

## One

### Philip 2023 Chianni, Italy



Claude



Ronnie

I spend my days in a small apartment in the Tuscan hillside village of Chianni, trying to make sense of the volumes of material gathered on my dad, Claude, and Uncle Ronnie.

Chianni is a million miles from where it all started with a visit to the Solomon Islands thirteen years ago. While enjoying an extended journey around Australia in a camper van, I took the opportunity to pop over to the Solomons, where my Uncle Ronnie lived. I still remember that visit as though it were yesterday. Every aspect of it was strange to me—the place, people and even the situation of finding my long-lost uncle, like *Stanley* finding *Livingstone*. Uncle Ronnie had hidden away in some remote and primitive Pacific islands for twenty years.

We would sit on his veranda, sheltered from the rain under an overhanging corrugated roof. The persistent tapping was on a mission to disturb the tranquillity. Finally adapting to

it, the peace was enhanced, and the rain seemed to also add to the tenderness of those moments alone together. The silences would be broken by Uncle Ronnie reeling off another of his outrageous anecdotes.

Now, years later, I find myself hiding away in my Italian cubby hole, trying to piece together everything I have learnt over the past nine months.

I dived into Uncle Ronnie's world with little thought of how deep his ocean was. The more I unearthed about Uncle Ronnie, the more fascinated I became.

Last summer in Greece, I started forming a chronology of Ronnie's life and established contacts with my far-flung family in Australia. Then, upon returning to England, I immediately visited my dad and asked about his and Ronnie's origins in Cairo.

To my surprise, a man who can barely hear and rarely speaks came alive. In fairness, when he does say something, it's not of much interest—mostly boasting of his gambling achievements, never his failures, and his historical sexual conquests. I think of him sitting in a quiet corner at family gatherings, wrapped up in his own world and sometimes ignored by the rest of us. However, last October, at the mention of Ronnie and Cairo and pressing for a few snippets of information, I inadvertently turned on his tap, which is now fully open and overflowing. It is as though he had awakened following a long sleep to once again live life, but not in the present, but in the place he most cherishes, his past.

I dug into their history, delicately applying the lightest touch. Dad gradually fed me answers to my numerous

questions, which frequently led to more questions and responses, and the cycle continued unbroken.

For a man who once refused to speak to me for eight months, believing I had switched television channels whilst he was watching a horse race, he now craves my visits to depart more reminiscences.

Claude and Ronnie became a fascination for me, and the more I learned about them, the more curious I became. Those months of research brought the discovery of two men and an era I thought I knew but clearly didn't and of history deep and rich, which we, as a family, had the barest knowledge of.

From their origins in Egypt, both born to Greek mothers and British fathers, they, either through desire, need, or destiny, moved and lived in Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and, in Ronnie's case, Australia and finally, the Solomon Islands. Their movement was geographical, but their aims were always financial. They looked to make a living and, more importantly, their riches. Claude through obsessive gambling, and Ronnie through one business venture after another.

Along the way they married and produced children yet remained devoted to themselves and their causes, rarely, if ever, giving much consideration to their families. Moving in their own circles, we were expected to follow, and when we didn't, they just carried on moving without us.

As self-centred as they were, they were gifted some magic power that enabled them to be liked and loved. They can be infectious, holding a childlike quality and simplicity that draws people in. Loved by others, and seldom, if ever,

really loving, certainly rarely showing any. Boys who became men who preferred the dusty streets of Cairo and deserts of Egypt to the pavements of London and England's greenery.

They seldom spoke much of their past, of their upbringing and youth. But, there is much to know about them, and with some reluctance, I admit, to learn from them about myself. I started to see their traits and how they lived; what made them who they became.

As I discovered, there is so much to know. Fortunately, I have not been feeding on crumbs for these past months. I digest feasts of history and question everything I thought I knew about their past. There is reality, truths, confusion and lies in equal measure.

Some days, I am filled with doubt about the task I set for myself. How can I hope to make sense of these two complex men?

Over weeks, I diligently work away at my research, and then, as though waking from a long sleep, everything gradually becomes clear, and my understanding of my family is irrevocably changed forever.