

CHAPTER SIX

Lynda stared at the breakfast bar separating the kitchen from the lounge room as the memories came flooding back. Daina's mention of Ali had suddenly put an entirely different slant on the murder investigation. Here was a piece of the jigsaw puzzle that Stanley didn't have and as she glanced over her shoulder at Danny, who appeared to be mulling the information over, she began fitting other pieces into the jigsaw puzzle.

"So, Aitkens was in contact with Ali," he murmured, "it's a real pity Stanley doesn't know that, isn't it?" he glanced up at Lynda.

"Yeah," she replied hoarsely, "this was the investigation we were pursuing overseas, that one that was shut down," she propped on the bar and folded her arms. "Bloody hell, I can't believe it's followed me all the way down here," she shook her head.

"You were investigating people smuggling?" Danny asked.

"I was part of an international sting operation," she replied coldly, "operation Tiny Tots."

"I don't have to know any of this," Daina made as if to get up but Lynda froze her with a steely look, the blood rushed from her face and with a quick glance at Danny she sat down again.

"Operation Tiny Tots," she shook her head, "you're a part of this whether you like it or not," she moved around the bar and took down a bottle of vodka. She spoke quietly as she poured herself a drink and drank it straight, Danny noticed that her hands remained rock steady as she poured yet another measure; Lynda's tolerance for alcohol was obviously higher than his.

"We were part of an international operation comprising Scotland Yard, the FBI, Sûreté, and elements of the German police force; we had contacts in every country, from London down to the sex pits of Thailand, Japan, Solomon Islands, the US, South America, there was nowhere we couldn't go."

"Sûreté?"

"French Intelligence," Lynda replied matter of factly and lighting a cigarette, poured another drink. "We were the best, our mandate was the worldwide child sex market. We would set up links with known sex offenders and infiltrate the porn rings and bust them wide open. We started in London and LA simultaneously and worked our way across the world," she exhaled a cloud of smoke.

"We were based in Hanover, Germany, but our operation was going badly initially until a guy, whose name I can't mention, walked in off the street and volunteered to be our first contact. We had no idea who he was but he checked out. Our Mister X as I'll call him, introduced us to a man in Berlin, who in turn took us into his confidence and gave us names of people operating in Germany, Switzerland and Bulgaria amongst others."

Lynda flicked ash into the ashtray.

"X was our salvation, he was an ex CIA operative, now in hiding, who had contacts like you wouldn't believe. After we'd shut down the ring in Germany we moved into France, Poland, Hungary. In Chechnya, the Russians and Chechen fighters called a twelve-hour truce, so as we could raid a house where members of a child sex slave ring were holed up. It was heartening," she smiled bitterly.

"We went in on Russian choppers with Spetsnaz troops and met the Chechen resistance, who guided their arch enemies and us to this house and then blocked off any escape routes while we broke into the place, that was our crowning glory," she raised her empty glass.

"We stopped a civil war that they still can't stop today, just to bust child exploiters."

"What happened?" Danny spoke up.

"I'm getting to that," she filled the glass and pointed the bottle in Danny's direction but he held up his hand and shook his head.

"Our investigations across the Atlantic were going well, the FBI raided fifty houses in fifteen states and recovered thousands of CDs and DVDs containing child porn, and that in turn led to illegal brothels and sweatshops being shut down. We were on a roll and nothing could stop us," she took a healthy slug from the bottle and grimaced slightly as the fiery liquid made its way down her throat.

“But our investigation were heading higher and higher up the food chain. We had three senior cabinet members in the British government in our sights, and at least five congressmen in Washington when suddenly we were shut down.”

“What do you mean shut down?” Daina sat up in alarm.

“Shut down,” she stared at her over the rim of her glass. “The British government pulled the pin on our funding and within six hours the Americans had also cut funding to our American side of the operation. They could never have shut us down wholesale; they just did it piece by piece. It took nine weeks to destroy three and a half years worth of work and it was all done legally. They officially declared the emergency to be over, congratulated us all, handed out a truckload of medals and earmarked funds for clean-up work,” she stared blankly into space.

“The so called clean-up money was then diverted through a Swiss bank and funnelled out through a secure conduit to banks in Iraq, Egypt, Singapore, Tokyo and a dozen other locations, to the very people we had been fighting; it broke our hearts,” she tossed the dead cigarette into the ashtray and stared at the bottle of vodka.

“I was shipped back here to help in the clean-up at this end, but it seemed that everywhere I turned there was another obstacle put into my path. I couldn’t call witnesses, my surveillance requests had to pass through four different departments, all of whom had more leaks than the Burnley tunnel. I had no power to do anything except write recommendations, most of which are still sitting in a filing cabinet somewhere in Canberra,” she cracked the bottle and poured out another measure of vodka.

“I got tired of this after six months and put in for a transfer, the heart had gone out of my work, it was destroyed when they shut us down.”

“Jesus,” Daina grabbed the arms of the sofa and swallowed.

“And none of this ever got out?”

“You would have heard of porn rings getting shut down,” she replied, “but a lot of time we used to announce a major music pirating ring had gone down. Their members were awaiting trial and we could keep them there until we had the next level in our sights, we bought a lot of them off as well, promised immunity if they would sell their mates out and disappear into obscurity.”

“Christ,” she shook her head, “and I thought Aitkens was a big story.”

“Probably bigger than you think,” she nodded, “but I wouldn’t try telling it on tv, the operation had complete deniability. As far as the government or police forces were involved, we didn’t exist. We couldn’t afford to tip our hand and warn the sex industry that we were hiding in their backyards, filming everything they did.”

She closed her eyes and leaned back, feeling the vodka taking effect. She was nowhere near drunk and had she not had company, she would have opened another bottle before she started feeling drunk. It had been one of her strengths, a high tolerance for alcohol and pain.

“Ali was Stanley’s boy and that means he was being paid,” she opened her eyes, “I wouldn’t mind betting that the gold belonged to the Australian government and that Stanley was the banker.”

“Fuck it,” Danny pinched his nose.

“So what do we do now?” Daina leaned forward and picked up Danny’s cigarettes.

“Nothing until I’ve made a phone call,” she checked her watch, “it’s ten o’clock now, make sure I’m awake by six in the morning. I have to call someone in LA.”

Danny glanced at his watch.

“And you’re staying here,” Lynda smirked and tapped the couch. “This folds out into a bed, I’m sure you can work it out, and if you two,” she pointed to him, “can work out what the fuck you’re doing with this famous pergola, you can crash in the same bed for all I care,” she rose and drained the glass.

“I’ve had some stupid fights with lovers but none as stupid as that, fight over an affair or whatever, but a pergola?” she cocked an eyebrow, “now, that is stupid.”

Danny watched her walk up the hallway, the quarter bottle of vodka in her hand as she hummed an old Russian drinking song.

Daina glanced across at Danny and swallowed.

This was going to be hard...

The mist drifted across the cobblestone street, its tendrils partly obscuring the rows of houses running along both sides of the street. The mist also obscured the two snipers sitting behind cars at each end of the road, their rifles, equipped with infra red sights trained on a house about midway along.

Lynda straightened up as a man wearing a bearskin hat stepped into the foyer of the house where she and twelve other agents had been waiting patiently. His face had a long scar running from his right eye down to his mouth, as if someone had tried to cut his face off. He glanced around at the assembled ten men and two women and said two words.

“Vi gå på fem minutter.”

Lynda nodded, as she translated the Norwegian in her head, five minutes to go, it would seem like five hours. She tightened her grip on the MP5, the comforting weight of the submachine gun lending a certain sense of security. The Oslo connection was about to be terminated permanently.

She glanced at Jacob who was sitting with his back to the wall, the MP5 leaning against his chest. She had cautioned him before about the way he carried his weapons, but Jacob had never bothered listening to her, and why should he? His childhood had been spent in East Jerusalem and during the Arab Israeli conflict of 1967 he had joined his brothers and sisters in fighting the Arab Legion.

“You dumb fuck,” she smiled, “one day you’ll blow that stupid Jewish head off sitting like that.”

“Blow me,” he blew her a kiss and nodded at the rear of the apartment building where the designated smoking area was. She glanced at it and after a moment shook her head, it was too close to zero for a cigarette.

“Have one for me.”

“Ah,” he grinned, “I will have to do without your company,” he stood and exited via a hallway leading to the back door. The apartment building had been commandeered by the military three days ago and during that time, undercover police posing as workmen had been performing renovations on the building, whilst their companions inside monitored the occupants of apartment ten just across the road.

Jacob was one of her most trusted friends and ordinarily she would have joined him for a last cigarette before the team was sent in, but there was something wrong tonight. She had felt it two days ago when she had slipped in via a back door to survey the target. The sudden panic attack had lasted a scant millisecond and had been indiscernible to all but her closest friends, but she had spent more time going over the finer details of this operation than any other they’d undertaken and nothing could shake that sense of foreboding.

Jacob entered just as the major stood up and racked his shotgun, the sign for the rest of them to check their weapons. Lynda’s eyes wandered to Jacob who was busy checking the tape on his magazine. He sensed her attention and offered her a quick smile before moving to the door.

The gang members had no idea an assault was under way until a smoke grenade shattered the window of their apartment a minute later. Within seconds the team was barging through the door, the torches on their assault rifles sweeping the rooms and hallway. A burst of gunfire sent a man crashing in a bloody heap against the wall, he slid down the wall like a rag doll as Lynda lowered the MP5.

Jacob’s first awareness that he had been shot came as he felt himself falling forward. His eyes widened in mild surprise as he saw Lynda’s mouth open in a scream of warning, the assault rifle slamming to her shoulder at the same time. He saw the flash leaving the barrel in spurts as she pumped a burst into his assailant and then he hit the ground with a bone-jarring thud, unaware that his brains were splattered over the ground beside him. The impact of the high powered round had sent his body arcing around to face his opponent who was sailing through the air to land in a bloodied heap, his vital organs mangled beyond recognition as another agent fired a devastating blast into his dying body. Seconds later, Lynda was leaning over him, her hand reaching for his throat as he exhaled for the last time, her mouth open in a scream of rage that echoed in time and eternity.

Lynda sat up, her mouth open, the Beretta trained on the doorway, wide-eyed as she waited for the assailant to come crashing through the door.

Lynda breathed out slowly as the dream faded into the dark recesses of her mind and she realised where she was again.

“Fuck it,” she let the gun fall to the bed and wiped the moisture from her forehead, “fuck it, fuck it, fuck it.”

She tossed the covers aside and swung out of bed, knocking the empty bottle of vodka over at the same time. It fell with a clunk and she made a mental note to buy more tomorrow, or was that today? She glanced at the clock and shuddered.

Two hours sleep? Fuck it!

The light from the fridge caused her to blink as she reached for the two-litre container of orange juice, her throat was parched. A noise from the living room caused her to turn suddenly, her mind already isolating the sound and its possible cause.

Snoring, it's Danny.

Lynda wandered through to the living room to find Danny sprawled out on the couch, his shirt hung over a nearby chair and a blanket covering his bare legs. Her eyes wandered to his crotch and she found herself wondering.

Too complicated with her around.

Danny opened his eyes and blinked nervously, his mind registering the fact that she was standing there in a nightshirt, drinking a bottle of orange juice.

“Sorry,” she wiped her mouth with her arm, “got thirsty.”

“Mmm,” he pinched the bridge of his nose, “what time is it?”

“One o’clock,” she sat on the arm of a chair and took another slug from the bottle, “I couldn’t sleep, and my mouth feels like the bottom of a birdcage.”

“Not surprised with all the piss you were drinking.”

“My last boyfriend said the same thing,” she smirked, “said I had a drinking problem, my only drinking problem,” she raised the bottle in mock salute, “is not getting enough piss.”

Danny smiled.

“Now, that’s a problem.”

“Hey,” she pulled a face, “it’s my problem, and I’ll deal with it.”

“No worries,” he shrugged, “but if it interferes with your job just let me know, I’ve got contacts that can help you, after all, you wouldn’t be the first cop to succumb to the demon drink and it’s a fucking shame to see it happen.”

“So, you two didn’t sort out the pergola shit after all?”

“No,” he replied after a while, “not saying we won’t, just not tonight.”

Lynda leaned down and grabbing his cigarettes, lit one and blew out a half dozen smoke rings much to Danny’s amusement.

“You think I should?”

“I think you’ve got a problem you haven’t dealt with,” she replied, “much like my alcohol consumption, and like me, you’re lying to yourself.”

“So you’re saying,” he leaned over and grabbed a cigarette, his other hand fumbling for the lighter, “that if I root Daina again, you’ll go to AA.”

“Pig’s arse I will,” she smirked, “but what the hell, if you sort something out, I might be induced to stop buying vodka, my head feels like shit.”

“My old man always said the best thing for a hangover was another drink,” he replied with a wry smile, “he said you’d wind up drunk again but the hangover was gone.”

“Sounds like a good idea,” Lynda blew out a couple of smoke rings, “but the problem comes in when you have to front up for work more or less sober.”

“Now that could be a problem,” he agreed.

“How did your old man solve that one?” she asked with a cheeky grin.

“He drank himself to death,” he sighed.

“Jesus,” she bit her lip, “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” he frowned, “he was an arsehole, used to beat the shit out of mum, my two brothers and my sister on a regular basis, every Friday and Saturday night.”

“Mine too, only I got a double dose, mum and dad were both pissheads.”

“It’s a bitch when you think of it,” his arm flopped against his forehead, “with dad the unacceptable became acceptable. I remember him marching over the road to a neighbour’s house because the neighbour had come home drunk and started belting his missus, he beat the shit out of him and threw him out into the street. Two weeks later he did the same thing to mum, talk about the pot calling the kettle black.”

Lynda smiled bitterly.

“I remember my old man gave mum a hiding one night, it was a terrible hiding, she had a black eye, fat lip and another broken nose,” she took another slug from the bottle. “Then he passed out in the passageway and she fucked off to her sister’s place. She came back two hours later to find him still there and next thing we know, there’s this almighty clunk and he starts screaming. My auntie starts screaming at mum to stop hitting him with a fry pan and mum’s going for it. He was bawling like a baby, she chased him out of the house and we didn’t see him for three days after that.”

“Well you ever get that bad I’m dragging you into hospital,” he pulled a face, “you’re too good a person to lose to the piss.”

“Thanks,” she looked down sheepishly. “Nicest thing a guy’s ever said to me, hell, if Daina don’t take you back I’ll jump your bones,” she butted her smoke out and stood up, “and on that pleasant little interlude, I’m going back to bed, alone.”

Danny watched her walk up the hallway, carrying the bottle in one hand; her sudden appearance had taken him by surprise, along with her frank admission.

Damaged goods.

He sighed and butted the cigarette out as he thought of Daina lying fast asleep in the spare room. Now there was a problem he’d never dealt with, the knowledge kept him tossing and turning most of the night.

The mist rolling in towards the Dandenongs hung heavily over the well to do suburb of Blackburn, as the black Holden Rodeo eased to a stop, the vehicle hadn’t aroused any suspicion, as it had parked some distance away from Daina’s house. The four men in the 4WD acted quickly and methodically. Two men exited the car while it was still going and darted into a nearby driveway carrying a briefcase. Seconds later the Rodeo took off with a screech of tyres, heading straight towards Daina’s house. The driver was weaving up the road as if he was drunk. Seconds later, he side-swiped the security car sitting outside her place and the two men in the driveway heard a shriek of laughter as the Rodeo kept going.

The driver managed to open the car door eventually as the Rodeo careered around the corner. He threw his torch on the road and screamed obscenities into the night. A few minutes later he calmed down enough to call a tow truck to carry the damaged car away.

It was while the car was being winched onto the back of the tray truck that the two men in the driveway moved quickly up the road, shielded by the cars parked on the side of the road. When they got to the low, stone wall around Daina’s house they stopped while the security guard radioed for backup. Approximately two minutes later he clambered into the front seat beside the driver and the truck slowly moved off.

“Five minutes tops,” the first man whispered.

The second man relayed the information over a mobile phone as they stepped over the wall and walked across the manicured lawn to her car sitting in the driveway. It took thirty seconds to disable the car alarm and another ten seconds to open the car. The bomb was placed under the seat and the alarm reactivated.

The second man grunted with satisfaction as he checked his watch.

“You’re getting better,” he muttered, “you’ve beaten your own record.”

The two men walked down the driveway just as the Rodeo pulled up again. They both climbed in although the first man thought it strange that he was sitting on plastic sheeting.

“Covers the broken glass,” the second man pointed to the broken window beside him.

Fifteen minutes later the Rodeo pulled up beside a late model Commodore sedan in a park. There were three quick shots in succession and three men got out of the car, leaving the man who’d set the bomb lying propped against the doorway, his brains splattered all over the seat.

Two jerry cans filled with petrol were taken from the boot of the Commodore and poured over the car and inside the car. A third smaller jerry can was poured over the man they'd hired to set the bomb.

The ensuing explosion could be heard five miles away as they drove out of the rabbit warren of streets surrounding the park, the driver radioed the success of the mission to his controller.

Now all they had to do was wait for Daina Macintosh to return home in a few hours time. If she couldn't keep her mouth shut then the Company would shut it permanently.

Daina's career as a tv reporter was over...