

Left Hook

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For my darling wife, Rose.

Prologue

Phuoc Tuy Province, South Vietnam, late
September 1971

I gotta save 'em... I have to! The soldier urgently spurred himself on under the hot tropical sun. A single rain drop hit his chiselled cheek, quickly followed by another and another. The drops feeling like tiny heartbeats against his skin.

A little Vietnamese girl clung desperately to him. Hope radiated from her face as her saviour sprinted down the muddy road. A bloodied hand supported her tiny body in their joint fight for life.

The rapid pumping of his legs was matched only by his strong heartbeat. *They're counting on me, there's no other choice.* In the distance through the empty village he could see his rifle troop, urging him to safety. The goal posts of freedom barely visible in the sudden tropical downpour. The moment seemed to last forever. His mates' cries of encouragement were drowned by the sound of gunfire from both sides. The rain saturated everything: he struggled with the added weight of his wet army fatigues, the damp clay gripped his boots with every step.

Images started to flicker through his thoughts; the people he loved, his parents laughing, his sisters chasing each other last Christmas and... Evie. *I promise girl, that when I—*

Suddenly, an AK-47 bullet blasted through the young man's leg with shockwave ferocity; muscle and clothing erupted from his shattered thigh. His legs twisted violently, throwing his body to the muddy ground. The little girl clung desperately as both rescuer and victim landed with a thud. Still conscious and oblivious to his injuries he pushed the girl forward. 'Go! Go!' he yelled. 'Get outta here.'

Frozen in fear she could not move. *Go where? Where is safe?* Her young mind was overwhelmed in a world of madness.

I've got no choice. With all his remaining strength the sapper rose to his feet and grabbed the child under the arm, pulling her forward. Bullets whistled past as he dragged her, and himself, valuable metres towards the finish line, refusing to give up, refusing to let go of life. *I don't... think I*
—

His body shook with sickening thuds. Small droplets of blood sprayed up under his chin from all directions. Too many bullets to count had passed through his muscular frame.

Come on! Move, dammit, move! You've gotta... the young soldier commanded his body, but it was hopeless, flesh and bone no match for mankind's hideous inventions. Slowly, like a defiant ship refusing to sink, powerless against the gravity that called him, the desperate hero collapsed into the bloodstained mud. His ocean-blue eyes, that contrasted so strikingly with his chiselled olive features, stared, surprised at the world.

His awareness of his surroundings dulled and recent events slipped away into a thickening fog. He stared upwards at the falling rain, almost smiling at its beauty. His heart began to slow, his sky began to darken, and his thoughts began to fade. *Evie... I'm... I'm sorry...*

‘Mick! Hang in there, Mick —’

Chapter 1

Four weeks earlier

Bankstown, New South Wales, late August 1971

‘Michael, ple-ease let me in.’ The young girl in her warm home-made dressing gown begged her older brother. ‘I’ve got to go,’ she pleaded through the solid bathroom door.

Suddenly the door flew open. ‘What is it Soph?’

Ten year old Sophie Halias stared up at her brother.

‘Can’t ya see I’m busy?’ Michael said, looking at his reflection while he shaved his chiselled cheek. A confident smile escaped the corner of his mouth. *Shit!* he thought as he studied his muscular body in the mirror. *The army’s got me lookin’ pretty good.* His white singlet neatly shaped his impressive shoulders and the tight blue jeans complimented his narrow waist. Michael nodded at his own reflection. *Even old Adonis would have been proud of this body.*

‘I’ve really gotta go Mickey... I’m busting!’ Sophie pleaded through her thick black fringe. Her intense stare was made even more dramatic by her pale ocean-blue eyes that contrasted so beautifully with her olive skin. Her eyes the same colour as her mother and two siblings.

‘Give me five minutes and it’s all yours.’ Michael kicked the door closed. *Bloody kid, I finally get back from training and everyone wants a piece of me. Mum’s trying to shove food down my throat, everyone I know’s coming over for dinners... Christ! Sometimes I feel like gettin’ this ten days of leave over with, and just gettin’ over there.*

‘When I grow up,’ Sophie yelled through the door, ‘I’m going to have a house with *two* toilets.’

‘Yeah!’ Michael said, opening the door. ‘Only rich people have two dunnies ya little cockroach.’ He smiled and kissed her on the cheek leaving a smear of shaving cream across her angelic face.

‘Rrrhh!’ Sophie growled, ‘I’m telling Mum and Dad.’ She turned and stomped towards the kitchen.

*

‘Remember this song?’ Nic whispered into his wife’s ear while he helped wash the dishes.

‘Shush!’ Dimitra whispered, remembering when she first started dating him back in Greece.

‘Your mother was in the kitchen next door.’ Nic danced around his wife.

Dimitra smiled remembering the passionate moment.

Nic’s powerful hands gripped her tiny waist and turned her around pulling her back in to his chest.

‘Nic, what you doing?’ Dimitra blushed. She could feel his breath on the back of her neck as he sang through her black curls.

‘You are mine you sweet, sweet wine.’

Oh Baba, you don’t even know the right words. Sophie watched her father sing and pull her mother close to his body. ‘*Baba!* Look what Michael —’

‘How long you been there?’ Nic questioned.

‘Baba I need to *go!*’ Sophie’s head tilted to the side in agony. ‘I’m *bur*-sting.’

Nic smiled watching his youngest daughter hopping on one leg, her face smeared with shaving cream. ‘Look Dimitra! She looks like your mother having a shave.’ Nic laughed.

Dimitra fought a smile and smacked him across the shoulder for disrespecting her mother; twenty-two years of marriage had done little to lessen the passion in their relationship.

‘She almost caught us,’ Nic whispered. ‘A couple more minutes and —’ Nic rolled his eyes as the phone started to ring. *After twelve hours in*

the shop, I don't need this. He flipped his tea towel over his shoulder and made his way towards the phone.

'Baba, what about me?' Sophie pleaded, her face beginning to quiver.

'Go outside.'

'I can't go —'

'Let me answer the phone, then —'

'I got it Dad!' Beth pushed past and grabbed the phone.

'Hello,' said the nineteen year old, 'Halias residence.'

'Who is it?' Nic called out.

Beth continued the conversation, ignoring her father. 'WHO IS IT?' Nic called, this time adding two opened-hand gestures. *She might be beautiful but she should respect me more.*

Beth calmly placed her hand over the mouthpiece. 'IT'S RUSSELL!' She returned to her original volume, 'Oh, that's just Dad. You know.'

Nic stood bemused, his hands held out; raising one of them in the air, he returned to the dishes hoping for no more distractions.

Russell? Sophie recognised an opportunity and ran to the bathroom door. 'Michael, Russell's on the phone, Russell's on the —'

'I heard ya, I heard *you* okay.' Michael walked from the bathroom drying his face. Sophie rushed past him and closed the door behind her. A faint 'Excuse me' echoed from the closed room seconds later.

Michael casually walked towards Beth with an open hand. 'Give us the phone.' Beth pulled a face and finished her conversation. *Here comes Mr Perfect.*

'Hi Russ... I know it's a Thursday night... It'll still be fun... Give me about ten minutes.' Michael nodded and quickly finished, 'See ya.'

*

Russell hung up the phone and picked up his comb. *Not bad.* The tall young man admired his reflection. *Not too bad at all,* he thought, combing his strawberry-blond hair in the living-room mirror. *I wonder if the shirt's too much... what a stupid name, paisley, still looks like flowers.* He nodded, happy with his appearance. His new flared jeans a size too small. *I think the chick in the shop liked me.*

‘Where you and your wog mate goin’?’ A raspy smoker’s voice resonated from a worn lounge chair where only a lit cigarette in hand was visible.

The lounge room was dull and void of life, its furnishings old and dusty, only a television provided any form of atmosphere.

‘His name’s Mick, Dad, and we’re just drivin’ around.’

*

‘You haven’t eaten all your dinner,’ Dimitra protested in the hallway.

‘The army, they not feeding you, look, you have no fat at all.’

‘Mum I’m fine, can I have my shirt?’

‘Still too skinny,’ she muttered.

‘See Mum,’ Michael squeezed into his tight t-shirt, ‘ya can’t call this skinny.’ He smiled.

Dimitra shook her head at her son’s broad chest and shoulders. ‘Go. Do your driving with Russell, but don’t be too late.’

‘Love you Mum.’

Dimitra muttered a protest and picked up her son’s half-eaten dinner. ‘Look how much he leaves. No wonder he’s so skinny.’

Michael pushed the front screen door open and ran to his ’64 Holden, juggling the keys. He turned the key in the ignition and smiled. ‘Shit you’re a good mechanic Russ, this baby’s running like a dream.’ He flattened the accelerator and wheel-spun down the road. ‘Woo hoo!’ he called out and slammed on the brakes only four doors down the street at Russell’s house.

Michael pressed the horn down until Russell ran outside.

‘Keep ya socks on,’ Russell shouted.

Michael continued to press the horn until Russell closed the door behind him. No sooner had he sat down than Michael accelerated down the street and towards the bright lights of the city, leaving behind barking dogs and peering neighbours.

‘You’re a goose,’ Russell said, smiling at his excited friend.

‘You and me Russ, just you and me tonight, and then,’ Michael turned smiling wickedly at Russell, ‘then we’re on our way to Surfers Paradise for a week of nothin’ but *chicks and rootin’*.’

Shit, the way Mick’s driving it’s like he just got his licence.

‘Is it just me, or are the dresses getting shorter?’ Michael said, looking everywhere but the road.

*

‘How long are we gunna keep driving around for?’ Russell said, checking his watch.

‘Relax will ya,’ Michael said and turned a corner. ‘I reckon all the chicks will be comin’ out of the movies about now.’

‘Movies?’ *Bloody hell, we’ve already spent half the night hangin’ around the dances.*

‘Jeez Russ!’ Michael said, changing lanes, ‘haven’t you picked up anything bein’ around me.’

‘Chickenpox when I was eight.’

‘Fuck off, you gave ’em to me,’ Michael snapped back and continued to explain. ‘The two movies showin’ tonight were *Planet of the apes* —’

‘I loved that movie!’

‘Fucken monkeys in a spaceship, give me a *break*.’ Michael shook his head. ‘The other one was *Summer of ’42*, a love story.’ Michael winked. ‘The chicks will already be half warmed up... get it.’

Russell shook his head. *If Mick put half as much effort into making money we’d already have enough saved by now.*

‘Over there!’ Michael said, pulling up at the lights. ‘Check out the two girls. Look at the tits on the one in pink. I reckon that blonde would —’ *It can’t be, no way!*

‘I think it’s... it is. It’s Rachael!’ Russell smiled. *Shit, she looks as good as the day her old man promised to shoot Mick’s balls off. Fuck that was funny.*

‘I’m gunna say hello. You can chat the friend up.’

‘I don’t know Mick, she’s not my type.’

‘Type? Since when did you get so picky? Anyway she’s gorgeous, and you love chicks with black hair.’

‘No I don’t,’ Russell said, pulling a face.

Michael shook his head. *There’s been something different about old Rusty Nuts ever since I got back from training.*

‘And anyway,’ Russell said, ‘you remember what Rachael’s dad said?’

‘Fuck him, so what he’s a cop. He can’t stop me from talkin’ to her.’

‘Aren’t ya forgetting something —?’

‘I remember what he said.’

‘Not about that, about those two crooks he shot dead.’

Shit. I forgot about that. ‘There’s no harm in talking.’ Michael swallowed nervously.

‘It’s your balls mate.’ Russell laughed as the lights turned green.

Michael pulled up alongside the two girls, matching his speed to the pace of their walking.

‘Look straight ahead Kim,’ Rachael said, glancing at the strange car driving menacingly beside them.

‘What do they want?’ Kim asked nervously. *I knew something like this would happen; darn Rachael for talking me into this.*

‘Does God know you two angels are out this late?’

Both the young women smiled, but their eyes remained glued to the footpath.

‘Check ’em out Russ,’ Michael whispered, ‘they’re blushing.’ *Hey, this’ll be fun.* ‘Russ, ya remember that thing I used to do... you know, the pretend talking?’

‘Don’t Mick, that’s kids’ stuff.’

‘Nah, it’ll be fun.’ Michael leant out the window and smiled. ‘I can’t ask that!’ he said, pretending to have a conversation, knowing the girls were listening to every word. ‘I know they’re beautiful, but they’d say no for sure.’ Michael smiled. *Rach is gunna flip.* ‘Especially that Rachael chick, she’d definitely say no.’

What? Rachael frowned. *That sounds like...* ‘Mick! I should’ve known it was you.’ She beamed at Michael’s devious smile.

‘G’day gorgeous,’ Michael said, scanning Rachael’s impressive body as she skipped over to the car.

‘You scared the hell out of me, Mick.’ Rachael stared deeply into the eyes of her first true love. ‘I like your hair, it suits you,’ she said, running her hand over his short army haircut.

‘I’m going over to Vietnam.’

‘What? That’s terrible, we shouldn’t even be over there.’

‘Don’t worry Rach.’

God I love it when he calls me that.

‘I was built for lovin’ not fightin’.’

Russell rolled his eyes at Michael’s smooth talking. Michael reached out and held Rachael’s hand. She had begun to blush a second time.

‘Sorry about my dad.’

‘Don’t worry about it Rach, he just cares about you.’ *If I didn’t need my nuts I would’ve given him a good uppercut.*

Rachael smiled at Michael’s understanding words.

‘You look gorgeous Rach,’ he said, changing the subject, ‘that dress, the perfume you’re wearing; I just want to gobble you up.’ Michael pretended to bite her wrist and forearm.

Jeez this guy’s hot. Rachael felt the adrenaline wash over her as Michael ran his lips over her wrist. ‘Cut it out Mick,’ she said with a little squeal but moved even closer.

‘Oh, I forgot.’ Rachael quickly turned and signalled to her friend to come over.

Don’t make me do this Rachael. Kim felt her heart thump all the way up to her throat. *You know I’ll get in trouble. And that boy is definitely trouble.*

‘G’day Rachael,’ Russell said and leant forward. ‘You look well.’ *I wonder if she ever knew I had a crush on her.*

Michael turned and stared at Russell. ‘Just well?’ he whispered and turned back to ogle Rachael’s curves. *She looks bloody fantastic.*

‘Oh, hi Russell! I didn’t see you there.’ *He looks different. I wonder if he still has a crush on me,* Rachael thought and turned back to the street. ‘Come on Kim, Mick won’t bite.’

‘I will if you want me too,’ Michael whispered into her ear.

‘Mick you... you’re still a devil!’ She blushed. ‘You haven’t changed a bit.’

‘Oh yeah?’ Michael grinned. ‘There’s only one bit that changes when you’re around!’

Rachael couldn’t look him in the eye. *No wonder I couldn’t get over this guy; he’s so... he’s so* — ‘This is Kim,’ she managed.

‘Hi Kim, nice to meet you,’ Michael said with a flirtatious smile.

‘I have a boyfriend you know.’

Michael laughed. ‘Steady on Kim, we’re just havin’ a chat.’

‘Rachael’s got a boyfriend too.’

Rachael rolled her eyes. ‘Peter’s just a friend.’

Boyfriend huh? We’ll see about that. ‘So where’s...?’ Michael pretended he had already forgotten his competitor’s name.

‘Peter?’ Rachael shrugged her shoulders. ‘Out with his mates I think.’

Michael winked at Rachael. ‘Do you want a lift hom—?’

‘No!’ Kim interrupted. ‘We’re fine thank you.’

Michael looked up into the sky with a premonitory smile. ‘The weather doesn’t look too good Kimbo —’

‘It’s Kim and —’ A rain drop hit her in the eye. ‘It’s just —’ A second drop tapped her forehead.

‘Come on Kim, it’s raining.’ Rachael winked at her friend. ‘Come on,’ she whispered. ‘Do this for me and I promise it’ll be fun.’

Rachael, why do I listen to you?

‘It’s okay Kim. Mick’s a good guy, so is Russell. Oh, this is Russell.’

Russell leant forward in front of Michael. ‘G’day Kim.’

Kim didn’t respond but followed Rachael into the back seat, both girls slid across the expensive custom sheepskin car-seat covers.

‘This is comfy.’

‘You should know Rach.’ Michael winked.

Rachael playfully slapped Michael on the arm. *God that was a wonderful night.*

‘So Kim, how’s things?’ Russell asked.

‘Fine. Just fine, thank you.’ Kim still wasn’t comfortable in the strange surroundings and was counting the minutes until she’d be home.

Rachael watched as Russell and Kim talked. *Jeez he’s different since I saw him last, he’s really cute now. What’s different about him? It’s like he’s turned into a man overnight.* ‘How’s your apprenticeship going Russell?’

‘All finished,’ Russell replied, turning towards the girls as he placed his arm across the top of the bench seat. ‘I’m a fully qualified mechanic now,’ he said proudly. *Topped the class and showed my old man how good I was.* ‘How about you Rachael? How’s uni going?’

‘Good. Really good, I’m going to be a teacher before you know it.’

‘I can see you as a really good teacher,’ Russell said. He was saying all the right things at the right times, much to Michael’s envy.

Rachael placed her hand on Russell’s shoulder. ‘Thanks Russell. That means a lot.’

That smooth talking Michael is danger on legs, Kim thought, but Russell, he’s really sweet, I wonder if he has a girl —

‘How about you Kim?’ Kim looked startled at the sudden attention from Russell, ‘What do you do?’

‘I’m studying to be a registered nurse at St Margaret’s,’ she blurted out.

Michael jabbed his friend in the ribs, Russell wasn’t sure what he was implying but ignored the prompting.

‘My mum was a nurse, that’s a real noble profession I reckon,’ Russell declared.

I hope he doesn’t have a girlfriend, Kim smiled inside, *Rachael was right; this is fun.* Kim looked up and saw Michael watching her in the rear-vision mirror. ‘Does your mum still nurse?’ Kim asked, avoiding Michael’s stare.

Shit. How did I start talking about my mum. Russell hesitated. *Here I am with two gorgeous girls hanging on my every word. 'My mum...' There's no other way of saying this. 'My mum died when I was born.'*

Both women's eyes widened at this personal revelation. They sensed the sorrow in Russell's tone, their hearts immediately going out to him for his loss.

'That's so sad,' murmured Kim; she could feel the sadness creeping into her heart, her hand instinctively grasped at her small gold cross. Her eyes began to well. *The poor guy*, she thought. *Never knowing his mother's love, her gentle touch, her warm hugs. I just want to hug him.*

Good one Russ, Michael thought. *The mood's going south quicker than a flock of ducks.* 'Russ's okay. He's like my brother.' He reached over and squeezed Russell's neck. 'We're always looking out for each other.'

Russell smiled suspiciously at his friend. *Typical Mick; using me to suit ya self.*

'Turn the music up, Russ.' Michael grinned, cruising the long way home. 'I love this song.' Michael slammed the accelerator down and wheel-spun down the wet road.

'Steady ya dick— I mean, ya goose.' Russell threw an apologetic smile at the girls.

'Hey Russ,' Michael whispered, 'why don't you jump in the back and let Rach come up front.' Michael winked.

Russell silently protested with a face that bewildered Michael. *What's wrong with Russ? He and Kim are hitting it off big time.*

'How about Rach and Russ swapping seats?' Michael announced to everyone, frustrated with his friend's lack of cooperation.

Come on Kim, Rachael thought, *don't look like that... it'll be fun.*

Kim stared in horror. *He is very sweet... and, well, quite attractive, but I don't want to sit next to a... a stranger.*

Bloody Mick; look at poor Kim's face. Trust him to put her in this spot. The poor chick's checking her watch every minute. 'Do you live far from here Kim?'

‘I live in River Road,’ Kim answered quickly, hoping they’d take her home soon.

‘That’s only five minutes from here,’ Russell said. *It’s funny I haven’t seen her around before. I think she’s Catholic. Of course! She would’ve gone to that private school, ya idiot!* ‘We can drop you off before I go home.’

Good on ya Russ. Michael winked. *Making ya self scarce so that I can get Rach alone.*

Michael pulled up in front of a large red-brick home. The house was quite modern complete with Aboriginal and kangaroo statues placed amongst the manicured garden beds. *Bloody hell!* Michael thought. ‘Shit! How many of you live in that palace?’

‘Just my parents and I.’ Kim couldn’t exit quickly enough, for fear of her parents noticing the strange car.

Russell hurriedly got out to say goodnight. *Poor Kim, the chick looks like she’s in trouble.* He attempted to open her door but she was already halfway out. ‘Nice to have met you Kim.’

I was wrong about him, he’s one of the good ones. She held out a hand.

Russell gripped it firmly. *Shit, don’t squeeze a woman’s hand.* ‘Sorry Kim... I —’

‘It’s okay Russell.’ She smiled. *He’s such a gentleman.* Kim held Russell’s hand a second longer and smiled. ‘I’ve got to go but... but I really enjoyed meeting you.’ She blushed and bit her lip before turning and hurrying through the darkness towards her front door.

‘Come on Russ.’ Michael waved his arm for Russell to hurry up.

‘In a minute.’ Russell waited until Kim had gone inside; he smiled as she sneaked a small wave at him before closing the door. Russell tried to get back inside the car but Rachael had already jumped into the front seat. He shouldn’t have been surprised at her eagerness. *The two of them have been flirting all night.* He reluctantly slid into the back seat. *I’m glad to be heading home. The way Mick’s drivin’ it’s as if he’s just got his*

licence. The rain was falling more heavily and Michael was too preoccupied with Rachael to notice anyone else.

‘See ya Rachael,’ Russell said, slamming the car door. *I wonder if I’ll ever see her again. Bloody Mick’s likely to do his thing and never call her again. She’s such a top chick. I don’t like to think it, but Rachael’s too good for you Mickey boy.*

‘See ya later Rusty,’ Michael said.

Russell waved slowly. ‘No worries mate, that’s what we do, look out for each other.’

Michael winked and wheel-spun away.

Russell smiled and shook his head. *Yeah right*, he looked up at the sweeping rain and sighed, *look after each other, my arse*. Russell flicked up his collar and jogged across the dimly lit footpath.

Chapter 2

Ten years earlier

‘Can you see him, where is he?’ eleven year old Russell called to Michael who was keeping watch.

‘Yeah,’ Michael replied as he peered out through the weatherboard garage wall. He watched Russell’s father inspecting his chicken coup across the yard with his prized bantam rooster tucked under one arm.

‘What’s he doing?’ Russell asked, carefully reassembling a small lawnmower engine, too focused on the task to look up.

‘He’s in the chook pen.’ Michael smiled. ‘Holdin’ his cock.’

Both boys laughed at Michael’s lewd reference; the two boys often laughed at the same joke over and over.

Michael watched in awe as his friend meticulously reassembled the family’s lawnmower, wondering how he could remember the correct order.

‘Will your dad let you come to my party tomorrow?’

‘Haven’t asked him,’ Russell replied as he clipped a small piston ring into place.

‘But he probably won’t let you go.’

‘I’m comin’, I’m just not tellin’ him.’ Russell smiled at the ease at which his reassembly was progressing.

Suddenly a squeak from across the yard made both boys look up; it was the gate closing on the chicken pen. Michael quickly resumed his role as lookout. ‘Shit, he’s coming!’

Russell draped a blanket over the remaining components as Wally pushed open the garage side door.

At first he overlooked the boys’ suspicious presence while his eyes adjusted from the midday sun.

‘What are you two up to?’ Wally snarled.

‘Nothin’ Dad.’

‘Bullshit you aren’t, inside during the day, somethin’s goin’ on.’

Russell watched in fear as his father began to examine the small garage area overcrowded with disused items.

Michael stood by his best friend’s side, hoping, praying that Russell’s violent father ignored the blanket-covered parts.

Wally noticed something out of the ordinary. *Oil on me old army blanket?* He bent down on one knee. ‘What’s this doing here?’ he demanded as he removed the old blanket, revealing an array of lawnmower components laid out in surgical order. ‘What the FUCK!’ he yelled, his face contorted with rage. ‘WHAT HAVE YOU LITTLE PRICKS DONE?’

Michael shook, not accustomed to hearing swear words, but he remained nervously supportive by Russell’s side.

‘It’s okay Dad. I know how to fix it, I’ve done it before.’

Wally’s short fuse had already been lit. His overreaction to the situation was a trademark response. Russell hid his trembling hands behind his back.

‘If this doesn’t start you’re gettin’ the belt. Now *fix* it.’ Wally forcefully spun Russell around to face the lawnmower. Wally looked back over his shoulder at a terrified Michael. ‘And ya wog mate’s gunna watch.’

Under pressure, Russell began reassembling the lawnmower. Wally continued to taunt the young mechanic with comments to undermine his concentration. Russell managed to block out the hateful accusations but some broke through.

‘No wonder ya stupid at school, can’t learn nothin’ for shit, can ya? Can’t stand seein’ ya ugly head every time I walk in the house neither.’

Russell could tolerate Wally’s resentment towards him, but it was the next few words that always tore at his heart.

‘If it wasn’t for you, ya mother would have been here instead of *your* ugly mug.’

A single tear ran down Russell’s grease-stained cheek. It was the worst possible thing Wally could to say to the fragile little boy. Russell

bit his inner lip, a trick he had devised to shut out a memory or help him refocus.

Michael watched the dysfunctional family scene, now appreciating his own loving family. He prayed for his friend while Russell's thin fingers worked with precision at a task most adults wouldn't attempt.

'THIS BETTER START!' Wally yelled.

Russell jumped. He carefully screwed in the spark plug before wrapping the pull cord around the starting pulley. *Come on old girl... ya just gotta start, ya just gotta...* After priming the carburettor with fuel, Russell stepped back and pulled hard with both hands on the starting rope.

The small two-stroke engine roared into life. Russell never doubted the outcome. He watched and listened to the lawnmower he had stripped down and rebuilt at least twenty times.

Michael looked on, elated; his best mate would now be spared the belt.

But Russell knew otherwise.

Russell flinched at the first stinging impact from Wally's belt. Terrified for his friend, Michael yelled for Wally to stop, but the lawnmower's loud revving drowned out any protest, not that Wally would have paid any attention to the little Greek boy from down the road.

The old timber door burst open as Michael ran from the garage to the safety of his home, mortified that a father could treat his own child with such hatred. The memory burnt deeply into Michael's soul, his feelings of helplessness spurring him to declare never to let his friend suffer at the hands of anyone, even his own family.

*

I can't wait. Russell smiled, carefully guiding the iron over his best shirt for Michael's birthday party.

The early morning sunlight glowed through the kitchen creating a dusty orange hue. *Just do the collar and I'm done.* The hands that had trembled in the presence of a monster, now hurried to finish the last detail.

Dressed in his black pants and worn singlet, Russell's old clothing revealed his cruel beating. His narrow shoulders bore the brunt of the blows. Crimson welts were already turning to storm-coloured bruises.

Bloody iron's playing up. Russell wet his finger and tested the iron's temperature, *I'm gunna pull this thing apart and* — 'Bugger!' he whispered, shaking his hand. Russell nervously peered down the hallway frightened his father might waken.

He continued to skilfully iron his only *fancy* shirt, the old iron's temperature fluctuating from years of overuse. Fortunately for Russell, Dimitra had bestowed upon him the knowledge of how to cook, clean and recently, wash and iron. If Dimitra had left it up to Russell's father, Child Services would have taken the boy years ago.

Russell held his shirt up for inspection. *Bloody good job I reckon.* He remembered Dimitra's words when he learnt how to iron, 'Your mother would be very proud of you darling.'

Russell smiled at his shirt. *I knew I could do it.*

*

'Hold still,' Dimitra demanded, struggling to comb her son's hair. 'Please Michael! You have got to look your best. Everyone is coming, your cousins, aunties and even Uncle George.'

'The shoes are rubbing,' Michael complained, wriggling his ankle, 'do I have to wear these new pants — they're itchy.'

'Just ... hold still ... another second — there!'

The birthday boy broke free and rushed out to 'oversee' the party food and planned games.

Dimitra sighed as she watched him go. *My only son! It seems like yesterday my little boy was learning to walk and now he runs.* Never one to dwell, Dimitra clapped her hands together and headed to the kitchen, running through the afternoon's programme out loud.

First to arrive was Russell, slap-bang on time at 9 am; he only had a short distance to travel. Michael eagerly led Russell around the large patio, showing him the array of party food which Michael had been strictly warned not to eat. 'Here Russ, have a chocolate.'

‘Ya mum said we can’t.’

‘She said *I* can’t.’ Michael smiled mischievously and shoved a large chunk of Violet Crumble deep into Russell’s mouth. Its size and delicious flavour made Russell salivate and choke. He gagged and coughed before spitting the half-chewed treat into his hands.

Michael laughed loudly at his friend, hunched over with chocolate and saliva stretched from his mouth to his hands. His laughter was contagious and soon Russell began to laugh at himself.

I’m not gunna waste this, Russell thought. He slowly returned the saliva-coated chocolate back to its rightful place in his mouth.

‘That’s disgusting!’

‘Nah, it’s delicious,’ Russell replied through a mouthful of chocolate.

Both boys eagerly awaited the arrival of Michael’s cousins and their families; they busied themselves with inspecting the array of games planned for the day.

‘Got the apples for the clothes line?’ Russell asked eagerly.

‘Check,’ Michael answered with a smile, knowing it was Russell’s favourite party game.

‘Eggs and spoons?’

‘Check.’

Michael and Russell continued diligently checking the activities until the guests started to arrive.

*

‘Come on Mick!’ Russell cheered; Michael’s face contorted in concentration trying to balance a wobbly egg on a spoon in a race across the yard.

‘Go Russ, go!’ It was Michael’s turn to cheer Russell to apple eating victory; each child chomped at apples swinging from the clothes line, their hands tied behind their back.

Dimitra smiled at all the excitement in her back yard; There were cousins in abundance and enough food to feed twice as many people.

Russell looked forward to his friend’s birthday with far more excitement than Michael did. He never felt comfortable about his own

birthday, knowing the day he came into the world was the day his mother left his. He tried not to think about it, always hoping his father would too, but unfortunately he never did.

*

Dimitra dodged between the chairs and squealing cousins. ‘Not my apron!’ She sighed looking down at a tomato-sauced handprint smeared across her floral apron. ‘Jessica, calm down.’ It was a hopeless attempt to regain control; little stomachs were full of sugar, and the adults too exhausted to chase their children. ‘Peter leave the chickens alone — George control your son.’ Dimitra ordered simultaneously catching a bumped soft drink when a game of chasing went wrong under her pergola. Children ducked behind her, giggling and clutching at her apron with sticky fingers. *Enough!* She raised her hands and clapped them twice; it was always effective. And it was amazing that such a small woman could make such a loud and commanding noise.

‘Time to open presents,’ Dimitra announced, smiling.

Michael shuffled forward, he knew what he had to suffer to get what he really wanted. ‘Happy birthday my darling.’ Dimitra pulled Michael into a smothering hug.

‘Mu-um!’ Michael complained fighting off his mother’s embrace, which only resulted in her smothering him with further kisses and hugs, bringing more laughter from the onlooker children.

Russell laughed along with the crowd but deep down he envied his friend, wishing just once that *he* could feel a mother’s kiss, her hug so tight he couldn’t breathe. He didn’t resent his best friend, but desperately envied him.

Michael opened his many presents, each one progressively larger than the last. Dimitra called out the family name on each card, allowing Michael to politely thank them before ripping the paper off. The children oohed and ahed at each gift.

Dimitra picked up a small cigarette-packet-sized gift, crudely wrapped in Christmas paper. ‘This is from Michael’s friend Russ-cell.’

‘He’s my *best* friend,’ Michael corrected his mother.

Russell smiled proudly with a nod, confirming that Michael was *his* best friend too.

Michael's family and friends turned to look at the small strawberry-blond boy, who was so easily spotted amongst his Greek friends. For the first time that afternoon Michael carefully unwrapped a present, he paused and looked up at his mother's horrified face. It was indeed a packet of Wally's cigarettes. Silence fell over the crowd and again all eyes were on Russell.

'Look inside, look inside,' Russell called out, oblivious to the accusing stares.

Dimitra opened the cigarette packet only to find a small card inside.

Michael snapped the card from her fingers. 'I can't believe it!' He came as close to a heart attack as a little boy could.

'It's Reg Gasnier! From St George. I've been after him forever.' Michael proudly held his new football card at arm's length to allow all to see his glorious gift. The magnitude of its significance totally lost on Michael's audience.

Nic and Dimitra may not have appreciated the gift but to see their only son smiling with such joy at a piece of coloured cardboard warmed their hearts. They smiled at each other, knowing Michael had a friend who cared for him implicitly.

The party went late into the afternoon; it was a success in every way: good company, delicious food and a very happy birthday boy.

*

With all the guests gone, except for Russell, Nic and Dimitra could finally relax. Nic lay on his back unable to move from too much food. *It's not my fault my wife is such a good cook!*

Dimitra relaxed on her plastic banana chair, a Mothers' Day present that looked out of place amongst the wrought-iron furnishings. She crossed her legs and leant back, sighing with satisfaction. She pushed her dark curls behind her ear, *I did it... another successful party.*

Michael and Russell sat on either side of her, receiving a gentle back scratch; Russell's fresh bruising robbed him of his usual enjoyment of the experience, but he wasn't about to miss the opportunity for affection.

'Thank you Russ-cell for such a thoughtful present, I didn't know Michael liked football cards so much.' Then without thinking Dimitra added something she regretted immediately, 'Maybe at your party Michael can be so thoughtful.'

Russell had never had a party.

What did I just say? Dimitra chastised herself. She didn't know if it was the second glass of red wine or her relief at getting through the busy day, whatever the reason, she was angry at herself for making the mistake.

Both Russell and Michael could feel the situation becoming tense.

'It's alright Mrs Halias, when I grow up I'm going to give myself a party every year.'

Russell's comment only made her feel worse.

Michael sensed the awkwardness and attempted to change the subject. 'Want a drink Russ?'

'Yeah, that'd be great.'

Michael ran off to find some lollies too, hoping they would ease the moment.

With Michael busy preparing a mini feel-good banquet, Russell asked a question he had been trying to ask for over a year. Whenever he asked anything about his mother people would politely change the subject in an attempt to ease the suffering, their own.

'Can I ask a question about my mum?' he edged onto her chair and leaned against her leg, wriggling closer in to the back scratch.

Dimitra hesitated. *He is older now; look at his eyes, he should know — he must.* 'What do you want to know?'

Russell was quietly surprised, it was more a case of what *didn't* he want to know. He had only ever seen one photo of his mother and that was locked away in his father's locker.

‘What did she smell like? Did she have a nice smile?’ The questions tumbled out.

‘Don’t you have a photo in your room?’

Russell shook his head still remembering the beating he received from his father for finding the old wedding photo.

‘Beth, go inside and bring out the photo album.’

Michael’s younger sister reluctantly complied. She returned with the album and a smile for Russell.

Dimitra flicked through the pages of precious family memories finally finding what she was looking for. ‘Here, look at this.’

Russell leant forward to take a closer look. At first he didn’t recognise everyone in the photo. *That’s Mrs Halias but who is that pretty lady? Unless...* ‘Is that my mum?’

‘Yes sweetheart, that’s your mother,’ Dimitra said smiling, her eyes misty with tears.

Russell studied the photo with the expectation of never seeing it again. He traced the curve of his mother’s face with his finger, looking deep into her unknowing eyes, realising the terrible fate that awaited her.

‘See, she’s got her hand on her stomach, she’s pregnant with you.’

Russell stared in wonderment at the realisation that his mother was touching him. Both women were laughing, squinting into the bright spring sunshine at Nic who was taking the photo.

Dimitra ran her fingers through Russell’s straight strawberry-blond hair. ‘Her hair was the same as yours, and you share the same eyes, like Michael and me.’

‘Is it,’ Russell paused, he had to know the truth, ‘is it my fault my mum died?’

Dimitra froze, she had been doing well to contain her emotions but Russell’s innocent questions suddenly tore at her heart. The little boy’s silent anguish moved her to tears. Even though he was looking down she turned her head to hide the welling in her eyes; battling her maternal instincts to protect her best friend’s son, she took a deep breath. ‘Why do you think such things? Life sometimes is bad, it’s not your fault.’

Even though Nic had been lying quietly he had heard every word, he had propped himself up on his elbows, listening to his wife's delicate answers.

‘Don’t ever think it’s your fault Russell, no one does.’

‘Dad says it’s... that it’s my fault,’ he said, turning and looking up for absolution.

Dimitra wanted to scream, she managed to contain her fury in the face of Russell’s misery, but her eyes told a different story. Those eyes Nic knew so well. *She could melt steel with that look*, Nic would often think.

Dimitra turned Russell towards her, the sudden pressure on his injuries caused him to flinch. ‘It’s not *your* fault and it’s not your *mother’s* fault.’ Dimitra gripped his shoulders with both hands again causing him to wince with pain. Despite her anger she noticed his discomfort. Dimitra glanced down Russell’s shirt and gasped, *What?... what is this?* It took all her self-control to inspect the bruised back of a child who only deserved love, not cruelty. She screamed internally, *What sort of animal does this to a little boy?* ‘Go play with Michael.’ Dimitra carefully guided Russell off the chair, concerned she had already caused him enough pain.

‘Did I do something wrong?’ Russell asked realising Dimitra was upset.

‘Darling,’ She held Russell gently by the shoulders, ‘you have never done anything wrong.’ She kissed Russell on each cheek. ‘Go play with Michael, everything will be alright.’

Nic watched as his wife stood, her relaxed composure now completely vanished.

‘Dimitra!’ Nic called. He stood and came over to put his arm around her. ‘There’s nothing we can do. It’s Russell and his father’s business.’

‘He’s no *father*,’ Dimitra yelled, then she hissed, ‘to blame his only son like this.’

‘What can I do?’ Nic held out his hands.

‘Plenty! Go in there and tell Wall-ee he’s no man and —’

‘I can’t do that, I won’t do that.’ Nic shook his head. ‘This is private business.’

‘Ha! This is wrong and you know it!’

Nic turned away, searching for the right answer. He turned back expecting to see his wife ready to strike like an angry snake. ‘Dimitra I — Shit!’

Dimitra had gone.

She pushed her front screen door open with such force it slammed against the wall almost catching her as it bounced back. *I will show this animal*, she raged internally. Dimitra marched down the narrow concrete path before turning left with military precision. Her floral apron fluttered like a battle flag with the speed of her progress and her expression spelled *war*. If only King Leonidas and his three hundred Spartans had Dimitra at the Gates of Hell with them, history may have turned out quite differently.

She strode past the three houses that separated the Halias and the Stratton homes, marching straight up to and in through the front door of Russell’s house. Dimitra was on the hunt for Wally, ready to do battle for the heart he kept on breaking.

Wally’s Saturday routine was always the same: after placing his bets he would listen to the horse races while drinking his problems away late into the afternoon. Suddenly his front door flew open.

‘What the fu—?’

‘You and me are going to have a big talk,’ Dimitra informed him loudly.

‘A *little talk* is the right expression,’ Wally replied, attempting to patronise his neighbour.

‘NO! *I* am doing the talking and *you* are having a big listen.’ Dimitra slammed her open hand down with a loud *whack* on Wally’s paper. He looked up, surprised by this diminutive whirlwind. Dimitra pointed her finger like a pistol; it might as well have been given his expression. Before Wally could respond Dimitra began to lay down the new law.

‘Now listen, what happened to Felicity was terrible... terrible!’ Dimitra said, shaking her finger at Wally, ‘But if you ever, *ever* tell Russell it was his fault for her dying, I promise you...’ She paused, reaching into her apron and grappling with her *words of war*, not easy with a language you were still learning to master. ‘I will...’ she pulled a small vegetable knife from her apron and, too upset to translate to English, she continued in Greek, ‘I will cut off your balls,’ she fired with Greek venom, ‘You’re not a real man. A real man doesn’t say such terrible things.’ Dimitra was ready to explode, she took a deep focused breath and stared straight into Wally’s soul, and in English revealed, ‘A real man doesn’t beat his own boy like that.’

Wally stared opened-mouth at the one-woman army that had besieged his back veranda. He needed no translation of her intentions.

‘You understand me?’ Dimitra yelled.

Wally nodded in silence at this sudden trial and execution and turned away from Dimitra’s long accusing stare.

Just as quickly as she had entered Dimitra exited with her chin held slightly higher. She marched a little slower along the footpath, passing Nic along the way.

‘What happened?’

‘I fixed it,’ Dimitra replied, raising her hand to stop any further questions, still not happy with his level of inaction.

Wally never stood a chance, Dimitra may have lacked physical presence but she was a powerhouse of emotion and had wielded her sword swiftly and accurately.

Russell had been surprised, he had expected a beating for revealing his father’s abuse, but it never came.

Through the years that followed Wally never accused Russell of his mother’s death ever again. Wally would never qualify as Father of the Year but the reprimand from Dimitra had made him reflect; he continued to internalise his troubled thoughts but left Russell out of his misery.

The only sign of affection between father and son was the old wedding photo in a brand new frame, a gift, carefully balanced on

Russell's bedside cabinet. A prime spot where his mother could now watch over her sleeping son.

Russell could now run his hand over his mother's face whenever he wanted. *I love you mum.* It was the greatest gift he had ever received.