

# Vicki

## The Brother

‘Now what do we do before we cross the road?’

‘Look right...look left...look right again.’

‘Good. Now hold mummy’s hand.’

The child, almost hidden beneath a bright red backpack, gripped the hand held out to him. It was long fingered and smooth and usually gentle; like when it brushed back his hair to help him go off to sleep, or when it rubbed his legs with lavender oil because they ached from growing too quickly. But today the fingers were strong and almost crushed his hand as they checked the road together and hurried across to the footpath on the other side.

The café sign in the window was orange and red and was flashing like Christmas lights. The boy’s tummy danced within. ‘Can I have a chocolate mint milkshake with extra cream and sprinkles?’

His mother looked down with a scowl that he knew was only pretend because her eyes still sparkled and her mouth wasn’t puckered.

‘Only if you’ve been a good boy. Choc mint milkshakes are only served to children who’ve been on their best behavior.’

‘I have, I have. I’m been the best kid ever in the whole world!’ He tugged her hand, until her lips parted into a smile.

‘Ok, I guess you deserve one then.’

‘And a mega choc chip cookie,’ he grinned.

She tousled his hair and laughed, ‘Hey, don’t push your luck. Remember I have some lollies in my bag to eat during the movie. I think that might be enough sugar for the day.’

He pulled on her hand and led her into the café.

It was busy this morning. As they lined up to place their order he glanced around for somewhere to sit. He liked to sit at the bench by the window so he could watch all the strange people go past. Sometimes he’d pull silly faces, when his mum wasn’t looking, and once a fat lady pulled one back. It was fun. But today the bench was already taken by some men dressed in suits, like the ones his dad wears to work.

He eyed the square tables dotted around the place but they were taken up by noisy, chatting people mostly drinking coffees and eating cheesecakes. His eyes stopped when he spotted a long table in the back corner with an old man sitting all by himself. That meant there were one, two, three, four seats free. He wondered if the old man would let them sit

with him. He looked grumpy, or sad or tired, like grandpa used to look when he'd come to visit. He doesn't come anymore. He's too sick and they have to visit him in his little room at the care place. He stared over at the man. They wouldn't annoy him. They could sit at one end and wouldn't even have to talk to him. He felt a hand on his shoulder.

'Ollie, do you want to tell Josh what you want?'

The boy looked up. Josh, who always worked at the café, was leaning over the counter and smiling down at him. He was nice and Ollie liked him a lot. Once he gave him a meringue for free. It was good, but it sure made a mess. His mother hadn't been mad at all, she'd just laughed.

'I'd like a...'

'Let me guess,' Josh interrupted. 'A choc mint milkshake, with extra cream and sprinkles.'

Ollie's eyes widened, 'How did you know?'

'I hear you've been good little bloke. Not muckin' up at all. Is that right?'

He nodded so hard he thought his head would drop off.

'Well, I'll get Bella here to make you one.'

A girl with dark brown skin had joined Josh at the counter. She pulled an orange apron over her black curly hair and began to tie it around her waist.

'One good boy special, please Bella,' Josh ordered.

'A what?' the girl frowned.

Josh gave Ollie a wink, 'She's new.'

As the boy and his mother made their way over to the long table to wait for their order, his mother bumped into a big man as he stepped into the café. He had a shaved head and a scary snake tattooed around his neck.

'Sorry,' his mum offered.

The man had eyes with red squiggles. His dad's were like this after he'd stayed up late working on his computer. His mum had bought eye drops for this, but his dad hardly ever used them.

'Stupid bitch,' the man grumbled and brushed passed.

'Excuse me,' his mother gasped.

Ollie watched the nasty man turn away.

'Hey mum, he has a backpack just like mine.'

His mother scowled for real this time. 'No he hasn't Ollie. It's big and dirty and...' She froze and her eyes grew large.

Ollie looked back at the man. Something was sticking out of the backpack. He thought it looked like the end of his toy cowboy rifle, but it glinted in the light. It was real.

‘Do that again and you’re a dead man!’

Josh now lay curled in a foetal position on the tiled floor. He gasped for air and cupped his aching groin. The pain radiated down to his knees. The sound that escaped his mouth was alien and only hinted at what he was feeling; not just in his body, but his mind, and his soul.

Through a blur he eyed the demon that had taken control of the café. His café. The bald head glistened in the flashing light of the sign in the window. First it was red, then orange, then red again. Evil personified. If Josh could move his head, he would try to shake himself awake. But this was not a dream it was a living nightmare.

The automatic rifle was now pointed at the head of a terrified woman in business clothes. The power dressing gave her no support when she needed it the most. She was crying and holding her mobile phone up with shaking hand.

‘I said I want to speak to the Prime Minister, no-one else!’ the man screamed into the phone, ‘How hard can that be, you cock sucking imbeciles!’ He grabbed the phone and threw it onto the counter with the other confiscated mobiles.

The pain eased, and so did the blurriness. Outside the floor to ceiling window Josh saw that the streets were still oddly bare. No sign of life or traffic or help at all, as if the whole city had abandoned them to the fate of a mad man. But he knew this mustn’t be the case. He at least prayed it wasn’t. Those building across the road had a good view into this one. There had to be police or military aid or at least news crews watching what was going on from there. The gunman wasn’t stupid. He continually positioned a hostage in the window and at the end of the gun barrel for a reason. This was for visual effect.

Josh felt something cold against his head. He looked up. It was Bella. She was holding a tea towel filled with crushed ice against his forehead. The gash stung. The butt end of the rifle had nearly knocked him senseless, and he wished it had. At least he wouldn’t have felt the heel of the boot, and he would have been oblivious to the horror taking place. He swore under his breath. Why did he try and tackle an armed lunatic with nothing more than his fists and desperation as weapons?

With an effort he sat up, holding the cloth himself, and looked around the room. Here was a group of about thirty people of all ages and all walks of life. Normal people, average people. Some were regulars, others were first timers and all had all made a bad choice in stepping into his café this morning. On any other day he would have been thrilled, but now he felt regret that his establishment had such a good reputation. Who would have thought

that a need for a morning cuppa would turn into a fight for life? A wave of guilt smashed into him. He was responsible. He should have been more alert. He should have suspected something was up before the door's electrics were de-activated. You only had to look the man in the eyes to see he was deranged. He could have warned them. Fatigue and raw fear was noticeable in all faces...but two.

The little boy, Ollie, looked back at him while his mother held him close and combed his hair with her fingers. He seemed so placid he could have been sitting on the beach or at a picnic. Such innocence. Josh's heart was squeezed by invisible claws. This cute kid always brought a smile to his day. Why did he have to be caught up in this horrible drama? Josh gave a strained smile, and the boy did likewise. He then noticed that the boy held his mother's hand and his grip was as tight as a wrench.

The other face devoid of visible anguish was the old man. He was sitting hunched against the serving counter and seemed to be asleep. Josh could see the steady rise and fall of his chest and hoped he was dreaming of better times. He'd been coming into the café for a number of months. Firstly with an older lady, and then more recently on his own. He'd still order two black teas, but sit in the corner by himself, lost in thought and fiddling with the ring on his left hand. The wrinkled eyelids suddenly opened and Josh saw a look of resignation in his eyes.

'You!' the bald man shouted, and pointed the gun at Bella, 'you're turn.'

He pushed the previous hostage to the ground and Bella took her place in front of the window. The man leant against the wall and pressed the barrel into her temple. She paled and shut her eyes.

The man studied the room. 'If I don't get what I want you'll all be dead by morning.'

Moans and sobs filled the café.

'Shut up! Shut up! They don't care about you. No-one does.'

I do, thought Josh. I care.

He saw movement and looked over at the old man. He was on his knees and his aged spotted hands had gripped the legs of a stool. Josh now read anger in those cloudy eyes, and as they connected with his, the grey head gave a nod. Josh's muscles tensed.

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The array of flowers grew by the minute. It lined the footpath in front of Jaffa's Café and was piled high against the wide glass windows and door. The sign had ceased its flashing and the only way one could enter now would be by the service doors at the back, though I expected they would be barricaded by floral arrangements as well. Though the only people

who would be allowed access now be the police and forensics.

I shuffled forward at the end of the long line of mourners and caught sight once more of those who had died in the siege that had rocked the entire nation and held us riveted in front of our TV's for close to ten hours. Five photographs were towered on stands above the sea of flowers. Tears ran again down my cheeks. The tissue in my right hand was a shriveled, soggy mess while the small posy in my right remained vivid and upright. A small token, I knew, but the grief felt was as deep as those who had laid the most impressive arrangement. Such a loss of life. Such tragedy.

A man and a small boy were ahead of me. The large hands rested on his tiny shoulders.

'Ready Oliver?' the man said gently.

The fair head nodded.

'Ok, you can put mummy's flowers down now.'

The child carefully stepped over the carpet of flowers and placed a wreath made up of yellow and red gerberas below a photograph. I heard a sob and saw his shoulders shudder. My throat tightened anew. Then he ran back into his father's waiting arms.

'Good boy, Ollie,' the man said, lifting the boy onto his hip. 'Let's go back to the hospital and tell mum. She'll be happy you did this.'

They moved on and I took a moment to pay my respects to each one of the three innocent men and two women who had lost their lives the day before. Some were heroes, some had been caught in the crossfire and one had been killed in the line of duty. All will be remembered as brave souls; especially by their loved one and those whose lives were saved. The sixth person who died that day will never be commemorated. Only condemned.

I placed my posy amongst the other flowers and peered up at the photograph above the orange and red gerberas.

'Joshua Angelo 1981 – 2015, Manager of the Jaffa Café.'

My brother.