

# **‘The Surrogate’**

**by Jem Tyley-Miller**

**Winner: Best ‘Body in the Library’ Story**

**Scarlet Stiletto Awards 2022**

## ‘The Surrogate’

Hemi recoils from the opulence of the Prahran penthouse and rests her hand against the rain-streaked window. Taking a breath, she focuses in on the sea wall below her, willing her resolve to be stubborn like the wall. Iron-grey waves pound the concrete monolith and create a spray so high it reaches the seagulls that glide above it, as well as the teams constructing the next wall, some twenty metres inland of the first. This one promises to be higher, thicker, stronger. It is the fourth such wall to be built on this stretch of coast that Hemi can recall.

‘Detective Inspector Navarro?’

Hemi swings to face her team, to confront the world that has made these sea-barriers necessary. Her booties whisper as she walks to observe the victim. If it weren’t for the crimson bloom on his shirt, he would be camouflaged against the muted luxury of the rest of his penthouse. Even the spines on the books in the library match the pallid décor.

'Have we isolated the doctor yet?' Hemi says. 'I want to speak to them before they have a chance to change their story.'

'Yes, Inspector.' The assistant nearest her glances down as he speaks, as he has been trained to do, to avoid recording any of Hemi's expressions with his contact lenses.

'And the wife? Where is she?' She looks around at her team.

'Taken to the bedroom, Inspector.' The stout one answers her this time. The smart one; the one most likely to take her job. 'I've taken an initial statement.'

'And the surrogate hasn't moved, not since we found her?'

'No, Inspector.'

Hemi can feel the smart one wanting to look at her but knows her underling will save that glance for when Hemi is at her weakest.

'The surrogate has been catatonic the entire time.'

Hemi focuses in on the woman draped alongside the victim's body, her eyes lingering over the holographic knife that spins by the accused's hand now that the real weapon has been removed for analysis. The bright fabric of the woman's dress clings to her round stomach where the blood has touched it, while the skirt flutters in the draft of the climate system.

Hemi switches her lenses to diagnostic and scans the woman. Aside from being in a trance, the science shows the surrogate is otherwise healthy, as two heartbeats drum steadily inside her.

'She has confessed, Inspector. I have it recorded. If you're satisfied, we'll have her moved so we can process the body.'

Hemi nods.

Prisoner Welfare Officers are motioned in, their turquoise suits sighing as they lift the heavily pregnant surrogate and shuffle her towards a polished glass lift. As gravity takes her down, the surrogate's eyes flick to the victim.

From the hallway behind Hemi comes the thuds of a scuffle: a body is pushed against a wall. Heels clatter as they struggle for purchase on the wooden floor, and a tall blonde in a linen pantsuit strides into the living room, bringing a drift of perfume in her wake. She scans Hemi's team for the person in command.

'I hope you've arrested the surrogate,' she says to the stout assistant.

'If she's guilty, Mrs Takano, she'll be charged.' Hemi steers the wife away from her husband's body in the library through to a space that is more gallery than a home. They settle in the sparse kitchen, beside a long marbled bench. 'I need you to tell me what you saw.'

The blonde fills a hi-ball with water from the recycler. She takes a large gulp, her eyes still wild. 'Like I told your officer, I was supposed to be gardening but forgot my gloves. So I came down from the roof to get them and that's when I found that bitch with a knife to Yuki's chest. She was screaming, claiming she wouldn't hand our baby over.' The wife takes another sip and places the glass

onto the bench. 'She looked right at me, daring me to stop her, as she plunged the knife in. I could have sworn I was next, so I ran as fast as I could.'

The wife shows Hemi where she claims to have hid, down the hallway over a run of real animal hides to the bedroom. There is a smell to the luxurious bed chamber, a mixture of earth and paper. Replica antiques rest on low bookshelves filled with *actual* books, as opposed to the holographic ones in the library, everything in the room is crafted from vital resources. Above a sleek jarrah bed that could warm an entire family, dangles the stuffed head of a bear.

'Nutraceuticals must be a lucrative business, Mrs Takano,' says Hemi.

The wife folds her arms. 'The state-permitted diet hastens our extinction. How else are we meant to survive?'

Hemi lets the reply hang as she wanders around the space. She compares this room to her own meagre apartment with its bed shelf, and solitary table and chair. The only feature that distinguishes her apartment from others is an intricate jade carving of a horse on her desk, fashioned by her grandfather. Hemi traces the curves of the *netsuke* with her fingertips each night and feels the smooth cool jade, imagining a time when horses were ridden by people, before the rationalisation of life on Earth saw them disappear.

Hemi turns to the widow. 'Do you think greed is what killed your husband, Mrs Takano?'

The blonde picks up a nutraceuticals bottle from the vast collection next to her bed and pops a pill. 'People always want more than they're entitled to, don't they?'

Hemi runs a hand across the silken furs on the bed. She doesn't need to look further than this room to see what the widow is saying is true.

Switching her lenses to UV mode, Hemi scans Yuki Takano's wife for trace evidence while processing the rest of her complaints; the constant harassment of her husband by people from below demanding drugs they can't afford, only she doesn't call them people. Hemi finds soil on the wife, but no blood, consistent with her claim to have been gardening at the time of the murder. She takes samples for analysis, while the wife stares past the looming turbines that spin over the angry sea. As the blades whoosh past, the wife dabs her eye with her scarf. 'How can I raise a child on my own?'

Hemi considers the options available, the suburbs of women who will apply for the position of nanny simply to breathe the clean air provided by the penthouse. 'How did you purchase the baby, Mrs Takano?'

'We paid handsomely for it. More than fair compensation for that filthy surrogate's mother's life credit. And to think she wanted more money.' The wife summons a holographic screen and

commands the required documentation to open. 'As you can see, it's all in order.'

Signed contracts legitimising the surrogacy flash before Hemi, as well as the acquisition of life number 4-587-943-921, and the printable rationing chip that is to be inserted into the baby once born. Hemi's fingers fly as she breaks down the documents to ensure validity. Forgeries are near impossible to detect, but not for Hemi. She has risen quickly through the ranks, not only because of her unwavering belief in rational thinking and the pursuit of truth, but because of her ability to beat the hackers who discovered their niche when the world's population was capped at eleven billion, and the one in-one-out policy came into effect. Satisfied Mrs Takano's papers are in order, Hemi confirms the baby growing inside the floor-stricken surrogate does indeed belong to Mrs Adele Takano of Prahran.

Another of her grey-suited assistants appears by the door. 'Excuse me, Inspector. Victim Welfare has arrived.'

Back in the library space, Hemi instructs her team. 'Confirm lenses are working.' She needs the feed to Civilian Rights to be seamless. With a case of this profile, any glitches will stream to the seven o'clock news.

When the crime scene is cleared of interference, Hemi examines the body. The accuracy of the Japanese sushi blade is impressive.

Death would have been instantaneous. Even if the doctor had arrived sooner, there was nothing they could do. But knowing what little she does of this man and his obscene wealth, Hemi has no idea if the victim was deserving of such a quick end.

Hemi gazes along the coast to where high-rise waterfront luxury dominates, to where the Australian *echo riche*, like the man lying before her, demonstrate no fear of the rising sea. They simply force the relocation of those in the *Unter* so that their newly commissioned penthouses can be built above the slums of the next suburb inland whenever they are required to move.

Hemi rises and turns to her team. 'Bring in the doctor please.'

Down on the street, in the humid shadows of the towering condos, Hemi slushes through the debris of the coastal *Unter*. Tarps cover doorways and entrances to small burrows, where make-shift furniture is raised on blocks as high above the waterline as possible. More at ease here than she is above, Hemi breathes in the scent of survival. She presses the speaker attached to her ear and orders her cavalcade to get ready for departure. 'I want the surrogate prepped for interview.' Confident all will be arranged when she arrives back at base, she takes a moment to shut down the link by closing her eyes.

The bayside drive along St Kilda Road takes less than five minutes. Vehicles glide beneath the shadows of the only remaining green leafy space in the city, where tall trees with enormous, mottled trunks glisten as they hold all past wrongs in their rings. The trees line the street and add a solemnity that reminds citizens of the reason behind the Shrine beyond—that peace wasn't always upon them. When this part of the coast is swallowed by the sea, Hemi doesn't want to be here to see it. She hopes to have earned retirement by then. To be sent to one of the bright Tasmanian homes reserved for those whose service to State is noteworthy, whose luck has been earned. Where the view from her window will always be green.

The interview room is light and airy, and the climate has been controlled to make everyone relax. Hemi angles the shutters, forcing light across the surrogate's face. She pulls her chair so close she can smell the harsh processing soap on the surrogate's skin.

'Shyra Romano, life number 7-500-797-163, do you understand why we have detained you?'

The surrogate's voice is steady, but she doesn't look at Hemi when she answers. 'Because Yuki is dead.'

'You confessed to my officers that you killed him. Is that correct?'

The surrogate says nothing.

'Can you explain your relationship with the deceased for the record please?'

'He's the father of my baby.'

'It's not your baby, Shyra', says Hemi. 'The baby belongs to Mrs Takano. Her embryo was inserted.'

Hemi leans back in her chair and considers the woman with the large downcast eyes. Shyra Romano's behaviour is common in the *Unter*, where education is less than basic.

'You have no claim I'm afraid, Shyra. You're simply the host. The law is very clear on this.'

The surrogate's eyes lift for the first time. 'You're not listening. I told you the baby is mine.'

A heaviness swells in Hemi's gut. She considers her last three cases, instances where women from the *Unter* lied in a bid to secure clean air for a child they couldn't surrender. She leans in closer. 'If the baby is not the Takano's, you have no right to give birth; You no longer own the life credit. And if you sold your eggs, then the baby becomes a ward of the state to be onsold, you know that. The law was created to protect you, so situations like this do not happen.'

The surrogate falls silent.

'Is that why you killed him?' says Hemi. 'Because Yuki Takano was going to report you?'

Shyra studies the hands in her lap. By four o'clock the sun has given up its attempts to penetrate the dense cloud above the city. The streets of the Richmond *Unter* glow with the warmth of conversation and wood fires. Smells of damp washing, spiced food and smoke curl together, unpleasant only when the stench of excrement and the open-air composting units combine. Hemi considers the spoils of the Universal Basic Income while rain splashes into the water around her feet, and her lenses lose signal. Laughter and phlegm-filled coughs stream from the alleyways, while she dodges umbrellas and plastic-ponchoed couriers on bikes, and the street vendors smile and nod at her. Young men and women approach, tapping her arm as they ask if she's up for some company. There is a liveliness in the *Unter* that is foreign to Hemi's world, and to that of those above in the heights.

Hemi arrives at Shyra's lean-to with numb feet. Attached to the remains of an old miner's cottage, the lean-to is propped beneath a stacked high-rise and stinks of wet wool and car parts. Shyra's quadrant—Sector K—is one of the better slum areas, where the revoking of life privileges for crimes has been an effective deterrent. Either that, or the willingness to report crime is low.

Hemi steps from a series of 44-gallon drums onto a raised rag-mat floor, where she is assaulted with colour. Tibetan prayer flags crisscross a sari-filled canopy, while a gallery of painted canvases block the wind. Mismatched furniture fills the space and

a dozen perfumed candles flicker. There is a sequined cushion with half its scales missing. Here, inside the shanty, Hemi has stepped back into the thick of history—into the old world where colour was permitted to flourish.

A fire heats the next room, as a child sits upon the knee of an old woman who is reading to her from a screen. The girl's eyes are the same magnificent eyes as the surrogate's, although there is no record of the child existing. The old woman flicks her apron like a lizard's tongue and closes the door of the potbelly, as she races to hide the orange glow of the coals.

Hemi flashes her badge. 'I'm not Climate Control if that's what you're worried about. And my lenses don't work down here.'

But the old woman is not put at ease. 'Where's Shyra?' she says. 'Arrested for murder.' Hemi studies the child. She looks well cared for.

The woman breathes noisily as she moves the girl from her knee and stands to stoke the fire. 'Shyra could never kill anyone. She's a believer in the old ways.'

The pain in the old woman's hip is evident as she ambles across to a black lace curtain. Her hand sweeps back the fabric to reveal a smoky altar filled with statues; Isis, Ganesh, the Virgin Mary. They stare at Hemi with opaque eyes and posed humility. Such artefacts are rare, even in the *Unter*, where faith has taken longer to stamp out, and Hemi is intrigued by how the surrogate has sourced

them. She lifts one up, it is lighter than expected, and pokes about amongst the incense coils until she finds an expensive collection of Nutraceuticals.

She picks up a bottle. 'Superstition never could stand up to the scrutiny of science.'

The old woman meets her gaze. 'Then again, there are somethings you simply just know.'

Hemi becomes still as she turns back to the altar, and the candles flicker.

Back at the station, within the grey walls of her work cell, Hemi rescans the evidence. She clocks off to avoid any interruptions by Fair Work Affairs, before re-examining the inventory taken at the murder scene—the list of every item found in the penthouse. Hemi's staff have been thorough: the single set of prints on the knife belong to Shyra Romano; the blood on her dress is Yuki Takano's; and the soil samples taken from both the floor and Adele Takano are a match to the rooftop garden. The family physician, a Dr Crawford, confirmed all three were alive and healthy when they completed their antenatal exam earlier that morning, until Dr Crawford was called back by Adele Takano to check on her husband before the police arrived.

Based on the evidence, Hemi's decision to arrest Shyra is sound. An email from the commissioner suggesting she close the case to abate

further civil unrest backs this up; the rumours of the forced removal of children by the *eco riche* is gaining traction. But the unease in Hemi's gut remains persistent. It whispers for her to look closely at the science, at the truth in the inventory, which she placates by reopening the file and tapping her ear.

'Get me a warrant for the Takano building, including surrounds, and patch me through to Dr Crawford's delivery suite right away.'

Arriving in Prahran the mandated ten hours later, the construction of the sea wall is again in full swing. Hover-cranes drop apartment-sized blocks of recycled concrete into place with only the slightest disturbance to these rich people's lives.

Mrs Takano wears a full face of makeup when she answers, as if she's expecting Hemi's company. She floats through the house in a silken nightdress and settles upon the couch, insisting Hemi call her Adele.

'I need to know more about the murder weapon, Mrs Takano. I believe it came from your kitchen. I want to know how it came into the surrogate's possession?'

Adele Takano smooths a wrinkle in her gown. 'The blade is early 21st century Japanese. I gave it to Yuki for our anniversary this year. He sliced the *sashimi* with it the night before he ...' Her voice becomes quiet. 'I'm guessing she grabbed it from the kitchen.'



Hemi rubs the soft fabric of her chair with her thumb. The fish for the sashimi will have been wild caught, not taken from the tanks on the lower levels of the building. 'It's strange, Mrs Takano, don't you think, that Yuki's prints aren't on the handle?'

Adele Takano narrows her eyes.

'I keep a clean house, Inspector, and Yuki loved that gift.'

Hemi stares at the widow. 'It was the perfect choice for you to kill him with then, wasn't it?'

Adele Takano doesn't blink. 'You trust the words of a surrogate who will do anything to keep *my* baby?'

'Where are your gardening gloves, Mrs Takano? The ones you came down to collect the morning your husband was murdered. I've searched the inventory. We couldn't find them in your house.'

The widow crosses her knee. 'They must be above, after all. When I came down the surrogate had the knife already poised, so I guess I didn't have time to realise I left them on the roof.'

'We've searched the roof, Mrs Takano. And the garden shed. The gloves aren't there.'

The widow doesn't break her stare.

Hemi relaxes into the couch. 'I think we both know why the knife has no prints on it. What confuses me, though, Mrs Takano, is how you thought you were going to pass the baby off as biologically yours? I've spoken to your doctor who is keen to avoid prosecution. Blood tests give us the truth. Just like the DNA we

found on the gloves on the roof of one of the lean-tos beside this building.'

Defeated, the grieving widow morphs into downtrodden wife. 'It was Yuki's idea. He said we were rich enough for people not to ask questions. We tried for years to have a baby. When Yuki suggested a donor, I said I would carry it—that I wanted to. He convinced me it was easier to find a surrogate for the entire thing. But then, that piece of *Unter* goes and screws everything up by claiming Yuki loves her! She insisted he leave me if he wanted to keep the baby! That he leave all this.'

'And when he agreed, Mrs Takano?'

The real Adele Takano emerges, debuting in a single, satisfied smile. 'The stupid bitch took the knife right from my gloved hand, sobbing she had killed him. So, I told it to her straight: yes, she most certainly had.'

The surrogate sits in the interview room, bathed in the weak natural light. Her eyes are swollen from crying.

'You are to return to your quadrant as soon as you've given birth, Shyra. The rest, I'm afraid, is up to the courts. You have been cleared of Yuki Takano's murder, but you have still broken the law.'

The surrogate grabs Hemi's hand so tightly it burns. 'What if I can prove he loved me?' she says. 'Then can I keep my son?'

Hemi wrenches her hand back from the desperate woman.

'Is love something you can ever prove? All I know is that if you are to keep the baby, you must prove the existence of a true relationship with intended parentage beyond all scientific doubt.'



The valley is wide and green and smells of fresh rain. A tired sun glints off the solar-panelled mountainside, and from the verandah of the small log farmhouse, Hemi watches workers tend to the crops beneath the spinning turbines. From a horse pen next to the farmhouse, a playful whinny echoes across the valley, as a stallion—the deepest of blacks—kicks and bucks. Its muscles ripple as it races around the yard, and Hemi is mesmerised. Never has she seen anything insist on remaining free even though it is imprisoned.

Six months ago, Shyra Romano gave birth to a son and was forced to surrender him to the State. Buildings were destroyed while vehicles burnt across all quadrants. Even now, every second of Shyra Romano's trial can be seen on screens across the country, and Hemi (who is yet to provide testimony) has been forced to come here to find the evidence she needs to tell the absolute truth.

An old man scrapes his walking stick on the wooden flooring. He speaks Chinese at her through his toothless gums. 'Mr Takano

was very clear. It was to be a lifetime lease based on all intended occupants and their descendants.'

When the door creaks open and she is welcomed into the farmhouse, Hemi is greeted by bursts of orange, purple and crimson. Every inch of the abode is colourful and textured with cushions and throws. She steps inside and moves through the living-space and discovers three bedrooms. The first, next to the nursery, is made up for a little girl. The ceiling is painted with stars and Hemi stands beneath them, looking up at what she knows from books to be the night sky. She scans the furniture; a small bed and dresser, and a scattering of toys, before inspecting a photo on the wall. It is a picture of Yuki Takano smiling with his arms around Shyra and a younger version of her daughter, while they laugh in front of the Freedom Monument. The obelisk is decorated with the regalia of the Republic's bicentenary celebrations, and green and gold flags flutter in the background. Hemi had surveyed those celebrations as a newly minted Inspector almost three years ago. The photo would need to be authenticated.

'Did anyone else ever come here?' she says. She startles the old man as he sweeps the floor. He turns to her slowly. 'Takano was the only one.'



‘Did you find evidence of a quantifiable, loving relationship between the deceased and the accused, Inspector Navarro?’ says the centre judge of the High Court.

Hemi takes a breath and scans the packed courtroom. She knows the commissioner, as well as billions of eyes from above and below are drilling into her now. She turns to the judge.

## Jem Tyley-Miller

Jem Tyley-Miller’s short stories are published in *Meanjin, Overland and We’ll Stand in that Place and Other Stories* (Margaret River Press). In 2018, she was awarded a Wheeler Centre Hot-desk fellowship.