

## Chapter 1

WHEN I think about the first time I laid eyes on Frankie, my mind imbues it with a significance it didn't have – a recognition of kindred souls or a premonition of a shared future. The reality was that our eyes met for a couple of seconds in a courtroom. I was intrigued by her from that moment; although I can confidently say that I made no impression on her at all. I hesitate to use the word obsession but what the hell, I already have.

And if it wasn't for my craving for a sausage roll, I wouldn't have been in that courtroom at all.

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*June 2005*

I CRANKED the car heater up and turned on the windscreen wipers against the steady drizzle. The suburban roads shone damp in the streetlights. At 10.15 on a Tuesday night, there wasn't a lot of traffic. I hated working late in winter and couldn't wait to get home to my warm, cosy apartment and collapse in front of the TV with a beer. I'd stayed back in the office to get my head around the financial reports of my newest client, a national chain of fitness centres, who'd been served with a bankruptcy notice by a creditor.

As I approached the lights of my local 7-Eleven store, I realised how hungry I was. I'd only had a sandwich at my desk for dinner. The empty parking space right in front vindicated my decision to stop. Mike was sitting behind the counter reading a newspaper.

'Hi Mike! Busy night?

Mike grinned. 'Flat out as usual. How about you?'

'Same as always. Any sausage rolls left?' I walked over to the hot food stand on the side counter. There was one sausage roll in the pie warmer. 'Must be my lucky night.'

I tore a paper bag from the hanger, took out the sausage roll and popped it into the bag. I heard the entrance buzzer beep behind me.

'Get your hands in the air!'

I whirled around. A man with a stocking over his face stood in front of the counter pointing a gun at Mike. Mike was standing, his hands raised, his face frozen into a sickly shade of pale. The man motioned to me with the gun. 'Go and stand next to him.'

I forced my legs to move. Although fear had numbed my body, my mind was in overdrive, taking in as much as it could. The man was tall and solid, and dressed in jeans, pullover and joggers. He wore a beanie and although the stocking over his face blurred his features, I could make out a broad nose and square chin.

'Is there anyone else in here?'

Mike shook his head. The man leaned forward and jabbed him in the chest with the gun. 'Don't fuck with me, mate.'

'I'm telling the truth, there's no-one else.'

The man waved his gun in the direction of the cash register. 'Empty it! And move it!'

Mike opened the register drawer. His hands shook as he pulled out the notes. The man peered out the front door, rocking back and forth on his feet.

‘Hurry up!’ he yelled. Mike handed him a pile of notes and the man stuffed them into his jeans pocket. He jabbed his gun into Mike’s chest again. ‘Is that all?’

Mike nodded. The man backed out the front door, the pistol still trained on us, then ran into the night. It was all over in less than a minute.

## Chapter 2

‘YOU’RE a lawyer, Mr McPherson?’ Senior Detective Hunter asked.

He was an imposing man with a deliberate manner; his presence filling the small interview room at the police station.

‘I’m a corporate lawyer at Chapman and Goode. I specialise in insolvency.’

‘You were never tempted to do criminal law?’ barked Detective Ross, a petite, dark-haired woman with an abrupt manner. Or maybe she was just having a bad day.

I shook my head. ‘There’s no money in criminal law, especially when you’re representing the dregs of society like armed robbers.’

I neglected to mention that my father’s illustrious career as a criminal law barrister before he retired to academia had also put me off, although he’d managed to make a very good living by only representing white-collar criminals.

SD Hunter pressed a button on the digital recorder on the table. ‘Interview with witness William James McPherson by Senior Detective Neil Hunter and Detective Fiona Ross. Wednesday 15 June 2005 at 10 am. Mr McPherson, can you go through the events of last night again, from the moment you entered the store?’

I stared at the dewy young Queen Elizabeth II smiling regally at me from the painting on the wall as I recounted the events of the previous night. My heart was thumping as if it were happening all over again.

‘Apart from his physical description, what else can you remember?’ SD Hunter asked. ‘What was his voice like?’

‘Low and sort of gruff.’

‘Did he have an accent?’

‘He only said a few words, but he sounded Australian.’

‘What about body odour?’ Detective Ross asked with distaste, as if she could smell it.

‘I wasn’t close enough to notice, thank God.’

‘Any distinguishing marks or tattoos?’ she pursued.

‘The only part of his body I could see were his hands and I didn’t notice any marks or tattoos on them.’

SD Hunter took over again. ‘What were his hands like?’

‘Just ordinary hands,’ I snapped. ‘He didn’t have any fingers missing, if that’s what you mean.’

He looked at me coolly.

‘Sorry,’ I said. ‘I didn’t get much sleep last night.’

After the police had arrived and taken our initial statements, I helped Mike to lock up, made sure he was okay to drive home, then drove home myself and fell into bed. I lay awake for hours, the events of the night churning over in my mind. The birds were chirping outside my window when I finally drifted off.

‘What I meant, Mr McPherson, was were his hands large or small? Did he have broad fingers? Were they hairy? That sort of thing.’

I shook my head. ‘Honestly, I can’t remember. I was concentrating on the gun more than his hands. He seemed agitated and I was terrified the thing would go off.’

‘Did he seem under the influence of alcohol or drugs?’ Detective Ross asked.

‘I don’t think alcohol. His reflexes were too fast. Maybe drugs.’

‘And you didn’t see his vehicle?’

‘No, I just heard a car revving up and speeding away. I was going to run outside as soon as he left to get the number plate, but Mike stopped me. He said the guy probably had an

accomplice and if they saw me they could take a pot shot at me. Poor guy. It's not the first time he's been held up.'

'Thanks, that will be all,' SD Hunter said. 'If you'll wait outside, we'll get a statement typed up for you to sign.'

'There's just one thing,' I said.

SD Hunter paused. 'Yes?'

'I got the impression of strength. Not in a good way – the brutal, beat-you-till-you're-senseless kind.' I shrugged. 'I might just have imagined it because he was pointing a gun at me.'

'Thanks.' Detective Ross said. She scribbled in her notebook then looked up at me. 'How are you coping?'

'I'm fine.'

She handed me a business card. Victims of Crime Counselling Service. 'If you need support, contact this agency. You've been through a traumatic experience and sometimes the after-effects don't show up till later.'

I pocketed the card. I doubted I'd need their services. I didn't want to dwell on the experience; I wanted to put it behind me.