

JOHNNY

I blink in the darkness. Someone is pounding on our front door. Amy groans and turns on her bedside lamp. It's 3.15 a.m.

I roll out of bed, pull on my jeans and head down the hall. The knocking starts up again. *Thump, thump, thump*. Fuck, I'm coming, okay? I check my son on the way past his bedroom. He's fast asleep, sheet thrown off, arms flung wide, blond hair too long for a boy. I grab the cricket bat I keep in the umbrella stand. Just in case.

I check the spy hole. Police. My heart rate cranks up a notch, but I put the bat back in the stand. When I open the door, the wet heat of the night spills in and expensively cooled air swirls out around my ankles.

Two uniforms take up a sizeable chunk of my front patio. They're big bastards, similar in shape, bookends. A tall bloke stands in the shadows a couple of paces back, a glint of red in his hair.

'What's going on?' I'm looking at the suit, trying to place him.

He steps forward. 'Been a while, Johnny.'

My shoulders tighten. It's Detective Inspector Ian MacPherson and the last time we met he was in charge of the Liverpool Narcs. Now he heads up the Western Sydney Organised Crime Task Force. What the fuck? Why is someone this senior at my front door?

MacPherson nods at the two uniforms. 'Constables Bridges and Dyson. Can we come in?'

'Got a warrant?'

'We're not here to search the place. Something's happened.'

Did one of the boys get caught in the middle of a job? But why come to me? Has something happened to Dad? I open the door, turn on some lights and gesture towards the living room.

'I'll throw a shirt on.'

By the time I make it back up the hall to our bedroom, Amy is zipping up her dress.

'What's happening?'

'No idea. Two cops and MacPherson.'

'MacPherson? The head of that task force?'

'Yeah.'

'Why would he be here?'

'No idea, Ames.'

I keep my voice down, pull on a T-shirt. Whatever she sees on my face makes her frown.

'I'll put the kettle on,' she says.

Amy walks ahead of me down the hall. My wife is tall, slim and beautiful and I wonder why the hell she fell in love with me. Keeping her and Sasha safe is my number one priority, so I don't let them anywhere near the family business. Amy tucks a strand of blonde hair behind one ear as she peeks into Sasha's

room, then closes the door. I can tell by the set of her shoulders that she's anxious. Me too. She disappears into the kitchen and I wish I could follow her, but I keep going, back into the living room.

The cops are looking around. MacPherson is holding a framed photo from the mantelpiece. It's my brother and me, aged about six and five. We're sitting cross-legged in Mum's veggie patch, tanned and grinning. Ivan's arm is slung around my shoulders and I'm holding a huge pumpkin like a trophy. MacPherson puts the photo back and avoids my gaze. I'm getting squirrely so I take a long slow breath.

'Amy's making tea, but we can do coffee if you want.'

One of the uniforms gives MacPherson a pleading look.

'That won't be necessary, thank you. Perhaps you could ask her to join us instead?'

Amy must be listening. She comes in and I introduce her to the cops.

'Please sit down.' She gestures at the sofa.

Amy perches in one of the armchairs opposite and I take the one beside her. MacPherson sits on the sofa, but the book-ends remain standing, as though they're expecting action. The detective pulls out a pen and one of those black, flip-top notebooks. He opens it, looks at his watch and makes a note.

My fingers start drumming on the armrest. What the fuck is going on? Amy reaches over and takes my hand.

MacPherson looks up. 'I'm very sorry, Johnny. There's no easy way to tell you this.' Now his eyes are locked on mine, as if he's searching for something. 'It's your brother, Ivan. He's been shot.'

In two strides I'm out in the hall, snatching up my car keys.

My ears are ringing. Why has nobody moved?

‘Which hospital?’ I shout.

‘He didn’t make it. Johnny, I’m sorry.’

MacPherson does sound sorry, but I’m back in the living room towering over him. Nothing makes sense. They’ve fucked this up somehow.

‘Bullshit. It’s not him.’ One of the bookends steps forward and puts his hand on my arm, but I shake him off. ‘You’ve got him mixed up with someone else. Ivan can’t be dead.’

MacPherson looks at his notebook again. ‘Ivan was shot at the end of his driveway while he was putting out the garbage bins at eleven-forty this evening. A neighbour called it in. Ambos got there before we did, but there was nothing they could do.’

I can’t breathe. The keys are digging into my palm. I want to rip that black notebook out of MacPherson’s hand and shove it down his throat. I want to rip the world apart. Then Amy’s arms are wrapped around me.

‘Are you okay, Mummy?’

Sasha is behind us. I can’t look at him.

‘Oh, God,’ Amy groans into my shoulder. I can feel her heart pounding as she hugs me tight. Then she lets go.

‘Come on Sasha. Back to bed.’ She bends down and cuddles our son, murmuring to him as she guides him out of the room. Their voices recede up the hall.

I’m shaking and somehow my face is wet. The cops haven’t moved. I sit back down in the armchair, wipe my face with my hands and take some deep breaths.

When I can trust my voice, I ask who did it.

AMY

I'm amazed and relieved that Sasha doesn't remember waking up last night, seeing me crying, his father unhinged and the living room full of police. I have to explain what happened all over again. I don't want him finding out about Ivan's death by watching some TV report about Croatian-Serbian gang wars. What if a kid at school asks him why his uncle got shot? It's not like Novak is a common surname.

'Something very sad happened last night. Your Uncle Ivan was killed.'

He's eating a fried egg on toast and trying to grasp what I've said.

'So, he won't be here for Christmas?' he asks, as if Ivan's on holiday.

'No, Sash. He's in heaven now.' If such a place exists, they sure as hell won't be letting in Johnny's brother. But Sasha goes to a Catholic primary school; heaven is a concept we've discussed before.

'Uncle Ivan said he was coming to the concert. I'm gonna

be a transformer. He promised.'

Sasha stares up at me, his blue eyes confused rather than sulky.

Okay, this will be a process. He's ten years old and no one he knows has ever died.

'He didn't mean to let you down. Sometimes things happen we can't control. You know that Sash.'

Sasha looks down at his egg, his eyes hidden behind his blond fringe. He needs another haircut. He looks like me, not Johnny, not one little bit Croatian. But he's got his father's temperament. He only speaks when he has something to say and kindness is always just under the surface. He flicks his fringe from his eyes as if he's stepping out of a swimming pool, his expression bewildered. But he reaches out across the kitchen bench and pats my hand. My son consoling me; I want to break down and sob. His gesture somehow makes me feel even more alone in this.

We talk about it some more in the car, during the ten-minute drive to All Saints Catholic Primary School, in downtown Liverpool.

'How did Uncle Ivan die, Mum?'

I knew he'd get here eventually. I go with what I think he'll understand.

'He was shot. You know guns are very dangerous, Sash, so it might have been an accident. The police are trying to find out what happened.'

This seems to satisfy him, for now.

At the Kiss and Drop area, there's the usual mess with cars arriving and leaving, frustrated parents wrangling children and

little kids crying. Sasha is out the door before I can bring my Mini to a complete stop. He weaves around smaller kids, his long legs executing abrupt changes of direction as if he's in some kind of race. Then he stops short and turns back to wave. No smile. Maybe it's sinking in.

My hands are numb on the steering wheel. I'm outside Johnny's parents' place, and I can't remember getting here. I try to slow my breathing and focus. Every few seconds it hits me again, our new reality looping around in my head—Ivan is dead. Alive one moment, dead the next. Probably didn't feel a thing. I guess there are worse ways to die.

Maybe, if I could reset the clock, Ivan would still be alive. Ivan, Johnny's hero, not mine. But I didn't want him dead, did I?

Last night, after confirming Johnny was home with me all night, Detective MacPherson asked him to help break the news to his parents, Milan and Branka. MacPherson is no dummy. I'd want Johnny there as a buffer too. There's a reason Milan has a bad reputation. He's ferocious. He hates cops and I bet they don't like him much either. Johnny is still with Branka and Milan and, now that Sasha is at school, I need to be with Johnny. But I make no move to get out of the car. I pull the sun visor down and slide open the mirror. A pale face with red-rimmed, blue eyes stares back at me. I snap the visor back into place and look at Branka's garden instead.

When Branka and Milan arrived in Australia, back in 1980, they bought this single-storey, red, brick-veneer home on the edge of the sprawling suburb of Liverpool. I wonder what the neighbours thought when the Novaks first moved in. My

parents would have taken one look at Milan and slapped a For Sale sign on their front fence.

Just before we got married, Johnny and I bought a house of a similar vintage, three blocks away. Like most of the other houses in this quiet, residential neighbourhood, our house is a triple-fronted brick home with a double lock-up garage. There's a lawn in the front and a backyard shaded by ghost gums. Oh, and a swimming pool.

Ivan's place is three blocks in the other direction. All of us, living here in the same part of Liverpool, I know this is normal for most European families, but sometimes I find it claustrophobic.

In contrast to their neighbours, Johnny's parents' house has a knee-high row of Besser blocks, painted white, separating the front garden from the verge. On this side of the fence, a big jacaranda throws shade and purple flowers out as far as the street. Inside the fence, staked tomato plants compete for space with brightly coloured vegetables and string beans on trellises. There's no gate, just a gap in the fence. Concrete paving curves through the garden to the three steps leading up to a small verandah and the front door. Apart from a square of grass in the backyard, cultivated the year I was pregnant with Sasha, the whole block is one big vegetable patch. Branka's domain. That square of grass was her gift to me, so Sasha would have a place to crawl, then run around, when we came to visit.

Branka's edible garden is as extraordinary as the woman herself. I see her round face in the kitchen window. I can't stay here any longer. As I get out of the car, the heat hits me like a big wet slap.

I let the scents of the garden lull me as I step over the cracks

in the concrete path. Just like it always does, the screen door squeaks when I push it open to enter the dim hallway. Branka's bright-yellow kitchen opens up on my left.

Milan and Johnny are slumped at the long timber table as though they haven't moved for hours. Two huge men, built like front-row forwards, weighed down by grief. Hazel eyes, curly dark hair, Milan's streaked with grey. Their prominent brows bisected by strong, straight noses. They are so similar I know exactly what Johnny will look like in twenty years. Their faces turn as one to acknowledge me. Johnny wears the semblance of a smile, Milan an ugly scowl. He's never liked me. I'm not sure why. Maybe because I'm not a good Croatian girl.

Johnny stands to give me a hug. Milan stays seated and turns his head away slightly as I lean down to give him a kiss. He's still the biggest, scariest man I know. There's a sense of power emanating from him that could fell trees. But he looks diminished this morning. The sunlight pouring through the kitchen window accentuates every line on his broad face.

Branka is wearing a rumpled floral house dress she probably made herself. She'd be horrified to know the hem has come down at the back. After pouring tea into thick white mugs, she stops, transfixed by the large crucifix attached to the wall above the kettle. Jesus looks peaceful enough, considering his plight. The expression on Branka's face shifts from blankness to savagery before she shuts her eyes and crosses herself.

I make my way around the table and reach out to touch her shoulder. Her eyes are red, her full cheeks shiny and taut from crying. Her chin is trembling. Her face looks broken. I imagine Sasha dying and the thought drives all the breath from my lungs.

Branka is a big woman, but I'm tall, so I get my arms around her somehow. I feel a shudder run through her. We hold each other. She sniffs and breaks away to hand me two milky teas. I place them in front of our men and sit down beside Johnny. Branka turns back to her bench top and starts making something with flour, eggs and slow, silent tears. Branka's answer to everything is to cook.

When I can't handle the silence any longer, my voice comes out in a squeak.

'Has Detective MacPherson provided any new information?'

Milan looks at me and his face fills with anger. I wish I hadn't spoken. I always seem to say the wrong thing when he's around.

Johnny answers as though he's talking in his sleep. 'A neighbour heard shots and called the police. No one saw anything. Same as when Michael Vucavec got shot last week.'

Stanislav Vucavec and Milan Novak. Two of the biggest gang leaders in Western Sydney. One Serbian, the other Croatian and sworn enemies. Stanislav lost his eldest son last week. Last night it was Milan's turn.

Johnny sips his tea, then continues. 'MacPherson said the shootings are his biggest priority, right now. He doesn't want a turf war. He kept asking if we had any idea who might want Ivan dead.'

Branka moans and Johnny buries his head in his hands. How can I comfort this family, my family now, when they have lost their favourite son? Johnny idolised his brother. Ivan protected Johnny from Milan. He protected Johnny when they were out on jobs. He protected Johnny his whole life, and now he's gone.

Milan stands up, his chair toppling and his whole body vibrating with fury. He looks as if he wants to kill someone. I flinch, but he marches off down the hall. I hear the back door slam. Branka turns around, sees he's left his tea and hurries after him, holding the mug out in front of her.

I put my hand over Johnny's and squeeze. No response, as he stares blankly at the wall.

'Was he working on something...unusual?' Now we're alone I can be more direct. But there's a lot I don't know.

'He was across everything. It could be another crew muscling in. It could be the Serbs. Maybe they think we had something to do with Michael's death. Maybe Ivan slept with the wrong man's wife.' Johnny doesn't sound like himself.

'Does your dad have a theory?'

'Dad hasn't said a word since I broke the news.'

'MacPherson made *you* do it?'

'I told them to wait outside, just in case Dad went nuts and pulled out the Bren he's got strapped to the bottom of this table.'

My gut constricts as if the machine gun is pointing right at my belly button. I want to look under the table, but I stop myself. A new fear grips me. Milan will want Johnny to step up. He needs a new second-in-command. I shiver then squeeze his hand harder and Johnny looks at me at last.

'Milan is going to take you away from me.' I sound like a five-year-old, but the words are out now, sitting between us.