

Prologue

"So, Jane Doe, you kept your promise."

Jane noted that the voice was breathless and disguised. "Yes. Why don't you come out, and we can talk?" Jane peered into the darkness of the warehouse, but she could only see a vague shape in the shadows. "You asked me to come. You said you have information about the serial killer."

"You're alone?"

"Yes," she lied. "Please come over here. I'd prefer not to call out to you."

The man moved a few steps towards her, but stayed in the shadows. "I'm glad you came alone, as requested, Jane Doe."

Jane's nerves tingled down her back. *You don't know, mate, but Steve is outside!* The stocky figure moved another step closer. At that instant, Jane realized why she could not see his face. He wore a dark balaclava. She feigned nonchalance as she spoke. "What do you want to tell me?"

The hoarse voice echoed around the empty warehouse. "I know who you're looking for. But I can't tell you his name or it will be the end of me."

"We can give you protection -"

"I don't want protection, Inspector, I just want you to know that this man is clever - he targets prostitutes."

"We know that already -"

"He thinks they are all trash! All of them are trash! He must be stopped - he'll kill again."

An eerie silence followed. Jane's heart pounded in her chest. Her mouth was dry and her voice croaked, "What's your name?" He did not answer. She steeled herself and asked, "What do you know about this killer?" She needed to feel the cool comfort of her gun that was nestled in her handbag, but resisted the temptation, not wanting to scare him away.

The hoarse voice repeated, "Trash! All trash!"

"You're not telling me what I need to know."

There was a noise outside the warehouse as Steve bumped into something in the dark.

"You're not alone!" the man snarled, and spun away.

Jane grabbed for his arm, but the bulky figure was surprisingly nimble on his feet. She managed only to snag his jacket sleeve. He jerked free, then shoved her backwards into one of the metal roof poles. Her head hit the pole with a thud. Surprisingly, there was no pain at first, but as she crumpled, warm sticky blood oozed down her face.

Her assailant turned and ran.

Although dizzy and weak, she managed to call out for her partner. She heard him in pursuit, then yelling at the retreating man. A moment later, Steve was at her side.

"Steve?" she croaked, then dry-retched onto the floor as nausea and pain overcame her.

Strong, but gentle arms went around her. "It's okay, Boss, everything's okay. I've called for an ambulance. You'll be fine, Boss - Boss?"

Jane slipped into unconsciousness

"Jane? Can you hear me?"

She did not recognize the voice. She tried to move her head, then stopped, overcome with severe pain. Her mouth was dry and her lips felt like parchment as she mumbled, "Don't shout! I hear you."

Someone, a man, peered directly at her. She realized that the voice belonged to him. "Follow my finger. Yes! That's good, Jane. You're lucky! One fraction to the right, and - well, it wasn't, and you'll be fine. I repaired the depressed fracture. There will be bad headaches for a while, but with patience and rest, they should gradually disappear. By the way, I'm Doctor Green, your surgeon. You just need rest now. You gave us quite a scare, you know."

"I'm so tired," she muttered. Bright sun from the window made her frown in pain. A nurse quickly closed the curtains. Jane thought her lips would crack as she croaked, "It's daylight. I've been out all night?"

"You've been in a coma for a week, Jane."

"A week?"

"It's time to rest. I'll call in later. By then, your fan club might be allowed to visit." Doctor Green grinned.

"F-fan club?"

"One is your fiancée, Oliver Tarrant, and the other is Senior Sergeant Steve Ho."

"Oliver's not my fiancée - not yet."

Dr Green smiled again. "They can wait a little longer. You need to sleep for a while first. I'll see you later."

Jane wanted to thank him, but he had already disappeared in a rush through the door. The nurse stayed, patted her on the arm, and said, "Relax. The doctor wants you to rest. This is the call button, if you need us." The nurse left the room. A few minutes later, Jane drifted off to sleep.

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When Jane woke, she felt light-headed. Doctor Green magically appeared and extended more platitudes. Finally, with his examination complete, he smiled at her again. "It's time to let your fan club in," he said, and left the room.

Oliver entered first, holding a toy 'Pooh Bear' and a single red rose. Steve came in behind him, clutching a bunch of flowers. "Oliver - Steve!" Jane tried to sit up, but was stopped by pain.

"Keep still, my love," said Oliver.

"I'm sorry he got away, Boss. But my priority was looking after you," said Steve as he put a bunch of flowers on the bedside table. "These are from the squad, Boss." Steve was not a man to show any emotion. Jane wondered if his deliberate deadpan look was part of his Chinese heritage. *Steve Ho, you always take everything so seriously.* In contradiction to her thoughts, Steve suddenly flashed a big smile and said, "I won't stay now. You two need some time together. See you tomorrow, Boss. Take care of her, Oliver."

After the door closed, Oliver moved across the room and kissed her lightly on the lips, then tucked 'Pooh Bear' in beside her, and laid the rose on the bedside table.

"That idiot nearly killed you, Jane," he murmured.

"So Doctor Green keeps telling me."

"Well, your Doctor Green has ordered that you stay in the hospital for two weeks, with at least four weeks rest at home. Then, I think you should take another month's leave. Perhaps we can go away somewhere."

"Maybe," Jane responded, then feigned a yawn as she added, "I'm sorry, Oliver. I'm so tired. Thanks for *Winnie the Pooh*. I always wanted one." Jane yawned again, but this time it was a natural one. She suddenly felt exhausted.

"I love you, Jane Doe," he remarked, and kissed her on her cheek. He sat down on the chair next to her bed and took her hand in his. Within a minute, Jane drifted off to sleep.

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"It's always your bloody work! What about us?" Oliver paced around the room. "Why can't you commit yourself? For God's sake, Jane, I love you."

"And I love you, Oliver, but I need time. I can't think clearly with these damn recurring headaches. The month down at the coast will be good for me. It's the first time I've been down in that area since my parents died."

Oliver stopped pacing and returned to the couch to put his arm around her. "I know that."

"When I was stuck in that little room in the hospital, I had plenty of time to think. I can't let mum and dad's accident at Apollo Bay stop me from going there again."

"Good! That's my girl!" Oliver kissed her lightly. They sat in silence for a few minutes.

Jane looked at Oliver and sighed. "I now accept the fact that they were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Your parents would be proud of you. You're now a Detective Inspector and idolized by the members of your Homicide Squad." Oliver fidgeted on the couch and moved forward to look at her as he added, "I'm only asking for a yes."

"I don't want to give an answer tonight. Please understand." Jane hugged him, and added, "Look, I promise that I'll give you an answer the day I return. Okay?"

"No, it's not okay, but I guess I have no choice, do I?" Oliver responded, with a wry grin. "I'd better go. Look after yourself, and please, please keep in touch!"

"I will. I'm taking my mobile. I'll phone you. The local police know I'm coming. Sergeant Stan Greenough and I worked together years ago. I'm staying in his rental cottage. I guess it won't be long before the locals find out who I am and start to fuss over me. That's the nice thing about small coastal townships. Steve told me that our informer phoned to apologise for hurting me, but also said he won't meet the police again, as he's too scared of the killer."

"Look, I'm a hundred percent behind Steve, if he finds this man, and arrests him for assaulting you. Scared, or not, he could have killed you. But, as a police profiler, I agree that he was right when he told you that the killer only stalked prostitutes."

"Well, I'm not a target, Oliver. I pity the prostitutes, though - they're all scared of being his next victim."

"Jane, for goodness sake, forget about this case. As much as I want you here, you need to get away and stop thinking about work for a change." Oliver put his arms around her and kissed her. "I'm going. Sweet dreams, my love."

Jane was filled with mixed emotions as the sound of Oliver's car disappeared into the night. She went to bed, but sleep eluded her as she mused about the ten horrifying rapes, and mangled bodies of young prostitutes that she had seen over the last three years. Each had daunting, similar autopsy reports. Rape followed by a savage beating, faces battered beyond recognition, making identification difficult. The latest victim still lay unidentified in the cold fridge of the city morgue, labelled as *Jane Doe*. As usual, the killer had left no fingerprints and had used a condom. But Jane and her squad had connecting evidence. DNA results of skin found under each victim's fingernails matched. All Jane had to do was find the man who matched the DNA. Oliver's right, I mustn't think about this case. *That's Detective Senior Sergeant Steve Ho's job now*, she mused. *Heck, I wish I could get to sleep.*

In desperation, Jane got up and took one of the sleeping pills that had been prescribed for her, then returned to bed. The drive to the coast would take her around three and a half hours or longer with a lunch break. *Don't worry, Oliver, I'll phone you on my mobile when I get to Apollo Bay and have lunch. Damn you, why did you have to propose to me tonight? Tonight of all nights!* She recalled the irony of the connection between her name and her job. *Jane Doe! God, there are times when I hate that name!*