

Stumped!

A Bondi Detective story

Episode One

By

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PROLOGUE

There's a cemetery with a splendid outlook in the eastern suburbs of Sydney, in NSW. In one direction, you can look all the way to New Zealand; in the other you can see the Harbour Bridge. Magical. Only it's for a cemetery where none of the occupants can see it. That's exactly what Joe thought. Indeed, it was his only passing thought, as he gazed down at his wife's grave. He always feared she would die before him. And she had. It wasn't a good death either. Not even allowing her the time to see their children become adults. But there she was now, remembered in stone. Lucy Charnock, 1940-1999. She was only 59. People kept saying it was no age, and they were right. Joe looked at the vacant plot next to it. If it were possible, some days, he felt like he could simply jump in it, too. Was that the easy way? Not for his two children admittedly. They had their own lives now. They were moving on. He was standing still. Joe's life seemed permanently in a waiting pattern. He was forever telling himself to stop being maudlin. He was even going to a grief counsellor. But for 10 years? That wasn't a good sign. Perhaps the counsellor liked him.

Joe saw death around him, all the time. Every week it was a new dead body, seeing what horrible things one person could do to another. It had destroyed his humanity, except towards his children, or maybe Jimmy at work. He believed in justice for others, but he saw none of it in his own life.

Take me to the grave, he thought. Take me... Nothing happened of course. He had a flash of Lucy slipping on the cliff edge at South Bondi, her foot giving way.

His prayer for the end wasn't coming true. He couldn't do it. He wouldn't. In the end Joe believed in life. The sanctity of life. He started at a sound beyond. Suddenly someone was beside him.

"Closing the gate now, mate."

It was the caretaker at the cemetery.

"What?! Sure. Sorry."

"It's a great spot," he said. "One of the best."

“Yeah. It is. Can’t stop coming here.”

“Come back any time you want, mate. Ain’t no one going to give you a hard time here.”

“No. No.”

Profundity at the cemetery. Joe walked away, his spirits raised, slightly. Don’t wallow in death? He was having none of it.

CHAPTER ONE

Joe was always being woken by dead bodies. As mornings were not his speciality anyway, this was not good. The evenings weren't much better either, but at least by then the day was almost over. Detective Chief Inspector Joe Charnock – Joe to those who knew him – especially loathed being stirred in the morning by his mobile. Then his landline. Then by his alarm.

On this particular morning, this triple whammy joylessly thundered through his head at 5.51am. God, it was early. Joe had a bedroom at the back of the house, a Twenties brick bungalow of uninspiring character, but which was shaded by a sumptuous jacaranda tree. This was the redeeming feature. The house was probably built by a couple of Kiwi builders, he thought, who had come over on the latest tide and knocked it up in a few weeks before heading down to the surf. For this was Bondi, the jewel in the crown of Australian beach life. In the Twenties, it was no doubt a terribly nice place with civilised people going about their business very politely. Now, it was chaotic whirlpool of crime, immigrants, backpackers and chancers, all wanting to make a buck in the sea air. And why not? Australia was booming. Bondi was a staging post for many on their way to driving a truck at a mine for 100k a year.

Joe hadn't got there either. He was 55, widowed and loved to hate Bondi. He was also too fat, too drunk mostly, didn't do any exercise and couldn't stop watching sport on TV. He was addicted to it, like half the country. He'd been up late the night before watching the Hockeyroos. The what? Women hockey players, that is. There was something not quite right about that, but Joe didn't care. He hadn't for years, which was the nice thing about reaching a so-called respectable age. What he saw ahead of him now was a sizeable retirement cheque, a passport out of backpackers' land and a pretty retirement cottage on the east coast of Tasmania, where the Poms gravitate. He didn't even mind that. Deep down, quite subterranean admittedly, he was something of an Anglophile.

Joe's mobile rang again.

"What?" he mumbled.

"Boss? Is that you boss?"

It was Detective Constable Jimmy Cook from the Bondi Police Station, Joe's partner in the detective unit, the "plain clothes" boys.

"What?"

"We got a stiff, mate. Bad one."

"Oh, Christ. Where is it?"

"Up with the posh lot. Vaucluse."

"Ah. Makes a change."

It was mid-October in Bondi. Jimmy was doing the driving, as he mostly always did, and they sped up Dover Heights Road with the beach and early dawn at their backs. October could mean any weather in Bondi. This morning, it was muggy, cloudy, a bit airless and destined to be uncomfortable, even for mid-spring. Joe grimaced slightly as the car swayed around the sharp bends. It was just after 6.30am, and he'd had no real breakfast. This wasn't going to be pleasant morning.

Jimmy gestured at the takeaway coffee on the dash, in a holder. Joe glugged away. It was only thing Bondi did well, he thought. Coffee. The surf wasn't bad either, only that Joe was as likely a long boarder as he was a champion barista.

Dover Heights and Vaucluse were nestled together at the top of a spit of land facing out to the Tasman Sea. It couldn't be more spectacular. You could almost touch the North Island of New Zealand from here. Joe didn't care much for views to be honest. From where he was sitting, he'd had little sleep, no breakfast, couldn't stop thinking about women's hockey and now had a moderate hangover washed down with a swig of a latte.

"You watched all that Hockeyroos match, didn't ya?" asked Jimmy.

Joe mumbled in the affirmative.

"You gotta stop watching women's hockey, boss. You'll be hanging around school netball matches next. It'll get round the station."

"Only if you tell you them, detective constable. I hear the beat along Bondi Road is a great

shift, especially late at night.”

Jimmy and Joe got on perfectly well. Probably friendlier than either of them would ever have acknowledged. It was typical Aussie mateship, but with dead bodies and murderers along for the ride.

Within moments they came to a stop, smack bang in the middle of well-heeled Vaucluse. Gone were the reddish-brown brick flats, giving way to multi-coloured Mediterranean-style rendered houses. People were doing very nicely here. The police tape was already out, around the house of the victim.

No one was saying very much at the crime scene. Clearly the big Hockeyroos match had been a popular choice the night before.

Cook and Joe slipped on the fetching forensic white suits.

“Bloody things,” muttered Joe. It was always a struggle.

“Where?” he asked the constable.

“Round the back, sir.”

“Who is it?”

“Some cricketer, sir.”

“In this house? That’s some cricketer.”

Joe and Jimmy headed down the gravel drive of the cream two-storey house. Impressive.

Not bad, thought Joe. They went through a side gate and into the back garden, which appeared to lead to the cliff edge, where there was a summer house. He didn’t like cliffs at all.

“God, boss. Someone was doing well.”

They came into the kitchen through large floor-to-ceiling doors, which were cantilevered. Beyond a breakfast bar, Joe could glimpse the top of a body. He prepared himself, holding his breath for some reason. Two pathology guys were doing their stuff.

As Jimmy and Joe moved further into the kitchen, there was a strange, stale smell.

“Err...” said Jimmy.

“You’ve come across a dead body before?”

“Yes, sir.”

Joe turned to the pathologist.

“What have we got?”

“Male, 55 thereabouts, with a large knife in his chest, and what also appears to be cricket stump inserted in his, ah, rectum sir.”

No one spoke momentarily as this horrid piece of information was digested.

He continued. “No ID on the body but the woman who found him said it was the cricketer Terry Forbes.”

“Forbes?! The top opening bat? Bloody hell. Not Forbes. Take a look around Jimmy. No sign of a struggle in here.”

Joe, shocked and disgusted, stood over the body in the kitchen. The victim was wearing what you could only describe as indoor leisure wear, a green and gold tracksuit. Patriotic. He was slumped forward over a glass-top table. Blood now covered it, and it had slightly congealed.

It appeared that the weight of the body was somehow supported by the knife, which was holding him over the edge of the table. There was no doubting the position of the cricket stump, however.

“Time of death?”

“Hard to say, sir, but about 24, 28 hours ago. Maybe 11 o’clock, AM, even earlier. Something like that.”

“Can we lift him? I want to see his face.”

“Well...”

“Well, you lot don’t even know who he is. At least I will recognise him.”

The forensic officer lifted the body, revealing the face of the victim. He was smiling.

“Well, it can’t have been all bad.”

Joe caught sight of the knife. “Bloody hell,” he said, placing his hand over his mouth. It turned his empty stomach. He dashed for the back garden.

The forensic officer followed him outside with a glass of water.

“Thanks, mate.”

“Who was he, sir?”

Clearing his throat, he said, “Bloody hell. Only one of the greatest batsmen of the Seventies. What a tragedy. Just a shock. He, ah, opened the innings, and just had this beautiful style. To see him like that when you’ve seen him at the SCG. He was the sort of batsmen who you thought would never get out. Must have had a solid average of 65-70. But he would just take the blows. Ball after ball. An Australian Colin Cowdrey. They would thump them down, he would take it on the body. No poncy helmets then either. If you got hit on the head you just took the blow, shake yourself about and get on with it. The “arch defender”. That’s what they used to call him. The “arch defender”. With a cricket stump up his backside. The press are gonna love this.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And he’s smiling. I wonder which came first. The stump or the knife?”

“We should know that tomorrow.”

The forensic officer went back inside.

“Terry Forbes. Can’t believe it. You don’t see someone for 40 years then they turn up dead in front of you. Where has he been?”

Joe walked a few steps beyond the patio. A seagull squawked overhead. Straight ahead was the Tasman Sea. There were neighbours to the left and right. On the right hand side, there was

another summer house perched on the edge of the cliff. Nice place. It almost matched the size of the summer house at the bottom of Forbes garden, which alone was about the size of Joe's house.

Jimmy joined him on the patio.

"Sir?"

"Yes."

"You alright?"

"Of course. What is it?"

"Just weird. For a bloke who lived alone, it's the tidiest house I've ever walked into. Bloody spotless throughout."

"Except for that mess in the kitchen."

"Why alone?"

"That's what the neighbours say."

"I found this in the hall table drawer."

Jimmy passed him what appeared to be a glossy brochure.

"Australia versus Pakistan, 2002. Forbes Tours'. Interesting."

"That's it?"

"Well, I haven't gone upstairs yet."

"2002? What's that all about?"

A Wpc turned up from inside.

"Sir?"

"Yes."

"Sir, the woman who found the body is quite upset. Wants to know if she can go home. It's

only next door.”

“Has she got blood on her?”

“No, sir. Why?”

“Nowhere on her?”

“I don’t know. I couldn’t see. I can’t –”

“You don’t know. That’s the issue. Have you just arrived from Goulburn training, mate?”

“No, sir. Four months.”

“You bloody well sound like it. Constable, anyone who comes near this house in the past 24 hours or the next 24 hours is a suspect. That’s how it works. I’m sure she’s very distressed.”

“She lives with her elderly mother.”

“Listen, don’t waist my time and get me a coffee. You haven’t left her on her own at the crime scene with all that evidence?!”

The trio darted into the kitchen, pushing aside one of the forensics’ team and going for the staircase.

“You bloody idiot!” bellowed Joe, as he did his best at taking three stairs at a time.

But Jimmy, quite the athlete, sprinted ahead of them. After racing up the stairs, he went straight into the living room in the front of the house. It was deserted. He came back to the landing where he greeted Joe and the Wpc at the top of the stairs.

“She’s gone...”

“What! Are you sure?”

The three dashed into the room.

“Look down there, Jimmy,” said Joe, pointing to a doorway appearing to lead back into house. “You go back outside and see if anyone saw her leave.”

Jimmy ran for the other door, but as he did collided with a woman coming the other way. She was carrying a glass of a water and wearing a dressing gown.

“Shit!” said Jimmy.

The glass was catapulted from the woman’s hand against the door, and on to the carpet.

“Well, that’s no way to greet a lady,” she said calmly.

CHAPTER TWO

“We’re very sorry, Mrs –?”

“Field. Marion Field.”

Joe and Mrs Field were sitting across from each other while Jimmy had gone to get another glass of water.

“I’m Detective Inspector Charnock and this is Detective Constable Cook, from Bondi Station. We get a little panicked in these situations. You know how it is, madam.”

“No, not really.”

“Well. Anyway.”

Marion Field was in her late fifties, tall, attractive and with her hair scraped back. She was wearing a smart, mauve dressing gown with braiding along the lapels. She had been crying a little and was clutching a tissue.

“I just can’t believe it,” she said. “Terry, our next door neighbour. You never think something like this will happen next door. Never.”

“No, it’s always a shock. How long have you lived next door?”

“We moved here, my mother and I, about 12 years ago, a few years before my late husband Walter passed away. Heart attack in the summer house. Just dropped dead. He was in building supplies. Bondi Hardware. Did you know it?”

“Oh, yes. Off Bondi Lane.”

Jimmy returned with a drink.

“Thank you so much, detective constable. I’ve never seen a native Australian in the police force.”

“Aren’t many of us, ma’am.”

“Good to see, I say,” she continued.

“If only he wasn’t so useless.”

Joe smiled at Jimmy.

The DC sat across from Mrs Field and took out his notebook.

“You were saying, Mrs Field?”

She moved slightly in the chair, and crossed her legs. She made sure she was well covered by her dressing gown.

“Well, Walter, and now Terry...”

She began sobbing. Joe gestured to Jimmy who reached for a box of tissues and offered them to her. She blew her nose, rather theatrically.

“You must get plenty like me.”

“We get all sorts, Mrs Field. Did you know Terry Forbes very well?”

“We all knew Terry. Famous for his barbies in this area. The Forbes’ Boy and his barbie were inseparable. He was a sporting hero you know. You couldn’t not know Terry round here. He was absolutely wonderful.”

“Oh yes?”

“He was the sort of the neighbour who would do anything for you. Anything. When Walter died, and he was so handy, Terry was the only one. We relied on him. He even came next door to do some work on the summer house, Walter’s pride and joy that. He needn’t have done that -”

“When was that?”

“Just last month,” she replied, again reaching for the tissues. “He got on famously with my mother, too.”

“Can I take her name?”

“Iris, she’s 74.”

“Really? What a fine age,” said Joe. He paused slightly. “Where were you yesterday morning, say first thing?”

“Well, my life is like clockwork, Inspector. Every morning at 6.30am I have to move my mother who is virtually bedridden. MS, you know. She can walk if absolutely necessary, but she mostly chooses not to. I am with her mostly every minute of the day. It’s very sad. I think families should stick together. I do really believe that. Don’t you? This new generation don’t care for it, but I think it’s more and more important. Don’t you, Constable?”

He looked up from his pad, and glanced at Joe for guidance. None was forthcoming.

“I dunno,” replied. “We all live in a big house in Surry Hills. Is that what you mean?”

She gave way to watery, slightly patronising smile. “Yes, I suppose so.”

There was pause. No one quite knew where the conversation was going.

She continued. “Are you married, Inspector?”

“Widowed, Mrs Field.”

“Ah. How sad.”

Jimmy broke the silence.

“How did you discover the body, ah, Mrs Field?”

“Well, after I’ve done my first turn of mother for the morning, I go down to the summer house and do Tai Chi. Stretching, that kind of thing. I feel closer to Walter there. It’s still only three years. I was doing my sun salutation actually when I saw his back door was open. It never is at that hour, I thought. How odd. So I asked Mother about it and she convinced me to take a look. Bit odd to barge in so early I thought. But she thought otherwise. Very wise. What if someone had broken in, she said. Quite.”

“You must have key then.”

“To the front, yes.”

“Oh. Not the back?”

“No, no.”

“What did you do?”

“I left mother, came through the front door and found him like that in the kitchen. Awful. It’s so, so... “

She began sobbing again. Jimmy offered another tissue.

The WPC entered the room.

“You better come, sir. There’s a barny out the front with a bloke.”

“Thank you, constable. Stay with her.”

Joe and Jimmy headed for the fracas. Outside the house, a small crowd was gathering the other side of the police tape. There was already at least a dozen people standing about. They were milling around in groups of two or three, chatting interestedly to each other like they were at a bowls’ match. Some were in suits, one bloke was still in his dressing gown. It was like gawping at a car accident, but without the carnage. In reality they were staring at a house surrounded by police tape. There was also a satellite TV van. The press.

“Bloody hell,” said Joe to Jimmy. “Haven’t these people got lives?”

The man in the dressing gown approached them. “I’m George Fraser. I live on the other side.”

“We will need a statement from you, Mr Fraser,” said Joe. “You should get changed in the meantime.”

“What’s happened? It’s Terry, isn’t it?”

“Come through. You can join Mrs Field in the front room. Talk about barbecues.”

“What do you mean?”

“Get on, sir!”

Another constable led the man into the house.

“What about me!? Hello! Hello!”

Further along, a man was standing next to a uniform who had a firm hold of his arm. Joe and Jimmy made their way to him.

“I understand sir, that you have been making my investigation very difficult. I do hope that’s not true, because I would like nothing more than to press a charge of obstructing justice. It’s been a while.”

The man tried to break his arm free. Unsuccessfully.

He said: “Right. Do you know who I am?”

“Very unlikely, sir.”

“I am Asif Ramesh, Terry Forbes’s business partner. He’s dead isn’t he?”

“Let him go,” said Joe.

But Ramesh suddenly bolted through the cordon and sprinted towards the open front door.

“Get him!” yelled Joe.

Jimmy responded like a greyhound from the traps. In a moment, he had turned on his heels, darted towards Ramesh, bringing him down just before the door in the fine rugby tackle around the ankles. The small gathering broke out into instant applause. But for a only moment. This was a murder scene so it was dignified respect rather than resounding joy at this unexpected physical spectacle. Sporting prowess could be appreciated in any context. The TV boys had even garnered themselves into action, with a camera suddenly trained on the action.

Jimmy and a uniform constable brought Ramesh back to Joe.

He looked directly into the eyes of the Detective Inspector. “Tell me what happened to Terry or... I will kill you.”

Joe was boiling and was having nothing of this. He seized Ramesh by the collars and lifted

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