

Chapter 263

Show and Tell

DS Adam Cosgrove was thirty one years old and looked like a detective from a TV show. He wasn't good looking enough for it to be an American show, but he had a dishevelled intelligence that was compelling enough for a middlingly successful British or Australian crime drama.

He was in the middle of an apartment building, standing next to a uniformed officer. An older woman, she had the air of having seen it all. Being a police officer, all in her case meant all the horrible things people do to one another.

"Have you ever seen anything like this?" Adam asked.

"Nope. I've seen some weird business, but this is a new one on me."

The apartment building was ordinarily an unremarkable one, on the upper end of lower class. Melbourne, like most cities, had more than enough of them to go around. This particular one, however, had developed an unusual feature. Despite the exterior wall remaining intact, a large chunk of the interior was missing.

It hadn't been destroyed in an explosion or collapsed in some kind of structural disaster. There was no debris or collateral damage. It was just gone; an empty space inside a building where an entire apartment should have been. The exterior wall was intact but the rest the apartment was gone, along with portions of the apartments around, above and below it.

What truly made the space remarkable was that it took the form of a perfect sphere. It was as if someone had lifted off the top half of the building and taken out a scoop, before putting the top back on. Walls, floor, carpet and furniture were cut with the smooth precision of a laser. Pipes now just ended, requiring the building's plumbing to be shut down due to spillage.

"It mostly affected the one apartment?" Adam asked.

"Yep," the officer said, looking at the clipboard notes she was holding. "It touched on the surrounding apartments, but centred on this one. The guy above got banged-up pretty bad when the floor under his bed vanished and he dropped two apartments down. It was a lucky thing he didn't land on anyone."

"That's how it was described?" Adam asked. "Just vanishing? No explosion or anything."

"Some of the neighbours described a sucking air noise. Like in movies, when someone shoots out an aeroplane window and the air goes rushing out."

“What about whoever lived in the apartment? Has anyone else been significantly hurt?”

“Just the one man who dropped two floors was hurt badly. There were some minor injuries amongst the other occupants, but not many. We’ve been tracking down residents, making sure they’re either here or otherwise accounted for. The only one we couldn’t find was the sole resident of the apartment that had occupied the centre of the missing space.”

“It happened in the middle of the night.” Adam said. “The poor sod is probably in the same place as the rest of his apartment. Do we have a name?”

“Yeah, it’s...”

She checked her clipboard again.

“Jason Asano.”

“Are you serious?” Adam asked.

“Detective Sergeant, this matter is not a concern for the Victoria police. It’s a federal issue.”

“It’s an apartment building where you claim there was a simple accident. How is that a federal crime?”

“It will go better for everyone of you don’t go around asking questions like that, Detective Sergeant.”

The apartment building had been evacuated of people, ostensibly on the basis of structural instability due to the damage. Now, what looked like a small army of forensics people had claimed a number of the apartments as set up areas and were crawling over the interior like ants.

Adam was in a ground floor apartment where the federal police had set up a command post. Their goal seemed to be to have as small a visible footprint as possible, although they were having little success. The displaced residents and rumours already starting to spread were made all the worse by the media, which had already been present. The military had been conducting one of its unannounced terrorism readiness exercises nearby though the night, part of a new program that was starting to draw press attention.

The local police had been directly and explicitly instructed to completely remove themselves, outside of the uniformed officers being used to secure the exterior of the building. Adam might have left it at that, if the explanation he was given wasn’t so patently absurd.

“You’re seriously going with a gas explosion?” he asked. “A gas explosion in a building with no gas service, blowing a perfectly spherical hole with no debris and a blast

area that completely annihilated everything up to a point and then completely stopping dead. An explosion that no one heard, despite being in a building full of people.”

“Detective Sergeant, we have already asked you nicely to leave this matter be. We highly recommend that you move on and do not give this incident any further thought. Otherwise, we will have to move on from asking, the ramifications of which will fall directly on you and be unambiguously negative.”

Adam glared at the woman. The federal police officer had a nicer suit and nicer hair than him. She was not a large woman but her stern features and short-cropped hair radiated professionalism.

“Are you threatening me?” he asked.

“Yes, Detective Sergeant. You need to forget all about this incident or you will find the weight that drops down on you from a very great height sufficient to squash you and your career like a bug under a shoe.”

Adam glowered. In addition to the feds there were military personnel and some less conventional people busying themselves. There was a group talking quietly amongst themselves that Adam’s trained eye picked out as not being law enforcement or military, in spite of the expensive suits. From the looks of things, however, their presence was wholly unchallenged, unlike his own.

He turned to leave.

“Detective Sergeant,” the federal officer called out.

“What?” he asked.

“I need to know that you won’t interfere further.”

“I’m leaving, aren’t I?”

“You need to tell me that you understand. I want to hear you say it.”

“And I want you to get run over by a bulldozer,” Adam said. “We don’t get everything we want in life.”

“Detective Sergeant, I’d better not hear that you’ve been talking to the media. And if you do, I will hear about it.”

He left, not bothering to respond.

Someone stopped Erika Asano outside the café.

“I just bought your new cookbook!”

“Thank you. I hope you enjoy it.”

“I was so sorry to hear about your brother.”

“Thank you.”

She took a selfie with the fan before going inside, making her way into a secluded booth in the back. She sat down opposite a man who looked like he had slept in his suit. He smelled like he was several days past his last shower but only minutes past his last drink. He had bloodshot eyes and a scratchy beard.

“Hello Detective,” she said, voice and face both filled with concern.

“Not anymore,” Adam said.

“I’m sorry to hear that. I hate to think that I pushed you to...”

“You didn’t push me into anything,” he said. “I walked into this with my eyes wide open.”

“What do you have?” Erika asked. “You didn’t sound optimistic over the phone.”

Adam took a battered folder from the satchel on the seat next to him, placing it on the table. Then he took a flash drive from his pocket, placing it on top of the folder.

“I’ve taken this as far as it will go,” he said. “I’ve been chewing my way around the outside, but there’s no way into the middle. It’s like there’s a giant hole at the centre of all this and nothing that would fit makes any kind of sense.”

“What are you saying?” Erika asked.

“This is as far as it goes,” Adam said, patting the folder. “This is everything I have. There’s some photos in there of the space where your brother’s apartment should be. I shouldn’t have those, so be careful where you flash them around. Or don’t; I don’t care.”

“There’s nowhere else to take the investigation?” Erika asked.

“I’ve put together enough of the puzzle to see that there’s one very big, very weird piece missing. There’s a secret here and I promise you that neither you nor I will be able to crack it. I know it’s somehow connected to all those terrorist readiness drills the military are doing. I know someone is influencing government bodies at an incredibly high level and I know there is some kind of operation working completely in the dark. I don’t know if it’s some kind of off-the-books intelligence program or what, but they have a stupid amount of pull.”

A waitress came by and Erika ordered some tea. Adam ordered coffee.

“I don’t care, as long as it’s strong and hot.”

“So what now?” Erika asked after the waitress walked away.

“Now, I go spend my rent money on bourbon. This is the end of the road, Mrs Asano. There’s a secret here and it’s a lot bigger than you and me. The only thing I kept out of this folder is a number of deaths I’m pretty sure happened to keep that secret. I won’t let you go poking around and get killed too.”

“Are you in danger?” she asked.

Adam let out a bitter laugh.

“Frankly, I’m amazed I’m still alive. I was advised to leave this alone multiple times. Then I was told, then I was fired. Don’t make my mistake. I know you don’t have answers for what happened to your brother, but you need to find a way to let it go.”

“You’re going to sit there having thrown everything into this and tell me to walk away?” she asked.

“Mrs Asano, not everyone who told me to back off had something to hide. They knew what keeping at this would cost me, and they were right. Just look at me. I don’t have anyone. You have family. I know he was your brother, but would he want your family to get hurt chasing answers when he’s already dead?”

Erika’s face scrunched with unwillingness, but she gave a slight nod.

“I don’t like this,” she said.

“The people behind this don’t want you to like it,” Adam said. “They want you to shut up and stop poking into this or they’ll kill you.”

“Are you seriously suggesting I would be murdered by some conspiracy group? That’s absurd.”

“Mrs Asano, those deaths I mentioned? There weren’t any murders. There were car accidents. House fires. Suicides.”

“Which could be exactly what they seem.”

“Suicide will be how they do you, by the way. Celebrity chef kills herself after brother’s tragic death in gas explosion. Friends say she became erratic in the months following her brother’s death, obsessed with conspiracy theories. She was known to associate with disgraced former detective...”

The return of the waitress with their drinks forestalled Erika’s response.

“Do you really expect me to believe any of this?” she asked, once the waitress was gone again.

“I barely believe it,” Adam said with a wry, weary smile. “But remember, you were the one who found me. We both know this thing has stunk from the word go. But don’t make my mistakes. You have people that can still get hurt.”

He placed a hand on the folder.

“This is almost everything I’ve been able to put together, from copies of police reports to my personal notes. You can take it, but I’m asking you not to. Go home and look after your family.”

“Detective... Mr Cosgrove. I did come to you. I can’t help but feel I am, in part, responsible for the circumstance you find yourself in.”

“I may have bought a first-class ticket for the self-pity train, Mrs Asano, but I know who put me where I am, and it wasn’t you.”

She looked at the folder under his hand for a long time before standing up without touching it.

“I’ll take your advice, Mr Cosgrove. I know we probably won’t meet again, but do not hesitate to contact me if you ever need something. I appreciate how much you’ve sacrificed looking for the truth about my brother.”

“It was never about you or your brother for me, Mrs Asano.”

“I appreciate it, nonetheless.”

She took out some money, leaving it next to her untouched tea.

“For the drinks.”

Adam shuffled wearily through the bottle shop. Standing in front of the bourbon was a woman dressed in an exquisite suit. She was looking right at him. His memory stirred.

“You’re one of them,” he said. “You were there, when Asano’s apartment went wherever the hell it went.”

“I was there, yes, although we never actually met. You have a good eye and a sharp memory, Mr Cosgrove. It’s what makes you a good investigator.”

Adam snorted.

“Being a good investigator is about legwork and persistence,” he said. “You can shove that Sherlock Holmes crap up your arse.”

He moved forward to take a bottle and she stepped into his path.

“Lady, if you think I won’t kick your arse right here then you’re underestimating how little I’ve got to lose anymore.”

Adam drew a sharp breath as the woman’s presence seemed to strangely swell until it felt like she was towering over him, despite not having moved. He suddenly felt incredibly vulnerable and exposed, with no idea why. He fought back against the feeling by calling on the wellspring of anger that had been simmering inside of him for months, grabbing the front of the woman’s suit with both hands. Her own hands gripped his forearms like a pair of industrial clamps, pulling his hands off of her with a mechanical inexorability.

“Jesus, lady. Are you a frigging terminator?”

“Mr Cosgrove, I’m here to offer you the thing you have been chasing since this all began. The things that destroyed your life. The secret you’ve been circling without ever being able to see.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“We’ve been watching your efforts, Mr Cosgrove. You are a dogged and determined investigator who looks beyond the obvious and is unflinching when others lack resolve.”

“And hasn’t that worked out well for me?”

“Mr Cosgrove, come work for us. All the answers you’ve been looking for are just the beginning of what you’ll receive.”

“You want me to work for you?” he asked, incredulous. “Everything you’ve done and you want me to throw in with you?”

“Mr Cosgrove, your life is not in a good position right now.”

“Because of you, you wretched harpy.”

“We can make amends and more.”

“And if I tell you to shove it up your arse?”

“Then you can drink yourself to death in ignorance,” she said. “You don’t have the credibility to cause us any problems. Convincing Erika Asano to let it go was a smart move. You were wrong though; it wouldn’t have been suicide.”

Adam’s hand flashed out, snatching a bottle from the shelf and swinging it at her head. Her reflexes were too fast for him to follow and the next thing he knew he was stumbling back and falling over, the bottle in her hand.

“That’s disappointing,” she said as she put the bottle back on the shelf. “I think you could have been quite remarkable, Mr Cosgrove.”

She waked away as Adam pulled himself to his feet. She turned the corner and he didn’t see her again.

Adam walked out of the bottle shop with a half dozen bottles in a cardboard box. He glanced around the parking lot, habitually taking in the details. There was a man who had been sitting in a car before Adam arrived, who now got out and started walking in his direction.

“She’s a bitch isn’t she?” the man called out. He was wearing a pastel shirt with the top two buttons undone and a white jacket over white slacks. He was white, looked around Adam’s age and had an American accent.

“Excuse me?” Adam asked.

“Miranda,” the man said. “She probably didn’t tell you her name, though, did she?”

“Look, Miami Vice,” Adam said. “I’ve had my fill of mysterious pricks, so how about you sod off.”

“Yeah, I get why you’re bitter. Can I call you Adam?”

“You can bugger off.”

Adam resumed the walk to his car.

“She’s not the only one who can tell you the big secret, you know,” the man called after him. Adam stopped and turned around.

“Save it, mate. I’m not buying.”

The man chuckled.

“I’m Dash,” he said. “And yeah, I’d like to recruit you as well. Say what you want about Miranda, but she knows good material when she sees it.”

“I told her to stick it up her arse,” Adam said. “You can stick it up her arse too.”

Dash laughed again.

“You know, I like you Adam. Here’s the difference between me and Miranda. She’ll let you in on the big secret if you agree to join her little group and follow orders like a good boy. Me, though? I’m going to tell you the secret. Right here, right now. If you want to throw in with us after, then great. If not, then all it cost me was a little time.”

“You’re okay with me knowing, then just going my own way?”

“My organisation isn’t like Miranda’s. We don’t care about keeping the secret. The thing is, the secret wants to be told. Every year it gets harder and harder to keep it under wraps, and we have no interest in helping.”

“Then what do you do?”

“We’re getting ready for the day that the secret isn’t a secret anymore. I’ll be happy to tell you all about it, but you’re going to want answers first. What is this great, big, important secret that I’m walking around?”

“You’re going to tell me, just like that?”

“If I just told you, you wouldn’t believe me,” Dash said. “I’m going to show you.”