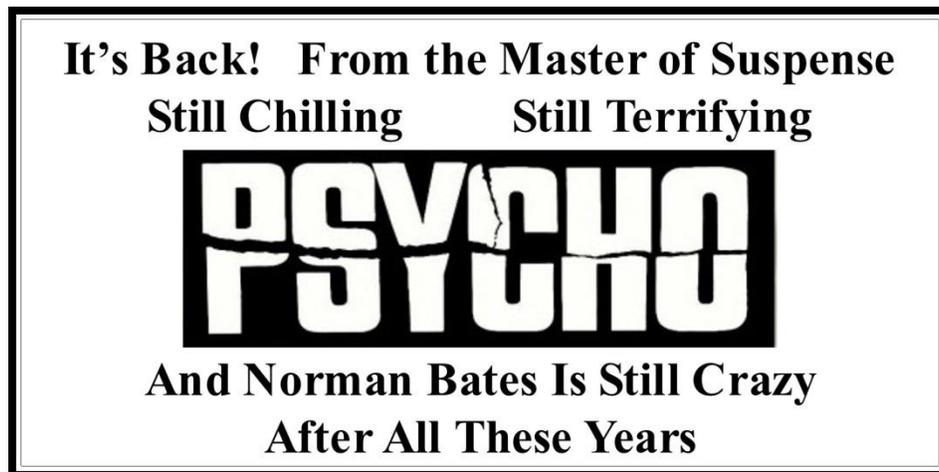


Chapter 1

Bizarre death and terror had come to Stuart, Florida with the arrival of a murderer wielding a bloody butcher's knife. Oblivious to the gravity of the killing they'd just witnessed, an animated throng of people exited the Cineplex Theater and milled about under hype emblazoned on the marquee.



A black, tricked out, 1959 Chevrolet Bel Air sedan slowly rolled down the street beyond the theater, its glasspack mufflers emitting low bursts of throbbing sounds into the crisp night air. The four passengers inside could be seen only as silhouettes in the low-riding car as it ever so slowly inched closer to the marquee area like a military patrol boat hunting for the enemy.

In the crowd in front of the theater were two teenage boys, one Hispanic and one white; and two teenage girls, one black, the other white, all 16 to 18 years old. They laughed at one of the boys in the group who mimicked a scene from the movie they'd just seen with slashing motions as if stabbing an invisible person.

A tall boy, 19, exited the glass doors of the theater with another man in his mod-thirties. Both were chicly dressed, smiling and talking as they came outside. Suddenly the older man spotted the black car nearing the theater. His face changed to one of ashen fear. His younger companion, followed his gaze, saw the car and began to run. As he bolted past the four teenagers, automatic gunfire erupted from the car.

Bullets filled the air, crashing through glass doors and poster sign frames. A life-size photo of Alfred Hitchcock instantly collapsed from its easel in riddled shreds. The ticket booth nearby exploded into glass shrapnel, the ticket-taker blasted through its back door. Bloody splatter stippled its tiny walls.

The tall boy, shot in the back mid-run, stumbled and dove forward like a dead halfback making one final end zone plunge. He rolled and crumpled to the pavement, ripped through and bleeding.

The older man, frozen in shock, took numerous slugs and gyrated in place like a marionette on jiggled strings. He fell backward through the glassless door frame of the theater.

The teenagers, one by one, as if in slow motion, turned toward the source of the gunfire, their faces quickly changed from happiness to terror. Each was brutally stricken down. The bullets obliterated their youthful looks, leaving them sprawled on the sidewalk. One teenage girl, lying across her dying friend, managed a single word.

“Momma....”

and then joined the others, breathless, crimson, without life.

* * *

A crowd of people gathered around a memorial ceremony in the auditorium of a high school. Four caskets lined the area in front of a small podium where a clergyman addressed the gathering of mourners, news media, and a crowd of other attendees.

“We are here to say our temporary goodbyes to Nia and Kate; to Mateo and Brad, whose bodies shall rest here, side by side, while their spirits ascend to Almighty God. And so, as they

were in life, the best of friends, always together, so shall they be evermore. May God have mercy on these beautiful souls and on all of us. Amen.”

Four women, dressed in black, stood in a row behind the caskets. They struggled to contain their emotions, but tears won out.

Joann Erikson, a statuesque redhead and a youthful 42, consoled another of the four, Amy O’Brien, an Afro-American in her late 30s, who had draped herself on one of the caskets cried hysterically. Amy’s husband, John, tall, 40, tried to calm Amy in her grief. Ellen Berger, dark-haired, beautiful, 45, with the body of a super model, stood without facial emotion, while the tears she tried to deny ran down her tan cheeks, leaving trails in her make-up. Her husband Stan, 50s, at her side, his arm around her shoulders. The last of the four women, Liliana Perez, Hispanic, early 40s, dried her eyes with a small handkerchief.

Joann ultimately succeeded in gathering up the other three women and led them away from the service.

* * *

The four women from the memorial sat at a booth in the lounge of a pleasantly decorated, homey bar. Moments passed in an interminable silence as they sipped their drinks and stared off into a space known only to each of them.

The silence finally ends.

“Nia always liked this place,” Amy O’Brien said.

“She *drank* in here?” Ellen Berger said.

“No. She liked the bathroom.”

“The bathroom?” Ellen asked.

“Cleanest public ladies’ room in Waukegan,” Amy said. “That’s what she always said, anyway.”

Liliana Perez chimed in, “The seats may look clean, but I put paper on them anyway.”

“You put paper on the seats at home,” Joann Erikson said. “Amy, am I making this up?”

“I do not,” Liliana said. Who're you kidding, girl? You've always had this *sterile* thing going on.”

“Where are you getting this crap?” Liliana said.

“Ellen, she took her own silverware to Pappillon's last month?” Joann said.

Liliana glared at Joann.

“If they drop a fork on the floor, they just put it back on the table. They don't even wipe it off. I've seen them.”

“For God's sake.” Joann said and took a generous sip of her drink.

“I'm not eating off the floor. So I bring my own flatware.”

“Why do you go there?” Ellen asked.

“It's the best restaurant in the county, Liliana said and paused. But I'd give up all the restaurants

for the rest of my life for just one more kiss goodnight from Mateo.”

Liliana began to break down and looked at Joann.

“He was so in love with your Kate. Literally the girl next door. He used to sail paper airplane notes from his bedroom window to hers.”

Joann reached to Liliana, clutched her hand.

“I know what you were trying to do, Joann,” Liliana said, “and I love you for it. You have always known how to divert me from wallowing in sorrow. You do it for all of us. You always have. You're so damn strong.”

“God made buzzards tough,” Joann said.

“I thought the ceremony today was nice,” Amy said.

“It was nice of the town to do it,” Ellen said.

“Where did Lou get to?” Liliana asked.

“You know cops,” Joann said. “I fear the sound of a pager as much as a gunshot.”

The bartender, who'd been watching a TV in the bar, called over to the four women.

“Ladies, you might wanna catch this,” the bartender said and gestured toward a newscast playing on the television.

The women turn their attention toward the onscreen TV announcer's report.

“...found by tracing the bullet casings discovered at the scene, the police have obtained enough evidence to make arrests on four males, reputedly members of the street gang calling themselves The Mariahs. Formal arraignment is scheduled for tomorrow.”

The four women look at each other contemplatively.

“I've got to find Lou,” Joann said and scooted from the booth and hurried out of the lounge.

* * *

Joann strode to the front door of a three-story office building. A sign on the facade reads:

Martin County Police Department

Joann entered the building and approached a glassed-in barrier where a uniformed officer sat behind a window with an intercom to the right of the thick glass. The officer acknowledged Joann with a smile.

“He's in his office, Ms Erikson,” the officer said. “Go right in.”

A buzzer sounds and the door to the main floor swings open.

Joann nodded her thanks to the officer and proceeded down a long corridor to an open office doorway. A sign on the door says:

LT. LOUIS GLORIOSO.

Joann stepped inside the door where Lou Glorioso, pored over files on his desk. A gold shield hung from his suit jacket breast pocket. She knocked on the door frame. Lou looks up,

“How're you doing, doll?”

He shuffles from behind his cluttered desk and kisses Joann.

“Sorry I had to leave the ceremony,” Lou said. “I guess you heard why.”

“On the TV at Torlino’s.”

“Let's take a walk.”

Lou guides her out of the office. They head for the front door and exit the building.

* * *

Lou and Joann walk down a path in a pretty park. Benches line the walkway.

“I could have told you who they were,” Lou said. “They're smalltime punks who think they can play hardball with the pros. All we needed was a little proof to get the warrants. Like most stupid criminals, they left a trail Barney Fife could follow.”

“What's next?”

“They go to arraignment tomorrow morning, then to a bail hearing.”

“They could get out on bail?” Joann asked.

“Not if their old man was Alexander the Great. They don't grant bail to repeat perps on murder one. Plus they've all got FTA's out the ass. The court's not thrilled with people who make a habit of not showing up for their hard-earned, tax-paid trials.”

“In other words, they stay in jail.”

“They're going to throw them in jail and bury the building.”

Chapter 2

Eight long months have passed since the Cineplex murders and Joann Erikson had agonized during the wait like a patient about to hear the results of a cancer biopsy. Her daughter had been in the ground for going on three seasons while her killers ate three meals a day, lifted weights, and watched TV and played checkers in a rec room. It was high time to get these murdering bastards off to death row.

A huge crowd of people had crammed into the courtroom where four young men stood before a judge. Joann, Amy, Amy's husband, Liliana, Ellen and her husband, and Lou Glorioso were in the audience near the front. Everyone rose almost as one. The tension was palpable as the jury had returned with its verdict.

The foreman of the jury, a man in his 50s, crossed and handed the judge a piece of paper. The judge read what was on the paper and returned it to the foreman and nodded. The foreman stepped back into his place in the jury box.

“Has the jury reached a decision?” the judge asked.

“We have, Your Honor,” the foreman said.

“And what say you?”

“We find the four defendants, on the charge of murder in the first degree . . . , not guilty.”

The courtroom erupted. The scene turned chaotic. Loud outcries directed at the jury boomed in the air. Officials attempted to restore order, but to no avail. Amy screamed in anguish and pounded on the back of the bench in front of her. Joann looked at Lou in disbelief. The judge banged his gavel repeatedly.

“Order in this court! Order in this court!”

After several minutes the din slowly began to subside.

“This is a court of law,” the judge bellowed. “You will maintain order in my courtroom!”

The judge glared at each of the four young men.

“You have been tried and judged by a jury of your peers and have been found not guilty. Ramon Pena, Perry Colano, James Mantel, Joseph Diamante. I have had the verdict read to you.

And though I totally disagree with the decision, I nevertheless will now carry out the will of the people. Guilt, at times, may sidestep our system, but I hereby warn you of the ultimate justice for your acts that will not this day come by this court's hand, nor by mine. The justice that screams out from beyond this life, that you so cleverly evade today, will stalk you anew. You are men steeped in crime and have managed to outmaneuver the system and symbol of law that would've punished you, and now you hide beneath her very skirts. Mark me well. No crime such as yours goes unpunished forever. Guard your restless sleep, gentlemen, for Justice has a two-edged sword and she comes like a thief in the night to exact her measure. Now get out of my court, and out of my sight. We are adjourned.”

He brought down the gavel angrily, slammed it on its wooden pad, and tossed the gavel across the bench.

* * *

Joann ambles around the edge of a picturesque lake. She picked up stones near her feet and began tossing them into the water. Lou followed ten paces behind her.

“How could those bastards get off?” Joann said.

She threw the stones with increasingly more force and anger.

“How could those lying, rotten, stinking, murdering assholes get off?”

She now hurled the stones with ferocity.

“They bought an alibi,” Lou said.

“They bought an alibi? They *bought* an alibi? Are you kidding me?”

Joann picked up a dead tree limb lying near the water's edge.

“My baby's dead and they're out laughing and scratching like nothing ever happened.”

She pounded the bank repeatedly with the tree limb.

“Jo, please...”

“Jo, please’ my Irish ass!”

She flung the tree limb into the lake.

“Nobody's killing my family and getting away with it.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Even the score.”

“Jo, please don't talk crazy. Swede and Kate wouldn't want you to do anything foolish.”

“Swede died in your arms doing right. Kate died because she went to a movie. You shouldn't die doing right in America. It shouldn't cost you your life to go to a movie in America. I shouldn't be without them just because I loved them.”

She broke down, dropped to her knees on the sandy edge of the lake. Lou rushed to her, held her close.

“Let me handle this,” Lou said.

“You handle it, Lou. Bring them to me dead. Then I'll calm down and just be angry.”

She rose and pulled away from Lou's embrace and walked away. She waved off Lou so he wouldn't follow her and marched into the woods surrounding the lake.

* * *

Joann got her mail from a street-side mailbox labeled: "THE ERIKSONS," and returned to her middle class rancher.

Inside, Joann walked into the den to the front of a wide bookcase on whose shelves were displayed several photos of her husband Swede and her, her daughter Kate in a soccer jersey, a picture of Lou and Swede in uniform, and a family portrait of the three Ericksons. She picked up the family photo and brushed dust off the glass affectionately. She replaced it and took the photo of Swede and Lou. She half-smiled and replaced it. Also on the bookcase, sat a pair of bronzed

baby booties, a special display of Swede's decorations for bravery and his badge from the Chicago Police Force. She ran her fingers over the badge.

She stepped to a desk in the room and opened a drawer. Inside was a stainless steel revolver. She stared at it for a moment, picked it up, and weighed its heft with her hand. She opened the cylinder and noted that it contained a full load of six .38 caliber bullets. She left the den and strode into a bedroom with the gun and sat on the edge of the bed. Tears filled her eyes as she stared at a picture on the wall across from the bed. It was a watercolor depicting a stick figure of a woman with red hair. At the top were the words "My Mom." A signature at the bottom attributed the art to "Kate."

* * *

The acquitted perpetrators Ramon, Perry, James, and Joseph sashayed down the street four-abreast like cocks of the walk. Perry shoved an elderly woman struggling with shopping bags out of their way, forcing her into the street where she stumbled and fell. They laughed at her helpless plight. They received congratulations from a young boy with his head and shoulders protruding from of a second story window across the street. They waved and gave him a "thumbs up" gesture of their victory.

The four sauntered to a bar at the corner of the street. A sign over the door signified the run-down establishment as the *Oasis*.

The four young men went to a booth in the back where two well-dressed men sat with drinks. One of the men in the booth turned toward them with an unemotional expression and handed Ramon a small package and an envelope. Ramon stuffed the items inside his jacket and the four young men returned to the street.

"Catch you later," James said and headed in another direction from the other three.

* * *

James entered the door of a run-down row house and disappeared up a flight of dimly lit stairs. He unlocked his apartment door and stepped inside and locked his door. He doffed his jacket and threw it on a beat-up sofa in the living room.

He strode to the bathroom and took a moment to admire himself in the mirror. He adjusted his hair with a hairbrush the shower curtain burst open and a ski-masked person stepped out and placed a revolver against his head.

“You move and the last thing you'll ever see is your ugly face splattered on that mirror,” the gruff voice said.

“What the fuck, man,” James said.

“See, this is sort of like the movie *PSYCHO*, only backwards. Dig? In this one, the babe in the shower gets Norman the owl stuffer. Neat twist, huh?”

“What do you want? A fix? What?”

“Your ass on a sharp stick.”

The masked person pushed the gun hard at James' head. He winced.

“Easy, man.” James said and raised his arms.

“Piss in the toilet,” the masked person said.

“Say what?”

“Don't make me repeat myself.”

“I don't have to go.”

“If I don't hear water running into that toilet in five seconds, I'm going to put this bazooka up your crack and squeeze the trigger till it don't work no more. Got me?”

“Shit.”

“No, pee.”

James moved to the front of the toilet, unzipped, and forced himself to urinate. He finished and zipped up.

“Okay, you happy?” James asked.

“Not quite. Get on your knees in front of the bowl, stick your face in the water, and hum *The National Anthem* ... all of it.”

“Aw, come on, man You can’t be serious.”

The gun is jammed into the back of his head.

“Does Howdy Doody have wooden balls?”

“Jésus Christo.”

James knelt, took a deep breath and reluctantly lowered his head into the bowl, his face immersed in the water. After several seconds, he exhaled, making loud bubbling noises mixed with a loosely interpretive, hummed version of *The Star Spangled Banner*.

“Okay, what now?” James asked, his voice bubbling in the bowl.

After a long silence, he withdrew his dripping head and looked around the bathroom. The masked person is gone. He spat several times and grabbed a towel to wipe his face.

“Fuckin’ Alfred Hitchcock.”

Chapter 3

Lou Glorioso sat at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee in front of him. Joann buttered toast at a kitchen counter.

“What word on the street?” Joann asked.

“One of those perps in your case got nailed last night,” Lou said

Joann stopped her buttering.

“One of them is dead?”

“No, but somebody paid him a visit with a gun. Tried to scare him, I guess.”

Joann sets the toast on the table.

“Drug related?”

“Drug dealers don't dunk you in the crapper. They dunk you in Lake Michigan. With cement scuffies.

Joann pours herself some coffee and joined Lou at the table.

“It's a crazy world,” Joann said

“I hate to even think this, but I gotta ask. Did you have anything to do with shaking up this punk?”

Joann presses her hands on her chest.

“Moi?”

“Okay, forget it. But you understand I had to ask.”

“Eat your toast while it's warm. Why did you have to ask?”

“Because you have a motive to harm him. So do the parents and relatives of the victims. I'll have to question them all. Routine crap.”

“Crusading for the little bastard, are we?”

“Jo, you're the last person I have to explain my actions to. You were married for over twenty years to one of the best cops I ever knew. Swede would be doing the same thing. We have to. It goes with the job. Personally, if the dirty son of a bitch got run over by a tank I wouldn't give a rat's ass, but if a crime's been committed, I've got to do what they pay me for.”

“And it's all about motive, huh?”

“Yeah, that old "MOM" principle”.

“Motive, opportunity and means?”

“You got it. Swede taught you well. Without motive we don't solve many cases. In fact, without motive we don't even make many arrests. Nothing to take to a grand jury to charge someone with a crime. If we don't get a good motive, we pray for a smoking gun. Doesn't happen often.”

While Lou munched toast and scanned at the newspaper, Joann slipped out into the den, opened her purse, took out the revolver, and returned it in the desk drawer.

A floorboard creaked behind Joann. She quickly turned, her body hiding the desk drawer, and saw Lou standing in the doorway of the den.

“Gotta run, kitten. See you around six?”

“Fine.”

Lou moved close and pecked her on the lips. Joann slowly closed the desk drawer with her buttocks as he headed for the front door.

* * *

Joann, Amy, Ellen, and Liliana are seated at a booth in the back of the lounge at Torlino’s Restaurant. There are no other patrons near them as they talk quietly and occasionally look around to see who might hear their conversation.

“Tell me you're not serious, Joann,” Liliana said.

“My joking days are over, Lil,” Joann said. “This is in deadly earnest.”

“What makes you think you can find other women to do this?” Amy asked. “Suppose they go to the police? Suppose *we* go to the police?”

“Who's going to be able to prove it? Joann said. “If we do it, we're committed. If we chicken out, there'll be no proof. Go to the police be damned. They can't even get killers who murder people in front of eyewitnesses. What the hell are they going to do with a distraught woman railing in anger about revenge? Sounds like kind of normal behavior to me.”

“I'm no chicken,” Liliana said, “but I can't go against my Christian morals.”

Joann gave Liliana a hard look and paused before she spoke.

“The Bible justifies self-defense. You think David, Joshua, and Moses got everything they had without a fight? This is kill or be killed. Only this time Pharaoh is evil in a different form. Part of our family and part of our lives have been brutally and senselessly taken away from us by

these dogs and they may come back for more. Well, not on my watch, sister. I'm fighting back. Now, who's with me?"

There was a lengthy pause, and then Liliana and Amy get up and quietly left the booth. Amy stopped before she exited the room to look back at Joann.

"I'm sorry, Jo. I just can't."

"It's okay, Amy."

Amy and Liliana disappeared into the darkness outside. Ellen looked across the table at her disappointed friend.

"Jews are taught not to harm anyone," Ellen said. "I've lived by that all my life. I taught my children that."

"Watch what an Israeli soldier does when a terrorist breaks across the border with a bomb, then talk to me about that."

"Yeah, I guess sometimes aggressive people are needed."

"Does that mean you're in?" Joann asked.

"Up to my mezuzah. God help me."

Joann smiled and placed her hand on Ellen's.