ago.'

'Jesus,' I said.

'And the first cop you're gonna have to put under the magnifying glass...is me.'

'You?!'

'Yeah, but before you do, we should eat. They do a salt-encrusted steak in the restaurant that'll make you weep.'

Chapter Two