



Lance Colbert Smith - Preview

PROLOGUE

How does an eight-year-old brain process murder?

Death has no boundaries—no particular time or place, and no common cause. Death can visit anyone, anytime, anywhere.

Take this balmy night, with trees swaying in the gentle breeze outside a Queenscliff family home. A young girl hears her dad's two gruff friends downstairs start to argue. Voices rise to a scream, and then gunshots echo through the house.

She looks down from the first-floor balcony and sees Mum and Dad, lying in a pool of blood. Her older sister runs for her life up the stairs, only to be gunned down by that horrible, scar-faced man. She watches in slow motion as the gun is wheeled around and pointed at her.

Fear. Pure terror. She turns and runs, and runs, and runs. She dives out the window, clammers down the drainpipe, crashes into the bushes below and takes off into the darkness.

Now, ten years later, that scar-faced man is a senior policeman, still looking for the only witness to his horrific crime.

Beware of the dogs.

CHAPTER ONE

Detective Superintendent Tina Samuels and her sidekick Inspector Mike Broadfinger raced to the airport under siren and boarded the first available flight to Sydney out of the Gold Coast. They'd only just finished burying their friend when the news broke: a massive bomb had exploded at Parramatta Police Headquarters hours earlier, with many killed and injured.

Tina was working with the New South Wales Police Missing Persons Bureau, as well as heading various special task forces. Tall, with short blonde hair, a piercing stare and a huge reputation for her success fighting police and mob corruption, she was a force to be reckoned with, and very popular with the good guys in the ranks.

Her sorrows were twofold today.

The first of her troubles was the loss of long-time friend and fellow cancer sufferer Catie Lanyon, who'd died at the age of thirty-eight—far too young for such a talented and brilliant investigative journalist. Tina was so thankful their paths had crossed again at Dr. Emslie's surgery, where she too had first been diagnosed with cancer. Their reunion had led to Catie introducing her to a group of amazing people and, as a result of their combined efforts, worldwide headlines for busting major international drug cartels and illegal arms dealers. The New South Wales Police and Australian Federal Police profiles

were at an all-time high, and Tina was getting the kudos. They'd produced some incredible results, some of which extended beyond her policing duties.

Catie's extensive list of influential contacts had been invaluable to the investigation. The information they were able to supply Tina, at great risk to themselves, led to the arrest and gaoling of many drug lords, mobsters, crooked cops and politicians worldwide. Catie's legacy would last forever.

Great lives never go out; they just go on, thought Tina.

Despite the overwhelming success of the operation, Tina still carried a nagging self-doubt. So many people had been killed on her watch—good ones, like Anita, the girlfriend of mob boss 'Wipeout' Tony Moribito. At least her little girl had survived the raids. Nick 'The Greek' Pashalidis, a vegetable stall boss from the Sydney markets, was another of the casualties. A decent and wonderful man, Nick had worked with Tina on mob corruption and criminal matters in the markets for years. Both were killed for giving invaluable information.

Then, of course, there was Catie's demise.

Tina was grateful that Catie had won the top Walkley Award and thus been appropriately recognised for her efforts before leaving this life. A lot of bad people were off the streets because of Catie's efforts, including some of Tina's colleagues. Many of them had died, and Tina was acutely aware that even they had mums, dads, children or siblings who loved them no matter what. The burden weighed on her heavily.

Her second sadness was about this morning's bomb blast at Parramatta Police Headquarters. Her close colleague, Inspector Derek Sward, was thought to be amongst the dead. Derek had been her backbone, confidant and mentor over the past few months, and she considered him responsible for much of her success.

Details about the attack were sketchy at best. There were no immediate leads to confirm if it was mob payback, terrorism or just a disgruntled citizen with a grudge against police.

Tina and Mike were to be met by another member of the special task force at Sydney Airport, Detective Sergeant Georgia McHenry-Holder, who'd been recalled from her honeymoon that morning to support the operation. Already on the job, Georgia was to brief them on the latest developments.

Tina rested her eyes as they approached Sydney airspace. It seemed so long ago that they'd solved the Riley Sampson missing persons case, yet it was only three months ago. The Cobama gang had abducted eight-year-old Riley for ransom. Riley's dad was a real estate agent who'd fallen into the claws of the Cobama gang through his large gambling losses. The gang had abducted eight-year-old Riley from his school camp at Narrabeen, cut off his finger and sent it to his petrified dad along with their demand for money. Rick Sampson had then begged from all his friends and associates, had a fire sale of his most valuable assets and misappropriated some of his clients' trust funds to repay the mob and get his son back.

It was good police work by Detective McHenry-Holder that had solved the case. There'd been a shootout at Riley's handover that resulted in the death of one of the mobsters and injuries to others, including one of the police task force. The good news was that Riley had been kept safe and was returned home to his very relieved and thankful mum, Jan. Tina wondered if that mob might be responsible for the Parramatta attack.

It was a bleak day in Sydney as the jet flew under low clouds on the approach to Kingsford Smith Airport, the rain over Botany Bay skidding across the small cabin

windows. The whitecaps on the ocean below looked like the peaks of a thousand snow-capped mountains. Several fishing trawlers on the water retreated to their moorings, seeking shelter from the howling wind and rising seas.

As soon as the plane landed, Tina turned on her phone and saw two missed calls from Police Commissioner John Palmer. She immediately called him back while Mike hauled down their cabin bags. They were in seats 1A and 1B, positioned to be the first off the plane.

"Hi Tina," the commissioner answered.

"Commissioner," said Tina. "What's the situation?"

"I don't know how much you know, so I'll just start talking," said Palmer. "The bomb was massive, and a real pro job. There were many civilian and police casualties, including Derek Sward, who is in a critical condition in ICU at Westmead. I'm on site now. I understand you're coming over from the airport, so I'll wait for your arrival."

"Where do you want me on this one?" she asked.

"I'm putting you in charge, because I suspect you'll have the best idea of what led up to the bombing. It looks to me like some sort of payback for recent events, but whether it's a local mob or international, we have yet to sort out."

"My thoughts exactly. Hard to imagine it's just coincidence."

"I've stationed extra police at all airports, railway stations and shipping departures to monitor anyone trying to get out. There are extra highway patrols carefully checking all vehicles. If they're on the road, we'll find them."

"Okay, commissioner. See you soon."

Tina signed off.

Her first sense was one of relief that Derek Sward was alive. She would keep her fingers crossed that he remained that way. She passed on the details of their conversation to Mike as they walked up the aerobridge and into the terminal.

Detective Sergeant Georgia McHenry-Holder waved as they exited and immediately briefed Tina and Mike as the trio walked down to the baggage collection area. Their two bags were amongst the first out, so they headed out of the terminal to the waiting police transport. It was a Wednesday, so the traffic was heavy.

Mike looked around as they drove out and frowned.

"Boss, a black SUV just pulled out behind us. Looks like it's following us," he said. "I'll get Pol Air to do a check straight away."

Meanwhile, Georgia reported that the explosion had not originated from a vehicle outside the Police HQ, as they'd first thought. It had been planted inside the station behind security and detonated from somewhere nearby.

"So that means whoever planted it had security access to the area," she added. "That narrows the field of inquiry."

"I've requested any surviving CCTV footage from the station, as well as various businesses and buildings on Charles Street," said Tina. "Parra Council also have some pole-mounted footage. What else do we know?"

"There was mass confusion after the bomb went off," said Georgia. "At the moment, we have fourteen confirmed dead; six civilians, and eight police and station staff. Some thirty to thirty-five were injured and have been sent to various hospitals, a number of them

critical. Amongst those are Inspector Sward and his assistant, Sergeant Garry Townsend, who were both in the interview room near where the device was planted.”

“Bastards,” said Mike. “How is the recovery effort going?”

“Rescuers are expecting to find more buried under the debris. Sergeant Joe Hudson from Parra car twenty-eight, who I’m sure you remember from the Cobama bust, was soon on the scene. Terry Smythe and Charlie Wake also happened to be nearby with a special dog squad car. Those three, and some others, did a great job getting people out and to safety amongst fears that a second device might go off.

“I’ve asked Blacktown to give us a team to deliver the sad news to all the families of those who have died and are injured,” the detective added. “Brian Carey went out to Barbara Sward himself. Says she was devastated. He’s on his way to Garry Townsend’s home at Chipping Norton now.”

By the time they arrived at the scene, Georgia had relayed all the known facts to Tina and Mike, but they still had only a very rough picture of events.

The two were surprised at the extent of the destruction. Smoke was still spurting out from a number of areas in the ruins.

”God, how could anyone have survived?” said Mike, speaking for all of them.

There were still many ambulances, fire engines and special units working at the site. The rescue teams painstakingly sifted through the broken and twisted rubble. Cranes lifted large, broken slabs of concrete and tortured metal away into waiting trucks. Forensic teams were everywhere, taking notes and photos and placing evidence in sealed containers.

Tina could hear a dog barking somewhere nearby.

Then, a loudhailer announced, “Quiet on the site. Quiet on the site.”

Suddenly, an eerie silence descended on the scene as everything ground to a halt.

Rescuers with specialised locator devices pointed, checked screens and listened on earphones. Everyone looked on as a team of four galvanised into action around a crumbling mess of debris in the far western corner.

One of the men spoke into the rocks in a deep, reassuring voice.

“We hear you. Stay still. We’re nearly there. Can you hear me?”

There must’ve been a response from under the rubble, as the team leader appeared to be talking to someone. Tina, Mike and Georgia looked on as the team burrowed further into the destruction.

After what seemed an eternity, but was no more than a few minutes, excited cries and claps rang out as two people were hauled carefully out of the devastation and placed onto stretchers. One man was in a uniform which, by now, was hardly recognisable. The other person appeared to be a youngster. Both were covered in debris, dust and obvious injuries. Surrounded by rescuers, they began the risky trek through the crumbling wreckage. Then, the rescue noises started all over again as the pair were loaded into two of the waiting ambulances.

Tina felt a shiver go down her spine.

“What sort of animal would do this?” she asked, looking to Mike for answers.

He had none to offer.

Georgia had wandered off and returned with three men, one of whom was in uniform.

“Superintendent, this is Sergeant Joe Hudson and Detectives Terry Smythe and Charlie Wake,” she said. “They were the first on the scene and did a great job mobilising the rescue effort.”

Tina had met ‘Smokin’ Joe Hudson at the Riley Sampson handover shooting, and she knew Charlie Wake from previous task forces. She remembered him as a good cop with a brother in the force. With the surname Wake, their nicknames were ‘I’m a’ and ‘Wida’. She couldn’t remember which was which.

“Have you all given statements?” asked Tina.

All three nodded.

“Okay. I’ll go over them back at my office. You look buggered,” she said. “As soon as you can, go home, clean up and rest. Thanks for your efforts. It sounds like a good few people owe their lives to you three. I’d like to see you in my Chatswood office at 9 tomorrow morning. I should be ready to move forward by then—unless there’s anything you think we need to do sooner?”

Nothing was forthcoming. The three men wandered off in a trance-like manner. They’d had a long and tough day.

“Mike, you stay here and keep me posted on any developments,” said Tina. “Georgia, you and I are going back to Chatswood to get started. But first, I’d like to call in at the hospital to check on Derek, Garry and the others.”

They headed back into Charles Street, which was full of curious onlookers, anxious relatives, media and rescue teams, as well as a group of uniformed police trying to maintain some sort of order. They avoided the media scrum and left quickly.

As they drove west along Hawkesbury Road on the approach to Westmead Hospital, Tina directed Georgia to park outside the main entrance.

“We won’t be here long,” she said. “I just want to set up a line of communication and find out how everyone is. I’m feeling a bit uneasy about all of this. Call HQ and get twenty-four-hour police security set up wherever the victims are, hospitals or otherwise. I should be back soon.”

Tina strode into the main entry and presented at the reception desk. She told them who she was and was asked to wait.

Shortly after, a well-dressed man in his late forties came up to her.

“Good afternoon, Superintendent,” said the man. “I’m Richard Doyle, CEO of Westmead. Whatever you need, we will provide to the best of our ability. Like so many others, I am saddened to hear all the dreadful news.”

After a fruitful five-minute discussion, Tina bid farewell to the CEO, who’d informed her that Derek and Garry were both in deep comas with multiple injuries. He’d said their conditions were extremely serious, but assured her they were in the best of hands, promising to call as soon as anything developed.

Tina was deep in thought as they drove north along the M4 heading towards Chatswood. Nearing the city, she wondered how Brad and the 4G Team were coping after Catie’s funeral. She hoped the wake had gone well.

This was her ‘other side’, she thought, shivering at the notion.

Peak-hour traffic was starting to build on the southbound lanes. An ambulance made slow progress, weaving amongst those trying to move out of its path.

“Oh God, Georgia, I forgot to ask,” said Tina. “Forgive me. How was the honeymoon?”

“No worries, Super. Totally understandable,” she said. “It was wonderful. We spent the first week on Daydream Island. The Whitsunday weather was fabulous. We snorkelled, scuba-dived and cruised. We even took out a sailing boat. Dave is no sailor, and I’m even worse, but we had a ball. Daydream Island has an amazing underwater observation area. Sensational. We came home for the last week to do some work on the house. Dave had to go back to work today, and I was called in this morning. A sad end to two great weeks.”

Tina nodded solemnly, then chuckled.

“The wedding was beautiful, and so were you ... but that little flower girl upstaged you all. She was priceless.”

“That’s my niece, Carley,” Georgia laughed. “My sister Fiona’s little girl. She really is a hoot.”

They talked more about the wedding for a time, then got back to the case at hand. Tina made a call to Commissioner John Palmer from the car, outlining her plan to form a new task force and set up a special working room at Chatswood. She agreed to go into Day Street Police HQ the next day after her meetings, and then signed off.

“This bloody COVID,” Tina sighed. “The commissioner is saying we have to cut down on numbers because so many are on pandemic patrol. What a waste of resources.”

“Why can’t people wake up and obey simple restrictions without bringing the boys in blue and the defence force in? What a crazy country,” Georgia replied.

Neither of them saw the black SUV coming up behind them in the adjacent lane. Georgia was first to realise they had a problem when she saw through her rear vision mirror the gun barrel poking out of a window. She took instant evasive action, swinging straight into the left shoulder lane and jamming on the brakes as the shooting started.

Tina and Georgia felt a huge impact. There was a crunching sound as the police car crashed into a stationary van and crumpled, followed by a deathly silence as they both fell unconscious.

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